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## The Sociolinguistics Function of Yoruba Talking Drum

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the symbolic and cultural significance of the talking drum within Yoruba society, examining its role as a medium of communication, preservation of oral tradition, and expression of communal identity. Through an analysis of historical contexts, spiritual associations, and performance practices, the study demonstrates how the talking drum transcends its musical function to serve as a dynamic vessel of language and meaning. The drum is recognized not only as a musical instrument but also as a storyteller, an orator, and a sacred voice that is integral to Yoruba cosmology and cultural continuity. This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing ethnographic sources, historical texts, and scholarly analyses to investigate the talking drum's communicative and cultural dimensions. Key themes—language mimicry, spiritual function, and performative context—are examined through interpretive analysis, synthesizing data from academic literature, musicology, and cultural anthropology to provide a culturally grounded interpretation of its role.

*Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Cultural Preservation; Tonal Language; Performance Rituals; Speech Surrogacy.*

### Introduction

The Yoruba talking drum, known as *Dùndún*, is a unique musical instrument that transcends its role as a mere percussion device by functioning as a sophisticated medium of communication. Its ability to mimic the tonal and rhythmic patterns of the Yoruba language allows it to "speak" in ways that convey specific meanings, making it an integral part of Yoruba sociolinguistic practices (Euba, 1990). Unlike most drums, the *Yoruba's Dùndún* is not simply used in making music; it also serves other important functions such as sending messages, proverbs and wise sayings, helping close the gap between music and language (Omojola, 2012). This multiple functions highlights the importance and significance of the drum in Yoruba culture, where it is used in communicating during social, religious and communal events. Beyond its communicative role, the *Dùndún* holds a significant place in social, religious, and communal settings. During ceremonies and celebrations, it is used to praise individuals, recount historical events, or convey moral lessons, embedding traditional knowledge into musical expression. In religious contexts, the drum serves to invoke spiritual presence, reinforcing communal bonds and fostering collective identity. Moreover, in communal gatherings, the *Dùndún* becomes a central medium for storytelling and oral history, preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people.

The sociolinguistic function of the Yoruba talking drum is deeply rooted in its ability to replicate the tonal inflections of spoken Yoruba. Yoruba is a tonal language, meaning that the pitch or intonation of a word can change its meaning entirely. The talking drum captures these tonal variations, allowing drummers to convey specific phrases, proverbs, and even complex narratives (Adegbite, 1989). For example, during naming ceremonies, the drum might play phrases like "*Omo tuntun, a kìn rọmọ tuntun kámá yọ*" (Nobody sees a newborn and is not excited), which carries cultural and emotional significance (Olatunji, 1984). In the same way, during weddings or chieftaincy festivities, the language of the drum is well chosen in a manner that represents the dignity and solemnity of the event, frequently using proverbs that highlight wisdom, solidarity, and communalism (Bascom, 1969).

The use of the drum language is greatly context-dependent, differing according to event or circumstance. For example, in religious occasions, the messages of the drum may call on Yoruba deities (*Òrisha*) or ancestors, while in social events, it may be employed in announcing or transmitting communal commands (Omojola, 2012). Such flexibility attests to the drum as an active sociolinguistic instrument in that it can address various audiences and settings while remaining culturally sensitive.

The Yoruba talking drum's role as a medium of oral history is particularly significant. It plays a crucial part in preserving and conveying traditional narratives, praise poetry (*oriki*), and historical accounts through the art of rhythmic storytelling. Skilled drummers are not only considered musicians but also custodians of oral tradition and cultural heritage. Their ability to convey stories, proverbs, and genealogies through drumming ensures that the collective memory of the Yoruba people is preserved across generations. The drum serves as an auditory archive, safeguarding wisdom, history, and communal values. The drum's capacity to unify the community is equally vital. During social gatherings, it acts as a social integrator, drawing people together through collective singing, dancing, and rhythmic engagement. The communal nature of drumming fosters a shared sense of identity and belonging, as participants respond to its dynamic beats. In festive contexts, the drum's vibrant rhythms energize celebrations, creating an atmosphere of joy and unity. Conversely, in mourning settings, its slow and solemn beats provide comfort and shared reflection, helping the community collectively

process grief. The duality of its function—celebratory and consolatory—demonstrates the drum's adaptability and its fundamental role in expressing communal emotions and experiences.

