

**THE TECHNOLOGY OF D̀̀ND̀̀N DRUMS
IN YORUBA CULTURE**

Adesokan, Zacchaeus Adelere
Music Department,
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
Kwara State College of Education,
Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria
Email: *musleretkc1960@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Musical instruments, no matter what culture on earth they are found in, often represent the most complex technological development of that particular culture. For instance, D̀̀nd̀̀n drums are the most famous traditional drums in Yoruba culture. It is the principal and the most popular type of instrumental music in Yoruba culture. It has a key role in traditional events, celebrations and functions that are dear for the culture e.g. birth, naming, burial and funeral ceremonies. D̀̀nd̀̀ndrum is used for various ceremonies because it is capable of producing music that is specific to an occasion. But what goes into its making that gives it such a potential? This paper thus attempts to discuss the origin, overall-shape, and construction, as regard the methods of attaching the skin to the body of frame of the drum, the tuning and the techniques of playing D̀̀nd̀̀n drums in Yoruba culture.

Key words: D̀̀nd̀̀n, Music, Yoruba, Culture, Technology, Instruments, Drum

INTRODUCTION

Music is an important component of Yoruba culture and every aspect of their daily activities is marked by one form of ceremony or the other, which are usually accompanied by music. In traditional Yoruba society, many social events attract varying degrees of musical involvement where the members of the community share a satisfying musical experiences. Akperi (2016) stated that “In traditional African societies, music plays an integral part in the life of the people. It is a basic ingredient that spice up the life of the traditional African on a daily basis” (p. 349)

Music in traditional Yoruba society is for religious, social, festival, occupational, enjoyment and ceremonies of which music is an integral part. According to Ekwueme (1983) “Music is known to play a vital part in the life of the African from cradle to the grave” (p.320).

Yoruba are naturally musical and talented traditional musicians and they possess gift of voices, knowledge of oral tradition, resourcefulness and drumming. They are masters in drumming which serve as a medium for understanding their customs, norms, values and traditions. In support of this argument, the Yoruba historian, Johnson (1921) stated that “Yorubas are recognized master-musicians; the use of drums is of great importance in Yoruba culture. Drum’s importance is highly developed and is used for deities, religious, ceremonies, evoking the presence of a god...” (p.58).

The music of Dũndũn drums is a delight to the members of Yoruba culture. They are the commonest, prominent and popular type of instrumental music in Yoruba culture and they specialize in the art of playing it. Beier (1956) pointed out that “the fame of the Dũndũn drums, the famous talking instrument, has probably overshadowed Yoruba singing” (p.23).

The Yorubas are a people with a rich cultural heritage and their music consists of both vocal and instrumental. They use drums in religious ritual activities to invoke spirits and appease the gods. According to Chidiebere and Nnamdi (2016), “In all ages, music has been used by man to achieve different intentions. These include their application and usage in traditional festivals, naming ceremonies, birthdays, burials and other occasions that engender convivial living and merry making” (p. 409).

They praise their heroes, important figures and kings with talking drums. Omojola asserted that “In traditional Yoruba societies, musical performance are generally viewed as an integral

to the total culture... it represents a mirror through which the Yoruba culture in its totality can be understood” (Omojola, 1990, p.121).

Drums serve as a good background for the image of the gods or spirits that is being invoked. Drums are highly developed and used for festivals, ceremonies, social, entertainment and for praising deities. The Yorubas learn how to construct, repair and speak with the instruments they have to perform upon.

History and Construction of D̀̀nd̀̀m Drums

Among the Yorubas, there are families known for their musical talents called *Àyàn* family of drummers. They are known and recognized for D̀̀nd̀̀m drumming in Yoruba culture and no other family is considered to possess this type of skill. Ademola (2015) emphasized that “*Ayan* is a name used to refer to a drumming family; this family is seen as the master of the drumming art” (p.134). They are specialists who handle the instruments technically from their inborn abilities, and the technology is strictly attributed to the family’s art talent.

