A LARGE DRUM FROM BENIN

BY H. U. HALL

THIS large wooden drum from the kingdom of Benin was acquired by the University Museum several years ago and constitutes an important addition to the group of objects of modern workmanship which supplements interestingly the collection of antiquities from Benin.

The drum is made of soft wood, evidently a large section of the trunk of a species of palm. The carved outer surface is stained a dark brown. The interior is hollowed out to the level of the lower of the two double bands of incised dentate ornament where a diaphragm is left, which is pierced at the centre by a large irregular hole formed perhaps by battering out the soft pithy heart of the wood. The two smaller holes in the panel which contains the principal carved figure are accidental and due to original defects in the wood. The large hole, if not due to the decaying of the softer portion of the wood, may have been intentional and connected with the acoustics of the instrument.¹

This vessel-like part of the drum stands upon eight legs of a triangular form which arise from a ring forming the base. The whole is carved in one piece from the solid log. It is 25 inches through at the widest, 23 inches in diameter at the top, and 32 inches high.

The style of the decoration and its subject and symbolism closely resemble those of the carvings on a drum illustrated by H. Ling Roth, in Great Benin, figs. 151–154. The latter is different in its general form, resembling a rather slender cylinder—the sides are almost straight—with a somewhat abrupt bevel at both ends, the lower resting on a disc-like base, so that the hollow body is not lifted from contact with the ground as in the case of the drum here, which probably has the advantage in resonance. The drum figured by Ling Roth is said to have come "from the northwest corner of Benin territory." This is, I think, significant, as we shall see later. It resembles in the general lines of its shape one of the types of drum which appear on the old Benin bronze plaques.²

¹ See Ankermann, Die afrikanischen Musikinstrumente, Ethnologisches Notizblatt, III, p. 49.
² F. von Luschan, Altertümer von Benin, Berlin and Leipzig, 1919, p. 190, fig. 313, and pl. 10, c.
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Of the old Benin drums represented on the plaques Von Luschan makes three classes: one like those just referred to, large drums which were stood on the ground, sometimes tilted, while they were being played; a second which he characterizes as "soldier drums" in allusion to the European type of small drum carried slung in front of the body by military, etc., drummers; and a third which is usually known as the pressure drum, hourglass-shaped and with two drumheads which are stretched by means of thongs passing from one to the other; this drum is carried under the arm and the pitch of its note can be altered by the pressure of the arm on the thongs connecting the drumheads. It appears that all three sorts of drums were beaten either with the hands or with drumsticks. All these drums are of types which have continued in use down to the present time in the neighbouring states; the pressure drum, sometimes known as the Yoruba pressure, or hourglass, drum, from its common modern use in the old home of the Bini kings, appears in a carving on a modern Benin decorated coconut figured by Ling Roth.

Of the drums used in recent times in the state of Benin we have very little definite information. Dennett says that a "big thick-looking drum" known as Ekun Alvera is beaten in the "father's house" when the Oba (king) "makes father," that is, offers sacrifices—formerly human sacrifices—in honour of his father and other ancestors. Then also the musicians carry two long drums and three of different sizes "like ours in shape." The "big thick-looking drum," which was evidently stationary, being beaten in a shrine in the palace (father's house) strongly suggests the drum we are chiefly concerned with, which is, moreover, carved with an interesting form of the emblems associated with the monarch in Benin. From Talbot we learn that the chief musical instruments of the Edo, or people of Benin, are wooden drums, large and small, with skin covers, trumpets made of ivory or of cow horns, iron bells and castanets. All these and others, as we learn from the bronze plaques and from surviving examples of some classes, were in use in old Benin. Talbot mentions a tradition that a certain kind of drum, which he does not describe, and the ivory horns were introduced by king Eware (Ewale),

2 At the Back of the Black Man's Mind, p. 191.
3 Talbot, iii, p. 814.
4 Ibid.
Drum, Benin. The carving represents the mythical Olokun-King and his arm supporters
a traditionary monarch who may have reigned during the fourteenth century of our era, according to the computations of Dennett and of Struck,¹ and who is said to have brought back from the exile incurred by his first attempt to seize the throne a new form of religion which he imposed upon the kingdom when at last he came to power. Considering the close connection between the ruling houses of Benin and of their western neighbours, the Yoruba—both Bini and Yoruba tradition derive the former dynasty from the latter— it is interesting to note that in Yorubaland ivory trumpets and a particular form of drum were peculiar to the king.²