By integrating musical, communicative, and ritual functions, the Yoruba talking drum remains central to both traditional and modern cultural practices. Its ability to bridge the gap between language and music makes it a powerful tool for social cohesion and cultural continuity. As globalization increasingly influences cultural practices, the continued relevance of the talking drum highlights the resilience of Yoruba traditions and the adaptive capacity of its cultural artifacts. This paper examines the sociolinguistic roles of the Yoruba talking drum in relation to the meaning expressed through language and social appropriateness on various events and occasions. Through analysis of how the drum sends certain kinds of messages and adjusts according to different cultural settings, the paper analyses and emphasizes the drum's relevance as a means of linguistic and cultural expression in Yoruba society.

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## Literature Review

### Overview of Existing Studies on the Yorùbá Talking Drum

The Yorùbá talking drum, particularly the dùndún family of drums, has been a subject of extensive research across various disciplines, including musicology, anthropology, and linguistics. The dùndún drum, better known as the "talking drum," is famous for emulating the tonal sounds of the Yorùbá language and is hence considered to be a distinctive instrument of communication and music expression (Beier, 1954; Euba, 1990; Villepastour, 2010). Its capacity to evoke speech tones is well recorded by scholars, as it is used in both music and language contexts (Akínbò, 2021; Durojaye, 2020). The dùndún ensemble typically includes several drums, such as the Iyáàlù (mother drum), gáangan, kerikeri, and gúdúgúdú, each serving distinct functions within the ensemble (Euba, 1990). The lead drum called Iyáàlù in Yorùbá is particularly important due to the fact that it can produce a wide range of sounds and pitches, enabling it to imitate the Yorùbá tonal inflection of speech (Durojaye, 2020). The gáangan another important drum in the lineup, has recently gained the attention of linguistic studies, these studies explores how it encodes the tonal features and phonetics of the Yorùbá language (Akínbò, 2021).

### Theoretical Perspectives on Drum Communication and Sociolinguistics

The study of the Yorùbá talking drum is rooted in the broader theories in speech surrogacy, ethnomusicology, and sociolinguistics. One of the main contexts for understanding the fundamentals of how the talking drum functions as a communication tool is speech surrogacy theory, that studies the way musical instruments reproduce verbal structures. Across various cultures, instruments have been used as surrogates for spoken language, allowing for the transmission of messages through pitch and rhythm rather than vocal articulation. Stern (1957) classifies speech surrogate systems into two categories: abridged systems, which replicate phonemic and tonal features of a language, and lexical ideograms, which convey meaning symbolically without direct phonemic representation. The Yorùbá talking drum falls under the abridged system because it is capable of mimicking both the tonal and syllabic structures of spoken Yorùbá, making it a direct substitute for speech (Akínbò, 2021).

The ability of the dùndún to function as a speech surrogate is rooted in the tonal nature of the Yorùbá language. Unlike non-tonal languages, where pitch does not significantly alter meaning, Yorùbá relies heavily on pitch variations to distinguish between words and sentences. The dùndún is able to reproduce these tones by adjusting the tension cords that regulate the pitch of the drum and can produce high, middle, and low tones in a way that closely approximates the tones of Yorùbá speech (Beier, 1954; Villepastour, 2010). Empirical evidence given by Akinbo (2021) shows that drummers of the dùndún encode lexical tones that distinguish between words and grammatical tones that identify subject markers and possessions. Through this capacity, the drum is much more than a musical instrument; it is a full-fledged linguistic tool capable of carrying complex meaning.

Outside its linguistic importance, Dùndún is very important within Yorùbá sociolinguistics, especially as an instrument for cultural preservation and identity development. It is traditionally used to pass oral traditions, including histories, proverbs, and oríkì (praise poetry), in ensuring that cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations (Durojaye, 2020). It also features in the domain of politics and religion, where it is used as an official instrument in courtly ceremony, religious rituals, and public spectacles. It is played in announcing visiting dignitaries, in passing political communications, and in asserting social ranking (Eluyefa, 2015). By taking these roles, the Yorùbá talking drum is more than just a musical instrument, rather it also help covey social structure, linguistic expression , and cultural continuity (Teller, 2024).

