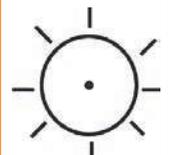
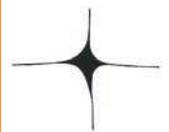
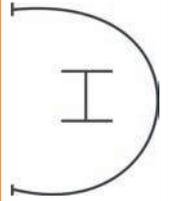


# **SPEAKING WITHOUT VOICE**

*(exploring four Nigerian non-verbal communication systems)*

## Resource Pack



Enquiries, please call:  
**020 8522 1950**  
[info@irokotheatre.org.uk](mailto:info@irokotheatre.org.uk)

[www.irokotheatre.org.uk](http://www.irokotheatre.org.uk)





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The illustrated symbols found in the pack are original commissions by IROKO from Chike Azuonye.





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## INTRODUCTION

**Communication - conveying meaning from one person or group to another through mutually understood signs - is essential to human experience.** Language is a complex form of communication and was integral to the development of civilisation. Where would we be without the ability to convey information and emotion to one another?

When we think about these things we immediately leap to speech and writing, the latter which is assumed to have originated in Mesopotamia around five thousand years ago to count, name and claim. There are however, forms of communication that are non-verbal in their nature, from body language to Morse code, symbols, emojis and... the Talking Drumming!

“How will people react if, in 500 years’ time, a mudlark finds an hourglass-type wooden shell of the Talking Drum in the River Thames?”

The above was the question our Artistic Director, Alex Oma-Pius FRSA, asked a group of young people conducting a ‘Talking Drum Beatboxing’ workshop in Dagenham. The subsequent responses and debate gave birth to the Speaking Without Voice project because, West Africa, with its rich cultural symbology, has a particularly strong history of non-verbal communication systems that are deeply connected to the history of the region. For example, you may have heard of a drum that speaks, or of objects that carry warnings and affection. Maybe you have noticed certain symbols on the sign of your neighbourhood African restaurant, or on the dress of a lady in your church congregation. The symbols, objects, or pictography have been used over the centuries to inform, advise, praise, motivate, celebrate, warn, punish and to incite people to communal action and are thus a vital and invigorating form of social history. In Nigeria, some of the non-verbal communication means were suppressed by the British colonial administration and missionaries who felt threatened by local people communicating in media, which they could not understand. We have been researching knowledge of these non-verbal communications systems since September 2016 and found that there is very little awareness of them amongst communities.

Our project, Speaking Without Voice, is an exploration of four such systems (Nsibidi, Uli, Aroko and the Talking Drum), originating from the area which is now Nigeria, tracing their development right up to the present day. It is our belief that documenting and sharing some of Nigeria’s oldest forms of communication with people, both young and old, and from diverse backgrounds, will enhance learning, understanding, interpretation and adaptation of a heritage that is significant to Nigerian and British colonial history. Speaking Without Voice is a chance to get familiar with this vibrant heritage - its roots, current uses, transnational contexts and how it relates to your own identity and creativity...

**Alex Oma-Pius FRSA & Kate Kelsall**



# NSIBIDI

## NSIBIDI - THE BASICS

### What?



You have heard of hieroglyphics, but have you heard of another African communication system which is almost as old as the one originating in Egypt?

Nsibidi - sometimes called nsibiri, nchibiddi or nchibiddy – is an ancient ideographic system of communication which does not correspond directly to any one spoken language. Over the years it has been used to “document history, celebrate the people’s heritage, instruct values, reinforce communication, deliberate on key issues and resolve conflicts” (Philip U. Effiong, 2013).

It is a complex and fluid system with a very wide vocabulary. There are thousands of symbols using linear markings and forms, some of which are abstract and others which contain numerical units, cosmic elements or animal sources. They cover subjects as diverse as love and the law, however only 500 of these symbols have been recorded and very few people can fully decode Nsibidi.

*Taken from 'Further Notes on 'Nsibidi Signs with Their Meanings from the Ikom District, Southern Nigeria'. Elphinstone Dayrell. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 41 (1911)*

### Where?

The use of Nsibidi crosses ethnic and linguistic lines. It is believed to originate from the Ekoi people who are found in the Cross River region located in what is now the Southeast of Nigeria and the southwest of Cameroon. From here it spread out and was used by Ibibio, Efik and Igbo people.

Today Nsibidi is found far and wide in Cuba and Haiti, where it has developed into the Anaforuana and Veve symbols. It was transported to this part of the world with slaves who were brought across the Atlantic from West Africa by Western imperialists, even making it as far as Venezuela and Brazil.





## Who?

There are two versions of Nsibidi. One is public and found in decorative contexts and the second is considered sacred, requiring a deeper knowledge of the symbols in order to decipher it. Access to the latter has historically been restricted to men with power in the social and political order, including secret societies such as the Ekpe.

Today Nsibidi also has a rich practice within contemporary art, being used aesthetically by artists such as the Nsukka Group, which Tony Ndikanwu and Chike Azuonye (two of our project partners) are connected to.



Igbo Ekpe members wearing Ukara inscribed with Nsibidi. Arochukwu region, Igboland, 1989. Photo by Eli Bentor.

## When?

Though scholars cannot be sure exactly when the system was first used, ancient ceramics inscribed with the symbols have been dated between 400 to 1400 CE. Nsibidi is very old indeed and was devised many centuries before Europeans arrived in West Africa.

Today Nsibidi is very much alive in Nigeria and other parts of the world.







The language also had a public form, which was secularized to meet the economic and social needs of the people as well as having aesthetic functions. This public version of the script was used by women and even taught in schools in the pre-colonial period.

The arrival of Christian missionaries and British colonialism saw a decline of Nsibidi. Threatened by its use, as they could not decode the language, Europeans emphasised the secrecy surrounding it to suggest cultic connotations and the amorous use to imply sexual immorality. This led many people to deny or hide their use of Nsibidi for fear of punishment, and to this day many people primarily associate Nsibidi with secret societies, though it in fact had wider uses.

Equally, it's important to note that "there are secret codes even within verbal communication. The Police, Army, Navy and other secret services have secret codes which they use in cases of danger, help or privacy. It is the same way the people guarded their means of communication not to be exposed to strangers or non-initiates" (S.E Erukanure, 2003).



*Missionaries in Benin. A group of European Christian missionaries pose with students in Porto-Novo, Benin, in this illustration from the History of the Catholic Missions (1882). Source: <http://what-when-how.com>*

## A source of African History and National Language for Nigeria

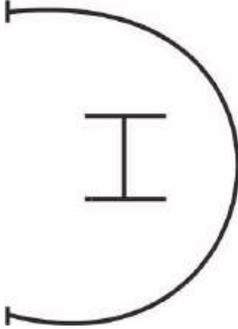
Imperial historians, wishing to justify colonisation, argued that 'Africa has no history' as history begins with writing. Even if this were true, the ancient use of Nsibidi and other non-verbal languages, if successfully decoded could be used to rediscover the past of what is now called Nigeria. For example, the Ikom monoliths found in Ikom, Cross River State, Nigeria, are estimated to have been made between 200 and 1850 AD and are inscribed with an ancient form of Nsibidi which is as yet undeciphered.

Scholars also argue that reviving the heritage of Nsibidi can contribute to the political, cultural and social development of contemporary Nigeria, given that "a script is not only a technology for writing ... it is also a cultural symbol of a people and their identity. A script is a powerful political symbol used all over the world to show national identity." (Chikezie Okoronkwo).



## SPEAKING WITH NSIBIDI

### Some symbols and their meaning



This symbol means happiness. It conveys to the recipient the state of happiness being experienced. It could also be used to make up other words or phrases, relating to a state of happiness or be part of someone's name.



This emblem represents union, unity and marriage between a man and a woman, with the mark in the middle signifying a pillow- a metaphorical interpretation of a happy union.



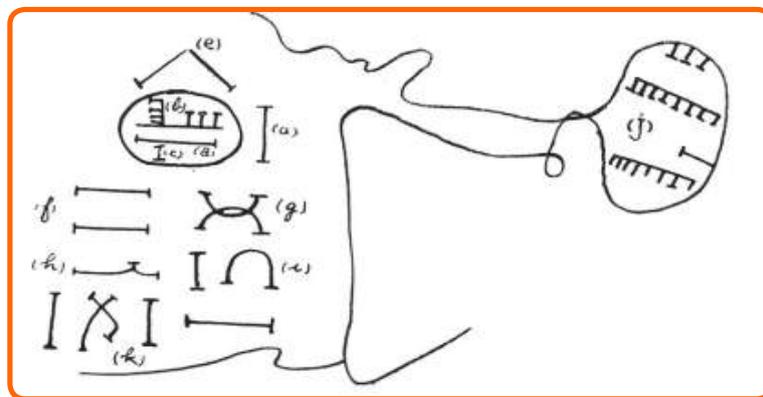
This symbol means welcome. Someone seeing this image will immediately know that he is welcomed. It is the nature of Africans to welcome strangers into their home, and to make them even more comfortable than those living in the house.



## Constructing sentences and making conversation

People sometimes compare Nsibidi to emojis. Though we do  $\text{☺}$  with  $\text{☺}$ s, an emoji is a pictogram: each emoji has a pictorial resemblance to the thing it represents. Many Nsibidi symbols are not a direct visual representation of their meaning and can only be understood by familiarity with prior convention. Furthermore, the vocabulary of Nsibidi comprises both representations of words and morphemes (we call this logography) as well as representations of ideas and concepts (which is called ideography).

Therefore it could in fact be more useful to compare Nsibidi to computer coding, in that it is an intricate and complex language that it takes training to understand.



The Ikpe from Enyong written in Nsibidi as recorded by J. K. Macgregor

The above Ikpe (traditional legal record) recorded by Reverend J. K. Macgregor in 1909 is a testament to how much can be communicated using Nsibidi. Macgregor's transcription is below:

- (a) The court was held under a tree as is the custom
- (b) the parties in the case
- (c) the chief who judged it
- (d) his staff (these are enclosed in a circle)
- (e) is a man whispering into the ear of another just outside the circle of those concerned
- (f) denotes all the members of the party who won the case. Two of them
- (g) are embracing
- (h) is a man who holds a cloth between his finger and thumbs as a sign of contempt. He does not care for the words spoken.

