

## TALKING DRUM - THE BASICS

### What?

The Yorùbá drumming tradition differs from European use of drums in that it is not simply music but a sophisticated form of language. This language ranges from simple signals to elaborately coded messages and as there is no direct correlation between the sounds created by the instruments and alphabetic symbols it is, by definition, a nonverbal form of communication. By modulating the pitch, a drummer can mimic the intonation, tone, stress, rhythm and even emotion of human speech.

The principle Talking Drum is hourglass shaped and called the Gangan or Dundun, which means 'sweet sound'. This instrument holds a very significant place in Yorùbá folklore and culture as the source of history, proverbs, poetry and daily life. It is used in company of a supporting ensemble, and the whole Talking Drum family plays an important part in laying the rhythmic foundation for the lead drums to interact and talk in their environment.



*An Iyalu Drum from IROKO's ensemble*

### Where?

Many regions of West Africa have strong drumming traditions including Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria. The Talking Drum is however most prominent among the Yorùbá ethnic group, principally in Nigeria but also found in neighbouring countries like Togo and Benin republic, as well as among other ethnic groups such as the Hausa.



*A Dondo drum from Ghana*

In the diaspora Talking Drums are also alive and well, including in North America and Europe. This brings challenges as audiences who do not understand the Yorùbá language can appreciate the musical quality of the drumming but cannot understand its meaning.



## Who?

The Talking Drum is taught to young children, traditionally boys, who will learn to play the instruments through both formal and informal educational processes, from relatives or sometimes at churches. However, to become a master drummer capable of creating complex phrases and conversations, takes great talent and many years of studious dedication as reaching a professional standard requires being eloquent in reciting thousands of traditional proverbs on the drum.

Traditionally, the Talking Drum is closely linked to griots who are West African storytellers, historians, poets and subsequently custodians of the oral tradition.



*The Oduduwa Talking Drummers:  
a well-established multi-cultural troupe formed by Ayan Ayandosu,  
known as Ayan De First*

## When?

The Talking Drum tradition is very old indeed. It is believed to have been introduced as a means of communication during the inauguration of the Alaafin of Oyo and developed throughout the period of the Oyo Empire established in the twelfth century in South-West, Nigeria.

As with the visual and symbolic non-verbal communication systems we have already heard about, the practice of Talking Drums was disrupted by the arrival of European colonialism when, in some cases, it was banned, but has nevertheless survived and thrived to this day.



## SPEAKING WITH TALKING DRUMS

To understand how the Talking Drum speaks, we must have some understanding of the language that it talks in. Yorùbá is a tonal language, with words having multiple meanings depending on the pitch at which they are spoken - high, medium or low. The dundun drum has a pitch range that can stretch more than two musical octaves whilst also matching the melodic capacities of other instruments. This means that in the hands of a skilled drummer, it can produce all of the possible microtones of the Yorùbá language. However, just as Yorùbá speakers must be careful to get the precise tone right, it takes a high level of expertise to manipulate both the drum stick and the tension of the leather straps, in order to create the correct tones and glides (and avoid misunderstandings!)

### The Ensemble

As we have already mentioned, each drum in the ensemble is important for laying the rhythmic foundation for the lead drums to interact and talk in their environment. Check out some of the different drums and their names below (with photos of IROKO's very own ensemble!). This is not the entire family mind; as Ayan De First told us

*"There are more than two families of talking drum. Like every nuclear family, there is also an extended family."*



#### Iyá ilù

Meaning 'the mother drum' the ìyá ilù is traditionally the lead though it can also play support. It is the largest drum in the ensemble and the only one to be decorated with small metallic bells called saworo which provide extra sound. This drum is usually used to dictate the pace, determine the song and gives clues and prompts to the rest of the ensemble. It is usually played by an experienced master talking drummer.

#### Adamo

This drum has the widest tonal range and it is therefore the most popular instrument for using as the lead instrument that does the talking!