The large drum figured by Ling Roth, which has already been referred to as resembling that illustrated here, has its drumhead fastened on in the manner typical of the region west of the Niger which includes Benin.³ The skin is stretched over the top of the drum and a long, stout peg is driven through a hole in each of a number of lappets, into which the edge of the skin is cut, into holes bored to receive the pegs. The fastening is reinforced by stringing a rawhide thong through small holes made in the drumhead skin just at or above the level of the scalloping which provides the lappets. This thong is drawn over each peg in loops which rest taut in a notch on the under side of each. The pegs are driven in diagonally, making an acute angle with the surface above the holes; the grooves in the pegs thus being necessary to prevent the upward pull of the taut looped thong and lappets drawing them off over the tops of the pegs. The drum is tuned by driving in the pegs, which would naturally have a tendency to be loosened somewhat by the constant pull of the taut drumhead.

The skin of the MUSEUM’s drum and its attachments are wanting, but an examination of the drum itself shows that the drumhead was held on by an interesting modification of the typical method. There are no holes in the sides of the drum but in the rim which was originally covered by the skin there are a number of transverse grooves which do not reach the outer edge but cut the inner in a plane diagonal to that of the top of the drum. The grooves are wider at the bottom than at the top and a piece of wood which was left in one of them when the drum was dismantled reveals itself as

¹ Dennett, p. 234; B. Struck, Chronologie der Benin-Altersümer, in Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, LV (1923), pp. 132ff.
² S. Johnson, History of the Yoruba, p. 52.
³ Ankermann, p. 97. See also Von Luschan, p. 190.
the remains of a peg in this unusual position, still firmly held but having a certain amount of play.

The drumhead must have been stretched tightly over the top and was probably confined by a thong threaded through perforations at the level of the peripheral groove which skirts the lower edge of the undecorated ridge at the top of the drum; the thong drawn tight here while drumhead and thong were new and moist would help to hold the drumhead in position, a function which would depend chiefly, however, on the long pegs driven obliquely through the skin into the grooves cut for their reception. The encircling thong, if there was one in this case, would have no loops for fitting over the pegs, for being below instead of above the level of the row of pegs such loops would be without the function they perform in the usual type of fastening, and, indeed, might even tend to pull the thong-fitted edge of the drumhead upwards away from its groove, and thus weaken the whole system of attachment.

In a small drum from Benin, also in the possession of the University Museum, the lappets of Ling Roth's diagram illustrating the attachment of the drumhead are wanting. This small drum has two heads and both are held on by long pegs, driven in much nearer the rims of the drum than is usual, so that they project far above the drumhead. The skin is not cut into lappets, though the edge has a scalloped appearance due to the stretching of the skin at the points where the pegs pass through it. In the illustrations to Ankermann's paper¹ the pegs do not pass through the drumheads; the tension is provided by the thong loops passing down the sides of the drum to the pegs, which are placed at a considerable distance from the rim.

The all-wood signal drum, which might more properly be called a gong, since its resonance proceeds from the striking of the hollowed log itself, is, according to Talbot,² characteristic in this region rather of the peoples to the east of the Niger than of those to the west. No such drums appear on the Benin bronze plaques, nor are they, so far as I know, used by the Bini of the present day. But the Alafin, or sovereign, of Oyo in Yorubaland, the chief and most sacred of Yoruba potentates, possesses one of these, the drum known as Ogidigbo or Ogidingbo, "a long all-wood drum, similar to that used for messages among the eastern peoples."³ Dennett says that "the

¹ Figs. 138–141.
² iii, pp. 810, 811.
³ Talbot, iii, p. 814.
drum language does not appear to exist much north of Old Calabar, and the Bini will tell me nothing about it." By "north" here Dennett presumably meant further along the Guinea Coast territories in the direction of Benin. Whether or no drum language was used in Benin, it was known in Yoruba\(^2\) and reached a high development still further west in Ashanti. Moreover, it was not the all-wood drum that was, at any rate exclusively, used for conveying messages in Yorubaland. Von Luschan appears to imply that it was this "slit- or talking-drum," like those of the Congo and the Cameroons, which was the instrument peculiar to this use.\(^3\) The Ashanti "talking-drums" also are true drums.