D̀̀nd̀̀m drums are ancient instruments and indigenous to the original owners of the land. The tradition of these drums is age-old as evident by early writers, explorers, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. Nketia (1954) pointed out that “musical instruments may be viewed historically in terms of origin and development, or culturally, in terms of social uses, functions, and the beliefs and values associated with them (p.234). D̀̀nd̀̀m drums play very important part in kinship rituals and in the celebration of religious ceremonies. They are dedicated to specific gods. Omibiyi stated that:

The first area of new instrument adoption is in court music. Early references to court music in traditional life mentioned the extensive use of big single headed barrel drums; a number of instruments such as the kakaki, long metal trumpets, D̀̀nd̀̀m-an hourglass pressure drum, and Kotso, a kind of pressure drum, had made their appearance into Yoruba court ensembles (Omibiyi, 1977, p.46).

Every palace in Yoruba land has a drum set in order to announce the presence, arrival and departure of any visitor. According to Johnson:

Drummers have to attend the palace every day within certain hours, including the visiting or business hour... He pre-announces the presence of any visitor in the palace, the king may be, he can tell by the sound of the drum who has entered the courtyard before the personage is actually announced (Johnson, 1921, p.58).

Account of the origin of *dùndún* drums is also tied to the Yoruba creation mythology. Laoye (Timi of Ede) opined that:

The *dùndún* was first used by one whose name was Ayan, a native of Saworin Ibarubaland, who thought some Yoruba families the art of drumming. He was so loved by his disciples that they deified him after regarded as god of music (Laoye, 1966, p.36).

Euba (1971) too had the same sentiments regarding the *Àyàn* family with respect to *dùndún* drums. He stressed that “In Ifa oral literature, *dùndún* drums were the 7th kinds of drums to be created by *Àyàn*, the first Yoruba drummer, afterwards, came *gáangan* and then *Kotso*” (P.180).

Another historical background of *Dùndún* drums was again gathered from my own informant. Ayanwale (2016) at Oyo, who ascribed the invention of the *dùndún* to the time of celebration of *Bere* festival (harvest home festival of the *Aláàfin* of Oyo) during the reign of Prince Abipa – one of the kings of Oyo Igboho or Oba Moro (the ghost catcher, who was the 4th and last king who reigned in Igboho). Adegbite (1997) viewed that “The annual festivals afford the opportunity to hear various types of music performed either vocally, with or without instrumental accompaniment or purely instrumental music such as *Dùndún*, *Bàtá*, *Ipèsè* and *Igbìn*” (p.144).

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that *dùndún* drums are old-age set of drums in traditional Yoruba society; the technology of constructing it is hereditary and passed to them

by their ancestors. They are used in the palace to sing praises to kings, ancestors, and invoke spirits and religious rituals.

Preparation for the Construction of Dùndún Drums

In traditional Yoruba society, construction of Dùndún drums touch the technical skill and thought. For building Dùndún drums, the Àyàn who is the maker must be aware of the way sound and different pitches can be made and modified. A solution to all kinds of technical problems like increasing sound through resonators, method of attaching drum-heads, tuning, sound-hole, techniques of playing, to mention but a few, must be there. The maker must have knowledge of the materials used, and the technology and tools to work with them, shape them to the desired end. The instruments must fit into the cultural mould expected of it in the society and serve its musical and non-musical functions. Agu (2015) stated that “To decode and encoded message delivered by the talking drum or any similar instrument, knowledge of the people is prerequisite” (p. 3).

The drums must be shaped in an acceptable size and decorated with traditional patterns and produce music that is considered authentic by the society. The *Apá* tree is being cut down from the forest and a carver from *Àyàn* family puts on bell-apron and carving strap, cuts the *Apá* tree into different sizes and shapes; he peels out the back of the tree and carve in a shape of hourglass with two cones joining at the points. It is slightly hollow in the middle with a wide hole inside and carved out the two faces of single face that would be covered with animal skin. According to Omibiyi:

Leather drums are most invariably carved out of solid logs of wood and covered with skins of various animals... They occur in a wide variety of shapes, conical, cylindrical, bowl or cup-shaped and even in the shape of an hourglass, as the drum orchestra of the Yorubas... (Omibiyi, 1977, p.25).