### Omele Gangan

Roughly translated, omele means ‘accompanying rhythmic instrument’ and these are the smallest sized drums in the ensemble. They are usually tied up so that when played they emit a fixed high pitch. Their part in the ensemble is repetitive. These instruments are normally played by younger and inexperienced members of the family.

### Gudugudu

Known as the father drum, unlike the hourglass shaped drums in the ensemble, this instrument is easy to recognise by its bowl shape. Its carrying strap goes around the neck so as to hold the instrument directly in front of the player. The waxed spot which you can see in the centre of the membrane produces a low tone, whilst the rest of the skin creates a higher, sharp tone.



### Sakara



This drum is made with a strong, thick clay rim and played with lightweight straight sticks. They play an open tone and can be made to talk by pushing the softened skin from the inside. In the hands of a good player, they can sound as powerful as the other Yorùbá Talking Drums, alongside which they now often play.

### Omele Batá

These are the smallest drums in the Batá family. The instrument consists of three drums which can be used both to talk or as accompaniment. They replicate the high, medium and low tones of Yorùbá. They are played with two leather straps called bilala or with bendy plastic strips, but not usually with the hands.



### Some Igbo instruments that also ‘speak’



#### Ogene

This is a large metal bell that has a conical, almost flat shape and is hollow inside. The sound comes from the vibrations caused when the instrument is struck, as the sound echoes inside the hollow, metal body of the instrument. It is usually struck with a soft wooden stick. It was mainly used to convey messages from the king or for general information.





### Ekwe

This is a cylindrical shaped drum, made out of wood (usually a tree trunk) and hollow inside. It has rectangular cavity slits and was used for communication over long distances. It can produce rhythms to connote anything from celebration to emergencies.

### Akpele Gourd Trumpet

Known as either the Akpele or the Opi, this is a slender fluted trumpet made from a gourd or calabash and predominantly associated with the Anioma people – or Western Igbo. Used at special occasions and extensively in folk music, it is a carrier of customs and lore and essential to the traditions of the Anioma people.



### Oja - Talking Flute

This wind instrument is used to create a sound which serves to announce the arrival or departure of a traditional ruler (Eze, Igwe, Obi) or a big masquerade. All horns made from animal bone, such as the Oja are granted respect and utility according to the values and norms attached to the animals from which it is produced. As music teacher Mmaduabuchi Gerald Eze explained in a recent interview with the BBC – “it is not just playing sounds. It is an esoteric art.”

### Military Bugles and Hunting Horns

It is not just Africans that use instruments as a form of non-verbal communication. In Western culture, bugles and trumpets have long been used in military contexts, to communicate simple messages and signals through short tunes. Traditionally, this was a way of making clear messages over the noise and confusion of the battlefield. It has remained integral to training in both the military and navy of many Western countries. Bugle calls include signals to call troops to attention, to charge and even to let soldiers know it is a mealtime!



In Britain the traditional (and now controversial) rural sport of hunting also uses a horn (as seen in the opposite picture) to communicate with a pack of hounds. The signals used are also understood by the mounted followers, so that they are able to follow what is happening.



## Playing the drum

We asked master drummer Richard Olatunde Baker to explain how to make the Talking Drum speak. Here is what he told us:

*“Talking drums are usually played whilst the drummer is standing up and are often played in processions. The drummer hangs the drum strap over their shoulder so that it fits snugly into their armpit. The other arm holds the stick and is positioned below the drum, so that the length of the curved stick reaches up to the centre of the drum face. Comfort is important when wearing talking drums, as they are often played for a few hours at a time. It is now common on smaller talking drums for the leather strap to be replaced with a soft cloth or towel strap, for the sake of greater comfort and better grip on the shoulder.”*