The lines round and twisting mean that the case was a difficult one which the people of the town could not judge for themselves. So they sent to the surrounding towns to call the wise men from them and the case was tried by them

- (j) and decided.
- (k) denotes that the case was one of adultery.



## TRADITIONAL USES OF NSIBIDI

So, where and how was this rich language written? As we have seen, Nsibidi has had a broad range of uses and this means it was also found in a great many different places.

The symbols can be found on everything from walls and buildings, calabashes, swords, brassware, textiles, masquerade costumes, masks, wood and bronze carvings and in tattoo designs on human skin as a beautification practice.

Interestingly the symbols can also be drawn in the air with gestures and etched onto the ground as a temporary way of communicating information.

One historical and cultural use of Nsibidi designs which is still practised today is the Ekpe Society's Ukara cloth which can be tied around the waist as a wrapper and used to decorate the walls of meeting rooms on special occasions, often used to symbolise influence, wealth and power.

Each Ukara cloth is commissioned by an individual, so its meaning - which might tell a narrative or be more conceptual - is highly personalised. To make the piece, artists sew the Nsibidi patterning into a white cloth using raffia thread. Next the cloth is dipped into an indigo dye and left to dry. Once the raffia is removed, the white design - with the spiritual significance and prestige it carries - stands out against a deep blue background.



*Ekpe Society member.  
Photo by Herbert Cole.*



*Cloth (Ukara), 20th century. Cotton, indigo, 60 x 79 x 1/16 in. (152.4 x 200.7 x 0.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Purchased with funds given by Frieda and Milton F. Rosenthal, 1990*



### Some other textile traditions which use non-verbal communication

Nsibidi motifs are also used in other traditional Nigerian textile techniques, such as tie-dye, tritik and batik, with prints on blouses, bubu, gowns, tops and trousers.

Another notable example is the hand-woven Akwa-Ocha, which literally translates as ‘white cloth’. This fabric is made and worn by the Enuani people (also referred to as Aniocha) who come from what is the present day Delta State in Southern Nigeria.



Akpeli Prince Kema and Toyin Anintah.

The fabric is adorned with motifs which are reflective of religious, cultural and social values and beliefs. Many of the abstract symbols take reference from the natural world, whilst others designate and inscribe historical events. This gives the cloth a huge spiritual and social significance for the Enuani people, which can only be interpreted in the context of local cultural values.

Akwa-Ocha is traditionally worn as a wrapper or made into clothing for special occasions ranging from cultural festivities through to marriages and state ceremonies. As globalisation has impacted the fashion industry in Nigeria, it is interesting to see how the fabric has been adapted for contemporary accessories, whilst retaining its identity and rich cultural heritage.

Originating from the town of the same name, found in Nigeria’s Abia state, Akwete cloth is famous throughout the whole of West Africa. Weavers use a vertical loom and are almost always women, working with raffia, hemp material and spun cotton. Traditionally the fabric would be made in earthy colours such as reds, yellows and browns, but the introduction of imported chemical dyes and yarns has seen the palette diversify to include blues, greens, purples and black and white. The town of Akwete is justifiably very proud of this unique contribution to Igbo heritage.

The motifs found on Akwete cloth are unique to individual weavers or families, with some claiming to know over a hundred, though two or three will rarely be used in any one piece. Traditionally, the creative inspiration for motifs is said to have come from a divinity and when a weaver dies, it is considered disrespectful to repeat her designs. Social status has a part in informing what motifs a wearer will carry. For example some motifs would be traditionally used as talisman to protect pregnant women, or warriors going into battle. Others, such as the tortoise motif (ikaki) is only worn by members of royal families.



Source: <https://craftatlas.co/>





## CONTEMPORARY USES OF NSIBIDI

### Reviving the heritage

Many people are doing exciting things with Nsibidi today - both inside Nigeria and in the diaspora.

A clue to how meaningful the script is, comes from the fact that [The Nsibidi Institute](#) - an organisation based in Lagos, which works to foster understanding of Nigeria's history, people, indigenous knowledge and possible futures - chose to name themselves after the language! As they say:

*“Nsibidi is a window into the authentic and independent ideas of ancient Nigerian communities and their surviving cultures... As a historic form of documentation, indigenous to the region and formerly incorporated into everyday practices, it challenges the myth that Nigerians are not capable or even appreciative of diligent record-keeping... Today Nsibidi is still used as a means to refer sacred messages between the members of the Ekpe Leopard secret society, demonstrating its tenacity and continued relevance to contemporary cultures and ways of life.”*

Online, there is a growing interest in using Nsibidi outside of the academic community, where you can find thriving discussions, digital dictionaries and projects which adapt the script for use in graphic design. Neo-nsibidi in such online spaces, is adaptable and international and being taken outside its traditional sphere of use.

[The Nsibiri Project](#), created by Chiadikobi Nwaubani, aims to make Nsibidi capable of writing Igbo. Below is a graphic design friendly version of a symbol from the original script posted on the Instagram account. The description of the meaning is as follows:



*“It is a forked road (red), symbolising crossroads and markets and trade routes, with a manilla horseshoe currency used in old days (yellow). The sign has always meant trade, in this project it is morphographically used with the Igbo word mgbere, meaning trade/industry/business”*



## Contemporary Art

A fair number of artists of Nigerian descent use Nsibidi in their artistic practice nowadays.

Nigerian-American artist **Victor Ekpuk** is perhaps the most famous. Ekpuk started out as a cartoonist for Nigeria's *The Daily Times* (1989 - 1998). During coup d'états and periods of military rule, using Nsibidi allowed him a freedom of expression, not afforded to others in these oppressive times. Now based in Washington DC, his practice has evolved across his prolific career, crossing mediums from painting and drawing to sculpture, yet remaining deeply rooted in the aesthetic philosophy of Nsibidi. Early on in his career he focused on pushing the artistic boundaries of what Nsibidi could do, subsequently inventing his own graphic symbols using markings, designs, scripts and schematic figures and referencing communication systems from many different cultures. For Ekpuk, Nsibidi remains "a point of departure, a cultural memory...a stream of consciousness that encapsulates human experience, lived and imagined, inherited or received, personal and collective".

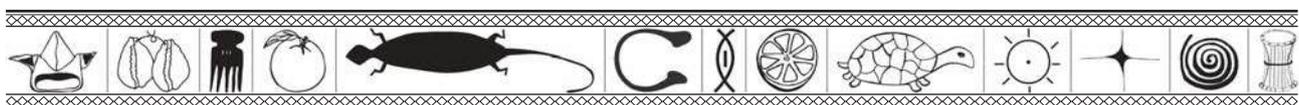


*All Fingers Are Not Equal. Victor Ekpuk. 2008*



**Toni Ndikanwu** was born in Nigeria where he trained as an artist at the influential Nigeria University, Nsukka graduating in 1988 and going on to lecture at the Kano State Polytechnic. Having moved around Europe, Toni is now based in the UK, where he is part of Nigeria Art Society UK (NASUK).

He works using oil paint and abstraction, exploring big themes such as religion and the meaning of life.





## Commemorating the past and celebrating the future

Contemporary use of Nsibidi often highlights the relationship between the past and present, whether that is by remembering historic events or keeping the heritage alive to empower those alive today.

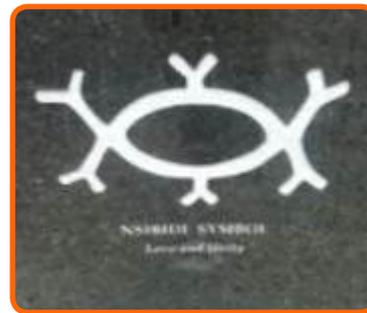


*The African Burial Ground National Memorial*

Built in 2006 and designed by American-Haitian architect Rodney Leon, the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City makes poignant use of inscriptions of Nsibidi and other indigenous symbols to commemorate the free and enslaved Africans who are buried there.

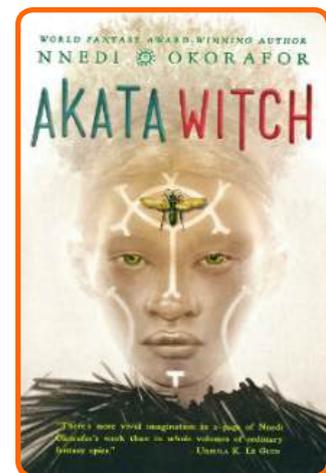


*Journey symbol*



*Love and Unity Symbol*

Another fascinating aspect of Nsibidi's contemporary relevance is how it has been picked up by the Afrofuturism cultural aesthetic. Nigerian American fantasy and sci-fi writer Nnedi Okorafor cites Nigeria as "her muse" and is heavily influenced by the country's heritage and folk traditions. The Ekpe leopard society and their use of Nsibidi form a huge part of the plot of her novel 'Akata Witch'.

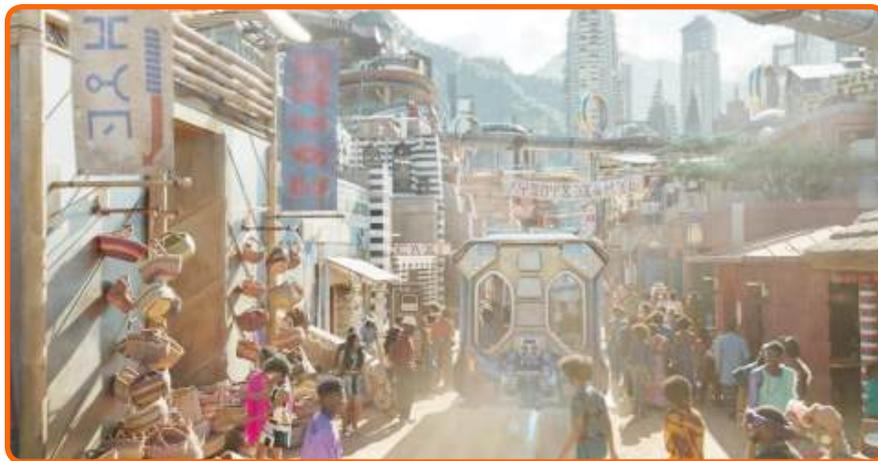


*Akata Witch book cover*



More famously, the Black Panther movie uses a script which closely resembles Nsibidi. The production designer, Hannah Beachler and her team worked for six months to create a language for Wakanda - the fictional Sub Saharan country in which Black Panther is set.

