

# Skin that Speaks

## An Introduction to the Nigerian Dundun ‘Talking Drum’ Ensemble

By Dr. Michael Varner

The Nigerian “talking drum” has long fascinated drummers from around the world. Little accurate information about this unique member of the percussion family has been known outside of Nigeria. I traveled to Nigeria to learn more about the tradition of *dundun* and found a fascinating history as well as a vibrant current use of this instrument. This article introduces information on the drum, the traditional performers, and how they can literally “speak,” mimicking the pitches and rhythms of languages. A Yoruba proverb states, “Drumming makes the people happy.”<sup>1</sup> The Yoruba believe that you cannot talk fully about their culture and tradition without speaking about the talking drum because it is a source of history, poetry, proverbs, and daily life.<sup>2</sup> Learning and playing the drum helps us understand a little bit more of the diversity and opportunities in the world of drumming.

### BACKGROUND

Nigeria, officially the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is a federal constitutional republic comprising 36 states. It is the most populous country in Africa with an estimated 170 million people, and the seventh most populous country in the world. Located in West Africa, its oil reserves have brought great revenue to the country. The three largest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The focus of this article is the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria.

The people of Nigeria have an extensive history. Archaeological evidence dates back to at least 9000 BCE. The British colonized Nigeria in the late 19th and early 20th century. Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960.

Music in Nigeria is dominated by two principal mediums of expression: the drum and the voice. The “talking drum” called *dundun* remains the most preferred instrumental ensemble in public ceremonies and the most capable of musical and artistic expression. The *dundun* family consists predominantly of hour-glass-shaped drums with a head on both ends and a thin center that allows a range of pitches by squeezing the tensioning thongs. The instrument has been present since ancient times, and

its widespread use suggests it was introduced in prehistoric times.

*Dundun* was first used by “Ayan,” a native from Ibarapa land. Ayan, though an outsider, taught Yoruba families the art of drumming and was so loved that they deified him after his death. Ayan therefore became the deity of Yoruba drummers, irrespective of the type of drums they play, and has been regarded as a God of Music among the Yoruba.<sup>3</sup>

The *dundun* is virtually a part of everyday life among the Yoruba people. It can be found hanging on the walls of homes, and people will often greet each other by “talking” through the drum. The drum ensemble is part of annual festivals such as the Olojo Festival to commemorate Ogun, the God of Iron, held annually in the city of Ile Ife.<sup>4</sup> It is also part of dance ceremonies and is found outside royal palaces where it “announces” the names of arriving guests. In the Yoruba culture, the art of drumming is highly developed. Drumming tends to be a specialized and primarily hereditary activity. Drummers’ families are generally called *Ayan*, and young men are taught at an early age to play the supportive rhythmic parts, continuing to learn until they have mastered the nuances and ornaments of the primary drum. Traditionally, *dundun* are exclusively played by men, although in the Yoruba culture other type drums are played by women. In contemporary and pop music, women can play the *dundun*. Expert drummers, although economically low-rated by the public, are usually given respect because they are keepers of traditions and beliefs among the Yoruba people. Throughout the culture the drums are represented in art, and even appear on the “evening” television news, which is introduced with the sound of the *dundun* “speaking” the proverb: “Even if a



child has a bad dream, he will tell it,” meaning that whatever is reported on the news program will be “truth in reporting!”<sup>5</sup>

### LANGUAGE

Yoruba is a tonal language based on three pitch levels: high – mid – low (/ - \). When speaking, one must be accurate in keeping the tonal levels relative or the meaning will not be clear (see chart). A word in Yoruba can have several different meanings depending on the tones on which the word is pronounced. The same word can have multiple meanings depending upon the pitch level spoken.

