

**TALKING DRUMS: MAPPING OUT THE TERRITORY OF USES AND
DEMARCATING THE REGION OF ABUSES IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The paper assessed the uses and abuses of talking drums in south-western Nigeria. A host of African communication scholars and ethno-communicologists have ignored the abuses of talking drums, focusing all their research attention on the functions and uses of the talking drums in the south-west, Nigeria and Africa. However, in a bid to bridge this research gap, the researcher made effort to interview local drummers in Oyo town, who revealed many abuses of talking drums. Development media theory was adopted to explain issues in this research study. Development media theory posits that for the development to be attained in Africa, local media must give a priority attention to local cultures and languages. The paper recommended that Government through the National University Commission should re-visit the curricular of Mass Communication programmes, Theatre and Media Arts programmes, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo Language Programmes and Anthropology and Sociology programmes in Nigerian Universities. There must be a course, in the course curricular of tertiary institutions, solely dedicated and

named DRUMMUNICATION STUDIES in our universities and polytechnics, including the Colleges of Education to sustain and uphold the life of talking drums in Nigeria and Africa. The study also recommended that the dying cultural days in our primary and secondary schools must be returned.

Keywords: Mapping Out, Territory, Uses, Demarcation, Region, Abuses

Introduction

Omu (1978), cited in Aina (2003), maintains that 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. Oso (2010) posits that traditional or indigenous media are traditional performances of many African communities, such as drama, music, songs, popular theatre, puppetry, and stories, which are part of the community communication system incorporated into the modern media to multiply their reach and possible effectiveness for entertainment, education and information of the people. Wilson (1987), cited in Aina (2003), argues that media, or indigenous communication systems, are continuous processes of information dissemination, entertainment, and education used in societies that have not been seriously dislocated by Western culture or any other external influence. Where traditional communication is still predominant, the role of peers, parents, village heads, and talking drums is vital in initiating the young into the community and preparing them for active integration in the life of the group (MacBride, 1980). The importance of interpersonal communication, offered by talking drums, is evident, for example, in critical or exceptional situations or during periods of major political or social change: election campaigns, agrarian reforms, religious upheavals, local festivals, campaigns against social evils, and so on (MacBride, 1980). Also writing on indigenous communication systems, James (2020) opines that itinerant information vans are substituting the roles of local talking drummers and traditional newsmen in most rural societies of Africa. We could describe itinerant information vans as the mobile radio station of rural communities, spreading their effective messages far and wide. Omu (1978), cited in Aina (2003), groups the oramedia or indigenous communication system into two. The first group operates through informal contact between individuals and involves circulation of unofficial information or rumours in situations and places such as family visits, death and burial ceremonies, weddings and moonlight gatherings featuring folktales, while the second group is

the formal transference media which operates through a more systematised dissemination of information not between individuals and individuals but between government and the people (Omu, 1978) as cited in Aina, 2003).

Talking drums are membranophonic media of communication. Membranophonic media, such as all varieties of skin leather drums, produce sound through the vibration of membranes (Oso, 2010). Examples of these include Yoruba talking drums such as Dundun, Gangan, Bata, Omele, Gbedu, Sakara, Iya-Ilu, and others. According to Oso (2010), the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria possess talking drums like Ekwe, carved from a cylindrical block of wood. Other tribes and elsewhere in Africa also have a rich heritage of talking drums of various sizes and shapes meant for the purpose of communicating a message in their respective communities.

Of all the indigenous or indigenised media of communication in Africa, apart from the traditional newsperson, also known as a town crier, talking drummers are reputed to disseminate vital and relevant messages in African communities. African cultural practices rely so heavily on the talking drum that its absence signals inevitable circumstances. A host of African communication scholars have extensively researched the uses and functions of talking drums, ignoring the fact that they could also be subjected to abuse.

Development Media Theory

The paper is anchored on development media theory because development theory emphasizes the use of local media to attain development. The theory stresses that for the development to be accomplished in Africa, indigenous or local media must give a priority attention to local cultures and languages for a holistic development to be attained. The theory, according to Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008), is based on the fact that local media and regional media must give priority attention to local cultures and languages. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy without prejudice to their traditional functions of information, education and entertainment of the public. They further contend that media should accept and help in carrying out the special development tasks of national integration, socio-economic, modernization, promotion of literacy, and cultural creativity. National media, as Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) maintain, should give priority in their

contents to the national macro culture in so far as this can be abstracted from national milieu, then to regional cultures and then to the local culture, all in a descending order of priority.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to conduct an in-depth review of available literature to examine the elements involved in talking drums, uses and functions of talking drums. It further highlights the indigenous communication system and kinds of talking drums in Africa, while also suggesting a theory to guide the study. The paper also discussed abuses of talking in south-west, Nigeria. The reviewed sources include reference books, journals, newspapers, images and other written materials linked to the issues.

