

Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria

Recorded by William Bascom / Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4441



SIDE ONE:
IGBIN DRUMS

SIDE TWO:
Bands 1, 2, 3: DUNDUN DRUMS
Bands 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9: BATA DRUMS

Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria

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EDITED BY HAROLD COURLANDER / PRODUCTION DIRECTOR, MOSES ASCH

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DRUMS OF THE YORUBA OF NIGERIA



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Introduction and Notes on the Recordings by
William Bascom

The Yoruba, one of the most important peoples of the West African Guinea Coast, inhabit southwestern Nigeria and portions of eastern Dahomey. They number over 3,500,000 and occupy an area which is predominantly forest near the coast and savannah farther inland toward the Niger River, and which is larger than the state of Maine. The Yoruba are composed of a number of cultural and linguistic sub-groups such as the Oyo, Ife, Jeshu, Jebu, Ondo and Egba, and of a number of independent kingdoms of which Oyo, ruled by the Alafin, was the largest and most powerful. The drumming reproduced here was recorded in 1951 at the capitol of this kingdom, known also as Oyo, a city of about 50,000.

One of the distinctive features of the Yoruba is their urban character. Almost a third of their population live in ten cities larger than 45,000. One of these, Ibadan, is the largest city in all of Negro Africa, with an estimated population of half a million. Yoruba political structure incorporates both city government, in terms of a chief and his council representing the "wards" and "precincts", and state government, with a king and his administrators for the various districts and towns within the boundaries of the kingdom. The capitol cities are ruled by the king and two councils, one representing the townspeople and one representing the royal family and palace officials. Yoruba kings have the right to wear beaded crowns and to use other state paraphernalia, and they were honored by special forms of deferential behavior. The kings and their wives and palace retinue were supported by a system of taxes and tribute, which today has been replaced by regular salaries under the British.

The large cities are supported by farming, trading, and handicraft. The economy is based on hoe agriculture, with maize and yams as the staple foods, and cocoa as the principal cash crop. The Yoruba in the forest zone produce the cocoa which makes Nigeria the world's third largest cocoa producer. Belts of farms thirty or more miles in diameter surround the cities. Women traders, who deal in local farm produce, imported goods, and handicrafts, dominate the huge markets, the most picturesque of which are held after dark and lit by the flickering flames of hundreds of small oil lamps. The profits from trading are a woman's private property over which her husband has no control, and some wives are far wealthier than their husbands.

Yoruba craftsmen include blacksmiths, brass casters, potters, dyers and weavers, leather and bead workers, woodcarvers, calabash carvers, and ivory carvers.

The social organization is based upon the patrilineal clan or lineage. The lineage occupies a large rectangular dwelling which may house as many as 500 people, including the male relatives, their wives, and their unmarried daughters. The ideal for all men except Christian converts is to have several wives. The husband pays bridewealth to his wife's family as a part of the marriage, and may acquire as wives the widows of his male relatives, for whom he becomes economically responsible. The first wife has special privileges and authority, directing the activities of her co-wives.

Yoruba religion, like that of the neighboring Dahomeans and Ewe to the West, represents a high point in African polytheistic belief. A high god (Olorun or Olodumare) is recognized, but there are no sacrifices, dances, songs, or other aspects of worship associated with him, except for brief prayers. In contrast, there are elaborate rituals and organized cults associated with the several hundred deities (orisha) created by Olorun.

In its general outlines, Yoruba religion is comparable to that of ancient Greece and Rome. An extensive mythology about the deities tells of their family relationships, friendships, love affairs, rivalries, enmities, and their eventual fate. Many of the deities turned into rivers or hills or rocks after having lived on earth, but others have no comparable counterparts in nature. Each deity has its special praise names as well as proper name, its special sacrifices and taboos, its insignia such as cloths or beads worn by its worshippers, and its special ritual paraphernalia, many of which are also accounted for in the mythology. Each deity also has its special songs and its appropriate drums and distinctive drum rhythms, some of which are illustrated here.

Much of Yoruba music, and perhaps the most exciting, is associated with religion, but Christianity and Islam have made serious inroads into the traditional religious music. Yoruba secular music has been strongly influenced by Islam, while another modern influence on secular music is that known by the Yoruba as "Spanish music", which is in large part Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian. Drums are the principal musical instrument, but trumpets, whistles, violins, several types of gongs, and a variety of gourd or calabash rattles are used, as well as hand clapping. Of some ten distinct types of drums used by the Yoruba, this recording illustrates three important sets, known as igbin, dundun, and bata.