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## Key Arguments and Findings from Previous Research

### Tonal Representation

Among the most important findings in Yorùbá talking drum study is that it can reproduce the three tonal levels of Yorùbá language—High (H), Mid (M), and Low (L). Yorùbá's tonal quality makes this aspect especially important, as tone is not a purely prosodic aspect of the language but rather a constitutive element of meaning. Through the manipulation of its tension cords, which raise or lower the pitch of the drumhead upon striking (Beier, 1954; Euba, 1990), the dùndún replicates the tonal quality. These tonal manipulations allow drummers to generate melodic contours that accurately reflect spoken Yorùbá, thus providing the drum as a successful speech surrogate. Akínbò (2021) presents empirical evidence that reveals statistically significant relations between the tone patterns of Yoruba speech and the pitch contours of dùndún drumming. Such capacity increases the communicative power of the drum, with the ability to communicate in messages intelligible for fluent Yoruba interactants, but in cultural as well as ceremonial contexts.

### Syllabic Structure

In addition to tonal depiction, study has also pursued how the *dùndún* represents Yorùbá syllabic forms. Yorùbá language mainly consists of a consonant-vowel (CV) syllabic structure, and the drum emulates this by using one strike for one syllable (Akínbò, 2021). Vowel-only (V) syllables, however, pose a special challenge, as they operate differently in Yorùbá phonology. Unlike CV syllables, which are rhythmically straightforward to reproduce, vowel-only syllables are moraic but non-syllabic, meaning they carry weight in pronunciation but do not always follow the standard drumming pattern (Orie, 2000).

### Grammatical tones

In addition to encoding lexical tones, the *dùndún* is used for encoding grammatical tones, another significant feature of Yorùbá sentential structure. These include the subject H tone, which marks subject pronouns, and the M-tone extra vowel in genitive constructions, which indicates possession and relational significance (Akínbò, 2021). These grammatical features are subtle in speech, although captured well by drum performance, which also highlights the drum's linguistic specificity. This function of the *dùndún* not only attests to the use of the drum as a surrogate for speech but increases the importance of the drum in sustaining Yorùbá linguistic constructions alive in oral forms.

### Cultural and Social Functions

The *dùndún* talking drum is an integral part of Yorùbá social and cultural life, being both ceremonial as well as functional in nature. It is used in religious worship, royal courts, communal gatherings, and social events (Durojaye, 2020). In religious settings, the drum is a key element in ceremonial performances, especially in the worship of *Òrìṣà* (gods) like *Sàngó*, in whose name the act of drumming is expected to bring divine presence about. In the royal palaces too, the *dùndún* heralds the coming of dignitaries, transmits declarations of rulers, and commemorates significant events in history. Its employment in oral forms of prose, in poetry, as well as in proverbs, is another reflection on the function of the drum as an object of cultural significance, retaining wisdom and proclaiming Yorùbá identity through generations (Villepastour, 2010).

### Intercultural Music

Its versatility is evident in how it influences contemporary music as well as music across the world. Although traditionally grounded in Yorùbá society, the drum has also been adapted in Afro-diasporic music genres, such as Afrobeat, jazz, and world music (Durojaye, 2020). This cross-cultural extension showcases the versatility of the drum in various music environments and the instrument's capability as a cultural bridge. Fela Kuti and King Sunny Adé are a few of the musicians that used the patterns of the *dùndún* drum in popular music, introducing it to greater audiences while staying loyal to tradition. The continuous use of Yorùbá drumming in diaspora communities also shows how the drum sustains cultural heritage beyond African shores and can still change while keeping its essential linguistic and music-focused functions.

### Gaps in the Literature and How This Study Contributes to the Discourse

In spite of the extensive literature on the Yorùbá talking drum, there are still gaps in the literature. On the one hand, numerous studies have examined how the drum can reproduce lexical tones, but fewer studies have examined how it can encode grammatical tones. Akínbò (2021) fills that gap by presenting empirical evidence that the drum successfully represents grammatical markers like the subject H tone and the M-tone extra vowel in genitive nouns. Furthermore, most previous work on the talking drum had been conducted through musicological or anthropological perspectives without regard for the linguistics of the drum. Akínbò's (2021) work, grounded in linguistics instrumentation as well as methods, is such an invaluable addition to literature as it fills the gap between musicology and linguistics. Through analysis of performance of the Yorùbá phonology in this research, the study is able to bring about greater appreciation for what the drum incorporates in terms of linguistic components within it.

