

## Talking Drums: Delineating between the Boundary of Uses and the Border of Abuses in South-Western Nigeria

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### Abstract

Talking drums have been a unique means of information dissemination in the rural areas of Africa. The Talking drums have two varieties: Bata and Dundun. They are employed for different purposes. Bata is used by the Sango worshippers during their festival. Dundun is used for a variety of purposes, ranging from commercial, extra-mundane, cultural, proverbial and information purposes. However, dundun talking drums are employed to pitch two communities against each other. They may also be used to disguise the 'praisee' physical defects. If one is bald, the talking drummer has a means of saying one is not. If the praise poem of a short man is being chanted, the talking drummer has a means of saying he is tall. Therefore, talking drums, as useful as they are, have their own abuses to which they are put. The study is driven by democratic-participant media theory which posits that the grass roots should have access to the media of communication, and that the media should give priority attention to the disadvantaged in the society.

**Keywords:** Talking Drums, Delineation, Boundary, Border

### Introduction

Indigenous communication has its origin where it is used. Wilson (1987) defines it as "a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in the societies which have not been seriously dislocated by Western culture or any other external influence". Also, defining indigenous communication, under traditional communication, Wilson (1990:281) describes it as:

an admixture of social conventions and practices  
which have become sharpened and blended into  
veritable communication modes and systems and  
which have almost become standard practices for  
society

He, however, adds that though these conventions and modes or speeches are communicative, they are also concerned with other activities.

### FORMS OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNICATION

Indigenous media vary from one locality to the other. The media which are widely used in the rural areas and among first generation of settlers in urban areas of the Third World are widely known for their pre-industrial techniques. They consist mainly of various festivals, forums, music, folktales, songs, rituals, clothes and other sartorial constructs, architectural designs, markets town-criers, social gatherings like funerals, wedding theatre or drama social institutions like the extended family and other rallying points provided by the kings, village heads and herbalists.

Also writing on traditional media, Omu (1978:1-3) said "though, indigenous society had no newspaper, it had agencies and institutions which served the same purposes as 'the newspaper or at least answered the contemporary needs of communication". He grouped the indigenous agencies of communication into informal transference and the formal transference media. The first group, he says, operated through informal contact between individuals and does not go beyond circulation or dissemination of rumours or unofficial information. Examples include family visiting, organised and spontaneous gatherings like weddings, death and burial and moonlight gatherings. The second group of traditional media, Omu says, is concerned with more systematised dissemination of information, "not between persons and persons but between the government and the people"

The Macbride Commission Report (p.57-58) extensively discusses the relevance of the indigenous media. The commission says the media must be recognised since the exclusive use of the big media (radio, TV, newspaper etc) to promote development in many countries has led to unnecessary wastage of scarce resources in view of their inappropriateness to diverse audiences. Besides, a balance in the use of the small and big media, it says, will promote a broader, horizontal communication.

A communication expert who spoke on the issue was quoted in the report as saying:

As the focus of the development programme turns towards local activity, there will be more incentives for a developing country to concern itself with local rather than large audience media. Such a country will not have to

choose between the big and little media. For it needs both, but it will have to display wisdom and foresight in balancing big against little media.

Indigenous media can communicate development ideas to homogenous groups through presentation of such ideas in locally popular artistic forms and idioms. For example, local songs, drama and dance groups can be used to campaign against evils like alcoholism, burdensome dowries, discrimination against women or for advance in farming, health and family welfare.

The interpersonal communication channels offered by the indigenous media are more likely to be effective when the goal of communication is attitudinal change.

Indigenous communication is the dominant source of entertainment for rural dwellers. Forums like arts and cultural festivals, musical shows, dramatic performance by choral and masquerade groups and other musical and theatre groups have high entertainment value.

## THE CONCEPT OF TALKING DRUMS

The word “drum” according to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*, refers to a musical instruments made of a hollow round frame with plastic or skin stretched tightly across one end or both ends, which is played by hitting it with stick(s) called drum stick(s) or simply with the hands. *The New Lexicon Webster Encyclopaedia Dictionary of English Language* similarly describes a drum as any of the various types of percussive musical instruments consisting of hollow cylinder or hemisphere of wood, metal etc usually with a skin stretched tightly over the end or ends struck to produce a sound. Akpabio (2003) points out that drums made of skin are common all over the continent of Africa where they are used as musical instruments accompanying songs and dance performance but also confirms that some are capable of “talking”. Various types of drums with various types of names can be identified in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular (Carrington 1949 and Raffray, 1992). We have pot drums which have the shapes of pots, beaten with a foam-like objects peculiar to those in the Eastern part of Nigeria which Doob (1996:100) describes as “drum like water pots made of baked clay”. We have other drums of various shapes and sizes like dundun and bata of South West Yoruba people of Nigeria. We have the Jebi Kalangu and Kanzangi of the Hausa in the Northern part of Nigeria.

