

CHAPTER 39

THE POSITION OF MEMBRANE DRUM (*IBID*) IN IBIBIO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY VIS-À-VIS AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This research work on African membrane drum explores in details membrane drum as an indigenous instrument in African societies with a particular reference to Ibibio culture of Akwa Ibom State. In this regard, facts are gathered on its nature – through first-hand information by the instrument maker on its construction, its musical and extra - musical roles in the society. Membrane drums have both musical and non-musical functions in the traditional societies. Hence, methods used in collecting data was historical and descriptive approaches through primary and secondary sources. This work considers the study of membrane drum as the indigenous instrument in terms of its nature, classification, application and values. This involves the study of the material object, its context, mode of construction, tuning, care, playing techniques and its role in musical ensemble and in the society at large. Whereas as a part of study in ethnomusicology, the basic knowledge on the constructions and performances of indigenous musical instruments become indispensable. Thus, this work serves as a study in organology to provide detail guidelines and information on understanding this indigenous musical instrument of Africa. In addition, the procedures outlined in this work is to guide the users to develop their technological skills on the construction of the instrument, and to help individual attain the height of musical scholarship on skills and performance practice of membrane drum. While the study exposes certain performance techniques to drum players, it can help one to go beyond drumming within one's conventional cultural contexts and bound. Another historical significance is the retention of cultural values through its socio-cultural functions, its musical and extra-musical values in African environment. It recommends special training on construction and various playing techniques of membrane drums to music students.

Keywords: Membrane Drum, Construction, Playing Techniques, Musical Effect, Extra-Musical Effect.

Introduction

Membrane drums are grouped under the membranophone family according to Sach-Hornbostel classification system of African musical instruments. They are musical instruments in which stretched membrane vibrates to produce sound. In African societies, the use of African membrane drum ranges from simple constructive type to some well-designed and decorated ones, which act

as social symbolism in the society. Membrane drums of all types and shapes are instruments that depend on the membranes of animals fixed on the wooden, calabash or pot frames for sound production.

There are wide varieties of drums body in which the animal skin is attached, and the distribution of drums with a particular design and construction tends to be restricted to limited geographical areas.



Ibid/ekomo



etok ibid

Fig. 1: Shapes and names of membrane drum in (Ibibio/ Efik)

The various drum shapes used in parching the animal skin include; conical, cylindrical, semi-cylindrical, square, triangular shape, and the sizes are either small or large, single or double headed depending on the need in each cultural area.

Indigenous Names of Membrane Drum in Some Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

Membrane drums are the most common musical instruments found in most parts of Africa including Nigeria, and they vary according to cultures. The distribution of wide varieties of drums with particular designs and construction, sizes and shapes is restricted to some areas. There are different kinds and shapes of drums found in some of the ethnic groups of Nigeria. However, the hourglass drum is so peculiar to Yoruba, though varieties of it can be found among the Hausas and Fulani. Some of the indigenous names are:

Tribe	Local name
Igbo	Igba, ogwe
Yoruba	Dundun, iya-ilu, bata
Hausa	Gangan, kalangu
Ibibio/Efik	Ibid, ibit, etok ibid, ekomo



Fig. 2- Parts of a membrane drum

Materials for Membrane drum

Materials used as drums for the instruments are usually carved out of solid logs of wood. Others like earthen ware vessels or drums shells are used, while in some places where there is no thick forest material used for making membranophone instrument is the large gourd or calabash; this is very common in the savannah belt of west Africa. Thus materials used for constructing membrane drum are:

- The skin membrane of animals (goat, sheep, cow, antelope and zebra in rare cases)
- The wooden trunk of the tree, large gourd or calabash and various hollow items such as drums, tins, and other such materials, it can also be made out of strips of wood bound

together by iron hoops. Earthenware vessels are also used as drums.