It's important to note that while social and cultural applications of the drum have been thoroughly documented, there is research that must be conducted on how it is being utilized in contemporary settings, particularly in diaspora settings. This is broached in some measure by Durojaye (2020) in his research on the role of the drum in popular music forms, but there is still research that needs to be conducted on how the drum is being reimagined and reinterpreted in global settings.

Finally, the literature that presently exists are centered mainly on the *lyáàlù* and *gáangan* drums, while little attention has been given to the other members of the *dùndún* ensemble, including the *gúdúgúdú* and *kerikeri*. Future studies can look into the distinctive functions and language ability of these drums in order to gain a better view of the *dùndún* ensemble in total.

## Analysis

### Description of the Yorùbá Talking Drum: Structure and Physical Features

The talking drum possesses a special form that makes it serve as both musical instrument as well as linguistic device. It is typically in the shape of an hour-glass pressure drum, alternatively referred to as variable tension drum in scientific literature, this design consists of several key components that work in concert to produce its distinctive sound and linguistic capabilities. Wooden resonator of the drum, often carved out of *igi ómò* (*Cordia alliodora*) (Lawal et al., 2010), serves as the structural base of the instrument. Hourglass-shaped resonator produces two open ends, each protected with a membrane made conventionally of goatskin or sometimes of the skin of a fetal cow (BattaBox, 2017). These membranes are connected by an intricate system of leather tension cords (*osán*) that run vertically along the drum's body (Akinbo, 2021). The tension cords serve as the basic means of pitch modulation, compressed by the arm of the drummer, they tighten the membrane and raise the pitch (Euba, 1990).

Some other components are:

- A tightening rope for tuning (osaán), usually made of leather or wool
- Leather rings (ègi) that keep the membranes secure
- Padded strap for carrying the drum
- A curved stick (òpá or kòngó) for playing

The acoustic characteristics of the drum have also been studied quantitatively by Akinbo (2021), in which it was observed that professional drummers are able to achieve clear pitch values that reflect Yorùbá's tonal system: high tones (mean  $F_0$  of 172Hz), mid tones (125Hz), and low tones (61Hz). Precise pitch control allows the drum to nail the language's differences in phonemic tones, e.g., /bá/ ("meet"), /ba/ ("braid"), and /bà/ ("land") (Akinbo, 2021).

### Types of Talking Drums

The family of dùndún consists of distinct individual drums, each of which possesses a separate function in group performance. They tend to be conceived in familial terms, correlating with their hierarchical organizations (Durojaye, 2020):

#### I. Ìyá ìlù (Mother Drum):

The head of the drum group which is known by its large size and the presence of brass bells called saworo (Euba, 1990), the ìyá ìlù has the widest pitch range and serves as the primary "talking" drum. It performs the functional aspect of music through improvisation and leadership, while linguistically it deals with complex speech patterns and oratory (Durojaye, 2020). The bells are both aesthetic and symbolic in purpose, and drummers regard them to be a requirement for traditional performance (Durojaye, 2020).

#### II. Gángan:

The gángan is a medium sized drum that is chiefly known and used for mimicking speech, in 2021 Akinbo's research focused explicitly on the gángan, exposing its capacity to replicate both grammatical and lexical tone with very high accuracy. Its portable size makes it ideal for mobile performances and community announcements (Villepastour, 2010).

#### III. Gúdúgúdú:

The only non-hourglass drum in the ensemble, featuring a conical shape with a single membrane. Despite its different morphology, gúdúgúdú plays a crucial spiritual role in the ensemble, often considered the "father" drum (Durojaye, 2020). Its two tones (produced by striking either the center or edge of the membrane) provide rhythmic foundation rather than linguistic content (Euba, 1990).

#### IV. Omele:

Smaller drums played in accompaniment of the rhythm. These are typically categorized as omele isáájú (front/lead) and omele ikehìn (rear/response), both of which produce higher pitches as tighter tension is applied (Durojaye, 2020). Such an ensemble mode is one Euba (1990) describes as a "musical ecosystem" whereby each of the drums maintains its singular identity but coalesces into an overall performance. Disparities in size create pitch order that is correspondent with linguistic tone registers, and polyphonic textures conveying different musical and linguistic contents coexist.