Therefore, “talking drum” is a term that involves the use of drums or drum beats to disseminate properly conceived ideas, appropriately coded or articulated via meaningful and comprehensible drum beats that can be decoded or understood or interpreted by the target listeners who respond to the message of the drum beat with the aid of appropriate, desired or expected feedback. It is important to point out that while most Yoruba drums can be used to say one thing or the other, the “speech ability or competence” of the drums is not the same. While some have limited speech ability or competence, some have unlimited speech competence. The dundun can be regarded as the straightforward Yoruba talking drum that uses a kind of surrogate language, while bata is a stammering talking drum that uses more or less a dialect of the language it imitates. So, these are the drums that come to mind when the phrase or expression “talking drums” is mentioned.

### Taxonomies or Categories of Yoruba Drums

Various types of drums or drum sets can be identified among Yoruba people of South-western part of Nigeria used for various purposes. We have the straightforward real talking drum set called the dundun set or dundun talking drum family. We have the dialect-speaking, stammering talking drum called bata.

#### Dundun drumset

This, according to Laoye (2005), is the real talking drum of Yoruba people with very high “speech competence or capability”. It is made up of a piece of carefully carved “apa” wood to form hourglass-like frames with two ends covered with membranes of kid’s skin which are also carefully joined by some strings made of goat skin. It is usually beaten with a curved stick called drum stick. The dundun drums, to Omu (1978), paraphrasing the idea of Laoye (1954 and 1959), can possibly imitate the tones and gibes in the Yoruba speech hence, apart from being able to produce music for dancing, can be used to communicate insults, praises, admonition and even proverbs. Ngozi (2001) also states that dundun, in addition to its ability to produce music for dancing, can also announce the arrival and departure of eminent personalities at a social gathering, can be used to recite peoples praise names, can be used to rain abuses when the need arises to the extent that it can be said that the dundun drums among others enjoy some “freedom of communication”. Daramola and Jeje (1995) state that the dundun drum set consists of six slightly different types of beautiful looking talking drums which include iya-ilu dundun, kerikeri, gangan, isaaju, kannango and gudugudu.

#### Bata Drumset

This, originally, is the drum of the Sango worshipers, and Eleggún traditional masquerades hence, the worshipers of Sango, the god of thunder and the traditional masquerade people or adherents were those who usually danced to the drumbeats of date, especially during their annual worships or ritual festivals and burial ceremonies of aged ones among them. But with modernization and the need for cultural promotion, development and preservation, we now have culture-promoting musical groups and other traditional performing artistes using the bata drums.

The shape of the wooden frame with which bata drum is made is usually conical unlike the hourglass-like shape of the dundun with the exception of gudugudu. The wooden frame of bata is also made from the apa wood just like dundun. However, the main types of drum that make the bata set can be identified.

The bata drums, whether the long conical ones or the three round ones tied together, are usually hung on the neck of the bata drummers (alubata) when beaten and they are usually played with a stiff leather strap on hand and the palm of the second hand of the alubata simultaneously. But in the case of the round face, three-in-one bata, two leather straps are usually used just like that of gudugudu. There are four types of drums that make the bata drum set namely: iya-ilu bata, omele-abo bata, omele-ako bata, and kudi.

### **DEMOCRATIC-PARTICIPANT MEDIA THEORY**

Folarin (1998) notes that the main thrust of democratic-participant theory is in its insistence that “the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers”.

This theory stresses an unhindered access to the media by the people. The theory is more suitable in the explanation of the situation in rural areas of developing economies. The rural dwellers have no access to the media of communication like their urban counterparts because Mass media of communication are urban-centric. Therefore, the use of traditional media to serve the information needs of the rural dwellers becomes imperative. Development is concentrated in the urban centre, as media concentrate on urban centres alone in their information reportage. Democratic-participant media theory emphasizes a situation whereby the rural and urban dwellers would have an equal access to the media of communication, so that the development will not be elusive in both sectors of the societies.