Heavily influenced by Nsibidi which formed the “jumping point”, she was also inspired by other African languages such as Dogon and Murica, as well as Chinese and Arabic script, and graffiti artists such as LA’s Retna. Modernising the language for futuristic purposes, she says “it was a process of trying to pay homage to lost languages but also infusing the idea from Afrofuturism, of reclaiming languages lost.”



*Wakanda street scene, Black Panther.*



*Throne Room, Black Panther*





## NSIBIDI'S TRANSNATIONAL LINKS

Nsibidi has found its way to many other geographical locations and taken root in local cultures from Salvador, Bahia and Brazil, to Haiti and Cuba. In many instances this serves as a stark reminder of how the transatlantic slave trade shaped the world we live in; people from West Africa were taken by European colonists and sold as slaves in the 'New World', bringing their culture and customs with them.

In the USA too, there has been a recent surge in popularity among the African American population for making quilts, using textile patterns based on African symbols of Nsibidi, Vai and Bogolanfini. The most prolific symbols are the checkerboard, hourglass and pinwheel, which again links us to the legacy of slavery. Some people claim that quilts - using these same motifs and derived from non-verbal systems such as Nsibidi - were used during the American Civil War as a visual code among slaves, to inform each other of upcoming escapes and the need for directions etc. Others say that the story of the underground railroad quilts is merely folklore, but it is very interesting to note that this is because there is no written evidence. This draws our attention to what is considered writing and who gets to write history.



Underground Railroad Quilt Patterns.  
Source: [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

The Underground Railroad Quilt Code Patterns	
	<b>Monkey Wrench</b> Prepare the tools you'll need for the long journey, including the mental and spiritual tools. Or (as a Ship's Wheel), the pilot is prepared to begin the transport.
	<b>Wagon Wheel</b> Load the wagon or prepare to board the wagon to begin the escape.
	<b>Bear's Paw</b> Take a mountain trail, out of view. Follow the path made by bear tracks; they can lead you to water and food.
	<b>Crossroads</b> Refers to Cleveland, Ohio, a destination offering several routes to freedom. It also signifies reaching a point where a person's life will change, so one must be willing to go on.
	<b>Log Cabin</b> A secret symbol that could be drawn on the ground indicating that a person is safe to talk to. It also advises seeking shelter.
	<b>Shoofly</b> Possibly identifies a friendly guide who is nearby and can help.
	<b>Bowtie</b> Dress in a disguise, or put on a change of clothes.
	<b>Flying Geese</b> Points to a direction to follow, such as where geese would fly during spring migration.
	<b>Drunkard's Path</b> Create a zig-zag path, do not walk in a straight line, to avoid pursuers in this area.
	<b>Star</b> Follow the North Star. Worked in conjunction with the popular song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a reference to the Big Dipper constellation.

Underground Railroad Quilt Codes





In Cuba and Haiti, Nsibidi has developed into the new and geographically specific forms of Anaforuana and Veve respectively.

Taking its name from the palm oil that was once used to draw it on the floor, Veve has evolved to incorporate more abstract designs which are different to those of Nsibidi. It is the non-verbal language of Voodoo, a religion with West African origins that is found in Haiti melding African traditions and Catholicism.



*A Vodun priest draws a vèvè for a simbi spirit. Carrefour, Haiti. Photograph by Graham Stuart McGee, 1968.*

In Cuba, Anaforuana is used by the Abakua society which was founded in Havana in 1836. This society, created by emancipated slaves to buy other captives' freedom and take part in independence movements against the Spanish, was derived from the Ekpe societies of the Cross River region and inherited its script - Nsibidi. Abakua, developed from Nsibidi, had the symbolic purpose of investing members with power and the practical use of avoiding the Spanish authorities.



*Chalk hieroglyphics drawn on a trunk of an oak tree convey mystical messages to members of Abakuá. (Nicola Lo Calzo / L'agence à paris). Source: Smithsonian Magazine.*





## NSIBIDI - QUIZ & ACTIVITY

Help us keep the heritage alive! See how much you have remembered about Nsibidi by taking the quiz...

- Which people is Nsibidi believed to have originated from?  
a) Cuba    b) Igbo    c) Ekoi    d) Brazil
- How did the use of Nsibidi spread across ethnic and linguistic barriers in the pre-colonial period?  
a) Cable and Wireless    b) Translators    c) Email    d) Marriage and trade    e) Ship
- Nsibidi was used for a great many purposes - how many of them can you remember?
- What does this symbol stand for?  
a) Unity    b) Peace    c) One Nigeria  
d) Mother and child    e) Welcome



- Where are Veve symbols used?  
a) UK    b) Haiti    c) Scotland    d) Nigeria

### Activity

Using Nsibidi and any symbols from other cultures that you are aware of, including contemporary symbols or some which you invent yourself, create a logo, an emblem or a message communicating 'Happiness'.

.....

- b)
- d)
- Nsibidi was used for a great many purposes - how many of them can you remember?  
a) Identification labels;    b) Public notices    c) Private warnings  
d) Keeping records    e) Body decoration    f) Judicial proceedings  
g) Marking tombstones    h) Documenting history
- e)
- b)

### NSIBIDI - QUIZ ANSWERS



# ULI

## THE BASICS

### What?

Uli - also known as Uri - is an aesthetically compelling Igbo artistic practice and form of nonverbal communication. It takes its name from an indigo coloured dye, obtained from several plant species. Traditionally the canvas is either the human body or walls of houses and community spaces used to paint uli murals.

Uli was used by the Igbo people to communicate and accentuate their social and cultural values.



Uli wall decoration. Source: <http://grandmotherafrica.com>

### Where?

Uli is a cultural practice of the Igbo people (also known as Ibo). The community originates from southern-central Nigeria which is shown on the map here in dark green. Igboland is separated by the Niger River, creating an eastern location and a western location.



## Who?

Uli is almost always practised by women. Traditionally it is considered to be a community activity and rarely would one woman paint, write, or draw alone. Though there are forms of Uli body adornment for the everyday, the practice is mainly used for celebration and commemoration.



*Petrolina Ikwuemesi painting Uli art. Source: <http://grandmotherafrica.com>When?*

By its nature traditional Uli is temporary. Body adornment will last for around one week and wall murals would often be washed away with the rain. This was not a major concern to the Igbo people, who in their traditional religion, believed memory and meaning are always accessible, and that through the third eye a person could always recollect previous works of Uli.

This makes it difficult for scholars to precisely date the emergence of the practice. However, it is believed to be many centuries old and records of Uli date back to precolonial Nigeria in the eighteenth century.

Some argue that Uli is practically extinct in contemporary Igbo culture and artistic practice and it is true that the practice has been in decline since the 1970s. Though not widespread, the knowledge of Uli is still sometimes being passed down. It has become a source of inspiration for new generations of Nigerian people - both in Nigeria and its diaspora - who are dedicated to uncovering a heritage that was nearly eradicated through colonisation.



## THE HISTORY OF ULI

Uli artists were a highly respected group of women in Igbo society. The art was passed on from mother to daughter in line with the vernacular education system. We should note that, though women are recorded as being the main practitioners, there is evidence to show that men sometimes participated in the painting process too.

As already mentioned, it was a community activity that anywhere between two and twenty painters - depending on what was being painted and the occasion - practised together. Large wall murals especially, required a number of women to work on them because they were usually intricately detailed and therefore took a long time to complete. The art of Uli body painting was also a community event among women: it not only emphasised their solidarity but also brought together the women in acts of celebration and was considered very fashionable.

It was used to emphasise human needs and to communicate and accentuate Igbo social and cultural values. No two designs are the same, as no two painters will interpret the motifs in precisely the same way. Women would often wear their Uli art on a daily basis usually featuring simple designs. More complex designs were used in preparation for important community events including marriages, births, funerals, and title-taking.



*Uli consummation dance by Nri women painters. 2003.*

Though it is something that has not been widely recorded, recent research by painter, art-critic, and art history academic Dr. Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi from the University of Nigeria, suggests that song and dance to consummate the murals on their completion, was a common occurrence.

Chuu's research recalls the women singing *Ọkw'anyi bụ nnè ndi ụka ndi'a* (we are the mothers of these churchgoers); *Ọkw'anyi mụlụ ndi ụka ndi'a* (we gave birth to these churchgoers). He surmises that this line reflects the pain that these women feel in being alone in their religion. They all have children who have mostly adopted Christianity, meaning that the traditional Igbo religion is rapidly becoming less and less common with new generations.



## Fattening rooms

One Igbo custom which Uli formed a crucial part of was the fattening room, though this is no longer widely practised. This was a secluded place that a woman went to in preparation for marriage.



Uli painting, Nigeria.

The woman was taught how to be a good wife and mother and instructed on religious, sexual, and domestic matters and also fed rich and fatty foods, as being fat was a sign of good health, fertility, and strength. Upon leaving the fattening room, the woman's body was painted with Uli dye to be presented to the community. The idea was that the woman would be presented to the community at the height of her beauty and Uli was used to emphasise attractive bodily assets.

On the woman in this painting (left) found in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection, the Uli designs represent desirable assets on different parts of the body. For example, Uli on her legs and arms represent strength and her ability to undertake the labour involved with running a household and the designs on her stomach and pelvis represent fertility. The neck was considered by Igbo people to be an area of beauty, and so the concentrated Uli design there also emphasised this asset.