Talking Drums in South-Western Nigeria

Talking drummers, as Goldstein (2010) avers, communicate with the dancers, audience and with one another. Talking drum, as Oyewusi (2021) observes, is an hourglass whose pitch can be regulated to mimic the tone and prosody of human speech. Talking drums are capable of imitating the rhythms and intonations of spoken words. Talking drums reserve a special position in African communities and serve as one of the most useful media of communication in African society societies because of their ability to disseminate information, educate, warn, advise, encourage and entertain (Oyewusi, 2021).

Typology of Yoruba talking drums

Basically, there are two forms of talking drums in south-western Nigeria. These are Bata and Gangan. Bata is the more preferred when events involve big or spiritual masquerades or during Sango, Ogun or Oya festivals in Yoruba Land. Bata are made up of five varieties: Omele Bata, Ako Bata, Abo Bata, Bata Koto, and Kudi Bata. The two ends of Bata drums are not of the same size. One is wider than the other. The wider end is usually struck with the leather stick, and the other end is usually struck with bare palm to mimic human speech or bring out the desired sound. People dance to bata drums through the acrobatic displays of dance steps.

A talking drum, as Oyewusi (20121) maintains, is any drum whose pitch can be modulated to sound like words in local language. Yoruba talking drums come in various sizes and shapes. There are Dundun, Gangan, Kerikeri, Iya-Ilu Dundun and Isaaju. talking drums have covered

leather heads on both ends and are beaten with a curve wooden stick to produce the desired sounds or to mimic the local language when squeezing, tightening or loosening of the strings. Example of a set of talking drums is shown below.



Source: Tribune Newspaper

Elements of Talking *Drumcommunication* Process

Stimulus: stimulus, as Ifedayo (2012) notes, is the impulse that triggers off the communication behaviour. The stimulus stage is the stage at which an idea is born and a need arises to initiate the communication action. The reason for communication may be to pass information, teach certain things or to entertain. the sight of a guest or a group of guest or important dignitaries is a stimulus that makes a talking drummer to initiate beating of his drum to either welcome the arriving guests or sing their praise. The talking drummer in the *drumcommunication* process initiate communication process at the sight of guests at a social event or to welcome an individual guest or a group of guests to an important state or local function or event.

Source: this is also known as a sender or encode. He is the one who initiates the communication process. Source, as Hassan (2013) observes, may be an individual, a teacher, a writer, a filmmaker, a dramatist, a guest, a leader or anybody who takes the initiatives to start a communication dialogue. Before one speaks or writes, the message is first conceptualized first and then encoded. A talking drummer in *drumcommunication* process is the sender of a message. The talking drummer has the memory of the history of exploits, brave exploits, and story of each family member in his community, and therefore, he can sing the praise of members of each

family off-hand. He can narrate the exploits their forefathers did when they were alive. He is capable of reminding members of each family their root and tradition of their families, and he can also pass an important message to the surviving members of the family either to advise them to keep up the good deeds of their forefathers or maintain a certain virtue that has always been part of their ancestry.

Channel or medium: channel or medium, as Hassan (2013) notes, is the vehicle through which a message is carried from the source or encoder to the receiver. The channels of communication are many: written, spoken, verbal, non-verbal, mass media like radio, television, newspapers, books. The medium in the *drumcommunication* process is the drum which may be Gangan, Dundun, Bata, Omele, Sakara, Agidigbo. Essentially, the drum represents the media through which the talking drummer communicates a message to the listeners, guests or people. The message communicated or beaten by the talking drummer might be to either inform, entertain or educate the guests on certain developments.

Message: a message is what a source or encoder actually produces for transmission using spoken or written words, or non-verbal means. A great deal of efforts is required to formulate a message the meaning of which should be understandable to the receivers. The purpose of communication by the source or encoder is to influence the receivers and obtain favourable responses. The success of any communication engagement depends largely on what is said and how it is said (Hassan, 2013). The message, as Ifedayo (2012) submits, is the communication content that originates from the memory, observations or experiences of the source for onward transmission to the receivers either to inform, educate, warn or entertain the receivers. The decodable and meaningful sound of the talking drum is the message in this case. A talking drummer in the *drumcommunication* process passes his message to the guests or people by way of the sound emanating from the beating of the drum, which could be decoded by the guests or the receivers of the message. The message of the drum, by convention, has an effect on the receivers or guests. Guests or receivers either start dancing to the sound of the drums or appreciate the talking drummers by putting money on his forehead.