*Dundun* are most suited to talking due to their ability to imitate all the tones and glides used in Yoruba language. The manipulation of these tones and glides on the instruments, however, depend on the expertise of the drummer. The meaning and understanding of a word may be altered or incomprehensible if a drummer lacks the ability to combine the handling of the drumstick with the manipulation of the drum’s leather thongs. When “speaking” with the drum, the three pitches are approximately a major third apart. There is discussion as to whether the drummer’s actual *meanings* are always clear, or

whether the listeners understand the meaning through context or familiarity with the poems/proverbs quoted by the performer. *Dundun* music in Nigeria is only taught orally. Dr. Yomi Daramola, Dean of Music at Obafemi Awolowo University (noted institution of traditional music learning), comments, "Writing *dundun* music down (i.e., with symbols) only confuses things!"<sup>6</sup>

### THE DUNDUN ENSEMBLE

The generic name for "drum" among the Yoruba is *ilu* (something that is beaten).<sup>7</sup> Drums generally are made in sets of three, four, or six with varying lengths and sizes determined by the function of each drum. *Dunduns* are hand-made from a single piece of wood called *Igi*, which is Red Mahogany (*Azalia Bella*) and sometimes *Cordial Millenii*, which is a member of the Banyan family.<sup>8</sup> The wood is carefully carved into the shape of an hourglass with two openings over which cleaned and stretched membranes made from antelope skin are attached by means of leather strings also made of antelope skin. Each of the instruments has a specific name according to its size, which reflects its gender, pitch implication, and the role it plays in the ensemble.

#### Iya'ilu (the mother drum)

The *iya'ilu* is the lead drum and the largest of the set. Its dimensions measure between 19 and 21 inches in length and 28 to 34 inches in circumference. Only the mother drum is decorated with twelve to fifteen small metal bells called *saworo*, attached at the rim on the leather thongs, which produce added color to the sound. The *iya'ilu's* role is to "speak" proverbs

and poems, relating traditions to the listener by combining pitches with the intricate rhythmic patterns from the single drumstick in the right hand.

#### Gudugudu (the father drum)



The *gudugudu* is perhaps the most easily recognizable drum of the set because it is not an hourglass shape. Its cup-shaped wooden shell is reminiscent of kettledrums. The *gudugudu* is made from a single piece of wood carved into a bowl shape. Its opening, covered with a stretched membrane firmly thronged to the wood, is affixed with black "wax" in the center of the head. Small wooden "shims" are used to tension the thongs holding the head. The waxed black spot of the membrane produces a low tone, while the plain surface produces a sharp and higher tone. Hence, a high and low tone can be produced played with straight twisted-leather "sticks" in each hand. The carrying strap of the *gudugudu* is placed around the neck to keep the drum positioned directly in front of the player. The *gudugudu* part is generally the composite of the interlocking *omele* parts put together. Although not required, due to his greater experience the *gudugudu* player

is free to add ornaments and slight rhythmic variants to his part.

#### Omele

*Omele* is roughly translated to mean "accompanying rhythmic instrument," and young members of the family who have limited experience most often play these parts. The parts are very repetitive and interlock, causing a constant composite pattern.

#### Omele Atele (Kerikeri) (the first female child)

The *atele* can be as large or bigger than the *iya'ilu*. It is an hourglass shaped drum with dimensions between 19 and 21 inches in length and 31 to 35 inches in circumference.

#### Omele Isaaju (the first male child)



The *omele isaaju* is also an hourglass shaped drum with smaller dimensions, around 18.5 inches in length and 28 inches in circumference.

Two other instruments occasionally can be used:

#### Gangan (the second male child)

Having a slightly more elongated shape of the shell, making it longer with a thinner hourglass middle, the *gangan* is larger than the *kannango*.

#### Kannango (the second female child)

*Kannango* has a slightly more elongated shape of the shell, making it longer with a thinner hourglass middle. It is the smallest of the double-headed tension drums. Often the *kannango* and *gangan* are not used unless one of the other drums is absent.

It is interesting to note how the organizational structure of the *dundun* is based on the family structure, as in many African cultures, but with the priority given to women. For example, the name of the drum ensemble takes after the woman: the *iya'ilu* (mother drum). This might be because of the tendency of women often to care for the family and also speak for it. Interesting also is that the higher pitch is considered "male" and the lower pitch considered "female." It was explained to me that this indicated the higher pitch speaks and

IGBA	lo lo	\\	time period
IGBA	mid mid	--	200
IGBA	mid hi	-/	calabash
IGBA	mid lo	-\	rope to climb a tree
IGBA	lo hi	\/	small garden fruit



The dundun family (pictured from left to right): *Iya'ilu* (the mother drum); *Omele Atele* (also called the *Kerikeri*) (the first female child); *Omele Isaaju* (the first male child); *Gangan* (the second male child); *Kannango* (the second female child—not pictured); *Gudugudu* (the father drum)



projects “fuller” while the lower pitch projects “less.”

