

## THE DISCOVERY OF MULTIPLE ROCK GONGS IN NIGERIA

by

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The first recorded discovery of ringing rocks used for the production of musical notes was made at Birnin Kudu in Kano Emirate (9°30'E., 11°N.) in June, 1955, during field investigations of the recently discovered rock paintings, the first to be found in Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> The term 'rock gong' is here used to denote the small percentage of the numerous natural rock boulders, slabs, spalls and exfoliations abounding in the rocky hills of Nigeria which vibrate with a ringing tone when struck and which also show indisputable evidence of having been used as percussion instruments.

The rock gongs at Birnin Kudu were found in an archaeological context, for their distribution in relation to the seven painted caves so far discovered leaves little doubt that they are associated in some way with these sites. The rock gongs themselves are usually clustered within about one hundred feet of the paintings, whereas ringing rocks which have not been used are to be found scattered all over the outcrops of granite which cover an area of approximately two square miles in the gently undulating plains of this part of Kano Province.

At Dutsen Mesa where the first and most important paintings were found there are no less than ten groups of rock gongs within about a hundred feet of the rock shelter. The most spectacular group of gongs, however, was found at Dutsen Murufu in two small caves about twenty feet behind the rock shelter. Here we discovered a very faded, though remarkable painting of a dwarf shorthorn bull, a species now extinct in this part of the country. We later discovered that the brides of Birnin Kudu (now a staunchly Mohammedan community) go to this cave at dawn on their wedding day and return in the late afternoon to the town for the marriage ceremony. As they are apparently oblivious of the paintings it seems likely that this custom may be a vestigial survival of rites, now forgotten, which were most probably connected with the paintings and the rock gongs a few feet away. The children of the town at present play at hammering on these gongs, and in most places it is possible to distinguish their fresh chattermarks, usually close to the ground, from the old patinated depressions, which incidentally are frequently out of the reach of children. The information given to me was that there is no local knowledge of any ceremonies ever having been carried out at this place or in connection with any of the rock gongs, but this evidence will require more searching investigation.

The gongs at Dutsen Murufu were very probably used as *ensemble* instruments,<sup>2</sup> by a number of players, for otherwise it is difficult to explain away rather more than fifty hammered depressions on a dozen different rocks of which half weigh no more than a hundredweight or two, and half are huge masses of rock weighing several tons apiece. The size of the rocks apparently bears no direct relation to its tone, but the rocks must be free to vibrate in order to 'ring' and not touch the solid earth at any point. The rocks themselves are almost always absolutely solid; when they are incipient exfoliations they give a hollow, less metallic, tone.

With a borrowed set of tuning forks, and relying on the ears of the two best drummers in the town, each depression was tuned and marked with the approximate note or semi-tone. Eleven of the notes were identified in this way, and the other two were

<sup>1</sup>It is hoped that a description of the paintings and preliminary excavations will appear in a subsequent issue of *Man*.

<sup>2</sup>This was discussed with Mr. Hugh Tracey at the African Music Society's headquarters near Johannesburg, who confirmed that this is the most likely explanation.

found by checking back over the biggest of the multiple gongs, on parts of it which had been only slightly used. This result, of course, proves little except that a detailed musical analysis would be worth attempting.

At Birnin Kudu all tests were carried out with the use of wooden hoe handles to avoid bruising the surface of the rocks, and possibly spoiling the evidence of their antiquity. Tape recordings were made of a group of five local drummers beating out all their local drum rhythms. After practice they were able to simulate the drumming of all the five drums known to them, including even the hour-glass shaped 'kalangu' or talking drum.

In September I visited Rui, near Bokkos (50 miles due south of Jos), to re-examine a rock I had casually seen there in 1940 with certain depressions which I had found it difficult to interpret at the time. I found the rock deeply buried on a shrine, but the visit led to the discovery of rock gongs at Bokkos, Jukudel, Mbar and Daffo, which were found to be in current use. They are invariably struck with fist-sized lumps of stone. They are called "kwangalang" in the Ron dialect at Bokkos, and "konworiang" at Daffo, onomatopoeic names which make it perhaps not surprising that I next found rock gongs at the village of Gwong and at the hamlet of Gingiring a mile or two to the East of Jos itself. These were well patinated and not known to the Jarawa inhabitants, who are, however, familiar with rock gongs at the village of Fobur, some ten miles to the South-East, where the Jarawa initiation rites take place.