Receivers: receivers are a group of people or individuals for which the message of the source is meant. As Ifedayo (2012) maintains, the receivers' task is to interpret the messages of the source,

both verbal and non-verbal with little or no distortion. The process of interpreting the message is referred to as decoding. For a communication message to take place, the receivers must be ready to listen actively and be in the right mood to receive, interpret and understand the message. In the case of talking *drumcommunication* process, the receivers are a group of individuals at social events such as wedding or naming ceremony, burial ceremony, or the dignitaries or visitors in a traditional Yoruba palace. The reaction or response of the receivers to the message sent, to a large extent, determines whether communication has taken place or not.

Feedback: feedback is an important component in the *drumcommunication* process. Feedback is the receiver's response to the communication initiated by the source. This also means that the receivers respond to the process started by the source or encoder of the message. As Hassan (2013) maintains, the communication exchange is possible only if the receiver responds to the message sent. A talking drummer in the *drumcommunication* process measure the feedback of the receivers by way of their body language or non-verbal response by way of dancing, smiling, facial approval, splashing of money on the foreheads of the talking drummers. As observed among the traditional drummers in Yoruba Land, a local poet accompanies the Dundun or Gangan traditional talking drummers to chant the praises of the guests.

Noise: noise is an unwanted element in the communication process. As Hassan (2013) states, noise is an interruption that creep in at any point of communication process and render it ineffective. Noise may be psychological, linguistic and physical. Noise, according to Ifedayo, (2012), is the cause of distortion which can lead to the reduction in the quality of the information transmitted. A talking drummer in the process of *drumcommunication* experiences a noise if the guests at a social event are not of Yoruba extraction or the ethnic nationality of the talking drummers. Besides, most youths in south west of Nigeria do no longer have the ears for the talking drums. In other words, they do not understand the language of the drum even if their praise is being chanted by the local drummers. This is reflected in the fact that foreign culture has, which is stronger, weakened the local cultural practices of many youths in Nigeria. The cultural imperialism, as James, Akarika and Kieran (2017) note, has taken away African dressing, language, food and mannerisms.

Uses of talking drums in Nigeria

Entertainment use

Apart from the communication use, talking drummers are known to be expert at entertaining guests and dignitaries at a social function or event. Talking drummers entertain people at the religious, and social functions. Their presence is noted during Ogun, Sango, Oya, Sonponna and masquerade festivals. Talking drummers are also embraced during naming, burial and wedding ceremonies. They perform to the delight of guests at such social and religious functions. As Olaoye et al. (2022) submit, talking drums are useful for musical purposes meant to entertain a group of fun seekers and guests

Communication use

Talking drums, as Ushe (2015) maintains, are important instruments of communication in African communities because it serves as the voice and culture of the people. Talking drums are used to communicate traditions, mores, customs, interest and desires of African society. It is widely acknowledged that Yoruba people communicate through their native drums (Akinbo, 2021). The major function of talking drums is the communication function. It connects the source and the receivers, and both parties engage in a decodable communication action. Communication by talking drummers takes different forms. A talking drummer is owned by his family and community at large, due to the credibility associated with the families of talking drummers in Yoruba land, they are traditionally nominated to serve as the mouth piece of the traditional rulers or other opinion leaders in most societies of Africa. What a traditional chief or a king cannot put into words, a talking drummer put into sounds and serves as the spokesperson of the king, and disseminates the information either to approve or disapprove of a certain issue.

Commercial use

Most traditional talking drummers use the drumming skills to make ends meet. Talking drumming remains their means of livelihood. The talking drummers, either invited or not, move to the location or venue of naming, wedding or burial ceremony to entertain the guest to get money from them. All they need is to know the name of the family of a guest. It is now common in Yoruba traditional setting to see a group of local drummers of different ages at various occasions during weekly, monthly market days, and other social functions singing the praise

poem of people to get money from them (Oluga and Babalola, 2012). They have a very sharp memory and can sing the praise of anyone as long as the guest is a member of that community and the one whose history and family root is known to the talking drummers.

