

TALKING DRUM: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN A CHANGING AFRICAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Talking Drum is a special musical instrument in West African societies. It is the art of expressing meaning with sound. It is used to educate, entertain, inform, and condemn. It appears in ceremonies in West African nations. Talking drum is of different sizes and it plays different functions in gatherings. It could be regarded as a mouth for the less privileged ones in the society. Talking drum is exceptional and special with its artistic and aesthetic distinctiveness. Talking drum is so powerful and could be utilized as catalyst to bond or dismantle a community with the ways and manners the drummers make use of the stick. This paper investigates the forms, functions and problems of talking drum in Yorubaland of West Africa. The challenges of cultural contacts on the cultural artifact is also examined. Interview method and existing documents are used to support the presentation. The conclusion suggests ways to surmount the challenges being encountered and solutions are proffered on how to maximize the benefits embedded in the use of talking drum.

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Introduction

Nigeria is one of the numerous nations in Africa with about 180 million population. It is divided into thirty-six states and 774 local governments for ease of administration. The major tribes include, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Nigeria, according to Akindele and Adegbite (21) has more than 400 indigenous languages apart from the English, French and Arabic. Nigeria is blessed with diverse cultures. Thus, Nigeria is a multicultural nation. Multiculturalism, which is seen to be the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural

groups and is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles. Culture is a dynamic phenomenon encompassing the totality of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and world-views. It is an integral part of every human society and all social groups are characterized by it. In other words, it is that “complex pattern of behavior and material achievement which are produced, learned and shared by members of a community” (Ameh, 2002: 165). Through this cultural understanding, mutual co-existence which is the backbone for progress subsists. Drum has been in existence before the western technological inventions, it served and still serves as a means of long-distance communication among the populace particularly in Yorubaland and in West Africa generally. Michael Kernan (2000) while expressing the status of drums in Cuba during the slave trade era, reiterates that, the master restricted the Yoruba in the Havana and Matanzas districts of Cuba, from making use of drum as it could be used to spread messages in defiance among slaves and as well as a petition to gods. This assertion highlights other functions of drum apart from dancing.

Yoruba people are mostly found in Africa. The larger percentage are in the western part of Nigeria. Some are in Togo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Benin republic. We have some Yoruba in diaspora such are in Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad & Tobago, Puerto Rico. In everywhere you find these people, they share the same cultural practice and beliefs. In all these places, drum plays significant roles during their traditional festivals, celebrations, worshiping and glorification of gods. They hold much belief in their traditions. Among the cultural artifacts used to enliven their daily activities include; music, drum, oral traditions and several others. It is through cultures that human beings find their true identity. The Yoruba identify with one another with their various cultures. Drum has become a representation of African culture. It is common in every gathering with various connotations. Drums are used in special occasions and ceremonies, celebrating naming ceremonies or death of aged ones. The use of drum adds coloration and flavor to such an event. Drum enhances effects and style of the merriments to some bits of the culture.

In the present day, change is constant in human being, despite these changes, drum continues to play a vital role in communities. There have been a lot of changes and improvement on drum. These changes are seen in the physical structures; forms and usages of drums. Drum could be said to be playing three main significant functions; signal mode, the dance mode and the speech mode. (Nketia, 1968:27). Looking at these modes, it is obvious that drum usually accompany music, musical speech form and the song form. Talking drum is used to speak the Yoruba language, recite prayers, greetings, announcements, making jokes, praises and condemnation, and finally, it is used for religious poetry. It is also used to ridicule and correct ills in the society. It serves as a means to excite and increase the intensity of spiritual enlightenment in the audience and adherents of such a religious body. In the spiritual settings, drum serves as a connection between humans and the spiritual world.

In Yorubaland, the kings and the nobles engage drummers who stay with them daily. In palaces of the Yoruba kings, Orangun of Ila, Alaafin of Oyo, Ooni of Ife, and in other prominent palaces, drummers are always present to enliven, to inform the king of any stranger in the vicinity, to entertain the king and relieve him of boredom. They play the **dùndún** with other drums. These drummers in the palace are abreast of history of the town. They could be likened to the griot who are oral praise singers. They sing the praises of the king. Those drummers are commendable for good performances, by the king and the nobles in the palace. Some of these drummers wake the king up in the morning. The major message of the drummer in such a situation is the eulogy of the fore-fathers of the king. These drummers make their earnings from this style.