### Linguistic Capacity

The language skills of the dùndún result from it duplicating Yorùbá's tonal and prosodic characteristics. Yorùbá is a tonal language in which pitch variations in words encode meaning - a quality that naturally makes it well-adapted to drum imitation (Akinlabi, 1985). Yorùbá has three level tones (high, mid, low) and two contour tones (rising, falling), both of which are replicated on the talking drum (Akinbo, 2021). In 2021, research on acoustic analysis conducted by Akinbo revealed statistically significant positive correlation ( $R \geq 0.98$ ,  $p \leq 0.0043$ ) among speech tones as well as their equivalents in drumming, favouring the system's linguistic validity. Various mimicry mechanisms of significant value were found in the study:

**Tonal Representation:** Tightly spaced cords that produce high pitches (average  $F_0$  of 172Hz).

- Mid tones: Mild compression (125Hz)
- Low frequencies: Little or no compression (61Hz)

**Contour:** Percussionists employ glides in H-L or L-H patterns based on varying membrane vibration tension. An L-H sequence is realized through striking without compressing but tightening the cords as the note endures (Akinbo, 2021).

**Grammatical:** The drum precisely illustrates grammatical processes such as subject marking (insertion of H-tone) as well as genitive constructions (insertions of M-tone vowels) (Akinbo, 2021)

**Syllabic Mapping:** The drum's stroke patterns conform to Yorùbá's syllabic structure:

- CV syllables: single stroke
- CVCV words: Two strokes
- CVV moraic units: One or two strokes based on speech rate

This systematic relation between linguistic structure and music parameters builds upon McPherson's (2019) contention that speech surrogates can yield useful evidence for phonology. The system of *dùndún* proves that Yorùbá drummers have internalized the phonology of their language and refined methods of representing it musically. The capacity of the drum goes beyond tone imitative functions to include pragmatic functions of focus, emphasis, and speech act marking (Villepastour, 2010). Master drummers can produce irony, sarcasm, or respect in delicate variations in timing, in dynamics, and in pitch contouring – an indicator of the system's flexibility as well as its expressive power.

## Sociolinguistic Functions of The Talking Drum

### Communication and Messaging

Beyond formal communications, the *dùndún* is central in Yorùbá social ceremonies. It marks life rhythms, from naming ceremonies, birthdays, and weddings, through funeral ceremonies, with life transitions and confirmation of communal union (Eluyefa, 2015). Drumming enhances the shared memory as well as mood of the occasion in these contexts. For example, festive rhythms are played in naming ceremonies, whereas somber tones are used in mourning ceremonies, each laden with cultural significations that are understandable within the community (Ajibade, 2006). Historically, the drum had been an earlier form of mass communications technology, particularly in pre-literate communities. Drum calls announcing public communications, summons, or emergencies were interpreted by the villagers, an indigenous form of sound broadcasting (Bascom, 1969; Durojaye, 2020). It is such roles that reflect the utilitarian, as well as symbolic, role of the drum in maintaining social order and cohesion.

### Social Engagements and Events

Outside of formal messaging, the *dùndún* is at the center of Yorùbá social ceremonies. It marks the rhythms of life—births and naming rites, marriage ceremonies, as well as death rites—delimiting transitions as it deepens communal unity (Eluyefa, 2015). Drumming in such contexts serves the communal memory and mood of the moment. There are celebratory rhythms for ceremonies in naming, for example, as there are for mourning rites, each charged with cultural significations within reach of the communal members (Ajibade, 2006). Historically, the drum had been used as an early form of mass communication, particularly in pre-literate communities. Drum calls announcing public statements, summons, or alerts were interpretable by residents, a native form of sound broadcast (Bascom, 1969; Durojaye, 2020). Such roles demonstrate the utilitarian and symbolic value of the drum in maintaining social order and unity.

### Religious and Ritual Functions

In Yorùbá traditional religion, the drum is not just any musical instrument but a channel between human and metaphysical dimensions. Drumming is accompanied with religious ceremonies as well as integral in worshiping gods (Òrìṣà), especially in ceremonies during festivals as well as in spirit possession rites (Drewal, 1992). In this case, the speech function of the drum is liturgical: it is mimicking chants, prayers, as well as invocations meant for divine hearing (Durojaye, 2020). Drums like the *gùdùgùdù*, an otherwise diminutive but spiritually empowered drum, are sanctified and played in religious settings like the once-a-year festival of Àyàn, celebrating Àyàn, the mythologized ancestor as well as god of drumming (Omojola, 2012). Drummers are specialist ritualists, whose performances are themselves exercises in cultural mediation. The drumming summons the gods, asserts social relations, and affirms ancestors' bonds. For Drewal and Drewal (1983), Yorùbá art of ritual—such as this drumming—is a dynamic social and cosmic negotiation act.

