West African Drum Languages

by

Michael Bakan

In Western Africa drums function as more than mere musical instruments. They are vehicles for verbal communication and speak the traditional dialects of ages past. From the relaying of simple messages to the presentation of eloquent announcements and the recitation of complex proverbs and legends, talking drums perpetuate traditional values, beliefs, and customs. The following represents a very general introduction to this fascinating subject.

West African drum languages are based directly on spoken languages. The sounds and patterns produced on talking drums are "representations of speech, that is, actual imitations of spoken language." It is often difficult, at first, for Westerners to comprehend the idea of a language in which drum sounds and patterns can be used to communicate information that we are only able to communicate through spoken or written words. But unlike Western languages, most African languages are tonal. The tones—that is, the pitch levels (i.e., high, medium, low) of words—are often more significant than the vowels and consonants. For example, in the Yoruba language of Nigeria there are four meanings for the oke, which are distinguished from one another only by their different tones:  

husband; hoe; spear; canoe.

The difference between the high, medium, and low tones is very distinct; moreover, the syllables of particular words consistently occur at the same pitch level. In this respect, African languages differ from languages, such as English and French, in which the rise and fall of speech tones are subtle and often irregular. (According to Russell Hartenberger, an expert on Ghanaian drumming, the English language is considered monotonous in sound by speakers of African languages.) "The basis of the drum languages...is the tonal pattern of the words which make up the (spoken) languages." Since the tones of words and syllables are so consistent and distinct, particular combinations of drum sounds, or patterns, can be used to imitate and thus represent spoken language.

There are many different kinds of drums which are capable of talking. Among the most rudimentary are wooden drums, or slit drums, that can only produce two tones, one high and one low. This type is used by the Yorubas to send messages from the palace of the chief to members of the community. The messages consist of specific rhythmic patterns and "adhere as much as possible to the rise and fall of speech melody in a musical language which comes easily to the cognoscenti." Since only two tones are available and the spoken language uses three tones, often the messages are relayed by ensembles of two or more drums with different pitches. However, when only one drum is used, the rhythmic patterns take on increased semantic importance and in so doing compensate for the lack of a third tone.

Instruments like the hourglass drums (donro or dondom) of Nigeria and Ghana speak far more eloquently than wooden drums. These drums (in small, medium, and large sizes), have two open ends covered with membrane and a series of leather strings connecting the two drum heads. The drum is held horizontally under one arm and struck with a curved wooden stick. By tightening and loosening the strings, the drummer can vary the pitch of the drum. An hourglass drum has a continuous range of an octave and is therefore ideally suited to talking. It not only produces tones of spoken language but can also imitate the vocal glides and turns that are integral aspects of speech. In tone production, hourglass drums are tuned to represent the high, medium, and low tones of speech, respectively. Ensembles of dondon perform at festive occasions and at ritual worship ceremonies. As solo instruments, they are often used to announce visitors to the royal household and to warn the community of any impending danger.

Tom-toms, drums carved out of wood and covered on one end by a membrane, represent another type often used for talking. They are found throughout Western Africa. A well-known tom-tom talking version is atimewu, the leading drum in the Ewe-speaking drum ensembles of Ghana and Togo. The Ewe language, which, like the Yoruba language, is tritonal, all three tones must be rendered on the single drumhead of the leading drum. To speak on atimewu, the...
drummer thus incorporates a vocabulary of six basic drum strokes and six supplementary strokes. The strokes are referred to by spoken syllables that in effect constitute an oral notation (i.e., ga, de, gi, dzi, etc.). The syllables for the basic strokes determine whether the drum is to be struck with a stick, with fingers, or with the palm of the hand; whether the drum is to be struck in the center or at the edge; and whether the stick or hand is to be pressed into the drum head or bounced off of it. The supplementary strokes indicate when two of the basic strokes are to be played simultaneously or in rapid succession.9

Correlations between the spoken and drummed Ewe language are quite involved as a result of the great variety of drum sounds available on atsmeaye. In general, one syllable is represented by one drum stroke (though there are exceptions). Text phrasing and the rhythmic phrasing of the drumming are closely connected such that "short rests in the leading drum patterns correspond to pauses between significant phrases in the spoken text." In addition, each drum syllable corresponds to a high, medium, or low speech tone. Most importantly, the rise and fall of the speech tones are mirrored by the drumming. "The drum language is understood as long as the overall contour of the speech tone-pattern is reflected in the sequence of drum strokes."11

It should be noted that drum languages are not based on modern African languages but are derived from archaic forms of languages. The art of talking on drums is very much a tradition, and as such is practiced in traditional settings. Drums are used to recite proverbs and legends, to make official public announcements, to give directions to dancers and musicians during public ceremonies and festivals, and to recite statements which flatten chiefs. It is in connection with birth rites, initiation rites, marriages, funerals, and state occasions that talking drums are generally used. Drums of this type are not utilized on an everyday basis. In fact, because of the archaic nature of drum languages and the general trends in Africa toward modernization and Westernization, the ability of many Africans to understand drum languages has been lost partially or entirely in the recent past.10

Talking drums are a most fascinating and exotic manifestation of language. They are also a source of some of the world's most powerful and beautiful musical sounds.

The path has crossed the river.
The river has crossed the path:
Which is the elder?
We made the path and found the river.
The river is from long ago,
From the Creator of the Universe.

— Akan (Gold Coast)
drum proverb

Notes
4. Locke, 25.
5. Akpabot, 37.
7. Locke, 26; see also Akpabot, 39.
8. Locke, 32-33, 26.

Michael Bakan was awarded the 1985 Eaton Foundation Graduating Scholarship, presented annually to the student in music, University of Toronto, who has attained the highest proficiency in a performance degree. The first percussionist to win this award, he is a student of Russell Hartenberger, Alexander Lepsch, Mickey Earnshaw, and John Rudolph. Bakan is active as a performer in contemporary and ethnic music groups, jazz ensembles, and symphony orchestras. He has played with the Toronto Symphony, Music at Marlboro Orchestra, and the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

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