We have seen that a large "thick-looking drum" was beaten in the palace at Benin in connection with rites commemorating the

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\(^1\) *At the Back of the Black Man’s Mind*, p. 191.
\(^2\) Johnson, p. 58.
\(^3\) P. 191.
royal ancestors. Similarly a drum intimately connected with the
ing, the Koso drum, was used, together with a kind of bugle and
an ivory trumpet, to announce the funeral of a king of Oyo (the
Yoruba Alafin). This drum was peculiar to the king, and was
beaten daily during his lifetime to awaken him at 4 A.M. According
to Talbot the Koso is a sort of pressure drum with "only a single
covering." He makes of it a class of drums including "a special one
belonging to the Alafin of Oyo, which is only beaten after midnight,
is much feared as it is rubbed over with powerful 'medicines,' and
is avoided by all."

Among the palace drums at Oyo, Johnson, besides the Ogidigbo
and the Koso, mentions also the Gbedu. In some respects this
Yoruba drum, used also by other Yoruba kings and by chiefs of
high rank, may have been more analogous to our large Bini drum
than the others mentioned. The Gbedu drum is thus described by
Ellis: "In important temples and also in the houses of kings and
chiefs of high rank, a tall drum called gbedu is kept. It is usually
covered with carvings representing animals, birds, and the phallus.
This drum is only beaten at religious fêtes and public ceremonies,
and a portion of the blood of the victims immolated is always sprinkled
upon the symbolic carvings, upon which palm wine, the yolks of
eggs, and the feathers of sacrificed chickens are also smeared. In
this case the offering is to the protecting spirit of the drum, which is
that of a slave who has been sacrificed on it. . . . On the Gold
Coast such guardians are provided for the stools of kings and chiefs,
as well as for the temple and state drums." According to Talbot,
the Gbedu is "a tall drum standing upright, covered at one end
with a skin, usually human, and often ornamented with carvings of
animals, birds, etc. It is generally reserved for important chiefs and
for the Oghoni club [an important political secret society, of which,
at Oyo, the Alafin is the head], is said to be inhabited by a powerful
spirit, and sacrifices of slaves were offered before it." It seems likely
that the sacrifice of a slave or slaves was not intended in fact to
provide a tutelary spirit for the drum but to furnish ghostly attendants
for the spirit inhabiting it. In the case of the stools referred to by
Ellis, and connected by him in relation to this custom with the temple

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1 Johnson, pp. 54, 58, 121.
2 Talbot, iii, p. 813.
3 P. 58.
4 A. B. Ellis, The Yoruba Speaking Peoples, p. 100.
5 iii, p. 814.
and state drums, they contained or embodied the spirit of the owner or of an ancestor—the famous Ashanti "gold stool" was the repository of the "soul" of the whole people—and the figure carved on the drum with which we are here concerned almost certainly implies that the instrument was of the nature of a shrine for the spirit of the royal ancestor. The religious conceptions of all these Gold and Slave Coast peoples are similar, and the figures carved on the Benin tusks,

Panel on the other side of the drum balancing that which contains the linked arm-supporters.

which figures the drum carvings reproduce in a simplified form, indicated that the tusks contained or embodied such an ancestral spirit.

The style of the carvings on the drum differs radically from the classical style of the bronzes or that, not essentially different from these, of most of the ivory or wood carvings which are known from Benin. Even quite modern carvings, such as certain ornamented coconut shells used as drinking cups, do not depart so
widely, though minor differences appear, from the old tradition of a simplified realism. In the case of the drum conventionalization has been carried to the point where it becomes frankly diagrammatic, and the principal figure and its accompaniments, while no doubt retaining their symbolic character, have been treated as a mere piece of decoration, interesting certainly in the balanced disposition of elements, and considered from this point of view certainly effective. Short of the entire omission of details essential to the symbolism, it would be impossible to carry simplification much further; while the manner in which this is accomplished forms a marked contrast to the great body of Benin toretic art in its devotion to strongly angular forms, curves being so squeezed or else joined to straight lines as, in general, to give the impression rather of angles than of curves, an impression which is strengthened by the free employment of sharply cut zigzag and straight-line ornament as filling.