*“The essential playing technique is to squeeze the drum under one armpit, using different amounts of pressure and to simultaneously beat the drum with the stick. The different squeezing pressures produce the different pitches. The larger talking drums are played by squeezing the drum against the thigh, whilst simultaneously pulling a small handful of the twisted goat skin rope away from the body. There are many sophisticated and subtle talking drum playing techniques employed, using both hands and the stick which significantly embellish the sound. Overall, the talking drum sound is a mixture of percussion and melody. The drum faces can be broken easily if the player doesn't use the correct striking methods, however it is common for the skins to be replaced anyway after several months of playing, as the drum skin naturally becomes less supple.”*





## THE HISTORY & TRADITIONAL USES OF TALKING DRUMS

### Origins

Music has always held a pivotal role in the rich cultural history of what is now Nigeria. Prior to the arrival of European colonialism in the middle of the nineteenth century, music was regarded as an integral part of social, religious and ritual events. It was also rarely performed in isolation, but would be played alongside dance, poetry and other dramatic expression, and often in combination with visual arts such as sculpture, design, painting and costuming. The Talking Drum is very much a part of this arts ecosystem and people are thus generally familiar with its sounds. A long-established and dynamic relationship between the drummer and audiences has been developed through repetition and communication. Performances are immersive and the Talking Drum is a part of everyday life for the Yorùbá. As Ayan De First put it when we spoke to him on the subject:

*“When artists are performing back home [in Nigeria] we don’t have spectators, but we always have participants.”*

The dun dun (Talking Drum) family has been present since ancient times. The instrument is said to have been first brought to the Yorùbá by a man called Ayan - a native of Ibarapa land, found in the South Western corner of Òyó state. Though he was an outsider, Ayan taught the art of drumming to Yorùbá families and was deified as a God of music after his death. The ascendance of the Òyó empire in the seventeenth century would have been a key factor in the distribution of the drum throughout Yorùbáland.

Ayan’s legacy is so celebrated that once drumming became a hereditary calling, passed down from generation to generation, drumming families became known by the name of Ayan. Until this day, expert drummers are accorded a high respect, not just because of their great technical skills, but because they are the custodians of this long line of tradition. Ayan clans can now be found in most Yorùbá towns among the Òyò, Ìbàdàn, Èkitì, Òṣun and Ìgbómìnà people.



*Ayan Agalu by Jekein Lato-Unah*

### Making the instruments



The Yorùbá talking drums are made from the wood of the tall Apa tree, found deep in the forest in South West Nigeria. Traditionally a selected tree would only be felled after the woodcutter has made a prayer and offering to Ayanagalu (the Spirit of drumming, who resides in the tree) for permission. Upon approval, the woodcutter could then cut down the tree. The drum maker buys this wood from the woodcutter and begins the carving process, using an intricate series of hand tools.

*An IROKO drum in the early stages of being made in Oyo, Nigeria.*





Once the wood has been carved into an hourglass shape, the drum is ready for skinning. Each open end is covered with thin goat or calf skin, which is stitched on wet, one at a time, using narrow thread made from goat skin and additional lines of thick twisted goat skin rope is used to join the two opposite drum faces together. During this process a leather ring that protects the rim of each drum face is also sewn on. Once left in the sun to dry for a day, the skin is re-stretched, a leather strap is attached and then the drum is ready to play, using a curved wooden stick known as "opa".

*IROKO's drums close to completion!*

## Teaching and learning

As we have already mentioned the art was taught from a young age, first through learning to play the lesser drums of the ensemble before moving on to master the Talking Drum. This remains the practice in Nigeria today. The process is always done orally - as scholar Dr Yomi Daramola says "Writing dundun music down (i.e.: with symbols) only confuses things!" Discussing how he learned to play dundun, Lekan Babalola describes the hard work he put in as a child:

*"On a daily basis, you go to school and you come back from school and you play the 3 o'clock service. Every 3 hours there is a service in the church so I came out of the church, and this is every day I have to play music three times, maybe six times a day, every three hours. So 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 9 o'clock. Every day!"*

## Traditional Uses

Historically the Talking Drum has been used for a huge range of things, including to communicate across large distances and from village to village, bringing people together, settling disputes and serving as a memory device to help people remember important events. It is important that the Talking Drum has a living history, with traditional uses being practiced and developed today.