### **The Process of Effective Drumming**

There are five basic elements of the process of drumming just as five good stages of the effective communication process can also be identified. These are discussed below:

#### **The Drummer or Source Conceives an Idea**

This is the first stage of drumming which involves the initiation of an idea by the drummer, aludundun or alubata (dundun or bata drummer) as the case may be hence, the equivalent of this stage in general communication is called the ideation stage by communication scholars. the drummer initiates the idea of welcoming some people to a given occasion or ceremony, passing vital messages to those in the neighbourhood, greeting the king who is just coming from his bedroom, reciting the oriki of important people or places or reminding subjects of the supremacy of the monarch within a kingdom. Whichever be the case, the conception of a good idea makes or marks the beginning of effective drumming. The drummer selects the appropriate channels. **The Drumbeat**

#### **Channel or Medium**

The second stage of drumming has to do with the choice of ideal means of disseminating the drummer’s message, that is, the specific talking drum that will be used to pass the intended message. The drummer can choose the use of very eloquent dundun talking drum, which is believed to be more comprehensible than others especially when he does not want the listener to have much difficulties in interpreting his message. The drummer can use the bata talking drum if his intended audience or listeners are also experts in bata drumming.

#### **The Drummer’s Idea is Coded into Drumbeat Messages or Sound**

This third stage of drumming process has to do with the choice of appropriate language or style of drumbeats with which the intended message will be coded. For example, straightforward drum language can be used which virtually everybody who understands the tonal language imitated by the talking drum can easily comprehend. Similar expressions that listeners or audience are already familiar with can also be used to achieve the same easy-to-comprehend drumming.

#### **The Drummer’s Audience or Receivers Decode the Drumbeat Message**

This fourth stage of communication has to do with the interpretation of the communicator’s coded drumbeat messages by his or her audience or listeners. The audience expected to decipher the drumbeat message may be a single person such as the king being welcome back to his palace from a trip by palace talking drummers. The audience can be important dignitaries or eminent personalities at an important occasion. Whichever be the case, there will be effective drumming if both the drummer and the audience understand the code of the drumbeat so that the latter easily deciphers and understands the message.

#### **The Audience/Receivers Send A Feedback**

This is the final stage of the process of drumming, which is basically about the response of the listener to the drummer’s message sent via the talking drum.

Such a response, according to Ngozi (2001:2), “can be positive, negative, limited, zero, verbal or non-verbal”. This means response to the drummer’s message can be the positive that is expected or the negative that is not expected. The response can be partial which represents the limited feedback or there may be no response at all, which is the zero feedback. Also, the response can be verbal if it is via the use of words or speech sounds and

may be non-verbal if it does not use words or speech at all. For example, a man whose oriki (praise poem) is played by a drummer may just smile, wave, stand and dance or send money to the drummer.

### **Uses of Talking Drums**

There are various reasons why people in traditional Yoruba setting especially the Yoruba people in the South-west of Nigeria opt for talking drum. Some of these reasons tally with some basic purposes of general communication while some don't. We can classify the uses of talking drums under the informational uses, proverbial uses, cultural uses, commercial uses, religious uses and other uses that would be discussed. These are all discussed below:

#### **Information Use of Talking Drums**

A most fundamental use of any means of communication, whether traditional or modern, exogenous and endogenous, verbal or non-verbal, interpersonal or group, is to ensure the dissemination of vital messages or the transmission of important information. Gerson & Gerson (2012) therefore point out that informing the target audience of known facts, is one of the basic goals of communication. The talking drum is not an exception because it is primarily used to pass meaningful messages or information that is also comprehensible to those who understand the language of the talking drum in question. For example, "kaabo se daa daa lo de" meaning "you are welcome, hope you have arrived safely" can be played to inform people of the arrival of somebody being expected. Also, "ki le n f'oba pe oba o oba alase oba" can be beaten to remind the people of the authority of the king especially in a traditional setting.