- Ropes for lacing the animal skin to the body of the drum
- Pegs or wedges for tightening the ropes and the skin for tuning – thus, making the skin taut and higher in sound
- Drum stick for striking the drum as alternative to the use of hands

Construction Process

The log of wood (sometimes coconut tree) which form the drum is cut, hollowed and shaped to the required size and design, while the hair on the skin of the animal is shaved and dried under the sun for some days. When it is properly dried, it is then stretched over the hollowed cut wood, while that is done, the skin is tightened with leather straps and nailed or pegged on the drum. A twine (robe) or any other strong robe is tight to lace the skin together, this is to smoothen the membrane in order to make it more flexible or tougher. The peg is used by cutting the small stick to shape, so as to knock it into position. The drumstick is prepared by cutting the stick and scrabbling it to shape with or without a pad at the end (Interview with the indigenous membrane drum maker – Okon Asuquo from Ikot Akpa, Ibesikpo/Asutan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State).

Tuning of Membrane Drum

The African membrane drum has no definite pitch, but the pitch varies. The tones depend on the size and style of beating for sound emitted from the membrane. It can be high, medium or low. While this is considered, the process of tuning membrane drum occurs during tightening or loosening of the skin surface of a drum in order to get the correct open tone for a piece of music. The tuning devices or materials which help in dictating the tune are; pegs, wedges and screws.

The method of tuning is demonstrated by varying the level of the open tone of the skin drum by adjusting the tuning devices while striking the skin surface. This will cause the level of sound effect either to rise or fall.

On every membrane drum there is a primary or open tone which produces a sound when the skin surface is struck with the hand or drumstick. Hence, drummers always prefer a certain tone level and quality of open tone on a skin drum for a particular type of music. The open stroke results from the free vibration of the entire skin surface.

To get the appropriate level of open tone as desired by a particular type of music is by tightening or slackening the tuning device on the skin drum. When the skin is tightly stretched over the round edge of a drum frame called the 'rim' the tone is sharpened, that is, it sounds higher in tone. And when it is weakly stretched by loosening the tightening or tension ropes or pegs, the tone is down or lowered.

The Drumming Positions

The drummer can use sitting or standing position while playing the instrument

- i) **Sitting position:** For a sitting position, the drummer can sit on the instrument while playing or if he/she sits on a stool and slightly bend forward to enable clear and easy production of tones. On a sitting position, the knees are slightly bend forward, with the drum in between the two thighs gripped or trapped firmly by crossing the legs with the feet leaning on the toes on the ground.
- ii) **Standing position:** The player only bends forward a little slightly towards the drums, this mostly occurs when playing the big drum.

The shape, size and the construction styles of the membrane drum really determine the position to use while playing the drum, hence, sitting or standing to play is greatly determined by the size and types of the drum. It can be played by hands (palm) or stick. For instance, a large membrane drum found in Ibibio described by Akpabot (1986) as having a unique three-legged drum called *ibid ekpo* used for ritual music of the *Ekpo* society is played by a standing position. All-drum orchestra played by *ekpo* society club in Ibibio employs standing position and they make use of drum sticks in place of hands. While other drum players make use of the stick or palm on the skin drum by striking, cupping and slapping.

Learning Process and Techniques

Drums can be played with either sticks or by hands (palms). Some drums are played with a straight stick without padding as the case of *ekpo* drumming group in Akwa Ibom, some use round stick with or without a knob and curvedly or slightly bent to exert weight on the drum when played. The tone quality and pitch is greatly determined by the use of hands –cupped, the palm, fingers, base of the palm or sticks at different positions on the drum. Chukwu (2011) notes the three primary techniques of playing membrane drum to include: **striking, damping** and **slapping**.

