A set of *Dundun* drums.

THE TALKING DRUMS OF THE YORUBA


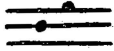


by

ULLI BEIER

THE most common type of Talking Drum among the Yoruba is called "*Dundun*" (see Plate I). Europeans sometimes refer to it as an hourglass-drum, because of its shape. It has two membranes, of which only one is beaten, however. The leather strings connecting the membranes are gripped by the drummer's left hand, and by tightening them, he can raise the pitch of the drum.

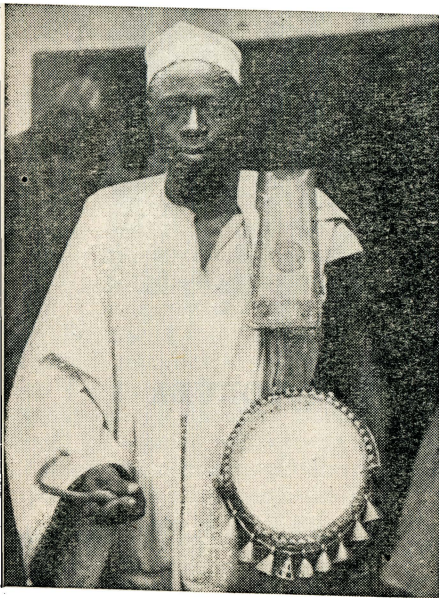
There are many kinds of *Dundun* drums, but the most important one is called "*Lya-Ilu*" (mother of the drums) which has a range of about an octave—the exact range depending on the strength of the drummer.

The *Dundun* is perfectly suited to represent the Yoruba language because it can produce not only all the tones, but also all the glides. Tones are more significant in Yoruba than vowels and consonants. Many words are distinguished *only* by their tones, their vowels and consonants being exactly the same, e.g.,

qkq		husband
		hoe
		spear
		canoe

The nature of the language then explains why the drum can talk. Just as a Semitic language is intelligible if written with the consonants only, so many African languages are intelligible if represented by its tones alone. The talking drum does *not* use a kind of Morse system, as imagined by most non-Africans.

The Yoruba have many other drums besides *Dundun* and to some extent all these can talk. Most notable among them is "*Bata*" the special drum of Sango, the thunder god. *Bata* has likewise got two membranes, but they are of different sizes and are both beaten simultaneously. There are, however, no leather strings to tighten the membranes and the *Bata* drum cannot reproduce glides therefore. It is much more difficult to talk on it, and far more difficult to understand it.



Drummer playing *Dundun* drum.



Drummer playing *Bata* drum.

There is also a small wooden flute called "*eye*" on which the Yoruba can talk. It is practically extinct now, but it must have been very common in the past, because it is represented on many ancient carvings. At present, I know of only one person who is still playing it.

Finally, there is also a talking elephant tusk. I know two players who still use this extraordinary instrument. It consists of the tip of an elephant's tusk, has a hole in the side, through which the musician blows. All tones and glides are produced by holding the palm of the hand at different angles against the mouth of the tusk.

I have often been asked: "What does the talking drum talk about?" It may be used for various purposes. The king may summon people to his court with the help of it. Visitors to the king will be announced by the drum and messages may be sent even to the next village. But the important function of the drum is to play "*orikis*".

Orikis may be called the poetry of the Yoruba. They are ancient metaphorical descriptions of kings and gods. Always picturesque, often mysterious and obscure. Here are some specimens of the *orikis* of a Yoruba king, the Ogoa of Ikerre :

"He draws red palm oil from the necks of men."
 "However small the needle, it cannot be swallowed."

“It is not the snake that is afraid, but he who treads on it.”
 “The white hair of an albino cannot be dyed.”
 “The hunter thinks the monkey is not wise. The monkey *is*
 wise, but according to his own logic.”

Thus the drummer expresses the fact that his king is a great warrior drawing blood (palm oil) from his enemies. That he is invulnerable to attack (needle; snake). That once the king is installed, he cannot be removed (albino's hair cannot be dyed) and that he is wise past the understanding of his subjects (monkey).

These *orikis* are not difficult to interpret, but when collecting the *orikis* of a pagan god, one may be up against something like this:

“The eye of God does not grow any grass.”
 or “He mixes the heads of other birds with the heads of vulture.”

It is very difficult to get *orikis* translated nowadays. Few educated Yorubas can still understand the talking drum. Even if one gets the drummer to give one the words, younger Yoruba will mostly find the ancient language beyond them. They have learned Shakespeare at school, but many of them were forbidden to speak Yoruba in their colleges.

The chances of survival of this ancient poetry and music are negligible at the moment. In January, 1955, all children aged six will be sent to school compulsorily; and the talking drum is not on the new curriculum.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—Records in which examples of “talking drums” can be heard include:

- P.427 A. “Folk Music of Western Congo.”
 “Bambala Talking Drum.”
 Long Playing, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ r.p.m.
- P.441. “Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria.”
 “Yoruba Praises.”
 Long Playing, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ r.p.m. *Ethnic Folkways Library.*
- LF.1169. “Music of Africa Series.”
 “Congo Drums.” An interview with the Rev. W. Ford with description and demonstration of Lokele message drumming of the Upper Congo. Recorded by Hugh Tracey.
Decca. Long Playing 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ r.p.m.

These records can be obtained through the African Music Society.