Uli painting, Nigeria. 1972. Pitt Rivers Museum

## British Colonialism and Uli

Cultural, social, and artistic practices of the Igbo people rapidly changed with the arrival of foreign Christian missionaries in Nigeria during the early 19th century. These missionaries often mandated their own values and beliefs on Nigerian communities, including the Igbo people.

Uli as a form of body painting was discouraged by the missionaries. Instead their artistry was directed towards needlework, in which designs were adapted for tapestries and items such as tablecloths and cushion-covers which were often made to be sold, with the profits going to the mission. The forced change in the making of traditional Uli art meant that the practice began to decline, eventually becoming almost lost in history as British colonists took rule over Nigeria.

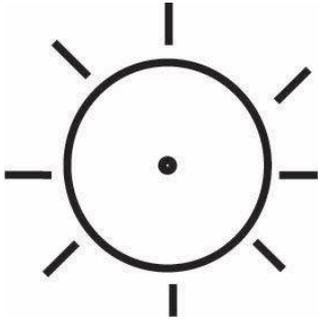


Cushion cover, Nigeria. 1972.24.16. Pitt Rivers Museum.



## SPEAKING WITH ULI

### Some symbols and their meanings



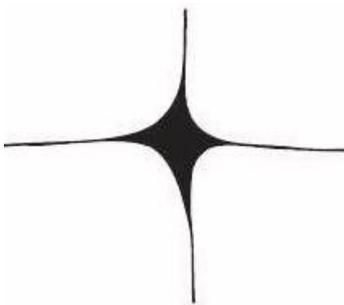
#### **ANYANWU (Sun)**

The sun is seen as the giver of life, without which, everything, including humans die. The Igbo see the sun as the manifestation of Chi, Chineke (Creator), or as they call Him, Chukwu-Abiama.



#### **AGWOLUAGWO (Coiled Python)**

This is a symbol of continuity, completion and wisdom. The snake is revered in a number of Igbo communities and it is considered an abomination to kill certain snakes, such as the Python, which the community views as a goddess never to be harmed. These sacred snakes have been known to appear on the birth of a new baby, and on such occasions, the family of the newborn will, traditionally, appease the snakes by giving them Nzu (a white salty chalk), which they eat before departing.



#### **ISI OJI (The head of a kola nut)**

The kola nut is symbolic of acceptance and welcoming, with the fruit being the first thing offered to a visitor by a host. A common Igbo proverb reads, "He who brings kola nut, brings life." When kola nut is broken, there is usually a prayer or incantation that follows, blessing everyone who partakes in the process. While kola nuts can vary in their number of pieces, tradition favours those of four parts. The four parts depicted, represent the four market days of the week, namely Eke, Nkwo, Orie and Afo. Therefore, each segment of the nut represents a day in the week of the Igbo calendar, as the Igbos do not follow the Western seven day week.



## Constructing sentences and making conversation



Unlike Nsibidi, the intent of Uli is not to construct complex sentences and carry sophisticated messages. Rather, Uli is an expression of beauty which holds innate meaning. If we note that in Igbo life, beauty is linked to morality, then we get a sense for how important this is. Describing the difference, Chike Azuonye told us –

*“Uli is more pictorial because this is something they put-on the body or walls... it becomes a narrative... One [Nsibidi] is a secret symbol, the other [Uli] is open and subject to your own interpretation.”*

As an aesthetic, it has strong linear qualities. Lacking perspective, it instead balances positive and negative space with asymmetrical compositions that are often painted spontaneously.

As we can see from the descriptions decoding the motifs on the previous page, the meanings of Uli designs are very much connected to Igbo cultural, social and religious life. From abstract patterns - such as zigzags and concentric circles - through to figurative representations of animals and everyday life - Uli motifs are exceedingly diverse.



## TRADITIONAL USES OF ULI

So, how exactly was the process of Uli painting done? Firstly, we should pause to say that although the process of applying Uli is commonly referred to as painting, Igbo terminology rarely references the process itself as painting, instead the phrase *Idę ụli* (to write uli) or *Ịse ụli* (to draw uli), is appropriate. Writing or drawing Uli, is a different process depending on whether the canvas is a human body or architecture, both of which are outlined below.

### Body Adornment

Before the Uli dye could be applied to the human body, there had to be time for preparation. The process worked like this:

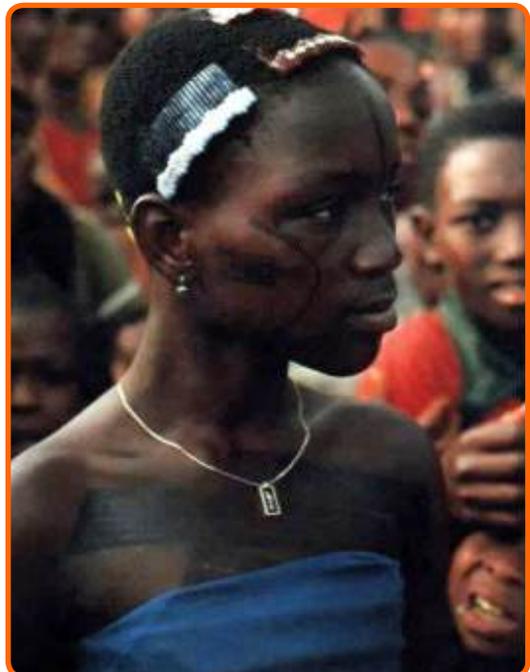
Firstly: the body hair was shaved off to allow for a smooth surface for application.

Secondly: a red powder was rubbed on to the skin. This was to stop the skin from sweating so that the Uli dye did not smudge.

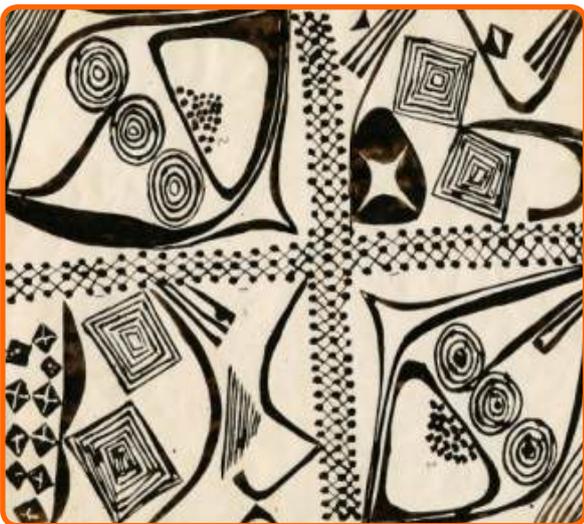
Thirdly: Uli designs were applied to the body using the Uli knife (*mmá nw'ụli*).

Fourthly: The designs had to dry. When first applied, the dye was green, but once dry it turns black, as seen in the picture.

Fifthly: Once the dye is dry, oil is applied to the skin to make it shiny.



*Igbo girl with Uli body art. Photo by Liz Willis. 1983.*



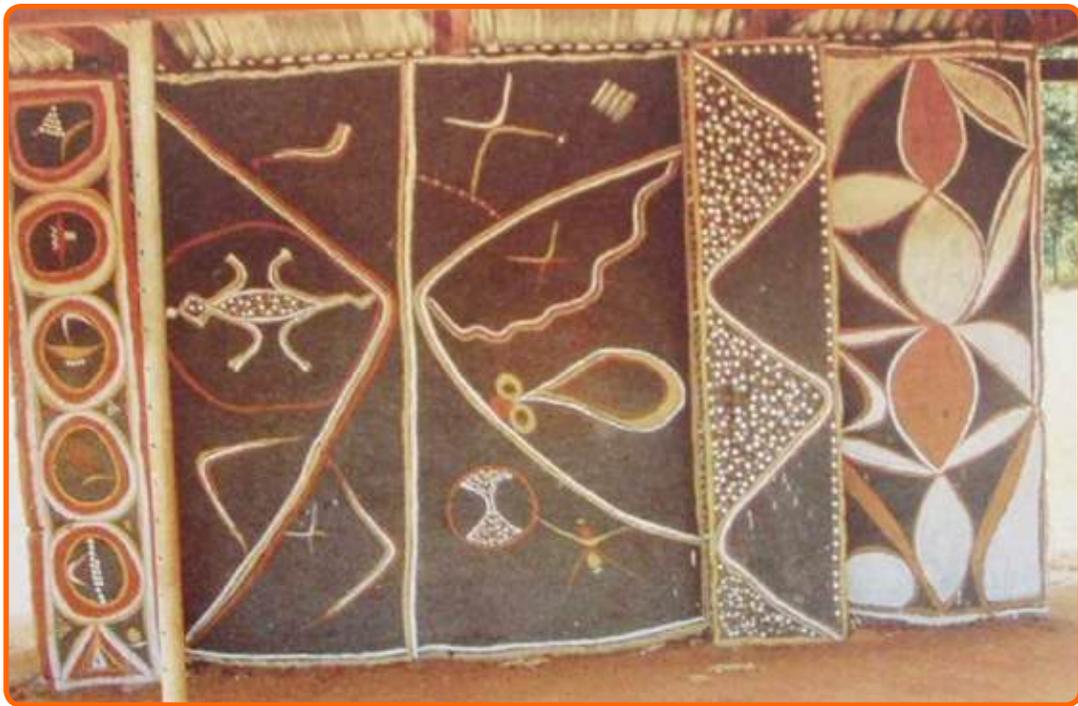
*Uli designs were visible for approximately four days. Uli designs by Igbo women that would be drawn on the front chest of women. c. 1933, Igbo region of Eastern Nigeria.*



## Wall Murals

The paint used on Uli wall murals was different to that which was used on the body. This is because a thicker much more substantial painting substance was needed in order for the mural to be clear and visible on the coarse surfaces of the clay buildings. The designs tend to be bolder and more vigorous. Like the paint used on the body, this paint was also made from natural substances. Four colours were used in the painting process: black (from charcoal), reddish brown (from the camwood tree), white (from clay) and yellow (from soil or tree bark).