*Church service in London.*

Funmi Adewole, had very interesting things to say about what 'traditional' really means:





*“My understanding of a traditional form does not mean the form is out of use or it never innovates, or there is no innovation. It continues to become innovated, but it is used in a context which pre-dated colonialism.”*

Funmi was speaking about dance, but we can see how the same argument applies to the Talking Drum and the other non-verbal language systems we have considered. For example, think of the contemporary artists who use Nsibidi and Uli alongside other scripts and symbols in their practice.



*Young girl playing an English Nursery Rhyme during ‘Speaking without Voice project’ launch.*

Perhaps one of the Talking Drum’s first uses (and one which it still fulfils today, despite the onset of modern communication systems) was as a broadcaster and instrument of summons. The sound of the òyá ilù would have everybody stop in their tracks and listen to its message. Scholar Oyeniyi Osundina puts it this way: “everybody owes allegiance to it and does everything it announces” and notes that the drums were put to lively use communicating messages during the debates surrounding independence in 1960.

Oral poetry, proverbs, songs and chants can be rhythmically replicated on the drum and used in ceremonies. Another reason why the Talking Drum is so deeply interwoven with Yorùbá culture is its rich ties to the language. Just as the tradition replicates proverbs, it also creates new ones. According to Ayan De First:

*“The talking drummers themselves, they actually sat down and composed so many proverbs, so many words, and many expressions”*



For a current example, young people of British-Nigerian heritage are using and adopting the modern Nigerian ‘Tungba’ musical style (rhythmic dance hall tunes with catchy repetitive melodies of Yorùbá language origin) to modify the tradition of speaking with the Talking Drum. They use rhythms to talk about issues that resonate with them and their lives in the UK. They are using the Talking Drum and ‘Talking Drum Beatboxing’ to communicate amongst themselves, make social commentaries, pass on advice amongst their peers and find a lighter way to deal with heavy social issues affecting them e.g. knife crime. For example:

*‘Omòdé ju beef sí lè, ju beef sí lè’: (Young one, drop the argument, drop the argument!) – a reference to the knife crime within the Black community in Britain.*

*‘Omò èlè, ogbón yín ni mo rí, kì í she fingernails’: ‘Young girl, my love is for your intellect, not for your fingernails!’.*



*‘Bata drummer. Source: <https://jiji-blog.com/2017/05/nigerian-traditional-dances-wont-able-resist-joining/>’*

So, when the Talking Drum speaks it is voicing Oriki (Yorùbá poetry), proverbs and the oral tradition of documenting events, carrying a social history of the Yorùbá people or making social commentaries in its rhythms.

Talking Drums also have a sacred function which pre-dates both Christianity and Islam and is intrinsically connected to the traditional religion of òrìṣà devotion, and particularly the Sàngó, Egúngún Èsù and Oya cults. Separate from the dundun tradition, the drum used in these religious contexts is called a bàtá. This instrument is hard to make, even trickier to play than dundun and also harder to understand, in many cases demanding knowledge of sacred texts. With the spread of Christianity, the bàtá drum with its association of òrìṣà worship became less popular, whereas the dundun continued to be used both in secular contexts, and gradually within the church. Lekan Babalola describes how the bàtá drum is used differently to the dundun as follows:

*“It is not a drum that we bring out every day. It is like your bagpipe... So, when we are doing a party, marriage, everything, we play dùndún, but it is only when we are doing a ritual that we bring out bàtá.”*

Finally, the Talking Drum had an important role in celebrations. Historically in Yorùbáland, palace musicians would often entertain the oba (the ruler) and his ijoye (chiefs) in the evenings. This celebratory role remains prevalent to this day, with dundun drums being played at occasions such as naming ceremonies, housewarmings, chieftaincy, weddings, coronations and anniversaries.