The language of the drum requires competency both in encoding and decoding, there must be a reasonable level of comprehension to decode the language as being demonstrated by the drummer. There is the need to develop sense of construction of meanings within the process of decoding the speech of drum. Drummers are conversant with the people's history and are able to produce such with the drum whenever the situation demands. The importance attached to pitches is of relevant in encoding and understanding the sounds of the drums. It is evident that milieu and the drummers that produce the sounds attributed to a drum in a particular occasion are prerequisite in interpreting drum speech.

Drummer can teach the dancers how to dance, in the Yoruba social milieu, we have such a case as

<i>Bó bá se pé è mi ni wò ni ni wo ni</i>	<i>If I were you</i>
<i>N'ba fi apá jó fapa jo fapa jo</i>	<i>I would dance with my hands</i>
<i>Bó bá se pé mi ni wo ni ni wo ni</i>	<i>I would dance with my hands</i>
<i>N' ba fese jo fese jo fese jo</i>	<i>If I were you, I would dance with my legs</i>
<i>Bó bá se pé mi ni wo ni ni wo ni</i>	<i>If I were you,</i>
<i>N' ba fi gbogbo ara gbo ninininini</i>	<i>I would have dance with my entire body.</i>

This is a way of teaching an amateur dancer how to dance to the rhythmic patterns as lead by the drummer.

Theoretical framework: Cultural studies theory

To suitably analyze this topic, we desire to make use of cultural studies theory. The theory was developed in Britain as a reaction against specific disciplinary and political positions, Waugh (2006:245). Cultural studies are also considered as positivist-empiricist-research method. It deals with culture and civilization. It is a tradition that ascribes to literature the power to shape individuals and instill in them shared understandings and social values. This theory replaces the questions of aesthetic value derived from literary studies with questions of subjectivity, identity, social meanings, values and power. Culture, according to the culturalists, is one of

the apparatuses whose aim is to instill meanings and values in individual. If cultural studies are concerned with the struggles over meaning that reshapes and defines the terrain of culture, it could be appropriately used to study the politics of drum in any given situation. The recent trend of globalization brings about hegemonisation, whereby certain culture dominates and overwhelms the other. This is the result of cultural contact which results in cultural struggle. Many nationals of the developing nations drop their own culture for the foreign ones. Culture remains unstable. The final or guaranteed culture could not be determined. Interpretation of the sound produced by the drummer validates the correct meanings. Meanings of a particular sound of drum is exclusively reserved to the drummer in most cases. Hence, the wise and popular saying in Yoruba that, *'kò séni tó mèdè àyàn bí eni tó mú òpá ówó'* No one can interpret the drummer's language as accurate as the drummer himself

Types of drum

Drumming could be said to begin with oral tradition. The early man used it for several purposes which are retained till date. During the slave trade era, slaves took it along to the masters' place of abode during the slave trade. The slave used it to brighten their days during the work in the sugarcane plantations in Cuba and in other West Indices nations during the colonial era. Drums are of different types, of various sizes and for diverse purposes. Those drums for religious functions are considered sacred and reserved for the deities.

Dùndún

Dùndún is carved laboriously from a single piece of wood and topped with goatskin; they are equipped with leather cords that can be used to adjust the tones. Bells and a circle of beeswax on the drumheads produce even more musical variation. Those types with bells at the edge are referred to as the "dùndún" in Yoruba. It plays the leading role. The bells at the edge adds to the aesthetic in sounding pattern and makes it melodious. It is usually handled by a competent and a versatile drummer. Dùndún is the biggest and adorned with metals. The set of metals rings, "saworo," add to the harmonious sounds which make the all-encompassing pleasant-sounding. It leads other drums and correct other whenever they want to go the other way.