These colours worked with eye-catching designs to create bold effects that proudly stood out as a prominent Igbo community fixture, as you can see in the photograph below.



*Uli Wall Mural. Source: Sacred and Secular Painting: Uli and Yorùbá Orisa Painting. Emmerline Green*



## CONTEMPORARY USES

### Reviving the heritage

When we spoke to Chike Azuonye about Uli he told us:

*“There are many people I know who have been born here [the UK], and even many people I know that live in Nigeria who have been born in the city and have not had the opportunity to live in a village to understand what I am saying now.”*

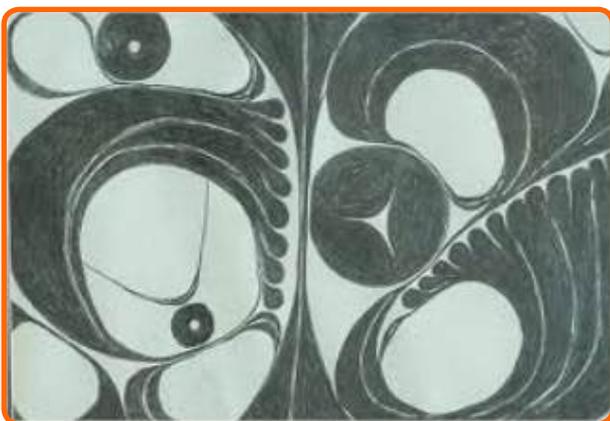
Chike believes the main reasons for Uli’s decline are the legacy of colonialism and changes in architecture, with fewer people now choosing to live in the kinds of traditional mud huts that were decorated in Uli. He told us about how the influence of Christianity meant that:

*“...those things were [associated with] fetishes, that they were evil, but not recognising that this was something that all of these villages had been doing for centuries, and somebody comes to prevent them from continuing their tradition.”*

Unlike Nsibidi which is still used by the secret societies, Uli is no longer widely practised. As such, the need to preserve the techniques and motifs of the form from extinction, is very real. A revival interest from contemporary artists - in particular The Nsukka Group - as we will come on to see, has been instrumental in ensuring the heritage is remembered. However, some say that this kind of ‘high art’ is elitist and belies the humble origins and community ethos of the Uli classicists.



*Eziafo Okaro, Uli Woman painter in Ogidi, Anambra State, 2009.*



*Uli drawing by Eziafo Okaro.*

We already mentioned the study of Dr. Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi. He spent over a decade with one such classicist - an Uli painter by the name of **Eziafo Okaro** who still practises Uli within her community. Despite facing political and social challenges on a daily basis largely stemming from the remnants of British colonisation, Eziafo continued her traditional Igbo religious belief and practice of Uli wall painting, continuing to experiment with Uli style and form, until her death in 2014.





## Contemporary art

The Nsukka Group are a group of artists associated with the University of Nigeria. Their primary focus is to highlight Uli as a traditional Nigerian craft within international media. In 1997, a landmark exhibition by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art displayed the pioneering work of the seven artists that make up the group: Tayo Adenaike, El Anastul, Chike Aniakor, Olu Oguibe, Uche Okeke, Ada Udechukwu and Obiora Udechukwu. These artists use Uli in their work, but also maintain that they must be aware of other worldly traditions, often welding different cultural forms together to reflect contemporary living. They use a range of mediums including pen, brush, and ink, pastel, watercolour, tempera, gouache, and oil and acrylic paints, as well as methods of printing, including silkscreen, aquatint, etching, and lithograph.

Note that whilst Uli is traditionally practised by women, most of the Nsukka Group artists are men. Speaking about the use of Uli by contemporary artists, including in his own work, Chike Azuonye told us:

*“It is about saying - okay, even though it is dying out in our villages, we are able to record and use those motifs in our own contemporary work, because they all have meanings. So, if I am trying to paint something that talks about happiness, I might use Uli to talk about sunshine - especially in this country, when the sun is shining, everyone is happy; when it’s winter, everyone is more gloomy. There are ways and means of using it. So, it is not that somebody got up one day and decided Uli should be appropriated by male artists... no one is prevented from using Uli - whether they are male or female. If it is out there, then people can use Uli and tell a story about our culture and about our people, to preserve it.”*



Uche Okeke. *Isi Nwoji*. 1972.



Chuka Amaefuna. *Benevolence*. 1979



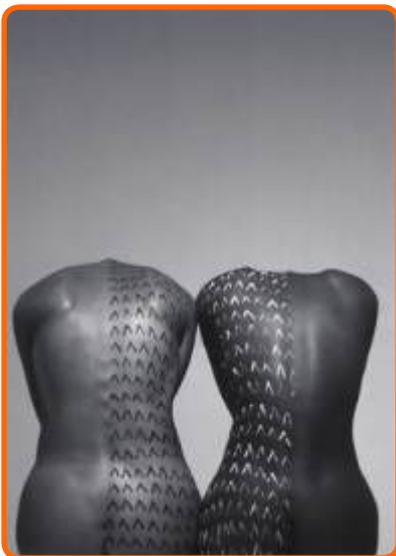
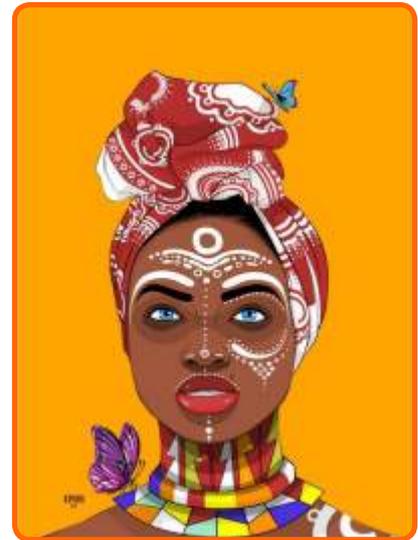
Tayo Adenaike. *Uli Notes*. 1991.

The Nsukka Group have emerged as a major group of contemporary African artists who link the skilled artistry of the past with the present and participate actively in the international art scene. This has transformed the use of Uli from a “purely local, to an ethnic/national concern” (Elizabeth Anne Willis, 1997).





**Ubiomo Chinedu Ogheneroh** is a young graduate graphic designer, 2D illustrator, and digital painter. Ubiomo's recent project Facial Series was inspired by Uli body art as a beautification process before the uses of modern day makeup. Although Ubiomo's work does not use Uli as an art-form in the traditional sense of the practice, his work celebrates the women who created it, its value in their communities, as well as its important and not forgotten part in Igbo Nigerian heritage.



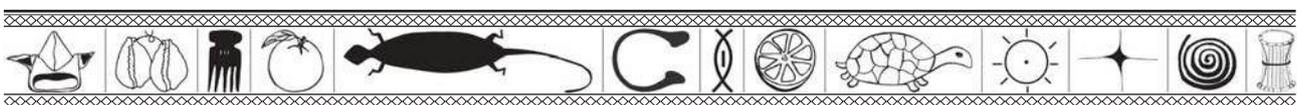
Untitled © 1997 Iké Udé

**Iké Udé** is a Nigerian-American photographer living and working in New York City, best known for his conceptual portraiture. His beautiful black and white series Uli, references Uli body art and wall motifs as well as high fashion.

Opposite is the work of **Chike Azuonye** who we have been hearing from throughout. Born in Nigeria and now based in South East London, Chike is a figurative, portrait and abstract painter. Classically trained, with a BA (Hons) degree in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1987). How many non-verbal communication symbols can you spot in his painting Ahia?



Ahia © [meaning commerce] Chike Azuonye





## ULI'S TRANSNATIONAL LINKS

People in many different times and places have used skin as an interface and platform for non-verbal communication and it has almost always been an expression of a particular culture – for example, for aesthetic reasons, to identify kinship groups, for performance or for ceremony. These customs are in a constant state of flux, be it in terms of innovation or modification, repression, decline or revival. It would thus be very hard to make definitive claims about Igbo influence on other societies that practise body adornment or vice versa.

However, some scholars have sought to explore aesthetic links between Uli and different traditions. Okoronkwo Ikechukwu Francis & Sukanthy Visagapperumal Egharevba have looked at Uli wall murals' similarities with Kolam, as practised by the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Remember how Uli was used to communicate Igbo moral values? By looking at commonalities between the stylistics and methods of nonverbal communication systems in places as disparate as Nigeria and Sri Lanka, we may be able to think about the spiritual or historical experiences that these cultures share.



Kolam design drawn on the floor with chalk powder.

Source: <https://www.sahapedia.org>

Entoptic Forms	San Rock Art		Palaeolithic Art				
	engravings	paintings	mobile art		parietal art		
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							

Adapted from Lewis-Williams and Dowson, 1988, pages 216 and 217

Another interesting thing to think about is that many designs in ancient non-verbal communication systems are thought to originate or be inspired by naturally-occurring visual effects within the eye, known as entropic visuals! A lot of the patterns which are found universally, could well have something to do with this (see image). These patterns include linear zig-zag patterns, dots, and other abstract shapes, just like Uli.





## ULI - QUIZ & ACTIVITIES

Help us keep the heritage alive! See how much you have remembered about Uli by taking the quiz....

- 1) What does Uli take its name from?
  - a. The place where the practice originates from
  - b. An indigo, plant-based dye used for body adornment
  - c. The hat practitioners wear when painting wall murals
  
- 2) What is Uli most commonly used for?
  - a. Telling bedtime stories
  - b. Political and legal documentation
  - c. Ceremonies and commemoration
  
- 3) Uli is almost always practised by who?
  - a. Young boys
  - b. Maidens
  - c. Women.
  