The Olokun-king\(^1\) is represented, practically, through three significant elements of his form, regarded as semi-human: a great triangle embracing his head and headdress, the zigzag ornament which fills the space between the lines forming its double outline being interrupted in the middle of the base to make room for the double line of teeth, which, apart from a slight lifting and hardly perceptible counter curve given to the upper element of the doubled outline, is all that stands for a mouth; the deeply indented line of hands, arms, and shoulders; and the strong downward-horizontal-vertical thrust of the catfish legs, the bodies of the catfishes being crossed, rather than grasped—though no doubt grasping is intended—just below their heads by the hands of the Olokun-catfish-king. The neck is represented by a narrow vertical ridge joining the middle of the base of the triangle to the middle of the line of the shoulders; a similarly tenuous figure of two raised lines enclosing a zigzag stands for the body. The general plan of the design overrules the physical necessity for the support of the body by the legs; their tops are outside the line of continuity demanded by the trunk. The rhomboid contained by a double line drawn across the top of the legs and the line of the shoulders and upper arms, and bisected by the body, forms a frame for the latter and for the two conventional supporters of the king's arms who are represented each simply by a head with conical headdress surmounting a short rod. It is possible, however, that the lines forming the base of the rhomboid are intended to

\(^1\) See Museum Journal, December, 1926.
mark the hem of a wide shift or similar garment, and that the central panel with its zigzag is merely a decoration of this. For this to be the case would imply only a slightly more marked disregard of logic in the indifference to natural spatial conditions involved in the placing of the two arm supporters: in mythology or mythological decoration why should not three objects occupy the same space at the same time? The artist was only concerned to indicate the presence of these two personages, well-known from other and more realistic representations.

The nearest approach elsewhere to this angular style of adapting the human form to decorative purposes is to be seen in certain ivory armlets which have survived among the older carvings. One of these is figured in the MUSEUM JOURNAL for June, 1922, figs. 59–61. There is in this armlet a greater attempt at realism combined with much cruder workmanship, but the angularity of style is markedly in evidence, being shown even in such a detail as the plume of the triangular headdress worn by a personage accompanied by arm supporters. The natural curve of the plume is converted into a right angle, and there is only one on a side instead of the two of the drum figure. The similarity of the two headdresses extends to the sideflaps which depend below the ears. An ivory armlet, presumably of considerable age, which was excavated about twenty years ago in Yorubaland\(^1\) resembles closely in the style of the figures in the decoration the ivory armlets from Benin of this type, especially one published in Von Luschan’s *Anfertümer von Benin*, fig. 615, b. Others of this class are illustrated by Von Luschan between pages 402 and 405. Figs. 623 and 623, a, have the triangular headdress with two plumes, one bent at an angle, the other short and straight, parallel to the proximal limb of the former. The same thing is to be seen on an armlet in Pitt-Rivers’s *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. 37, fig. 283, where the Olokun-king is grasping his catfish legs which have a double curve, the heads of the catfish resting on the ground. In Von Luschan’s fig. 614, the same figure, but with a different form of headdress, is also grasping his catfish legs. In Ling Roth’s drum figure the catfishes are headless, and the tails appear in the place usually occupied by the heads in this mythic figure; his characterization of them as headless serpents is erroneous, the tails being obviously fishes’ tails. No doubt Ling Roth was misled by the zigzag ornament; but this appears along the back of the catfish

\(^1\) L. Frobenius, *Das unbekannte Afrika*, pl. 179.
in Ling Roth's fig. 209, Von Luschan's fig. 614, and elsewhere. The form of the catfish's tail may be observed in Ling Roth's fig. 268 and Von Luschan's figs. 623 and 623, a. Various conventionalized forms of the catfish's head, from which the highly simplified form of our drum figure is ultimately derived, are to be seen in Ling Roth's figs. 88, 187, 221, 224–226; cf. Von Luschan, fig. 693.

The armlets referred to are in a style obviously foreign to Benin. Frobenius's finding of one of them in Yorubaland locates the source of their importation. Ling Roth's drum, we have seen, came from the northwestern boundary of Benin territory. The striking similarity in its style of carving with the Museum's drum, the lack of known parallels from Benin proper, and the similarity of the general style of the carvings on the armlets, point to a provincial style of wood-carving practiced in the northwestern province of the kingdom of
Benin and strongly influenced by the near neighbourhood of a Yoruban school. The finding of one of these armlets at Lokoja,\(^1\) at the confluence of the Benue and the Niger, may indicate one route by which the Yoruba armlets reached Benin City.