The drumming tradition has thus long sat alongside that of traditional dance. Communication between drummers and dancers during performance is sometimes characterised by a specific rhythmic language called eno which instructs the dancer on which movement to make, but the relationship is more dynamic than this would suggest. Contemporary African dance researcher and practitioner Funmi Adewole described this to us as follows:

*“It is a kind of play on stage... like an improvisational play. The drummer is giving the dancer these instructions and the dancer is interpreting them in creative ways. Sometimes the dancer subverts what the drummer is saying, by doing what the drummer is asking but in a way the drummer did not expect... and the audience would know that and laugh and cheer, at how the drummer and the dancer are playing off each other.”*

This is important during Egungun (Yorùbá masquerades) - annual festivals of ancestral reverence which involve elaborately costumed and masked figures. The Talking Drum is used to instruct, praise, warn and inspire the steps of the masquerade.



Egungun masqueraders, Source: Freedomonline.





## CONTEMPORARY AND TRANSNATIONAL USES OF TALKING DRUMS

*“The Talking Drum was, for me, the first sound that really excited me when I was a child in Nigeria.” Femi Elufowoju, Theatre Director*

Today the Talking Drum is still frequently found in churches, festivals, wedding ceremonies and at carnivals across Nigeria. The Talking Drum has survived and stood the test of time, more robustly than the other three systems that we have looked at on Speaking Without Voice, with a vibrant life right up until the present generation, both in Nigeria and her diasporas. Whereas traditionally, it would have only been played by men, nowadays women also play the instrument.

In the twentieth century its uses were diversified as it became incorporated into the popular music of West Africa. In Nigeria’s Jùjú music, smaller drums from the ensemble, such as the omele are played alongside modern synthesizers, the electric bass and saxophone, to follow the pitch of popular melodies.



*Drummer, Simisola Omoayan*

Musicians such as King Sunny Adé and Ebenezer Obey incorporated the talking drum to Jùjú music in this way, to great acclaim and its influences can also be found in the internationally successful genres of High Life, Afrobeat and Jazz and other musical forms. Diverse examples of the Talking Drum in popular Western culture include the Grateful Dead’s drummer, Bill Kreutzmann, incorporating the instrument into the band’s live shows, and Ludwig Göransson’s score for the 2018 Black Panther film which features talking drums at the core of a leitmotif associated with the film’s protagonist, T’Challa.



In Nigeria, innovation of the form continues. As Femi Elufowoju explains:

*“In recent years there has been a huge renaissance in the arts in Nigeria. Despite the crippling economy and the testing times, the entertainment industry, and particularly the theatre industry is undergoing a new birth... The West is looking to Africa for insights into how to improve their sounds”*



As we saw with Nsibidi, Yorùbá drumming traditions were first transported across the Atlantic with the slave trade in the 1800s. According to Mark Corrales the first batá with añá (sacred batá) was created in Cuba in around 1830. By 1951, there were about 15 to 25 sets and the Afro-Cuban tradition is still very popular and thriving today. When drummers in Nigeria faced pressures from Christianity, across the Atlantic the tradition benefited from the influences of European musical notation and Latin swing. Nowadays, musicians in Latin America and Africa are mutually inspired and influenced by one another and other musical forms.

In Cuba, Talking Drums do not mimic speech, as Spanish – unlike Yorùbá – is not a tonal language. It can however be used to intone Lucumí, which is an Afro-Cuban language melding Yorùbá vocabulary with Spanish phonetics and pronunciation, that is used for liturgical purposes.