Large numbers of Yoruba were carried to the New World during the slave trade. Their cultural contributions have been greatest in Brazil and Cuba, where Yoruba religious cults still flourish. All of the deities whose rhythms are recorded here, as well as many others, are worshipped today in Cuba and Brazil, while Shango is known in Trinidad, Haiti, and elsewhere. Yoruba songs and drumming have been retained in the New World, along with many other elements of the cult ritual. Similarities to jazz and to rhumba may be noted here.

NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS

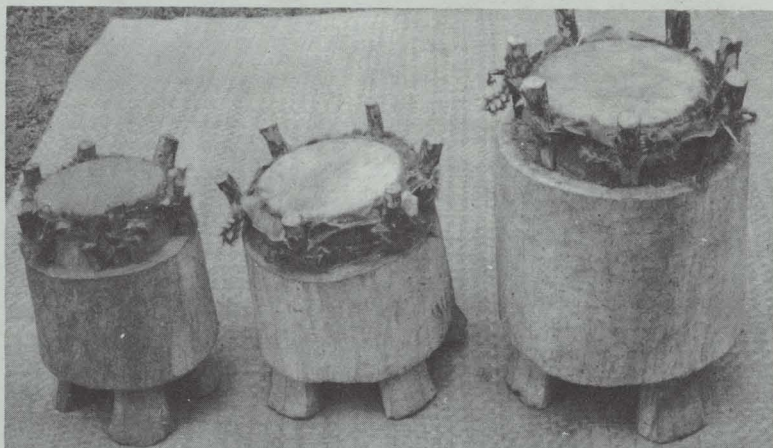
SIDE I. IGBIN DRUMS.

Igbin are upright open-ended log drums with single leather heads fastened and tuned by wooden pegs. They are known also as agba and apesi. The Yoruba have several other drums of this type, known by different names, used for different deities, and with somewhat different shapes and proportions. The igbin drums are generally thick and squat, and stand on three legs roughly carved out of the bottom of the drum. They are sometimes roughly hewn, and sometimes carefully carved with decorative figures and designs in bas-relief on the sides; sometimes the entire shape of the drum is adapted to that of the human figure. Three drums of different size played by three drummers make a set. The largest is called iya igbin, the second jagba, and the smallest epele. The two smaller drums are played with two unfashioned sticks, while the larger may be played with a single stick and the palm, fist, or fingers of the left hand. By varying the fingering and the use of the left hand, a variety of effects may be achieved.

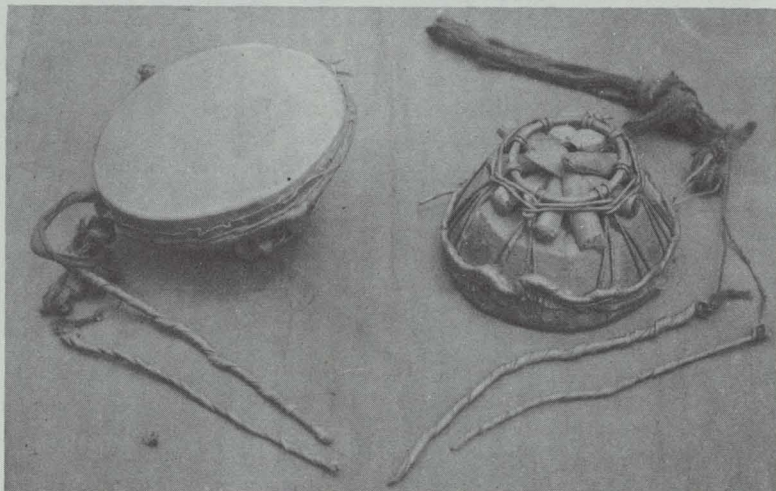
Igbin drums are sacred to the deity Orishanla ("the great deity") who is also known as Obatala ("king of the white cloth"), and who may be described as the deity of whiteness. His worshippers are distinguished by the use of opaque white beads and white cloths, and many of the things associated with his ritual are white. He is believed to fashion children within the mother's womb by opening the eyes, mouth, nose and ears, and by separating the arms, legs, toes and fingers much as a woodcarver does when making a figurine. He is also credited with fashioning the first humans, male and female, in a similar fashion. Albinos, hunchbacks, cripples, and children with six toes or six fingers are sacred to Orishanla and worship him.