A) **Striking technique:** This is the commonest of all the techniques. It can be played with the bare hands or with the drumstick. However, hand is mostly preferred because it involves up and down movements of the palm from the wrist segment to the striking of the drum. However, Nzewi (2005) notes the three important stages in striking technique to include centre stroke–open, edge stroke–open and centre or edge stroke - pressed while striking. The three learning procedures in the striking technique describes by Nzewi (2005) is to strike open tones on the drum at the centre stroke- open, the edge or rim stroke- open and the centre or rim stroke-pressed while striking. The following illustrations serve as guide:

Stage 1 - The centre stroke (open)

The centre stroke open involves using an open palm or a drum stick to hit the centre of the drum such that the full palm or the drum stick bounce off the skin surface on contact (open stroke), this will in turn produce a low or deep open tone on the particular drum, see illustration below:



Fig. 3: Centre stroke- open

Stage 2 - The edge or rim stroke (open)

The use of a stick or four fingers in each hand held together to play the same open stroke near the rim or edge of the drum surface produces a higher or sharper sound. See example:



Fig.4: Edge/rim stroke - open

Stage 3 - **The edge/rim (pressed) for centre stroke**

The pressing down of the skin surface at the rim with the fingers of one hand, while the drum surface is struck at various point either centre or edge affect tone qualities obtained. The tone at this point will be higher than the tone obtained at the centre stroke open and edge/rim stroke open. see illustration below;



Fig. 3: Centre stroke- open

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Fig 5: The edge/rim (pressed) for centre stroke

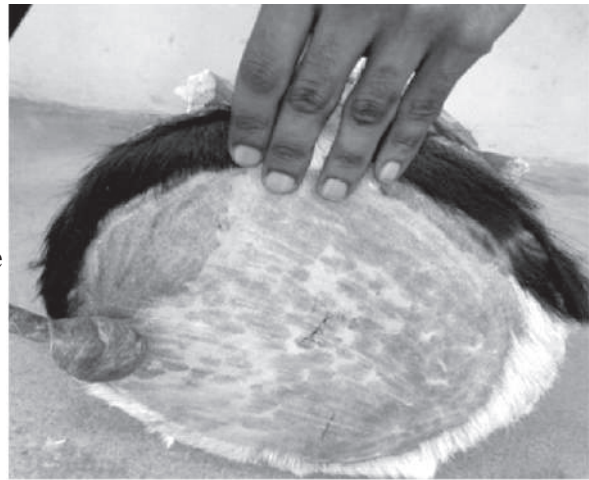


Fig 6: The edge/rim (pressed) for edge stroke

B) The damping/cupping technique

In this technique, the player cupped the palm and bounce on the surface of the drum to produce a dampened sound effect. this is applied to get different tone quality other than striking or open tone



Fig 7: Damping or cupping technique

C) **The slapping technique:** This is the method of slapping the surface of the drum to produce very sharp explosive sound. It is a quick hit with the flat part of the hand on the flat membrane surface. It is the technique of spreading out the stiff fingers and striking the surface of the drum with more pressure. One or two palms can achieve the sound effect, but it is mostly expressed by a virtuoso, who is able to display her/his extemporizing skill.



Fig 8: Slapping technique

Other sub-techniques described by Chukwu (2011) are; rolls, rubbing, flam beat and Finger damp technique

1) Rolls: He describes the six types of rolls and their vocabs

- i) Strike rolls – *krerererem*
- ii) Damp rolls – *dududududu*
- iii) Strike and damp rolls – *kedukedukedu*
- iv) Slap rolls – *kpakpakpakpa*
- v) Slap and damp rolls – *kpadukpadukpadu*
- vi) Slap and strike rolls – *kpakekpakekpake*

The above techniques are obtained through a fast alternating striking of the two palms with the tip of the index and the middle fingers or with the whole index fingers of the two palms. The striking is done alternating on the rim of the drum surface. This technique requires a flexible and sharp movement of the hands of the player with a good rhythmic application. One of such illustrations is shown below – slap and strike rolls



Fig 9: Slap and strike rolls technique

2) The Rubbing Technique: This is the combination of striking and making outward or inward movement with the other palm. It is the simultaneous process of striking and rubbing the membrane surface to produce a sound effect.



Fig 10: Hand position for rubbing technique

3) The flam beat technique: This is a method where two musical notes are played almost at the same time, one after another tone in a fast and excited mood. This can be achieved by striking alone or by combining with other techniques.