*Three batá drummers, with the kpuataki (or chief drummer) in the centre. Source: The Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum. Roberto Nodal.*



The drum of choice is the batá (rather than dundun) which has similar sacred functions in Cuba, as it does in Nigeria. However recently the form has also taken a secular form; these instruments are called aberínkula, or profane Batá drums, and may be used by an uninitiated person. The diverse, sophisticated and innovative secular forms of Afro-Cuban drumming – such as the conga and bongos – are also deeply indebted to the heritage of the Talking Drum.

In Brazil there is a similarly rich fusion tradition, with Afro-Brazilian Rhythms including Maracatu, Ijexá, Côco and Samba. African traditions nurtured and expanded in Cuba, have also been assimilated by progressive jazz drummers world-wide.



*Afro-Cuban Drum Master -- Alejandro Berillo*

Here in the UK there is also a vibrant and growing community of talking drummers, which we at IROKO are proud to be part of. For many practitioners, such as Ayan de First and Richard Olatunde Baker, the focus is on the traditions of Yorùbá talking drumming, while groups like Egbe Oduniyi School of Batá Drumming and other Afro-Latino batá drummers give workshops that incorporate traditions from the Yorùbá diaspora, including Cuba, Brazil and Equador.



*“Right now British people are now embracing Talking Drum” - Ayan De First*

Of course, playing to audiences who do not understand Yorùbá language has its challenges but, as Ayan De First says:



Francis Awe

*“You have to play the best rhyme for the right person. If I am to entertain you with my talking drum now, it will be different from if I have to entertain a Yorùbá person, because they will understand what I am saying with my drum. But you might probably not. So I will just do something that will entertain you.”*

Many people across the world are embracing these challenges. For example, master drummer Francis Awe, who formed his Nigerian Talking Drum Ensemble in 1985 has travelled to the USA, Mexico, Italy, Germany, and India, adapting dundún to new languages and contexts. The ensemble “aims to make Yorùbá music accessible and meaningful in new contexts while at the same time retaining the particular symbols and organisational principles that ground it in Yorùbá musical heritage.”

## A role reversal for Nigerian Churches

Throughout the history of talking drumming, it has been recorded that the instrument faced a lot of pressure from Christianity, because of its use in traditional religious settings. As a consequence, the talking drum, and particularly the batá drum, was banned from being used in Nigerian churches.

Nowadays, there has been a complete reversal of this approach and Nigerian churches have become the abode where talking drumming is now thriving and surviving. The most encouraging and impressive aspect of this development is how young Nigerians here in the UK are becoming self-taught talking drummers. This has fundamentally been facilitated by their regular attendance to the Nigerian churches and membership of the churches’ musical groups. The young people are combining their knowledge and skills in music technology with the practical application of talking drumming, both live and on synthesizers and through talking drum beatboxing.

It can be gainfully said that worshipping in Nigerian churches i.e. Celestial, Cherubim and Seraphim, and even in some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and in the Diaspora including here in the UK, is not complete without the sounds, rhythms, melodies, praise singing and religious proverbs emanating from the dundun and the batá drums.









- 8) According to Lekan Babalola, it is only when we (Yorùbá people) are doing a ritual that we bring out:
- a. Djembe drums,
  - b. Kpanlogo drums
  - c. Ekwe drums
  - d. Bàtá drums
- 9) Which people call the talking drums Gangan or Dundun:
- a. Ghanaians
  - b. Senegalese
  - c. Malians
  - d. Yorùbá people
- 10) Young people of British-Nigerian heritage are using the talking drum to:
- a. Contact their teachers
  - b. Write all their GCSE exams
  - c. Make commentaries on social issues affecting them and pass on advice amongst their peers
  - d. Send message to the Queen
- 11) Which contemporary Nigerian musical genre has the Talking Drum been most incorporated into?
- a. Reggae
  - b. Swing
  - c. Jùjú
  - d. Highlife

11) c  
10) c  
9) d  
8) d  
7) b  
6) d  
5) a  
4) b  
3) a  
2) d  
1) c

## TALKING DRUM – QUIZ ANSWERS





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