Proverbial use

Proverbs are witty or wise saying usually said by the elders in a community to add weight to their communication messages. They also employ proverbs to present an issue from another perspective to their listeners or hearers. Talking drummers use their media to narrate issue of the past and back it up with proverbs. Talking drummers use proverbs to warn, advise, praise, encourage or applaud. Drummers use meaningful and understandable proverbs to communicate intended ideas or messages in African societies (Oluga and Babalola, 2012).

Espionage use

Talking drummers attached to some prominent kings in Yoruba land serve as spies to the kings. In the case of Alaafin, the talking drummers, at any function with him, reminds the Alaafin of the rules and regulations guiding the throne of his ancestors he occupies. Besides, if there is a danger lurking around, unknown to other guests at the function, the talking drummers have a way of revealing such danger to the Alaafin with the instruction to him on what to do.

Festival use

A worthy festival in Yoruba land and African communities is not complete in the absence of talking drums. Talking drummers are what attracts the spectators to any festivals in Yoruba land because talking drumming is synonymous with local performances of the characters involved in local festivals. During Sango, Ogun, Oya, Obatala Osun festivals, talking drummers are present to entertain the spectators and to make the festival a memorable one. Bata drummers usually accompany Sango worshippers because bata drum is peculiar to Sango Worshipping or festival. Bata drummers and Sango worshippers are siamese twins. They never part. Bata drums are danced through the acrobatic displays of dance steps.

Transmission of cultural heritage use

Through cultural programmes of which talking drums are an important component, social heritage is passed from one generation to another. In fact, many youths learn the *orikis* and history of their towns and villages through talking drummers. The younger generations learn important parts of their cultural practices. They not only learn the praise poems of each town, but also that of their kings, traditional chiefs and important events of the past in their towns or villages.

Surveillance activities

Talking drummers scan our society and disclose threats and opportunities. They reveal dangers and disasters to the people and encourage them to take pro-active steps in a bid to avert such disasters. Talking drummers monitor contemporary issues in their domains, and use the issues to drive home their points during their drumming business at a social function.

Correlation use

Talking drummers interpret social issues and events in various African communities and prescribe solutions or appropriate reactions to them. Many are the issues that people do not understand in an African community. Talking drummers shoulder the responsibility of interpreting those issues to ensure people properly understand and take necessary actions on them.

It promotes social cohesion in communities

Talking drums help to reinforce good conduct by warning listeners and locals about the existing rewards and punishment for certain conduct. Medium of talking drums has been used to settle quarrels and maintain peace between two warring communities or significant individuals. Talking drums can douse anger, tension and can be used to plead the cause of offenders. It can preach forgiveness, and initiate togetherness among people. For instance, at the height of Ife-Modakeke crisis, talking drummers were part of the dialogue to bring the crisis to an end. In fact, the two late kings rose to dance to the traditional talking drummers when the issue had been amicably resolved.

Talking drums confer a special status on some individual in the society, especially during a social function or ceremony. The attention of talking drummers is always on those individuals because of special status and class they enjoy in the society. Just like journalists' attention is always attracted to those people considered as newsmakers in the society, talking drummers' attention is also shifted to important dignitaries when they arrive at a function or ceremony. So, talking drummers confer status on those individuals in the estimation of the guests present at such social functions.

Indigenized uses of talking drums

Many settlers have indigenised the use of talking drums in Yoruba land. Hausa and Igbo people in the South-West now make use of Yoruba talking drums in their various cultural festivals in the South-West. Just as Yoruba people have indigenized some foreign musical instruments like Goje, drum set and so on, people of other ethnic nationalities have adopted the use of talking drums to communicate, entertain, enlighten and mobilise.

Abuses of talking drums in south-western Nigeria

Ethno-communicologists or indigenous communication scholars in Africa have failed to study the abuses of talking drums (James, 2015). Talking drums, as communicative as they are, can sustain ill-will between and/or among communities. Since talking drums have an unrivalled capability to mimic human speech, they can be used to haul insult, curses even remind the listeners or a group of individuals of the misdeeds or evils committed by their forefathers or ancestors (James, 2015).

Having known the cultural significance of talking drums, local politicians make use of the media to haul abuses on and to discredit their political opponents in a bid to obtain the electoral support of the people during elections (James, 2015).