## Drum-Speech Examples and Explanation

The expressiveness of the talking drum is in its capacity for culturally situated speech acts. These examples illustrate this richness:

- “*Ọmọ tuntun, a kì í ọmọ tuntun kámá yò*” (Nobody sees a newborn and is not excited): This is a felicitous phrase used at childbirth, emphasizing communal joy, continuity of lineage, and the collective importance of progeny in Yorùbá society (Durojaye, 2020; Eluyefa, 2015).
- “*Pirí lologo níjì á kì í gbókùrùn eyẹ lóró itẹ*” (Only the farm owner can hear the birds chirping in the cornfield): A proverb focusing on individual accountability and insider information, usually applied in contexts of rank or chieftaincy (Villepastour, 2010).
- “*Má jẹ kówó ó gbéyìn, ohun gbogbo t’Ọlórún ó ẹe fúnmi*” (In everything that God will do for me don’t place money at the end): Prayerful appeals were sung through ceremonies in search of divine favor and prosperity (Eluyefa, 2015). Every one of these phrases encapsulates Yorùbá values—joy, duty, belief—and signifies the drum as an alive receptacle of moral and cultural dissemination.
- “*Ẹni tí ó bá mọríńí ounjẹ l’ó mọríńí òrò*” (Only those who value food can value speech): This expression emphasizes the importance of both physical and spiritual nourishment. Often played in gatherings where elders speak, it frames verbal wisdom (òwẹ) as essential to social harmony (Olatunji, 1996).
- “*Bí àgùtàn bá rí nńkan jìjẹ, ó ń bó lẹyìn àgbò*” (When a sheep finds food, it follows the ram): A metaphor about mentorship, loyalty, and hierarchical order, frequently played during chieftaincy rites or youth mentorship ceremonies (Euba, 1990).
- “*Ọjò ò rò, kì í sẹyìn àlàbáta*” (Rain does not fall without the knowledge of the frog): This proverbial expression alludes to insider knowledge or the omnipresence of elders. It is often used to express caution or call for wisdom in leadership (Villepastour, 2010).

- “Tí kì í tẹ ọmọ kì í jẹ kí àgbà dákẹ” (A child’s misconduct will not let the elder keep silent): Common in ceremonies with moral or didactic undertones, this expression speaks to the responsibility of elders to guide youth. It reflects communal accountability (Beier, 1966).
- “Igi ganganran maa gbó, ojú tí à bá fí wé ẹ l’ó n yọ” (A stubborn tree will be cut down when its time comes): Used in political or judicial contexts, the drum uses this metaphor to reference justice and the inevitability of consequences (Drewal, 1992).
- “Orí burúkú kì í gbé orí rere sùn” (A cursed head cannot sleep beside a blessed one): A spiritual admonition about avoiding bad company, often played during traditional cleansing rituals or divination sessions (Omojola, 2012).
- “Àjànàkú kì í ẹ ẹran ọpẹ” (An elephant is not a creature one finds under a palm tree): A metaphor for greatness and visibility, frequently used in *oríkì* to honor chiefs, royalty, or notable figures. The talking drum uses this phrase to elevate a person’s status (Durojaye, 2020).
- “Ìre gbogbo ní ó ọ̀jù ẹ̀ni, bí ẹ̀mì wà bí ẹ̀mì wà bá òkú, ire gbogbo ní ó ọ̀jù ẹ̀ni” (Every form of riches will be achieved, as long as one is alive and hopeful): This saying is used to cheer people up and remind them that as long as they are alive, they’ll achieve abundant greatness.
- “Táa bálé ní tá ò bááni ìwọ̀n là n bááni ọ̀tá mọ” (When we intend to hurt someone and eventually our efforts keep getting thwarted, it is better to stop hating on such fellow): This metaphor is used in social events most especially when the celebrant has overcome a major hurdle in life, it is used to remind folks that it is better to celebrate winners than hating on them.
- “Kò gbọ̀dọ̀ pa fínàfínà ikù tí kò bà pa’lágbèdè, kò gbọ̀dọ̀ pa fínàfínà.” (A mishap that didn’t kill the blacksmith, should not kill a forge blower): This proverb is usually used as a warning to someone who is crying more than the bereaved, that is the person or persons involved directly in a situation should be the ones to bear the consequences, and not someone who is just merely affiliated.
- “Olówó ì jó bá n diẹ diẹ lolówó n jó, olówó ì jó bá n” (The rich do not dance hastily, the dance of the rich is slow and steady): This saying is used to praise rich people at grand parties known as *Owanbe* in Yoruba language, especially when they are spraying money. It is usually used to invoke their ego, as they will continue to dance slowly and spray even more money on the drummers than they have budgeted.
- “Ènìyan ni ò jẹ, Olòrùn o dènikan komaa ní láfí, ènìyan ni ò jẹ” (God has created everyone to be useful and successful, the disparity you see amongst men is a byproduct of men’s handiwork): This is a deep spiritual saying commonly used in religious gathering to remind faithful that everyone is born equal and will be treated as such by the creator.