The wooden frame is dried in sun. A small goat is killed and the skin removed, and soaked in water until it is soft. A creeper (tangiri) is then used to brush the hair off the goat skin. The skin is then soaked in vegetable decorations (àgbo) with ashes, and water mixed together in a big pot for five or six days, all the hair of the goat skin is scrapped off immediately and the skin is properly dried up in the sun. As soon as the skin dries up, palm oil is rubbed on the skin and a sharp knife is used to cut the skin into different sizes and shapes. The skin cut into different sizes is rolled around the leg to produce hollow cylindrical shapes. It is hanged up inside a room for a week in order to dry up properly and at the same time produce the required pitches.

Construction of D̀̀nd̀̀n Drums

The evolution of man has always been culture driven and the driving force has been technology. Technology can be explained as a process, product and as a mixture of process and product. The cumulative wisdom of doing or making D̀̀nd̀̀n drums is a process of technology, while the drum made is the product of technology.

D̀̀nd̀̀n drums are an ensemble of five or six drums of the membrano-phone family. The five or six member drums of the ensemble are Ìyá-Ìl̀̀r̀̀, g̀̀rd̀̀g̀̀rd̀̀, k̀̀ǹ̀à̀̀g̀̀, ker̀̀ker̀̀, Isááj̀̀ and g̀̀ng̀̀. They are single and double – headed tension drums of different sizes and shapes. They have tensions through which the skin membrane can be expanded or contracted to produce sounds of different pitches. According to Akpabot (1986), “There is D̀̀nd̀̀n ensemble made up of five drums Ìyá-Ìl̀̀r̀̀ (mother drum), g̀̀rd̀̀g̀̀rd̀̀ (two-tone drum), k̀̀ǹ̀à̀̀g̀̀ (high-pitch drum), ker̀̀ker̀̀ (low-pitch drum), Isááj̀̀ (medium-pitch drum)” (p.107).

The art of constructing D̀̀nd̀̀n drum in Yoruba culture is hereditary - passing the skill from parents to the children. They received the training at home in order to succeed their parents.

They were introduced to the art of construction from birth or early age as a shared experience, born into musical families' called Àyàn and they first of all learn how to manufacture the instruments they have to perform upon, and at the same time repair the damaged ones. The decorations range from simple to complex. Omibiyi (1977) stated that "the traditional decorations vary from one drum to the other... the designs range from simple incised carvings to geometric figures, animal carvings..." (p.41).

The construction of Dùndún drums is influenced by local natural resources as well as historical and cultural considerations. Laoye (Timi of Ede) pointed out that:

A tree nearest a roadside is used in carving out a drum, the drum will be able to imitate human tones better as it is believed that trees like human beings have ears and can hear people talk as they go along the road (Laoye, p.36).

The Yorubas strongly believe that trees that are located very close to the roadside are suitable for the construction of Dùndún drums. They are capable of producing Yoruba tones or speeches of low, middle and high pitches. Akpabot (1986) affirmed that:

In the construction of Yoruba drum, only wood from Omo and Apa trees are used. Mythical tradition believe that wood from these two trees are used because they grew near the roadside and are able to hear humans passing-by conversing and are able to reproduce human tones (p. 97)

The materials in constructing Dùndún drums were of different kinds such as Igiilé (apa tree), ègì, (goat or animal skin), Osan (leather throngs), Ìlèkè (thread of cloth), Saworo (small brass bells), Ìlu (needle), Òbe (knife), Aso-Òkè (native-cloth), ide-ilu (string cord), tagiri (creaper), Òpá-Ìlù (curved stick), Ìdèlé (gum), Idá (black wax), Ìkékeré (leather strips), Àké (small axe), water, eérú (ashes), and àgbo or vegetable decoration.

The two faces of the wooden frame are covered with skin of animal and are tied with throngs. Austin Emielu (2005) opined that "musical instruments were constructed from the materials available in the environment while training of musicians was through informal process (Emielu, 2005, p. 287). Three tick sticks of the first face of the drum stretch the leather

thongs (osan) from the first surface to the stick inside the second surface, with the skin in the hole of a big needle (ilu) to pin the frame and the skin of a goat skin together.