## PLAYING THE DUNDUN

To play the hourglass drums of the *dundun* family, the leather thongs, called *osan*, which are connected to a stiff black leather “tube” called *egi*, are squeezed to change the tension on the two heads. This allows the drummer to squeeze the thongs to increase tension or release them to lower tension, producing the required pitch. Each drum has a second string tied around the tuning leather thongs called *idelu*. This string “ties off” the tension thongs to “set” the basic pitch of the instrument.

The drum is carried by a strap attached to the *osan* and over the left shoulder long enough for the drum to rest on the player’s hip. Hip pressure can occasionally be exerted to add nuances or to adjust the high tone. The player wraps his thumb and fingers (usually third and fourth finger) through the thongs and gently curves his upper arm around the drum. The low pitch is set by the *idelu* as the basic pitch. The “mid” pitch is derived by using the thumb/fingers to pull downward enough to produce the midrange “third” above the low pitch. The drummer must memorize how much pressure is needed to accomplish exactly the correct pitch. Continuing the pull downward with the thumb/fingers and adding a squeeze inward from the inner arm achieves the “high” pitch. Considerable practice is required to perfect the same pitch each time, as the player wants to achieve a very clean change from low to mid to high without a bend or slur between the notes.

Every drum in the set, with the exception of the *gudugudu*, has the same ability to generate various pitches. On the supportive drums, the *idelu* string is used to “tie off” the pitch capability so the drum speaks only one pitch. Apart from the *gudugudu*, every drum in the *dundun* ensemble could verbalize speech correctly, if properly tuned and manipulated.

In performance, the hourglass drums are carried on the shoulder and played with a curved stick in the right hand called *opa*, occasionally adding left-hand ornamentation notes. The end of the stick that is held is bound with cloth, and the striking end is a flared shape covered with the same type of antelope skin



Drum and skin

used for the drumhead. No part of the animal skin is wasted, as it is cut carefully to make the head, the tensioning strings, and the cover for the stick end.

In the *dundun* ensemble, the *iya'ilu* is the largest drum and plays the leading role in the organizational structure of the ensemble. It performs the actual “talking,” repeating both pitch and word rhythm for traditional poems and proverbs. The other drums all perform fixed repetitive ostinato supporting rhythms that interlock with each other. Although the supportive parts are traditional, they can occasionally be enhanced with ornaments or additional rhythm variations.

While all the other hour-glass shaped drums use the *opa* curved stick, the *gudugudu* uses two small sticks of twisted leather to play its ostinato pattern by combinations of beats directly on the center black dot and also more forward on the head. The player is careful to combine the head sound while simultaneously striking the shell causing something of a “rimshot” or sharpened bright effect to the tone. Both the two-drumstick *gudugudu* and the single-stick hourglass shaped drums utilize a rotational wrist motion rather than the conventional western “waved” wrist motion.

The extemporizations on the *Iya'ilu*, on top of the carefully-weaved complex rhythms of the supporting instruments, are complemented by jingling metal bells. This produces a gamut of blended formal and structural musical patterns, which is meaningful and considered pleasant to listen to. The standard ensemble contains the *iya'ilu*, *gudugudu*, *omele isaaju*, *omele atele*, and occasionally a variety of instruments including *shekere*, *aro* (small metal cymbals), or even a western bugle.



An “Ayan” family of drummers

*Dundun* ensembles, usually made up of members of the same family, are often paid to perform for events such as festivals or book signings. In addition to the agreed-upon payment, often a member of the audience will approach the *iya'ilu* player with money, moisten it, and stick it to his face. Called “spraying,” this is meant both as an honor to the players and also an honor to the donors, demonstrating they have extra money to give away freely.