The provincial divisions of the kingdom were ruled by viceroys who were members of the royal family, and the symbolism of the mythic figure on the tusks, the bronzes, and the drums would no doubt be part of the viceroys' traditional inheritance as well as of the king's. The drum is probably a state drum of the nature of that which we have seen was beaten in the "father's house" at Benin when the king "made father," or of the gbédù of the Yoruba; an appanage of a provincial ruler who set the mystical "arms" of the king upon the drum either because this was within his right as a descendant of the Olokun-king or because he represented in his province the living representative of the Olokun-king in the capital.

The two figures of the arm-supporters of Olokun appear again, alone and linked by a sort of yoke-shaped ridge proceeding from the tops of their headdresses, in a panel beside that in which they are shown in the position indicating the performance of their ordinary function. There cannot be much doubt, at any rate, about the identity of the former figures with the latter. The summary manner of the representation of both pairs, in which the body and limbs are reduced to a simple line or rod, and the repetition of the zigzag line which separates them in the first case and is repeated, in the second, in pairs framing the simple lines representing their bodies, as if to emphasize this identity—both these devices seem to indicate plainly enough that they are the same personages. Where their headdresses differ, below the "yoke," it is by the substitution of this same zigzag for the tiers of hatched decoration which probably represents beadwork, the form of personal adornment appropriated to persons of rank in Benin; and the reappearance of this wavy line from the back of the catfish in the headdress of the Olokun-king in the same position seems to signalize and stress the intimate connection of this second pair with him and with the first pair, as the first are connected with him both by their position with regard to his arms and also by association with the zigzag which plays so prominent a part in the artificial and, evidently also, symbolic construction of his person and habiliments. It symbolizes, I suppose, primarily the intimate linking or rather fusing, as by consubstantiation, of the essence of

\(^1\) H. Ling Roth, *Great Benin*, fig. 249.
the sacred catfish with the being of the sacred king—with rather characteristic naïveté of overemphasis, since, one would say, this relation was already sufficiently marked by providing the royal personage with catfish legs.

In the Museum Journal for December, 1926, in a brief discussion of the character of this composite mythical being and his arm-supporters, reference was made to a statement by the king of Benin who was deposed by England in 1897, which identified this figure and his arm-supporters with Olokun and two other important Bini divinities. The recent work by P. A. Talbot to which reference has been made more than once in the present article provides some further information about these gods of Benin.¹ The Olokun of Benin is the god of Benin River and of the sea. He sends the fertilizing rain and is the giver of wealth and the owner of all property. In this last attribute of the god there is new evidence for the identification of the king with him: at least in theory, land still is and other property formerly was held from the king.² "In the supreme council of the universe the President is the mighty but distant Ogbor, while Osa is in charge of our solar system, but does most of the work through the other members, Ogiwu, Olokun, and Obiemi. Osa is deemed to live in the east, Olokun in the west, and Ogiwu and Obiemi in the north." His location in the west is in accordance with his probable origin among the Yoruba.

Osa, according to Thomas, is the chief god of Benin. According to Talbot he is the son of Ogbor or Ogbowa, who, formerly the supreme god, has been superseded by his son. Osa helped his father in creating heaven and earth; later Ogbor was relegated to rule in a secondary heaven, or place of departed spirits, while Osa lives in Ennimi and rules there and on earth. The name Elimi given to Osa's heaven by Thomas is said by Talbot to be a Yoruba word.

Obiemi appears in Talbot's book as the wife of Ogiwu, god of lightning and of death, the son of Osa. She is a beneficent goddess and is known as "Our Mother." From her were born miraculously the first man and woman, parents of the human race. Osa "ordains birth" but the women pray to Obiemi for assistance in obtaining children and in delivery.

If, then, we are to accept the statement of the deposed king of Benin, whose testimony on this point might well seem to be authorita-

¹ ii, pp. 35–37.
² Talbot, iii, p. 685. See N. W. Thomas, Edo-Speaking Peoples, i, p. 91.
tive, and those of Mr. Talbot, whose official position and special duties in connection with the last census of Southern Nigeria are of a nature to demand respect for the results of his investigations, it appears that the mythical being of the carved tusks and of our drum, together with his supporters, is a representation of the three chief actively beneficent deities of the kingdom of Benin, Olokun, Osa, and Obiemi. The attribution to Olokun of the control of the property of the subjects of the king and the attribution to the king of the same control strengthens the probability, for which other evidence was adduced in the issue of the Museum Journal referred to above, that the king of Benin was regarded as in some sense an embodiment or reincarnation of the water god, Olokun.