Rock gongs were found and recorded at Kwoi, Nok and Chori in Southern Zaria Province. They have indeed been found in hilly country wherever a determined effort has been made to locate them.

I have in addition received unconfirmed but reliable reports of these instruments being used in the following places: near Chafe in Sokoto Province, at Kufena near Zaria City, at Shira Hill in Katagum Division<sup>3</sup>, at Bage near Nafada, at Kusarha Hill near Gwoza in the Northern Cameroons, at Hinna in the lower Gongola valley, and most recently at Old Oyo and Igbetti in the Western Region<sup>4,5</sup> I have also had a report from Mr. M. H. V. Fleming of the Education Department that, when in the Sudan in 1929, he noticed a rock with a number of cup-like depressions in a village to the North of the Sixth Cataract on the West bank of the Nile, which on enquiry was described to him as a bell.

The contemporary use of these gongs varies greatly, though they are most frequently used in secret religious ceremonies, often in connection with circumcision at initiation rites (Mbar, Bokkos, Daffo, Fobur). They are used at Nok in the ceremonies just prior to the harvest of the first *acha*<sup>6</sup> when certain grass seeds are carried up to the cave by the unmarried girls and ground on the solid rock. Here and in several other places the gongs are closely associated with corn-grinding grooves worn down into the solid granite.

At Kusarha Hill in the Northern Cameroons they are said to be used for communicating with spirits whose reply is received in the form of echoes from the depths of the cave.

At Nok and elsewhere in Jabaland they are said to have been used as warning signals of the approach of Fulani cavalry during the Holy Wars of the nineteenth century, and indeed the sound will carry up to two or three miles in favourable conditions.

They are in addition used in many places also for merrymaking, for they provide an excellent accompaniment for singing and dancing, resembling in sound and rhythmic

<sup>3</sup>These rocks were seen many years ago by Mr. W. F. Jeffries, Director of the Northern Region Literature Agency, Zaria.

<sup>4</sup>This was reported by Dr. Morton Williams of W.A.I.S.E.R., Ibadan.

<sup>5</sup>A similar rock was shown to Father Kevin Carroll on a visit to the Nok Hills in 1950.

<sup>6</sup>A diminutive cereal crop confined to the hill regions.

use the conventional double hand-gongs of iron<sup>7</sup> which are so widespread in Equatorial Africa. They are frequently closely associated with rock slides, sometimes as long as 150 feet, on which the boys amuse themselves by sliding down on small rock sledges from the tops of bare granite hills.

It is somewhat surprising that these rock gongs have escaped serious notice for so long. It is still premature to speculate on their origin, but it is possible that they came into current use with the introduction of blacksmithing, for most African smiths use anvils of solid rock. It is equally possible that they may eventually prove to stretch back into the remotest antiquity and to have been among men's earliest musical instruments, for the men who depended for life itself on their ability to fashion implements by flaking must have been conscious enough of the musical quality of stone.



(a) Rock gongs at Mbar, exposed to the weather. The lichen does not cover the hammered depressions.



(b) View of Dutsen Mesa with painted rock shelter protected by steel screening and masonry. Three rock gongs visible in the photograph are marked with an X. The gallery shown at bottom left hand corner gives access to other multiple gongs.

<sup>7</sup>The name for 'rock gong' in the Ham (Jaba) language is 'Kuge', which is merely the Hausa word for the double iron hand gong.



(c) Cave adjacent to the one shown in plate (A) at Dutsen Murufu showing two large multiple gongs and smaller ones in the shadows behind.



(d) The large rock gong at Dutsen Murufu at Birnin Kudu on which seven different notes were identified. The lip of the rock spall has been worn to a horizontal position by continuous hammering.