#### **Cultural Use of Talking Drums**

Culture according to Devito (2012) refers to common beliefs, values or behaviour of a group of people passed on from one generation to another. Baumeister & Bushman (2011) equally see culture as everything that a group of people share or have in common like food, language, government as well as artistic and historical achievements. They further point out that human beings are not just social animals but are also cultural animals. It is therefore not surprising that there is an increasing use of various talking drums to communicate in various areas of human endeavours. Those who advertise various products and services on the billboards, those who do advert jingles on the radio and television etc now make use of the talking drum more than ever before. Many enlightened people now show interest in study or art of the talking drum just as in many traditional festivals where talking drummers display dexterity in the art of talking drumming. This is just to ensure the promotion, development and preservation of indigenous cultural beliefs or art. It is therefore not surprising that even foreigners from Europe and the Americans now show interest in Yoruba culture of talking with drums. It is in the light of this that one can say promoting the art of drumming is tantamount to promoting the people's culture

#### **Religious Use of Talking Drums**

This has to do with the use of talking drums basically for religious purposes. It may be for the worship of the traditional gods of the Yorubas like Sango (the god of thunder), Ogun (the god of iron), Obatala (the god of creation), Osun (a river goddess) etc. as earlier mentioned the bata talking drums are used basically by the Sango worshipers especially during their festival or worship, but could be accompanied by other drums. Also, Igbin drum is used by the Obatala worshipers, which could be accompanied by others too. For example, the expression "Baa ba se yi tan ao se mi si, a se se tun se" meaning "we will celebrate this year and many more years" is a common expression usually beaten by drummers during traditional worships on festivals as a form of prayer to the admiration of all worshipers. It is important to note the fact that drumming is not peculiar to traditional worshipers only because nowadays we find talking drums among the musical instruments of the choirs of various churches used to disseminate useful information especially during praise worships.

#### **Extra-Mundane Use of Talking Drums**

This is a kind of extra ordinary spiritual use of the talking drum to communicate extra ordinarily or spiritual information especially with or to supernatural beings like spirits, gods, goddesses, ancestors etc. This may sound incredible to those who have not experienced such but believed by those from places where it happens. There are some drumbeats that one will hear and take to his heel if he is not initiated because such drumbeats like the one used to evoke certain spirit are not meant for hearing of ordinary people such an extra-mundane communication is displayed in the Nigerian home video titles "Saworo ide" where drum and its drumbeat was used to call another person who is supernaturally connected to the drum from a distant village, home to come and beat the drum to the hearing of an uninitiated ruler who on hearing the drumbeat was immediately affected by the mysterious drumbeats.

#### **Commercial Occupational Use of Talking Drums**

This is the use of talking drums to communicate so as to make money or as a means of livelihood. it is now common in traditional Yoruba setting to see groups of talking drummers of different ages at various occasions like during the weekly or monthly market days, wedding or marriage ceremonies, burial ceremonies, house warming ceremonies, naming ceremonies etc beating talking drum to praise people or to play the personal family town's oriki (praise poem). All they strive to get are the names and places of origin of such people having known the praise poems of as many names and places they just start to communicate with the talking drums to the

amazement and amusement of their target audience. They do not do this for nothing of course as they expect these people who enjoy their drumming to reciprocate. Really, some do respond by standing up dancing and placing some money on the forehead of the lead drummer. The leader in such a case would be expected to take care of others who in most cases are his close associates or relations.

### **Proverbial Uses of Talking Drums**

This is the use of the talking drums to preserve and promote the use of proverbs, which are wise or witty saying used in a special way. Onibonje (2002:53) describes a proverb “as a phrase or sentence that expresses some recognized truth about life”. Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy (2012) point out that proverb reflect “the wisdom, biases and even superstitions of a culture and are so important to culture that there are even proverbs about proverbs. They equally point out that the life of the Yoruba people of Nigeria that “a wise man who knows proverbs, reconciles difficulties”. proverbial communication of messages is very common in drumming which is not surprising because the Yoruba language which the Yoruba various talking drums imitates its tines and jibes as put by Late Timi of Ede, Oba Adetoyese Laoye is also very rich in proverbs. There is also a common saying that “owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe, t’oro ba sonu owe la fi n wa” meaning “a proverb is the horse (vehicle) of a word or an utterance just as a word is missing or vehicle of a proverb. When a word is missing, proverb will find it.” So, drummers’ do use meaningful and understandable proverbs to communicate intended ideas or messages.