This entire side was recorded during the annual festival of Orishanla in his principal temple at the house of Chief Ashipa of Oyo. During the recording of Band 1, several drumsticks were broken, and better drummers continued to replace those who had originally been playing. Igbin drums are played by cult members rather than by professional drummers, and are used only for religious music. The two smaller drums keep up a driving, interlocking, and almost inseparable rhythm.

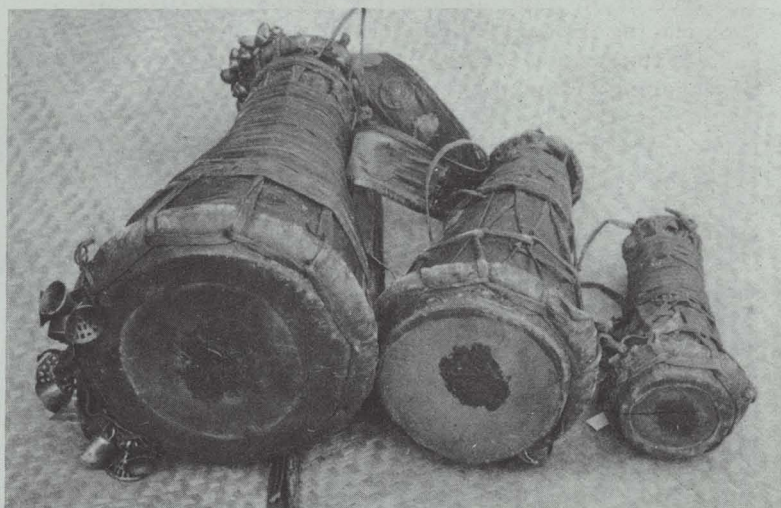
Against this background the deep tone of the large drum establishes intermittent rhythmic phrases which are dropped almost as soon as they become clearly established in the listener's mind, leaving him suspended in the middle of the phrase. The intricate interrelationships of the two smaller drums require extreme precision and accuracy, but the timing, subtle variations and choice of the simpler phrases of the large drum are regarded as involving greater artistry.



Igbin drum set.



Gudugudu drums, showing top and bottom, and the attached twisted leather thongs with which they are beaten.



Bata drum set.

SIDE II, Bands 1, 2, 3. DUNDUN DRUMS.

Dundun, or gangan as they are also known, are the type of pressure drum used widely in West Africa, and probably the most important Yoruba drum today. They are played by professional drummers and used both for secular and for religious music. It is the proper drum for some deities, and can be used for many others which have special drums of their own. Four of the drums in the five drum set have hour-glass-shaped wooden bodies carved by woodcarvers, with a leather head at each end. Small brass bells cast by the lost wax process may be attached to the drum. The two heads are fastened together by leather thongs laced back and forth between them. By applying pressure on these connecting thongs with the elbow, the tension on the heads can be increased, and thus the tone or pitch can be raised. It is possible to play a melody on a single drum by varying the pressure, within a range of almost an octave. The West African pressure drum is believed to be the only drum designed for instantaneous tuning, which makes it especially suited for the West African drum language.

African languages, like Chinese, are tonal. Tone or pitch is used to distinguish words which in other respects are phonetically identical. Each sentence, and each word, has a "melody" which can be whistled, blown on a trumpet, or played on drums which produce the requisite number of tones. The talking drums of West Africa are not comparable to telegraphy since they are not based upon a code. Messages are not spelled out, using symbols for letters. Instead, there is a true drum language and the drums actually "talk", reproducing the melody and the rhythm of the sentence, and approximating the quality of consonants and vowels by fingering the head with the left hand.

A variety of talking drums are used in West Africa. A set of three drums of different tones (such as the igbin) can be used for a three-toned language. It is possible also to vary the tone of a single drum by applying pressure to the edge of the drum with one hand. But the pressure drum, with its variable pitch, is especially adapted to drum language, and since it is carried by a strap which fits over the shoulder, it is mobile. A single drummer can walk about town drumming out greetings to the people he meets. Groups of professional pressure drummers among the Yoruba spend a great deal of time doing just this, drumming out the praises and praise names of important people in town in return for which they receive "dashes" or tips.

SIDE II, Band 1, illustrates this kind of praise, beaten out on a pressure drum in the drum language, and then translated into the Yoruba language by another drummer. It includes greetings for the different times of day such as "Good afternoon" (Ekasan) and "White man, did you wake well?" (Oyinbo, o ji re bi?), the praise names of important local personages, and other greetings and forms of praise.