- 4) What does this symbol stand for?
  - a. Beware of snakes
  - b. Sewing machine
  - e. Continuity, completion and wisdom
  
- 5) What does the white pigment, used to paint wall murals, come from?
  - a. snow
  - b. clay
  - c. berries
  
- 6) Missionaries discouraged women from body adornment and redirected the artistic practice into which other form?
  - a. needlework
  - b. photography
  - c. drumming
  
- 7) Which city do the group of artists who are most famous for contemporary Uli come from?
  - a. Newcastle
  - b. Lagos
  - c. Nsukka





- 8) Before the Uli dye could be applied to the human body, there had to be time for preparation. Firstly,
- You have a cold bath in the River Niger
  - You lie under the iroko tree to cool your body temperature
  - You shave the body hair off to allow for a smooth surface for application.

### Activities

Have a look at the symbologies shown in this section of the pack and see whether:

- You can identify any of the following:
  - Motifs specific to the Igbo surrounding environment.
  - Objects that appeared in everyday Igbo lives.
  - Objects often associated with Igbo worship.
- Identify similarities and differences between traditional Uli motifs and the work of contemporary artists shown in the pack.
- You can communicate ideas or commemorate an event, through the creation of a new artwork, using a combination of traditional Uli motifs, symbols from other cultures and your own invented symbols.



- c (8)  
c (7)  
a (6)  
b (5)  
e (4)  
c (3)  
c (2)  
b (1)

### ULI - QUIZ ANSWER



# AROKO

## AROKO - THE BASICS

### What?

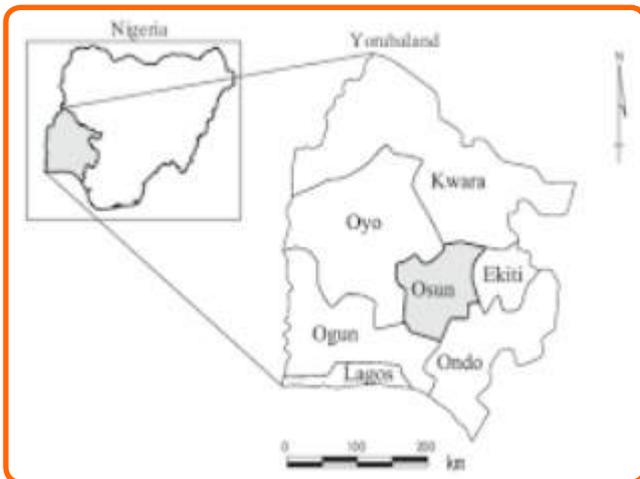
Aroko is the most prominent of many non-verbal communication systems used by the Yorùbá people. The system uses physical objects, presented individually or in combination, as a semiotic code (meaning a set of conventions linking signs to their meanings). Aroko enabled people to send messages, sometimes across large distances. Objects including cowrie shells, palm fronds and weaponry, hold symbolic meanings capable of creating sophisticated messages when arranged in specific ways.

Using local resources and materials, they are also often objects of aesthetic ingenuity and great craftsmanship.



*Aroko in the University of Aberdeen collection.*

### Where?



The Yorùbá are one of present-day Nigeria's largest ethnic groups and native to the Southwest of the country, as shown on the map opposite.

Similar object-based forms of communication with different names, forms and meanings can also be found in other African societies.





## Who?

Aroko is an elite language, originally created as a way to communicate official secrets for interstate and socio-political interactions. In many ways, it is a language of diplomacy and traditionally would have been used by priests and royalty. Found predominantly in rural communities, it is the elders who tend to be the custodians of this culture, rather than the general populace.

It is a secret code and therefore cannot be deciphered by outsiders. It involves the sender, the Aroko itself, a messenger and the receiver. Because of this, the meaning of the Aroko depends on the relationship between the sender and receiver. This means that the messenger, who would often also be tasked with taking a response back to the sender, might have no idea what he or she is communicating!

## When?

Very little is known about the origins of Aroko, but it is clear that it was used as a means of diplomatic communication in the pre-colonial period and there are some fascinating examples of this found throughout history.

One such example is that during the long period of the Oyo Empire, if a village or town was captured in war, then the trees surrounding the palace of the Baale (traditional ruler) would be cut down to signify conquest. This meant that a visitor would understand that the village or town had come under colonial rule.



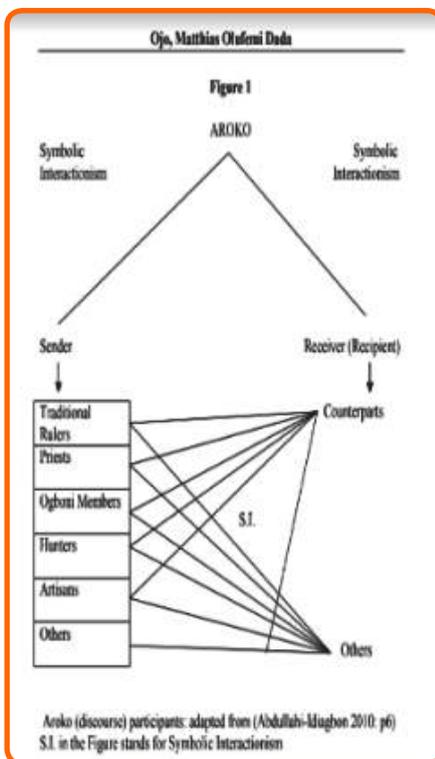
Late Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade. Source: <https://www.pulse.ng>



## THE HISTORY OF AROKO

### 'A common community of knowledge'

The Yorùbá have a long history of political centralization, distinctive culture and attending symbols of identity, of which Aroko is a part. Aroko is thus deeply culturally rooted, covering many aspects specific to Yorùbá life, in the same way that Uli communicates Igbo values. This culture was resplendent with a great many symbols and signs, and so Aroko was simply an extension of this: “combining a number of objects with definite, accepted meanings [so that] more complex and precise messages could be conveyed” (Gus Casely-Hayford, 2015). When objects are sent in combination, each one augments, adds to, or transforms the meaning of what the other object(s) signify.



Aroko was used when face-to-face communication was not possible, perhaps because of a long distance, or undesirable, for example if there is animosity between the sender and receiver. In Yorùbá culture, the Aroko is believed to stand in for the person. The messenger is merely a conduit: the message may even be about him or her without their knowledge. However, as scholar Philip Adedotan Ogundeji points out, the messenger is important because they have the power to tamper with the content, either deliberately or inadvertently.

Normally the meaning of the Aroko will depend on the relationship between the sender and receiver but, on the rare occasion that the latter does not understand the meaning, then they would have referred to elders in the community, for help with the interpretation.

Historically, Aroko has been used for a wide range of different purposes - economic, social, political, religious and intellectual - communicating everything from notices of dissatisfaction and even war, to expressions of optimism or affection.

It was commonly used between elite groups such as warriors, hunters, artisans and Ifa priests. It is also used by secret societies, as with Nsibidi. However, it also has more general use for ordinary people which would have been more prevalent in preliterate society and today, is mostly practised in rural areas.

As with other communication systems we have considered so far, the advent of European colonialism and spread of Christianity - as well as the invention of modern transport and communication and decline of traditional systems of governance - means Aroko was far more widely practised in the past than it is today.





## Public Aroko: Ààlè

Just like Nsibidi, which had a secret and a public version, Aroko also has two different manifestations. The first, as we have seen, relies on the relationship between the sender and receiver and is thus a private, secret method of communication. These messages are often wrapped up in a cloth or leaves to further ensure confidentiality.

Though there is some disagreement regarding what distinguishes the two forms, the second is commonly referred to as Ààlè, and we can understand this as being ‘public Aroko’. Ààlè are mostly used as warnings and deterrents on private property. Ordinary objects with symbolic meaning are not concealed, but rather displayed as a spectacle of danger. For example, a market woman may leave a knife on her goods when she needs to run an errand. The knife will symbolise the spirit of Ogun, the god of iron and it is believed that whosoever steals her goods while she is briefly away, will incur the wrath of Ogun!

Note that sometimes the same objects are used in Aroko and Ààlè, but they don’t always mean the same thing. For example, a snail shell sent between lovers is a symbol of affection, due to the saying *Ikarahun ìgbín kì í ya ìgbín* (‘the shell and the snail never part’). Used as Ààlè, the shell becomes a portent for what will happen to a thief, from the saying *Ojú boró kó n’ìgbín fin kurò ni ilé rẹ̀* (‘the snail does not depart its home in peace’).

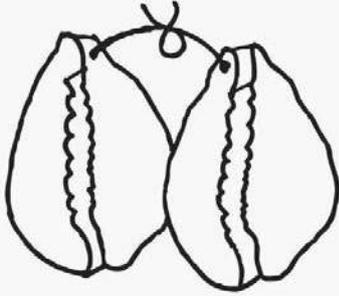


*Photograph from Symptoms and Strangeness in Yorùbá Anti-Aesthetics. David T. Doris. 2005.*

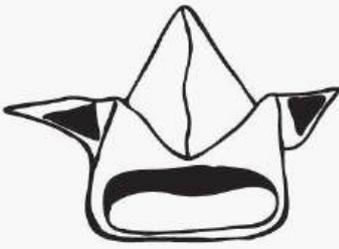


## SPEAKING WITH AROKO

### Some symbols and their meaning



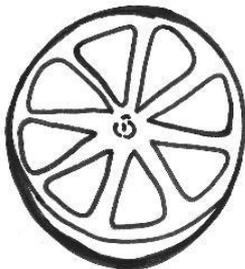
Cowrie shells have historically been used as currency in many parts of the world, as well as being used as jewellery, decoration, divination and for other ceremonial purposes. They are frequently used in Aroko. This symbol depicts two cowrie shells tied together facing each other, signalling an indication of an agreement and unity. A person receiving this knows there has been an agreement and that all is well.



This image is the Yorùbá traditional hat, usually worn by chiefs on special occasions. When there was a conflict between parties, the chief would send his cap, as a symbol or request for peace to the feuding parties.



A comb is used for parting the hair. When this object is sent to a person, another tribe or community, it signifies an irreconcilable end of a relationship.



When an orange is sent to someone, it shows that person has caught his or her fancy and is in love. In Aroko language, sending someone an orange means “I love you” or “I Like you.” This is usually sent to the loved one by a middleman, who could be a friend or a family member.