### Social and Ceremonial Functions of the Talking Drum

The *dùndún* ensemble, aside for its acoustic versatility, is what Émile Durkheim (1912) described as a "social fact" institution that reflects as well as perpetuates the values, structures, as well as norms of Yorùbá society. It is immersed in ceremonial life, performing the rhythm of birth, marriage, death, government, as well as divine communion. In this regard, the *dùndún* is not just music accompaniment but a participant in the act of sociocultural reproduction in these settings.

### Life Cycle Rituals

In rites of passage such as naming ceremonies (*isomọ lórúkọ*), weddings, and funerals, the *dùndún* enacts a semiotic system that encodes familial lineage, gender identity, social obligations, and communal memory. For instance, at naming ceremonies, drummers perform *oríkì*—genealogical praise poetry—that inscribe the newborn into ancestral and communal histories (Eluyefa, 2015). Specific rhythmic patterns may announce the gender of the child, such as the “*Ọmọ tuntun*” sequence that celebrates continuity and fertility (Durojaye, 2020). Marriage rituals are equally expressive, featuring processional rhythms that mark each ceremonial stage—from bride negotiation to symbolic gift exchange. Interludes of satire are used at times to ludicrously govern social behavior, reinforcing social expectations and moral norms (Ajibade, 2006). At funeral rites, the drum serves as an implement of remembering and transmutation. Prayers for ancestors are played in remembrance of those who have departed, whereas somber rhythms are utilized in order to express communal mourning as they lead the dead to their metaphysical destination in the world of ancestors (Beier, 1966).

### Political and Civic Dimensions

In court, drummers are keepers of formal communication, etiquette, and dynastic record. By means of coded sequences of tones, they announce the arrival of visitors, narrate dynastic exploits, and secure the respect for established institutions (Villepastour, 2010). The role of the drum is extended to the wider life of the town: particular patterns call town meetings into session, announce emergencies, and referee communal conflicts. In this function, the drum is an indigenous public address system—acoustic support for social order. Judicially, the drum is employed in oath-taking ceremonies, particularly in contexts where divine witness is invoked. Truth-verification rituals may involve drumming sequences associated with spiritual oversight, and public shaming performances—accompanied by derisive rhythms—function as moral correction within communal justice systems (Bascom, 1969).

### Spiritual and Cosmological Significance

In Yorùbá cosmology, the *dùndún* transcends its materiality to occupy a liminal space between the seen and unseen, the temporal and eternal. This sacred dimension is particularly evident in religious rituals involving *Òrìṣà* worship. Deity-specific rhythms are used to call forth and honor divine entities, and possession-inducing sequences enable *Òrìṣà* to mount human mediums during trance rituals (Drewal & Drewal, 1983). Sacrificial offerings and ritual movements are synchronized with drumming patterns, creating a multisensory language of devotion. Within Ifá divination systems, the drum accompanies consultations, using binary rhythmic codes to echo oracular responses. During annual festivals, such as those honoring *Ṣàngó*, *Ọṣun*, or *Àyàn*, the drum marks cyclical time, re-enacts mythological episodes, and facilitates communal purification rites (Omojola, 2012).

