

Talking Drums Script

The **talking drum** is an hourglass-shaped drum which originates from West Africa. The pitch of the drums can be regulated to mimic the tone, intonation and stress of human speech. It has two drumheads connected by leather tension cords, which allow the player to modulate the pitch of the drum by squeezing the cords between their arm and body. These drums are able to transmit messages over great distances, greater than that of articulated speech (Nzewi et al, 2001).

History of the talking drums

The history of talking drums can be traced back to the Yoruba people, the Ghana Empire and the Hausa people. Interestingly, talking drums were not limited to these areas, they have also been found in northern Cameroon and western Chad; areas which have shared populations with groups bordering West African countries.

Hourglass shaped talking drums are some of the oldest instruments used by West African griots. Griots also known as *jellis* are West African historians', poets and/or musicians. These individuals were tasked with orally recording, preserving, and sharing their community's histories and culture. *Jellis* used the drums as memory devices to help them remember important people and events. Drums are used to communicate messages across distances and villages. A king or other political authority may send a drummer throughout his land as a messenger. The drummer plays his drum, and because the villagers know the "language of the drum," they understand if the king is issuing a warning or a celebratory invitation. Talking drums are also used during religious rituals. Often, *jellis* and *griots* ran these ceremonies and used the drums not only for celebration, but also for sacred rites and stories. Talking drums were also used to bring people together and to help settle disputes among members of a village.

How Drums Talk

Here we see a single small drum that is usually held under the arm. The Yoruba drum is constructed from a hollow wooden tube covered at both ends with special treated goat skin. There is a tapering from opposite sides of the drum surface which makes it possible to position the strings properly; these strings hold the two leather surfaces in place. The function of the strings is to exert pressure which helps in the production of high and low pitches. The modulation of the cords helps to produce the necessary variations in the tones of the drum messages. A high degree of acoustic effect is achieved when drumming by adding tiny bells or jingling disks made of metal around the circumference of the drum surface. These bells added an effect that could be heard by nearby villages (Arewa, 1980).

The hook shaped drum gong is used to strike the drum. Some drums were larger and these were mainly used for entertainment purposes, these drums were struck using hands.

Talking Drums: Communication and Cultural Needs

The use of talking drums as a form of communication was first noticed by Europeans in the first half of the eighteenth century. Detailed messages could be sent from one village to another faster than carrying said message by horseback. In the nineteenth century, a missionary named Roger T. Clarke, realized that "the signals represent the tones of the syllables of conventional phrases of a traditional and highly poetic character." Like Mandarin and Cantonese, many African languages are tonal, that is the pitch is important in determining the meaning of a particular word, many of the African languages are intelligible when represented merely by their tones.

In Gaines' article, *The Talking Drum: Moving Toward a Psychology of Literacy Transformation* he says, the drum language is the immediate and natural reproduction of speech, it is a script understood by all who are trained in said language, only it is directed not by the eye but by the ear.

When the talking drum is used to send a message, the message is played repeatedly. This repetition serves many functions. First, it allows detection and correction of errors in the message. Even, to the trained ear the message may not be understood the first time. The second time, the receiver will get a general idea of the message. Some of the pitches may be contaminated or lost in surrounding noise. If the wind is blowing in the opposite direction to the message, this will cause parts the message to be lost. Villages located in heavily forested areas may also have sections of the drum message lost due to foliage and vegetation. The sender thus plays the message several times so that the receiver can fill in the blanks in the message (Arewa et a, 1980).

Let us say we want to send a warning message to a set of 30 villages. This could be seen as broadcasting. The first few villages will have no problem receiving the message, but the farther villages may only get parts of the message or no message at all, thus the villages in between serve as transmitters to help pass the message to the farthest villages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, talking drums have been and are a fundamental tool in the attainment and sustainment of literacy in many West African cultures. Talking drums are not merely an instrument used for entertainment, but served as an important method of communication and literacy transformation.

References

- Arewa, O., & Adekola, N. (1980). Redundancy principles of statistical communications as applied to Yoruba talking-drum. *Anthropos*, 75(1/2), 185-202.
- Ashanti Empire. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.
- Atlanta 07. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2, 2015.
- Ayanmilere (2010, June 10). *How To Play a Simple Rhythm On The Talking Drum* (video file). Retrieved from <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=SZtH1Tc1D2U>
- Bede, U. *The Return of The Melody Maker* [Painting]. Retrieved from Terra Art Gallery.
- Drums | Gandharva Loka: The world music store in Christchurch, New Zealand – musical instruments from around the world. (n.d.). Retrieved July 4, 2015.
- Edelud (2007, August 7). *Ayan Bisi Adeleke - Master talking drummer - drum talks* (video file). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4oQJZ2TEVI>
- Flag of Cameroon. (n.d.). Retrieved June 30, 2015.
- Flag of Chad. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.
- Gaines, J. H. (1996). The talking drum: Moving toward a psychology of literacy transformation. *The Journal of Black Psychology*, 22(2), 202-202.
- Griot. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2, 2015.
- Heart of Darkness. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.
- Images from Early Africa. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2, 2015.
- Music of Africa. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.
- Nzewi, M., Anyahuru, I., & Ohiauraumunna, T. (2001). Beyond song texts: The lingual fundamentals of African drum music. *Research in African Literatures*, 32(2), 90-104. doi:10.1353/ral.2001.0057
- Okiki, G. (1963). *Dance to A Talking Drum* [Painting]. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Dance_to_the_Talking_Drum%22,_1963_-_NARA_-_558973.jpg
- Ong, W. (n.d.). African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics. *New Literary History*, 411-411. Mbn The Metropolitan Drummer. *Kalangu Talking Drum*. 2014. *iTunes*. Web. 1 July 2015.

Rythem of the talking drums. (n.d.). Retrieved July 3, 2015.

Preserving Culture and History in Africa -. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.

Slavery images. (n.d.). Retrieved July 3, 2015.

TALKING DRUMS. (n.d.). Retrieved July 4, 2015.

Talking Drums Cartoons and Comics. (n.d.). Retrieved June 27, 2015.

Talking Drum 5. (n.d.). Retrieved June 25, 2015.

Tama (Talking Drum) in Gambia. (n.d.). Retrieved July 3, 2015.

THE CALL OF THE IKORO DRUM. (2013, June 15). Retrieved July 3, 2015.

The Swiss. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2, 2015.

Unit Three: Studying Africa through the Humanities. (n.d.). Retrieved June 29, 2015.

Vulcan death pinch. (n.d.). Retrieved July 2, 2015.

What were three effects of European imperialism on Africa? (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2015.

Yoruba Ere Ibeji - RAND AFRICAN ART. (n.d.). Retrieved July 3, 2015.