The second and the third sticks would be repeated by stretching the leather strings from one circumference to the other, in order to complete the first surface round. Before getting to an end of the first surface, there is the use of a gum for the re-surface (idele). After the construction with the membrane and the leather strings, to the leather strings with the gum to the remaining skin and use a saw-blade or knife to cut the pieces of the skin, then remove the three sticks and pull the Ìtálù, to enable it to be solid and strong. The second is then repeated as the first surface and to the Igbajù-saworo(bells) on the first and second faces of the drum with hand of the drums (apailu). Other members of the Dùndún orchestra such as Ìyá-Ìlù, kànàgó, kerikerí, Isáájù, gángan, except Gúdúgúdú use the same technological devices. The drums are beaten with a curved stick (opá-ìlù) and hanged on the left shoulder of the drummer. As for Gúdúgúdúropón, the single membrane drum is like a shallow bowl, covered with the animal skin. A piece of cloth is twisted round the frame and a sharp nail as a needle to spin the skin together with the leather strings round the wooden frame. Darius (1967) stated that “the gúdúgúdú, a bowl-shape single membrane accompanying drum, beaten with leather thongs, is well-known member of the Dùndún family” (p.36). The leather thongs are pulled round properly to make the drum stronger; the remaining skin is then cut.

After the construction of the drum, the bottom is covered with another skin with three thick sticks between the piece of cloth and the skin in order to make the drum stronger. The black wax or gum (ida) in the middle of the surface of the drum, and wooden hedge at the bottom are responsible for its pitches.

Tuning and Playing Position of Dùndún Drums

The technology of drum construction is not only the over-all shape of the instrument that is important but also the attachment of the skin to the body or frame of the drum and the tuning by way of increasing or decreasing of the tension throngs of the membrane. Tuning of Dùndún drums may be carried out by: wetting the drum head - which makes the leather softer; holding it over a fire or putting it in the sun; making the head drier, tighter, higher pitched; or by manipulating the tension throngs.

Dùndún drums are talking drums and the drummer can interpret the language of the drum. They are capable of playing melodic rhythms and the drummer manipulates the tension throngs which the skin membranes are expanded or contracted to produce sounds of different pitches. Ojuade Jeleel observed that “the gangan drummer is vast in proverbs and Yoruba adages and is indeed a reservoir of language and knowledge as displayed through his drum beats (Ojuade, 2017, p.361).

The mother drum (ìyá-ìlù) is capable of tonal variations and speech communication. It is free to vary the pitch with glides and embellishments by manipulating the tensioning throngs with his left hand. They are tuned to the lowest, medium and highest pitches and complicated overtones. According to Adegbite (1989), “there is a belief among the Dùndún drummers that the gúdúgúdú has two tongues, one which is used to produce high-tone and the other which produces low-tone. The black spot is said to be responsible for the low-tone” (p.120).

All the drums in Dùndún orchestra can be tuned and at the same time made to talk. Gúdúgúdú, in exception, is tuned to basic pitch level higher than the other drums in the ensemble, producing high and low tones through the black iron wax (ida) which is applied to the middle of the membrane.

Dùndún drums except gùdúgùdú are hanged on the left shoulder of the drummer. He uses his left elbow and left hand to press the leather throngs and drum surface and strikes the drum itself with a curved stick held in the right hand. Gùdúgùdú is suspended from the drummer's body around the neck and placed at the chest level, leaving both hands free for playing with two twisted raw-hide throngs held in each hand. They are played in standing position.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, it is evident that the technology of Dùndún drums in Yoruba culture represents continuity with the past, which gives us an opportunity of learning about present. Dùndún drums are old instruments, which are indigenous to the original owners of Yoruba land. Merriam (1964) asserted that "drum serve as a musical instrument that could be a technique of reconstruction history of African" (p.190)

If we look at the origin, construction, tuning and playing techniques of Dùndún drums in Yoruba culture, we would accept the fact that our fore-fathers have given us a noble art which we should improve upon. Dùndún drums are very significant in traditional Yoruba society and are of great importance which cannot be denied or forgotten.

Based on the discussion that have revealed the vital place of Dùndún drums in the Yoruba culture, the construction of Dùndún drums must therefore be studied and documented for posterity. Noteworthy, is how much time and trouble it involves in acquiring the skill and learning how to speak with the instruments, an essential aspect that must not be lost to the western technology.

Dùndún drummer is a professional and is recognized and considered a master of drumming by the way he handles and manipulates the drum. He plays a major part at funerals, installations, memorials, rituals, praise, dances and many others. The drummers are creative

artists and as long as they continue to practice this noble art through its preservation, the art is assured.

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