Fig 14: The flam beat technique

4) Finger damp and strike technique: This involves the placement of the exerted pressure from the finger on the drum surface and the intermittent striking of the drum. Two tones are derived from this method – the sharp high damped tone and the open tone derived from lifting up of the finger from the drum surface. Different tones can be produced, depending on the location that the player places the fingers. The placement of the fingers at the rim of the drum produces a high tone, while placing finger at the middle or centre of the drum produces deep tone.



Fig. 15: Finger damp and strike technique

5) Elbow-damp and strike technique: In this technique, the placement of the elbow on the drum exerts pressure to produce damp effect, while, the striking produces a different sound effect. This is mostly applicable when the drum is stable and firm on the stand or ground.



Fig. 16: Elbow damp and strike technique

Playing of Membrane Drum in Ensemble

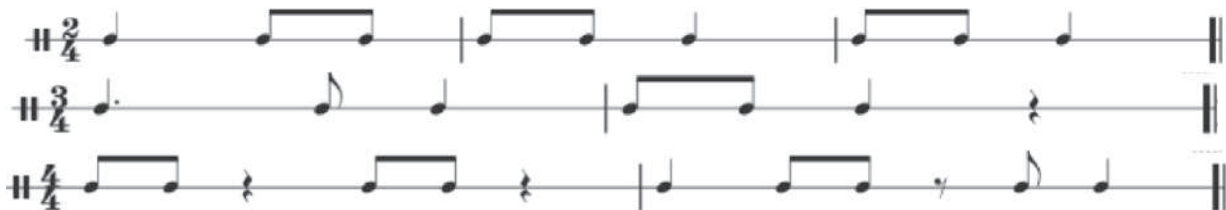
Ensembles of drums may be played alone or in combination with other rhythmic or melo-rhythmic instruments for accompaniments either in vocal, instrumental or dance groups. There are some ensembles which are strictly formed with membrane drums alone, like all-drum orchestra stated by Akpabot (1986) which is an orchestra of 2-6 drums only. In some cultures, membrane drums are grouped together and played in large ensemble, this is arranged such that each drum plays different pitch or tones as required in the orchestra example is *ekpo* orchestral music.

The accent of the drum orchestra can be strictly on rhythms, producing polyrhythms which is one of the features of African music. Sometimes, a solo or master drummer plays the improvisation while other drummers in the ensemble play various rhythmic patterns with a steady rhythm. This is also typically found in *ekpo* music among the people of Akwa Ibom State.

Learning Approach to playing membrane drum

Step 1: In practicing to play the drum, the learner starts to employ the following techniques using the rhythmic patterns below

- i) The centre stroke open
- ii) Edge or rim stroke open
- iii) Centre stroke with rim pressed down
- iv) Edge stroke with rim pressed down



Step 2: Formation of drum ensemble with four drums, whereby each drummer plays the rhythmic pattern as indicated below:

Step 3: Introduction of other rhythmic instruments into drum ensemble such as: gong, rattle, woodblock or slit wooden drum.

Preservation of the Membrane Drum

Membrane drums are kept in a dry environment, away from the moisture to avoid damp. The drums are stored on a raised platform or hung using a suspended object under normal room temperature. It is often dried under the sun periodically.

Musical Functions of Membrane Drums

The African membrane drum is conceived to possess melodic and rhythmic essence in its performance. Its melodic and rhythmic functions can either be as a solo instrument in instrumental music or in ensemble. The African membrane 'talks' as well as 'sing', some more eloquently than others depending on the size, shape and construction (Chukwu: 2011, Akpabot (1986: 19). During performance, master drummer expresses virtuosity by giving information or directives to members of the group. It gives direction during dance performance. Drums can talk and introduce a short musical scene to dancers before actual performance in some ensembles, hence, it has important role to play just like an overture which open the opera before the scenery.