### **The Abuses of the Talking Drums**

A host of indigenous communication scholars has failed to assess the abuses of talking drums. Talking drums, as useful as they are, can sustain ill-will between and/or among communities. Since it has an unrivalled ability to communicate insult, curses or even remind the hearers of the misdeeds or evils perpetrated by their forefathers, talking drums can be used to precipitate disharmony, quarrel, violence and cold war between two communities.

Having known the cultural importance of talking drums to rural people, politicians make use of talking drums to hurl abuses on and to discredit their political opponents. They think this would pave way for their political or elections victory when their political opponents are humiliated and disparaged.

Most local drum beaters are non-literate. Therefore, they use talking drums to commit libel and sedition. It is observed that if a drummer has a misunderstanding with a person, and perhaps the drummer meets the person at a social function, he (drummer) uses that means to call the person all sorts of names.

In Oyo town, there are two prominent masquerades, both of which have had sustained acrimony and bitterness for an age. Each of the two masquerades claims superiority over the other. On this particular Egungun festival in Oyo, they met each other at a T-junction, and the violence ensued. Prelude to the violence, it was the drummers attached to each of the two masquerades that started drumming insulting words, curses and abuses. It took the rapid intervention of the police and the leaders of Olojes before the dispute was settled. Lives would have been lost.

In the olden days, drums were employed to stimulate the warrior in the battle front. This suggests that the drums, having the power to sing the praise of warriors in the battlefield, were being used to lure them into death. The drums were being beaten to embolden them to face the enemies in the battlefield. As a result, many lives of the warriors were being lost in the process.

Talking drums, especially gudugudu have negative spiritual uses. It can be employed to effect curses. If the property of the gudugudu drummers is stolen, gudugudu can be used to rain curses on the pilferers, and whatever the drummers drum will come into fruition. Besides, a woman not born into the family of drummers dare not beat gudugudu if she does, she will stop menstruating.

The talking drums are used for deception. When the drummer sings praise of a man, if the character is short in height, drummers have a way of saying “he is tall”. If the fellow is ugly, drummers have a way of saying “he is handsome”. If the person is bald, they have a way of saying “he is attractive”. They employ the medium of drums to ‘praise’ the physical defects of people.

The manifestation of the Global Village of Marshall McLuhan is a challenge to African drummers. The world is now linked through the electronic media of Website and Internet. A host of Africans have abandoned the traditional cultural ways of information and communication for western media-disseminated message. Some Africans even believe drumming to disseminate information is an idol worshipping.

Talking drums communicate African languages, cultures and values, but with the adoption of foreign language as official language in the country our peculiar and cultural means of communication have been relegated to the background. For example, many youths, these days, do not understand when a drummer is chanting their praise names and their towns. They do not have ears for such praise poems.

Lack of African home training for children in modern times threatens drumming in Yoruba land as they do not understand indigenous verbal languages. The erosion of cultural technology in preference for new technologies is a problem to drumming in Yoruba land.

Domineering nature and indeed the ubiquities nature of mass media are challenges to talking drum. The radio, newspaper, magazine, television and other western media are pervasive. Therefore Africans do no longer

make use of drumming in spite of effectiveness of talking drums in information dissemination when compared to exogenous media.

Depletion of African values, culture and customs for western values is a challenge to talking drums. Many Africans feel inferior to employ traditional media because the new generations of Africans do not have pride in African tradition and values any more.

The expansion of African villages and towns into cities has greatly affected talking drums. It destroys the communal way of living of the people which makes drumming to be effective.

## CONCLUSION

Talking drums have been the most effective means of information dissemination, not only in Yoruba land but its informational use spreads across sub-sahara Africa. The talking drums are employed not only in the social gathering among the Yoruba people, but they are also used in the traditional festivals such as Egungun festival, Ogun Festival, Oro Festival and Alagemo festival.

Two major sets of talking drums are identified in Yoruba land: dundun and bata drums. They both have specific functions they perform. Dundun drums are used in the social occasions such as wedding ceremony, naming or burial ceremony, not only to inform the people but also to entertain them. Bata drum is employed for special occasions such as egungun festival, agemo festival, oro festival. Bata is hardly used in the events such as wedding or naming ceremony.

The drums serve as the effective means of communication. The drummer is the source, the drum is the channel, the sound is the message, the dancers to the drums are the receivers and the kind of dancing reaction is the feedback.

The drums, as useful as they are for communication, can be used to cause violence, conflict and sustained rivalry or acrimony, not only between two individuals but also between two communities or villages and even towns.

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