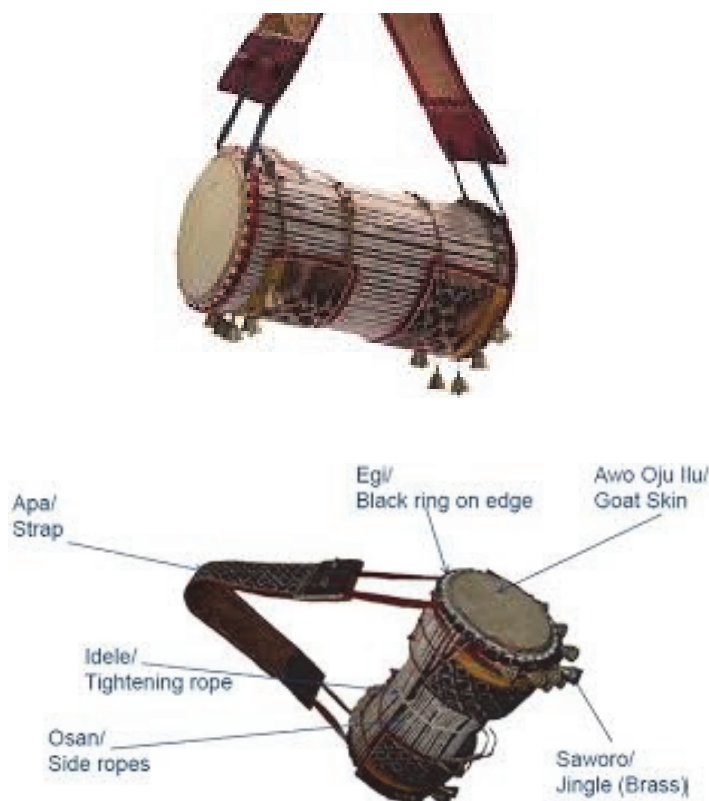


Image 1. Dundun

The above is a full description of a typical talking drum, *dùndún*. This particular drum can be played alone to be meaningful. It has everything necessary to make it melodious. The competency of the drummer is another factor that determines its functionality.

Besides *dùndún*'s functions as musical instrument, it also sings and speaks. This aspect in talking drum may not be easily distinguishable as the two functions are interwoven. A speech may be rendered as song and vice-versa in Yoruba.

The playing style of the talking drum is centered on producing sustained notes by hitting the head of the drum with the stick-holding hand. Squeezing and releasing the vertical strings to tighten and loosen the heads and the accompany free hand used to dampen and change tones immediately after being hit. The harder the hit the louder the volume of the drum.

The religious drum

Yoruba is known to be multicultural in nature, this affects their beliefs and actions. There are several deities being worshipped. There is the belief that these deities are capable of making the adherents to be prosperous or otherwise. Some deities are known to have special drum. These drums are to invoke the spirit of the ancestors and those of the deities. Cult members like the *Ogbóni* and *Obàtálá* use *Igbìn* drum. The size of this particular drum does not allow free and easy movement. It is usually reserved in the shrines of cult members. Sometimes in these cults, ceremonies, festivals and funerals may not be complete without this drum. No other type of drum could be used in place of this particular drum, *ìgbìn* drum by the members in the shrine.

In Ila-Orangun, a town in the North-East area of Osun State, there is a particular deity, *Àwòrò-Òsé*. *Àwòrò Osé*, a deity special and unique to the town, uses *àgèrè* during his annual celebration. *Agèrè* is a special drum beaten by specialists. This drum is unique and usually used during the annual festival of *Awòrò-òsé* in Ila-Orangun. Drummers use stick to force sound out of it. *Àwòrò* dances to the rhythmic pattern of this drum. This drum resembles *ìgbìn* used by the *Ogbóni* and the *Obàtálá* worshippers. The size distinguishes them.

Bàtá

Bata is another type of religious drum in the Yoruba cultural settings. It is not in common use partly because it is mostly used by the *Sango* worshippers. It is the solitary drum for *Sango*, a deity in Yoruba. Some have the belief that using such a common apparatus of a particular deity is a symbol and indication of having the feelings for such. They therefore refrain and condemn such in totality.



Image 2. Bata Drum

Functions of drum

Many drummers in Yoruba society are usually members of a family popularly referred as “Àyàn”. The profession is noble and hereditary in many Yoruba societies. They are oratures. They speak in stylized, epithetic and in proverbial manners with the drum. The knowledge of the drummer and his eloquence in the use of his language of the immediate environment determine his level of performance. He makes use of his first language to pass across several messages with his drum.

In every society, drum has been playing two major roles: religious and social. In the Yoruba context, drum plays some vital roles, which are determined by some factors. Drum is so vital in the cultural embodiment of the Yoruba. It performs emotional expression, aesthetic, entertainment, communication, symbolic validation, social institutions and religious rituals, contributing to the continuity and stability of culture and integrating the society. The variation in the use of drum include, the context of performance, the nature of the drum, the intended meaning of the drum and the organized procedures. In ritual drumming, the drums are played for the orishas, the Yoruba gods. It is believed that the drums themselves are praising the orishas." Such a praise enhances the spirits of the gods Orisà to grant the wishes of such a person earlier than others.