SIDE II, Band 2, illustrates the parts played by the drums in a five drum set. First there is the largest drum, the dundun itself, which serves here as the iya ilu ("mother of the drums"). Second is the smallest of the pressure drums, known as kanango. Third is the gangan drum, the second smallest. Fourth there is the kerikeri, the second largest, which the Yoruba say is added to make the music "sweeter". The fifth drum in the set is the gudugudu, which is not a pressure drum, but of a completely different shape. It is a shallow hemispherical drum with a single fixed head, which is worn on the chest with a strap around the neck and beaten with leather straps held in each hand. The four pressure drums, which are played only on one head, are worn under the left arm with a strap over the shoulder, with the left elbow applying the pressure and the left hand fingering the drum head. The forward head is beaten with the right hand, using a special wooden drum stick which curves through ninety degrees and ends in a button-head. A set of drums must include at least two pressure drums serving as iya ilu and omele (either dundun and gangan, dundun and kanango, dundun and kerikeri, or gangan and kanango) and a gudugudu.

SIDE II, Band 3, is a song for social dancing played by pressure drums, with voice and with shekere rattles. The shekere is a large calabash, up to two feet in diameter, which is covered with a string net to which cowry shells are fastened. It is a versatile and spectacular instrument. When shaken, it serves as a rattle; it can also be beaten like a drum, and thrown into the air and caught in exact rhythm. Here it serves only as a rattle. The song itself illustrates the Moslem influence on Yoruba secular music.



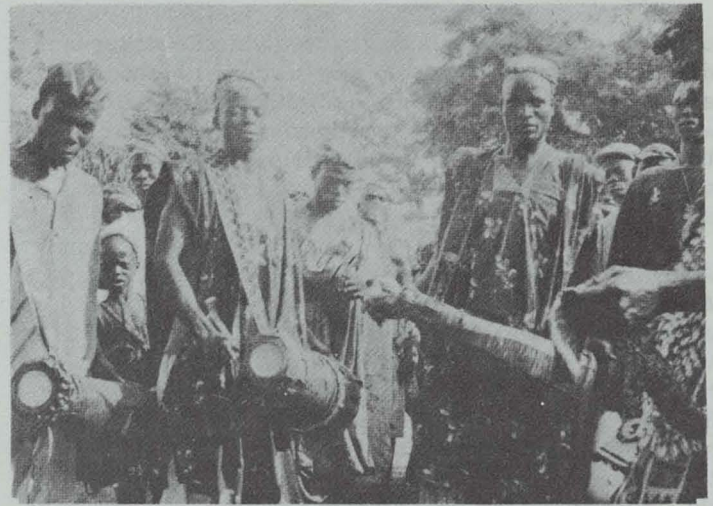
SIDE II, Bands 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. BATA DRUMS.

Bata are a special type of two-toned drums, believed to be found only among the Yoruba, and used only for religious music. The bata drum has a wooden body in the shape of a truncated cone, giving two heads of different size and tone. The heads are fastened together with leather strips which are wrapped tightly against the body of the drum with other leather strips, tuning them tightly and giving a fixed tone which has a metallic, bell-like quality. Small cast brass bells may also be attached to bata. Three drums make up the set recorded here. The largest drum, known as iya ilu ("mother of the drums"), and the medium sized drum, known as omele, are held horizontally in front of the drummer, who beats the smaller head with a leather thong and the larger head with his hand. The smallest drum, known as kudi, is held with the larger head up and is beaten with two leather thongs. Thus there are a total of five tones for a set of three drums. More drums can be added, in which case those of the same type are distinguished as female and male (e.g. omele abo and omele ako) depending upon their size, and the gudugudu described above may be added. Bata drums are still played in Cuba, where recordings of bata drumming were made in 1948.

Bata drums are played only by professional drummers and are considered one of the most difficult types to learn. A notable rhythmic feature of these recordings is the use of contrasting tempos, by the deliberate speeding up, and slowing down, of the tempo. Marked phases of acceleration and deceleration are used alternately in Bands 6, 7, and 9, while Band 8 maintains a fast tempo, while building in intensity. In jazz acceleration is used to build to a climax, but here the opposite is also used for effect, and Bands 7 and 9 end in a slow drag.