During dance session, there is always a lively dialogue between the drummer and the dancer which enhances the spectators. Nzewi & Nzewi (2005), opine that in some African cultures, the drum instantly engages in a conversation with human and transmits instructions or messages to designated person within the context of a performance. In addition, Bascom (1953) also states that drums which actually talk, reproduce the melody and the rhythm of sentences. Hence, the role of membrane drum is highly regarded especially where the master drummer during the performance enlivens the spirit of the dancers and even that of the spectators. This happens when the drummer exhibits his mastery skills as he talks or sings with the drum.

Extra-musical Functions

In most African countries as it is applicable to indigenous people of Akwa Ibom State, drum sound is used as a means of communication – to summon people together or send out messages. The oral interview conducted with the membrane drum maker (Asuquo: 2022), actually confirmed that, people patronized him not only for music making, but to use the instrument for communication purpose; to send out signals to people within the community for meeting.

Drums are generally known to be traditionally used for sending signals or messages in some parts of Africa. Okafor (2005) notes that 'As signal is a pre-arranged code of drum beats, but a message is a complicated series of beats played on drums which imitate the tone of the local language (p.179). He further adds, 'In many Igbo communities some musical instruments... *egbele-nkwu* (a type of membrane drum) gives information on death among the Abriba' (p. 182). Membrane drums in some areas are used in rituals and at shrines as healing musical instruments.

In Ibibio culture of Akwa Ibom State, during a research carried out by (Udok 2019) it was found out that there is a set of small membrane drums traditionally called (*ikon ikpa*) which are special drums set, kept, preserved and played only during *mbopo* performance and are custodied only by the village head for historical purposes. (Udok, 2021: 160)

Moreover, the three legged drum among the Ibibios described by Akpabot (1986) as *nsing obon* is used for *obon* masquerade music and only played when a prominent member of the secret society dies. It is used as a mark of honour and royalty.

A particular drum sound of *ekpo* society (*ibid ekpo*) in Ibibio land becomes signals of warning to women and the non-initiate of *ekpo* to remain indoors during the outing of *ekpo* masquerade. Thus, Ekong (2001) has it that, 'the *ibit ekpo ekpo* drum (in the traditional Ibibio setting, during the pre-colonial era) was generally struck to announce laws or prohibitions and everyone knew that contravention of the *ibit ekpo* meant trial by the *ekpo* society which might possibly result in death or very heavy fines' (p.145). He discussed further that the beating of *ekpe* drum in the land was for social order. 'As an instrument of government, all important laws of the land were passed in the name and by the authority of *ekpe* and sealed by beating of the *ekpe* drum' (Ekong 2001: 148)

The pre-eminent position of membrane drum in African culture is so symbolic, as Akpabot (1998:16) states 'among Yoruba of Nigeria, the Alafin of Oyo is a powerful ruler with great

tradition behind him, his right-hand man is called 'Asipa', and when the Alafin wants to show displeasure with his subordinate, he withdraws *Asipa's* drum as a symbol of temporarily stripping him of his powers. When the erring chief makes amend, his drum is returned to him. (p.16). Also, he made comments that hourglass as a speech surrogate is functioned at the entrance of the king's court where the hourglass drummer stands to transmit information from the visitor to the king. According to Nketia (1974), certain drums are for symbolic and representational purposes, citing example in Akan society, the *etwie* friction drum is played to extol the might and majesty of the king.

The above facts have clearly indicated some of the outstanding roles of membrane drum in African traditional societies, the list is inexhaustible, there are numerous roles in other African cultures which are not identified by the researcher.

Conclusion

Membrane drums are the most traditional musical instruments commonly found in various part of African countries. There are of different shapes and sizes. The design for construction depend mostly on the cultural areas. There are single headed and double headed membrane drums. In African setting, membrane drums are used both for musical and extra musical functions. To acquire the basic skills or techniques in playing membrane drums require sequential application. Therefore, progressive teaching steps to understand and master various techniques become necessary. When these are considered, the learner/player can acquire basic skills and hence play the drums effectively both as a solo performer and in ensemble as a master drummer.

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