## Constructing sentences and making conversation



One well-documented Aroko from history is an 1851 message of peace and goodwill, sent from the Oba of Ìjẹbú Kingdom to the Oba of Lagos on the occasion of his restoration. There are two records of this message, the first is an illustration in *'Abbeokuta; or sunrise within the tropics: an outline of the origin and progress of the Yorùbá Mission'* (London, 1856) which is a book by a nineteenth century missionary called Sarah Tucker. The second (seen here on the left) is found in the Pitt Rivers Museum. It is not completely identical but is believed to be a copy of the original.

Here are Sarah Tucker's accompanying explanatory notes:

**1st.** The cowries - there are four times two; this means that there are four corners of the earth all peopled, and that among them the Ijebbus and Lagos people are closely united.

**2nd.** The round stone-like kernel is used in the game called 'ware' [in Yorùbá the game is known as ayo], which is universal in those parts, and means that the Ijebus and Lagos people used to be friends and play together.

**3rd.** The next two cowries complete the first sentence, of being one.

**4th.** The plum-like kernel of the fruit called ossan means "What is good for me is good for you".

**5th.** The long black bean is a kind of spice called eree and means "Do not make a fool of me, and I will not make a fool of you."

**6th.** The rest of the cowries, with their faces the same way, and the two other kernels, mean, "Let us go on a straight; let us play together."



## TRADITIONAL USES OF AROKO

Consistent with Yorùbá culture in general - as we will see when we move on to look at the Talking Drum - Aroko makes great use of word play and proverbs. The tonal nature of Yorùbá language makes it a rich source for puns. An example of this is the esura, which is a kind of yam. Used as Aroko, it symbolises suura - patience - because of the words' similar sounds.

The choice of objects is far from random - as a language system, Aroko is very complex. In fact, as Philip Adedotun Ogundeji has written about, the relationship between signifier (Aroko) and signified (meaning), falls into five different types: phono-aesthetic association, functional association, natural association, contiguous association and proverbial association. Below is an overview of each different kind of Aroko, with an example or two, précised from Ogundeji's analysis.

### Phono-aesthetic association

A structural similarity between a syllable in the name of the object and a verb connected to it, creates the meaning. This kind of symbolic word play is common in Yorùbá culture. If that sounds confusing, it will make more sense in practice...



Òyà (wooden comb) is interpreted as òyà ti yà wà o (the wooden comb has separated us) --- the verb yà is derived from the noun Òyà.

Eku asín (long nosed rat) is interpreted as sínsínwín (getting mad)

Èé jọ (eight cowries or other objects) is interpreted as Jí jọ (situation is alright and as expected)

### Functional association

This one is more straightforward! The Aroko's meaning comes directly from the use that the object is put to. So...



Weapons are interpreted as a challenge to war. They were often sent along with ayò (a type of seed used in games) which is interpreted as peace and friendship. The receiving individual or community would be expected to choose one of the symbols.

Sponge, soap and camwood, used when washing a newly born baby would be sent to a father who is out of town to inform him that his wife had given birth



*Ayò boardgame*





### Natural association

Similar to functional association, with natural association the meaning comes from the innate qualities or characteristics of the objects. Take these for example:

Akọ òkúta (hard stone) is interpreted as Lílẹ̀ kokooko (good health, toughness)



*Ewúro (a bitter leaf that leaves a good aftertaste) is interpreted as Ajọ léyin iyà (joy after suffering)*

### Contiguous association

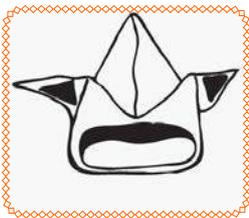
With this one, meaning comes from the connection between objects, either within the Aroko itself (this is called syntagmatic contiguous meaning, if you want to sound clever) or from connection with elements not in the Aroko itself (paradigmatic contiguous meaning). Some examples to give you a better feel include:



Syntagmatic –

Two or four cowrie shells tied together so they are facing each other reaffirms friendship or intimacy. The meaning comes from how the shells face each other.

Two cowries tied with their backs together is a symbol of distrust or conflict between friends, as it suggests ‘turning your back’.



Paradigmatic –

An object (such as a hat or ring) belonging to the sender signifies themselves.

Ílẹ̀ or yanrìn (soil or sand) is interpreted to mean death, as we are buried in the ground.

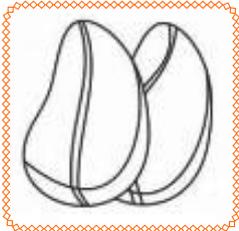
### Proverbial association

Proverbs are so widely used in Yorùbá culture and connected to so many of the Aroko, that it would be easy to assume that this was the main organising principle behind the communication system. That is because many of the Aroko already mentioned, which in fact derive their meaning in other ways, also have proverbs attached to them. For example, of the





camwood it is said that *kì í tán nígbá osùn kí a má rí fi pa ọmọ lára* (the calabash containing camwood cannot be so empty that there will not be some to use in adorning a baby's body). Here are some example of Aroko which get their meaning purely from associated proverbs and sayings...



Obí gbígbe (dried kola nut) is associated with the proverb *Obí gbígbe kí í hù mó* (the dried kola nut does not germinate any more) which is interpreted as an irreversible decision such as a death sentence.

Ewé ọdán (African fig tree leaves) is associated with the proverb *Ewé ọdán ẹ jù bẹẹ lọ, ẹran ló fi je* (the fig leaves did more than that but were at last eaten up by the goat) which is interpreted as a warning against pride or stubbornness.

The above are general rules but, as we have already mentioned, Aroko meaning is very much dependent on interpersonal relations between specific individuals. On this note, there would also have been subcultural differentiation between different Yorùbá groups, depending on the geographical area from which they are from.

Aroko can also be described as mnemonic objects, meaning that they are used to aid memory. Indeed, one of the reasons which they were so valued is that, as well as being succinct and direct, once they were sent they cannot be denied, in the way that a verbal exchange can be. An agreement made in Aroko therefore cannot be taken back, as the objects themselves provide the record.



## CONTEMPORARY USE OF AROKO

Unlike Nsibidi, Uli and the Talking Drum, Aroko has not been revived in contemporary artistic contexts and, though it is still used by priest groups, its use for day-to-day dealings in contemporary Nigeria is limited nowadays.

Visual artist **Babajide B. Olatunji** is based in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and has spent many years researching historical movements and modes of production. His work comprises mostly of photorealistic charcoal and pastel portraits, exploring the practice of facial scarification. We were delighted to come across a recent series, where he turns his hyper realistic virtuosity to Aroko.



*Aroko no.4 (Of rock, leaf and cowry shell)  
22" x 30"  
Pastel pencils on archival paper  
2019*

*'In Yorùbá culture, an encrypted message of a rock, a leaf and a cowry shell is used to inquire about a person's wellbeing. The rock never yields its hardness(strength); is the receiver in good health?*

*Leaves on water are never calm; is the receiver at peace?  
And the rattle of cowry shells suggest wealth; does commerce and fortune favour the receiver?'*



*Aroko no. 5(Firesticks)  
22" x 30"  
Pastel pencils on archival paper  
2019*

*An encrypted message of two tied, opposite-facing, pieces of firewood is an indication of a misunderstanding between the sending and receiving parties. As we know, a single piece of firewood cannot of itself cook stew. This signals a desire to cut ties (pun intended).*





## AROKO – QUIZ AND ACTIVITIES

Help us keep the heritage alive! See how much you have remembered about Aroko by taking the quiz....

- 1) Aroko is an elite non-verbal communication system amongst:
  - a. Christians in Yorùbáland
  - b. Lecturers and students in England
  - c. Yorùbá priests, royalties and elders in rural communities.
  
- 2) Aroko is originally created as a way to communicate:
  - a. Official secrets for interstate and socio-political interactions
  - b. Between the living and the dead
  - c. With those with hearing impairment
  
- 3) Aroko requires four essential elements - a sender, the Aroko itself, the receiver - and who or what else?
  - a. An interpreter
  - b. A messenger
  - c. A mobile phone
  
- 4) What is Aroko predominantly a language of..?
  - a. Love
  - b. Diplomacy
  - c. Religion
  
- 5) Aroko has a very valuable additional purpose - what is that?
  - a. Currency
  - b. Used to aid memory
  - c. Sending edible gifts
  
- 6) What makes Aale different from Aroko?
  - a. Ààlè is only understood by children
  - b. Ààlè is always edible and smells good
  - c. Ààlè are mostly used as warnings and deterrents on private properties
  
- 7) What does the orange signify when used as Aroko?
  - a. A peace treaty
  - b. Expression of love
  - c. Notice regarding a debt





### Activities

As we have learned, Aroko is a non-verbal language system that makes use of (and sense of) the pre-colonial Yorùbá socio-cultural setting it was created within. The meaning ascribed to objects and their combinations is specific to Yorùbá society.

Could you create a similar system within your own, personal micro-context?

1. Collect objects commonly found in your home, work or leisure environments
2. Invent meanings for the objects, based on shared understanding, in-jokes or common phrases used between your classmates or colleagues
3. OR you can create a new piece of artwork showing your own Aroko-inspired message

Now all you need is a messenger! Make sure you select someone reliable...



- 1) c
- 2) a
- 3) b
- 4) b
- 5) b
- 6) c
- 7) b

### AROKO – QUIZ ANSWERS



## TALKING DRUM - THE BASICS

### What?

The Yorùbá drumming tradition differs from European use of drums in that it is not simply music but a sophisticated form of language. This language ranges from simple signals to elaborately coded messages and as there is no direct correlation between the sounds created by the instruments and alphabetic symbols it is, by definition, a nonverbal form of communication. By modulating the pitch, a drummer can mimic the intonation, tone, stress, rhythm and even emotion of human speech.

The principle Talking Drum is hourglass shaped and called the Gangan or Dundun, which means 'sweet sound'. This instrument holds a very significant place in Yorùbá folklore and culture as the source of history, proverbs, poetry and daily life. It is used in company of a supporting ensemble, and the whole Talking Drum family plays an important part in laying the rhythmic foundation for the lead drums to interact and talk in their environment.