Cosmologically, the *dùndún*'s hourglass shape symbolically represents the axis mundi—a vertical channel between heaven and earth. Its tones are seen as vehicles of *àṣẹ*, the sacred power that animates existence and makes spoken word efficacious (Durojaye, 2020). Practitioners, often descended from the priestly *Àyàn* lineage, undergo rigorous apprenticeship not only in technique but also in spiritual discipline, adhering to purity codes and ritual prohibitions, including gendered restrictions in certain regions (Beier, 1966; Olatunji, 1996). The mythological foundations of drumming—such as the tale of *Àyàn Àganlú*, the deified progenitor of drummers—further sacralize the instrument. According to oral tradition, *Àyàn* received the gift of drumming from the gods, marking the *dùndún* as a hierophany, or sacred manifestation, in Eliade's (1957) terms.

### Linguistic Anthropology and Drum Speech

From the standpoint of linguistic anthropology, the *dùndún* exemplifies a multimodal communication system that challenges conventional boundaries between music and language. Building on Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) language socialization theory, transfer of the knowledge of drumming entails not just technical competence but communicative competence as well—a corporeal learning of cultural values in relation to sound. There is greater focus on performance as cultural encoding in apprenticing models in which rhythm is both linguistic as well as ritual making-speech. Hymes's (1964) "ethnography of speaking" is particularly apt here: drum performance occurs within culturally specific "speech events" that require mastery of appropriate keys, codes, and participant roles. Silverstein's (2003) notion of semiotic mediation also applies, as drum speech operates on three levels: *indexical* (signaling social context), *iconic* (mimicking tonal language), and *symbolic* (encoding shared cultural meanings). This layered semiotics supports Feld's (1984) concepts of "linguistic musicality" and "musical linguisticity," highlighting the fusion rather than opposition of music and language in Yorùbá expressive culture.

### Comparative Perspectives

While the *dùndún* system shares features with other global speech surrogate systems—such as the *tama* of the Wolof in Senegal or the *atumpan* drums of the Akan in Ghana—it is unique in the depth of its tonal and semantic range. As opposed to most systems that imitate phonological aspects, the Yorùbá *dùndún* combines linguistic content, ritual purpose, social signaling, and aesthetic performance in an integral communicative art (Euba, 1990; Villepastour, 2010). This makes it an untapped area of study for comparative ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology

Feature	Yorùbá Dùndún	Hmong Raj	Amazonian Bora Drums
Tone Mapping	3-level + contours	7-level	2-level
Syllable Encoding	Moraic	Syllabic	Word-level
Social Context	Multifunctional	Courtship	Ritual
Learning Process	Apprenticeship	Familial	Community
Spiritual Role	Central	Minimal	Primary

Table 1:

### The Talking Drum and Language Preservation

The *dùndún* serves as a living repository of Yorùbá cultural and linguistic heritage. By performing orfiki, proverbs, and historical recitals, the drum ensures the safeguard of oral lore antecedent of colonial writing. Drummers in precolonial society were custodians of communal memory tasked with retaining genealogical, mythological, as well as moral teachings (Beier, 1966; Eluyefa, 2015). This archival role continues in contemporary contexts, especially within diasporic and urban spaces where linguistic erosion threatens indigenous knowledge systems (Akinbo, 2021). Present-day drummers and cultural interpreters now employ the *dùndún* in fusion music, theatre, and school curricula, redefining its roles for relevance in the modern world while preserving its linguistic heritage (Omojola, 2012). In this regard, the drum is at once a cultural object as well as a durable force for linguistic revival.

### Conclusion

The Yorùbá talking drum (*Dùndún*) stands as a remarkable fusion of music, language, and culture, transcending its role as a mere musical instrument to function as a dynamic medium of communication. Its elaborate structure—specifically its ability to mimic the tonal and syllabic structures of the Yorùbá language—permits it "to speak" accurately, transmitting proverbs, stories, and communal admonitions. In addition to linguistic ability, the *dùndún* serves an important sociolinguistic function, affirming cultural identity, religious beliefs, and social unity among Yorùbá people. In an era of globalization, the talking drum serves as a resilient tool for preserving Yorùbá linguistic and cultural heritage, ensuring the transmission of oral traditions across generations. But its prospects is beyond tradition; it might be possible for future research to examine its ongoing transformations in modern music, digital media, and

diaspora communities, illuminating the ways in which this historic instrument still vibrates in modern settings. By bridging the past and present, the dundún remains not only a symbol of cultural pride but also a living testament to the *ingenuity of Yorùbá expressive arts*.

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