## PERFORMANCE OF AN “AYAN” FAMILY OF DRUMMERS

To learn more about the *dundun* ensemble, I attended a rehearsal of a family of drummers. The small community of Modekeke is close to Ile Ife, in Southeast Nigeria. The entire family lives in one compound with an enclosed area attached for practice. Out front, a minibus with a picture of *dundun* painted on the side indicates the group travels frequently to performances. The family begins by gathering the instruments and adjusting the basic pitch, tying off the *idelu*. Although there seems to be no attempt to set a specific pitch, it seems very important that the chosen pitch keeps a tension and a “good” tone on the *iya'ilu*. The other drums are then adjusted to pitches that are centered in their range and also consonant with the *iya'ilu*'s basic pitch. The room contains, in order from left to right, a shekere player/singer, the lead *iya'ilu*, the *gudugudu*, the *omele atele*, and the *omele isaaju*. The players represent each generation of the family with the *shekere* player being approximately age 55, the lead *iya'ilu* age 32, the *gudugudu* player age 25, the *atele* player age 12, and the *isaaju* player age 16. Women and many young children gather outside to listen. Most of the performers are dressed in tra-

ditional Nigerian attire, *gbarie*, which includes loose pants, long sleeved shirts with intricate geometric designs, and hat. The young boys wear common T-shirts and jeans.

They perform a number of traditional pieces of ceremonial or devotional nature and then end with two *Woro*, or pieces primarily for entertainment and dancing. Each piece begins basically the same way with the lead *iya'ilu* player saying a few words about the name and character of the piece (this was done mostly for me, since I was not familiar with the repertoire) and then starting with a few beats. The *shekere* enters second, followed closely by the *gudu-gudu*. The *gudugudu* part is generally the composite of the interlocking *omele* parts. Although not required, due to his greater experience the *gudugudu* player feels free to add ornaments and slight rhythmic variants to his part.

The *Woro*, or music for entertainment, is performed first in a slow pace, and following a short interlude on the *iya'ilu*, a fast pace. The slow pace features a distinct “2 against 3” feel on the *shekere*, and the fast pace features the 12/8 “timeline” pattern found throughout West Africa.

#### OTHER MUSIC STYLES IN NIGERIA THAT UTILIZE THE DUNDUN

Music, both traditional and pop, is part of everyday life in the Yoruba culture. It can be found at social functions, christenings, funerals, and weekly church services. The *dundun* has found its way into “pop” ensembles as well, being a prominent instrument in *JuJu* and *Fuji* style music, performing next to modern synthesizers and electric bass or saxophone. Predominantly, the smaller accompaniment *omele* are used in these pop groups and are usually heavily amplified. Without being tied off, they easily follow the pitch line of popular melodies or “talk.” While at a church in Nigeria, I witnessed the talking drum being used to “speak” proverbs and parables in a kind of heterophonic accompaniment of choral verse. The *dundun* “commented” and wove its own commentary underlying the sung words of the Psalm!

#### CONCLUSIONS

In spite of technological advancement and the introduction of western musical instruments, the Yoruba continue their interest in the *dundun* music ensemble to provide enjoyment in daily events or festivals. *Dundun* music is highly recognized for its functions at public social ceremonies and festivals. It is one of the few instrumental music styles that know no religious, festival, societal, or social boundaries, and which enjoy wide acceptability. Learning and playing the drum helps us understand a bit more about culture and the fascinating instrument that “speaks”!

#### Rhythms accompanying the “speaking” of the Iya’llu:

**Osun:** Dedicated to the Goddess of the River; slow paced duple feel

Gudugudu H	X		X	X		X		
L		X			X		X	X
Isaaju	X		X	X		X		
Atele		X			X		X	X
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

**Sanponna:** Dedicated to the God of Smallpox; slow paced triple feel

Gudugudu H					X	X			X	X	X	X
L	X	X	X	X			X	X				
Isaaju	X		X	X			X	X		X		
Atele					X	X			X		X	X
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

**Ogun:** Dedicated to the God of Iron; fast paced duple feel

Gudugudu H			X	X			X	X
L	X	X			X	X		
Isaaju			X	X			X	X
Atele	X	X			X	X		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

#### ENDNOTES

1. Yomi Daramola, interview with the author, 10 October, 2009.
2. Victoria Ozohu, “What is the Talking Drum Saying?” <http://www.africa.com>, 14, May 2011
3. Akin Euba, *Yoruba Drumming: The Dundun Tradition* (Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1990) p. 38.
4. Yomi Daramola, interview with the author, 10 October, 2009.
5. Yomi Daramola, interview with the author, 10 October, 2009.
6. Yomi Daramola, interview with the author, 10 October, 2009.
7. Yomi Daramola, interview with the author, 10 October, 2009.
8. Claudius Oluyemi Olaniyan, interview with the author, 9 October 2009.

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