Most local drummers are illiterate. Therefore, they use the talking drums to commit libel. It is observed that if a local drummer has a misunderstanding with a person, and perhaps the local drummer meets the person at a social function, he (drummer) uses that means to call the person

all sorts of names (James, 2015). Violence between masquerades have been initiated and sustained for ages because of the local drummers attached to these masquerades. Lives are lost almost every year as a result of rivalry and bitterness initiated and sustained by the local drummers attached to masquerades in some communities in Yoruba Land (James, 2015).

As James (2015) notes, drum beating was used to lure the warriors of those days in the battlefield to their untimely death. The local drummers who accompanied the warriors to the battlefield were in the habit of singing the warriors' praises, and in the process got them emboldened to move to the hotbed of the war, leading to their untimely death.

Talking drums, especially gudugudu drums have negative spiritual uses in Yoruba Land. It could be used to issue curses. If the property of the gudugudu drummer is stolen, gudugudu could be used to rain curses on the pilferer, and whatever the drummers drum will certainly come into fruition (James, 2015). In an interview with a group of Bata Drummers in Oyo town in 2015, it was revealed that a woman not born into the family gudugudu drummers dare not beat gudugudu drum, if she does, her monthly menstrual flow would halt.

The talking drums are also used for deception to procure money from the listeners or guests at a social function (James, 2015). When the drummers beat their drums to praise a man, if the character is short in height, drummers have a way of saying "he is tall". If the fellow is ugly, the drummers have a way of saying "he is handsome". Talking drummers employ the medium to praise the physical defects of their targets (James, 2015).

Talking drums communicate African languages, cultures and values, but with the adoption of foreign language as official language in Nigeria, our peculiar and culturally-based communication system has been abandoned (Oso, 2010). For example, many Yoruba youths do not understand when the local drummers are chanting their praise names and those of their towns or villages. They do not have ears for such praise poems (James, 2015).

Lack of African home training for children in modern times threaten drumming in Yoruba land as they do not understand indigenous verbal languages (Oso, 2010). The erosion of cultural technology in preference for new technologies, as Oso (2010) notes, is a problem to drumming in Yoruba land.

Domineering nature and indeed ubiquitous nature of mass media, as Oso (2010) observes, are challenges to talking drums. Radio, newspapers, television, Internet, magazine and other west-imposed media are pervasive. Therefore, African do no longer see values in talking drum in spite of its effectiveness in disseminating information, education, mobilization and enlightenment when compared to exogenous media (James, 2015).

Depletion of African values, culture and tradition for western values as Oso (2010) avers, is a challenge to talking drums. Many African feel inferior to employ traditional media because the new generation of Africans do not have pride in African tradition and values any more (Oso, 2010).

Talking drums thrive in a communal way of living of African people, but urbanization has destroyed the communality of African people, which renders drumming ineffective medium of communication (James, 2015).

Way forward

Government and other stakeholders have roles to play to resuscitate dying tradition of information and communication through talking drums in south-western Nigeria, Nigeria and by extension, Africa.

Government through the National University Commission should re-visit the curricular of Mass Communication programmes, Theatre and Media Arts programmes, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo Languages Programmes and Anthropology and Sociology programmes in Nigerian Universities. There must be a course, in the course curricular of these institutions, solely dedicated and named DRUMMUNICATION STUDIES in our universities and polytechnics, including the Colleges of Education to sustain and uphold the life of talking drums in Nigeria and Africa.

The dying cultural days in our primary and secondary schools must be returned. A cultural day affords the pupils to get familiar with traditional dances and other local programmes, which talking drums normally accompany.

All private primary and secondary schools in the south-west must be made to offer Yoruba Language as a subject to their pupils. Government of the respective south-western states must set up a task force committee to monitor the enforcement of this directive.

Government of south-western Nigeria must set aside a day in a week that all the pupils in primary and secondary schools, including the students in our universities, polytechnics, monotechnics and colleges of education must use Yoruba as a medium of communication.

It is high time Yoruba parents stopped communicating with their children using English Language. This habit of theirs is killing our cultural practices and tradition, of which talk drumming is a vital part. Scholars have established that no one could be a better speaker of a Language 2, if the person is not well grounded in Language 1. A Language 1 is a mother tongue, while Language 2 is a foreign language like English and French. So, if our children are not better speakers of Language 1, they will certainly be failed speakers of Language 2. Therefore, Yoruba should be used as a medium of communication at homes.

Like medical doctors in the hospitals and academic medical teachers are specially remunerated by the governments, Yoruba teachers and lecturers in our various schools should be specially remunerated to stimulate them to do more for the pupils and students.

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