Challenges confronting drum

Drum and music are products of culture. Culture differs from one community to another. This difference in music is a universal phenomenon which goes with drum. Culture varies from one community to another and this variation brings about imitation. Such an imitation brings about foreign and unethical practices in other cultures. Many cultural practices that are considered unethical are imported to another culture thereby constitutes menace in the society. The influx of foreign religion in the continent of Africa generally and in Yoruba states in particular brings about many differences and cultural adulterations. Drum among other traditions is also affected in adverse ways. Consequently, there is little or no flair for this cultural artifact among the Yoruba youths again. They embrace foreign culture and traditions vague knowledge.

Many Muslims, most especially, the youth frown at drum and condemn it with passion. The sacred book of the Muslims, the holy Quran, does not categorically condemn it. There is actually no verse in the Quran where music is directly forbidden, nor a verse where it is allowed. The verse that Muslims refer to states:

But there are among men those who purchase idle tales without knowledge or meaning to mislead men from the path of Allah and throw ridicule on the path, for such there will be a humiliating penalty. Quran 31:6

Music, singing etc. are referred to as idle talks in Islam by certain sects. Music is condemned by certain Islamic sects because it is believed that it promotes drugs, drinking of alcohol encourages fornication, indecent dressings and foul languages on many occasions by the singers. Hadith Bukhari Vol. 7, book 69 number 494 v states that:

From among my followers, there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and use of musical instruments, as lawful.... To these people musical instruments have been placed alongside huge sins in this hadith, suggesting their use also as a sin.

The Islamic religion is not categorical on the use of drum, it only forbids music among people of opposite sex. Women should not and are discouraged to dance where opposite sex is present and vice-versa. It is the belief of the Muslims that certain music is forbidden. If music is forbidden, drum, the accompanying and the main ornament in producing music is forbidden, drum will definitely have no place to stand. Drum is categorized as an amusement of speech in the Islamic way. Some Muslims abstain totally from music and all its embellishments. This has negative effects on the use of drum among Muslims.

There is certainly a difference of opinion in the Christendom as to whether drums are an appropriate accompaniment to songs in the worship services of the church. Some welcome the use of drum devotedly. To these in favour of drum in churches, it seems to appeal to them, and they provide an opportunity for another kind of talent to be put to use. They considered drum as agent that promote excitement in singing. It makes the situation in churches to be more appealing. In the other hand, others consider drums as unnecessary distraction. They perceive drum as a worldly interference. They are disgusted at what they see in the situation where drums are being used in the church services. The ways and manner of members during singing and dancing in many occasions are worrisome and unreligious. They are also of the opinion that the presence of drums and other musical instruments will overshadow the messages to be passed across to the congregation, thereby make going to churches as going to music jamborees. In the Christendom, there is no clear condemnation or approval on the use of drum in churches.

Migration

The materialistic nature of the younger ones in the present era constitutes another problem. The state of drumming in Africa is of great concern to Oba Adetoyese, The Timi Of Ede, according to (Sotunsa 2009:22),

It is a great pity that such a rich tradition is in danger of being lost. Much is already gone, because for the last fifty years, young Nigerians with higher education looked down on their traditions... only if the talking drum is taught in schools can we be sure that this noble art will not be lost.

The present generation cares less for their traditions they are much concerned about foreign cultures which were brought to their community via the internet, videos, and the hegemonizing brought by the globalization. To these younger ones, anything foreign is of more value than their own indigenous ones. Drum, one of the cultural arts in Yoruba is also negatively affected.

Ill behaviors, drug addiction, self-esteem, all these are exhibited in the ways and manners the present drum users use drum. They attach immoral behaviours and indecent dressings and nakedness, to music, a close associate of drum. Many indulge in smoking and taking alcoholic substance before they can dance.

Suggestions

Drum could be judiciously considered as subject of study in schools. It could serve as a course of study in the university system, by so doing, it will boost the cultural image of the community and serve as a means of creating employment for those graduates who may excel in the art of drumming. The skill of making and understanding drum speech can be globalized and popularized to make it serve as profession which will serve as sources of income to many. Not only will it reduce unemployment, it will also add to the aesthetic pleasure in the field of humanities.

Conclusion

Drum, an aspect of culture has been considered in this paper, the types and roles it plays in the selected community is also revealed. It is very pertinent to return to our indigenous cultural artifacts in a way to showcase our historical and cultures to the outside world and minimize the issue of unemployment that has led to many issues for discussion across different disciplines.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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