Bata drums are regarded as sacred to the deity Shango, and to his wife, Oya; but other drums may be used for these deities, and bata may be played for some other deities. The bata recordings here illustrate the different rhythms appropriate for the deities Shango, Oya, Egungun, Shapana (all four of whom are related to one another in Yoruba mythology), Orishanla, and Eshu.

SIDE II, Band 4: Shango is the Yoruba thunder god, who controls lightning. It is believed that he throws thunderbolts (neolithic celts, known as edun ara) from the sky when he causes lightning to strike, and can kill people who steal or who make bad magic, or set their houses on fire. He is said to have been one of the early Kings of Oyo who had many magical powers and breathed fire from his mouth when he spoke; after he committed suicide by hanging himself, he went to live in a brass palace in the sky. His worshippers are distinguished by strings of alternate red and white beads. Those who can be possessed by Shango when he returns to earth and enters into their bodies wear



Set of six bata drummers playing for Shango.



Bata drummers with iya ilu, omele, kudi.



Pressure drummers of the King of Oyo, in the palace. Gangan, dundun, gudugudu.

colorful costumes including cotton shirts and trousers dyed red with camwood and decorated with cowry shells, and panels of appliqued cloth and leather tied around the waist so that they spin out when dancing. Under possession, his worshippers carry pots of fire on their heads, and may even eat burning balls of cotton soaked in palm oil.

SIDE II, Band 5: Oya is the principal wife of Shango. Although Shango had many wives, Oya stayed with him after he had been deserted by all the others. She is identified both as the Niger River and as the very heavy wind which precedes a thunderstorm. When Shango goes out to "fight" humans who have offended him, Oya precedes him, blowing down houses and trees. Thunderstones are kept in her shrines, as in the shrines of Shango, and under possession her worshippers can also eat burning oil-soaked cotton balls. Her worshippers are distinguished by strings of long, cylindrical maroon beads.

SIDE II, Band 6: Egungun is the younger brother of Shango. A variety of costumes are used in connection with his worship: some with carved wooden masks worn on top of the head, some with long panels of appliqued cloth and leather similar to those used for Shango, and others of different types. All these costumes completely cover the body, head, hands and feet, and the male worshippers who wear them change their voices so that they cannot be recognized. Although any man may know the identity of the person inside the costume, revealing this secret to any woman is strictly prohibited and was formerly punished by a heavy fine or even death. Egungun worshippers have no beads or similar insignia by which they are identified. Bata or dundun drums are usually played for Egungun.

SIDE II, Band 7: Shapana is the Yoruba god of small pox, and the elder brother of Shango. One of his common praise names is Obaluaiye ("King of the world"), and in Cuba he is known by a variant of this, Babaluaiye ("father of the world"). The well-known Afro-Cuban song, Babalu or Babaluaiye, is based upon the worship of Shapana in Cuba, where he is identified with Saint Lazarus; it is not, however, related musically with the cult music, as can be seen with the drum rhythm recorded here. Shapana or Obaluaiye appears in the form of a whirlwind, especially during the dry season when small pox epidemics are likely to occur. He is fond of drums of all kinds, not only bata which are commonly used for him, and drumming is sometimes banned during outbreaks of small pox so that he will not be attracted into the town. His priests are responsible for precautions to prevent small pox, and for the care of those who become ill. Because of allegations that they actually spread the disease, the cult has been legally banned in Nigeria for many years. His worshippers were distinguished by strings of black beads.

SIDE II, Band 8: Orishanla is the deity of whiteness, discussed above. Although the igbin drums are sacred to Orishanla and are used for rituals within the temple, they are stationary and cannot be used to accompany dancing through the town. For this purpose bata or dundun drums are used.

SIDE II, Band 9: Eshu (also known as Elegba or Elegbara) is the messenger of the other gods, and the trickster deity. If a person is killed by a falling wall or tree, shot accidentally by a hunter, or killed in an automobile accident, it is the work of Eshu, who may have been sent by another deity to punish a worshipper who has displeased him. Eshu is the owner of cowry shells and of the crossroads, where he makes his home. His worshippers wear small maroon colored beads. Any drum may be used for Eshu, but bata are most important.



Restringing small pressure drum (kanango). Note the hour-glass-shape of the wooden body and the leather thongs which will fasten the two heads of the drum together.

CREDITS:

Photographs by William Bascom
Edited by Harold Courlander
Production Director, Moses Asch



Individual photographs of the six bata drummers

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