*An Iyalu Drum from IROKO's ensemble*

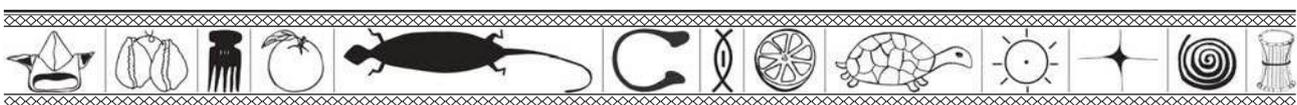
### Where?

Many regions of West Africa have strong drumming traditions including Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria. The Talking Drum is however most prominent among the Yorùbá ethnic group, principally in Nigeria but also found in neighbouring countries like Togo and Benin republic, as well as among other ethnic groups such as the Hausa.



*A Dondo drum from Ghana*

In the diaspora Talking Drums are also alive and well, including in North America and Europe. This brings challenges as audiences who do not understand the Yorùbá language can appreciate the musical quality of the drumming but cannot understand its meaning.



## Who?

The Talking Drum is taught to young children, traditionally boys, who will learn to play the instruments through both formal and informal educational processes, from relatives or sometimes at churches. However, to become a master drummer capable of creating complex phrases and conversations, takes great talent and many years of studious dedication as reaching a professional standard requires being eloquent in reciting thousands of traditional proverbs on the drum.

Traditionally, the Talking Drum is closely linked to griots who are West African storytellers, historians, poets and subsequently custodians of the oral tradition.



*The Oduduwa Talking Drummers:  
a well-established multi-cultural troupe formed by Ayan Ayandosu,  
known as Ayan De First*

## When?

The Talking Drum tradition is very old indeed. It is believed to have been introduced as a means of communication during the inauguration of the Alaafin of Oyo and developed throughout the period of the Oyo Empire established in the twelfth century in South-West, Nigeria.

As with the visual and symbolic non-verbal communication systems we have already heard about, the practice of Talking Drums was disrupted by the arrival of European colonialism when, in some cases, it was banned, but has nevertheless survived and thrived to this day.



## SPEAKING WITH TALKING DRUMS

To understand how the Talking Drum speaks, we must have some understanding of the language that it talks in. Yorùbá is a tonal language, with words having multiple meanings depending on the pitch at which they are spoken - high, medium or low. The dundun drum has a pitch range that can stretch more than two musical octaves whilst also matching the melodic capacities of other instruments. This means that in the hands of a skilled drummer, it can produce all of the possible microtones of the Yorùbá language. However, just as Yorùbá speakers must be careful to get the precise tone right, it takes a high level of expertise to manipulate both the drum stick and the tension of the leather straps, in order to create the correct tones and glides (and avoid misunderstandings!)

### The Ensemble

As we have already mentioned, each drum in the ensemble is important for laying the rhythmic foundation for the lead drums to interact and talk in their environment. Check out some of the different drums and their names below (with photos of IROKO's very own ensemble!). This is not the entire family mind; as Ayan De First told us

*“There are more than two families of talking drum. Like every nuclear family, there is also an extended family.”*



#### iyá ilù

Meaning ‘the mother drum’ the iyá ilù is traditionally the lead though it can also play support. It is the largest drum in the ensemble and the only one to be decorated with small metallic bells called saworo which provide extra sound. This drum is usually used to dictate the pace, determine the song and gives clues and prompts to the rest of the ensemble. It is usually played by an experienced master talking drummer.



#### Adamo

This drum has the widest tonal range and it is therefore the most popular instrument for using as the lead instrument that does the talking!





### Omele Gangan

Roughly translated, omele means ‘accompanying rhythmic instrument’ and these are the smallest sized drums in the ensemble. They are usually tied up so that when played they emit a fixed high pitch. Their part in the ensemble is repetitive. These instruments are normally played by younger and inexperienced members of the family.

### Gudugudu

Known as the father drum, unlike the hourglass shaped drums in the ensemble, this instrument is easy to recognise by its bowl shape. Its carrying strap goes around the neck so as to hold the instrument directly in front of the player. The waxed spot which you can see in the centre of the membrane produces a low tone, whilst the rest of the skin creates a higher, sharp tone.



### Sakara



This drum is made with a strong, thick clay rim and played with lightweight straight sticks. They play an open tone and can be made to talk by pushing the softened skin from the inside. In the hands of a good player, they can sound as powerful as the other Yorùbá Talking Drums, alongside which they now often play.

### Omele Batá

These are the smallest drums in the Batá family. The instrument consists of three drums which can be used both to talk or as accompaniment. They replicate the high, medium and low tones of Yorùbá. They are played with two leather straps called bilala or with bendy plastic strips, but not usually with the hands.



### Some Igbo instruments that also ‘speak’



#### Ogene

This is a large metal bell that has a conical, almost flat shape and is hollow inside. The sound comes from the vibrations caused when the instrument is struck, as the sound echoes inside the hollow, metal body of the instrument. It is usually struck with a soft wooden stick. It was mainly used to convey messages from the king or for general information.





### Ekwe

This is a cylindrical shaped drum, made out of wood (usually a tree trunk) and hollow inside. It has rectangular cavity slits and was used for communication over long distances. It can produce rhythms to connote anything from celebration to emergencies.

### Akpele Gourd Trumpet

Known as either the Akpele or the Opi, this is a slender fluted trumpet made from a gourd or calabash and predominantly associated with the Anioma people – or Western Igbo. Used at special occasions and extensively in folk music, it is a carrier of customs and lore and essential to the traditions of the Anioma people.



### Oja - Talking Flute

This wind instrument is used to create a sound which serves to announce the arrival or departure of a traditional ruler (Eze, Igwe, Obi) or a big masquerade. All horns made from animal bone, such as the Oja are granted respect and utility according to the values and norms attached to the animals from which it is produced. As music teacher Mmaduabuchi Gerald Eze explained in a recent interview with the BBC – “it is not just playing sounds. It is an esoteric art.”

### Military Bugles and Hunting Horns

It is not just Africans that use instruments as a form of non-verbal communication. In Western culture, bugles and trumpets have long been used in military contexts, to communicate simple messages and signals through short tunes. Traditionally, this was a way of making clear messages over the noise and confusion of the battlefield. It has remained integral to training in both the military and navy of many Western countries. Bugle calls include signals to call troops to attention, to charge and even to let soldiers know it is a mealtime!



In Britain the traditional (and now controversial) rural sport of hunting also uses a horn (as seen in the opposite picture) to communicate with a pack of hounds. The signals used are also understood by the mounted followers, so that they are able to follow what is happening.





## Playing the drum

We asked master drummer Richard Olatunde Baker to explain how to make the Talking Drum speak. Here is what he told us:

*“Talking drums are usually played whilst the drummer is standing up and are often played in processions. The drummer hangs the drum strap over their shoulder so that it fits snugly into their armpit. The other arm holds the stick and is positioned below the drum, so that the length of the curved stick reaches up to the centre of the drum face. Comfort is important when wearing talking drums, as they are often played for a few hours at a time. It is now common on smaller talking drums for the leather strap to be replaced with a soft cloth or towel strap, for the sake of greater comfort and better grip on the shoulder.”*

*“The essential playing technique is to squeeze the drum under one armpit, using different amounts of pressure and to simultaneously beat the drum with the stick. The different squeezing pressures produce the different pitches. The larger talking drums are played by squeezing the drum against the thigh, whilst simultaneously pulling a small handful of the twisted goat skin rope away from the body. There are many sophisticated and subtle talking drum playing techniques employed, using both hands and the stick which significantly embellish the sound. Overall, the talking drum sound is a mixture of percussion and melody. The drum faces can be broken easily if the player doesn’t use the correct striking methods, however it is common for the skins to be replaced anyway after several months of playing, as the drum skin naturally becomes less supple.”*



## THE HISTORY & TRADITIONAL USES OF TALKING DRUMS

### Origins

Music has always held a pivotal role in the rich cultural history of what is now Nigeria. Prior to the arrival of European colonialism in the middle of the nineteenth century, music was regarded as an integral part of social, religious and ritual events. It was also rarely performed in isolation, but would be played alongside dance, poetry and other dramatic expression, and often in combination with visual arts such as sculpture, design, painting and costuming. The Talking Drum is very much a part of this arts ecosystem and people are thus generally familiar with its sounds. A long-established and dynamic relationship between the drummer and audiences has been developed through repetition and communication. Performances are immersive and the Talking Drum is a part of everyday life for the Yorùbá. As Ayan De First put it when we spoke to him on the subject:

*“When artists are performing back home [in Nigeria] we don’t have spectators, but we always have participants.”*

The dun dun (Talking Drum) family has been present since ancient times. The instrument is said to have been first brought to the Yorùbá by a man called Ayan - a native of Ibarapa land, found in the South Western corner of Òyó state. Though he was an outsider, Ayan taught the art of drumming to Yorùbá families and was deified as a God of music after his death. The ascendance of the Òyó empire in the seventeenth century would have been a key factor in the distribution of the drum throughout Yorùbáland.

Ayan's legacy is so celebrated that once drumming became a hereditary calling, passed down from generation to generation, drumming families became known by the name of Ayan. Until this day, expert drummers are accorded a high respect, not just because of their great technical skills, but because they are the custodians of this long line of tradition. Ayan clans can now be found in most Yorùbá towns among the Òyò, Ìbàdàn, Èkìtì, Òṣun and Ìgbómìnà people.



*Ayan Agalu by Jekein Lato-Unah*

### Making the instruments



The Yorùbá talking drums are made from the wood of the tall Apa tree, found deep in the forest in South West Nigeria. Traditionally a selected tree would only be felled after the woodcutter has made a prayer and offering to Ayanagalu (the Spirit of drumming, who resides in the tree) for permission. Upon approval, the woodcutter could then cut down the tree. The drum maker buys this wood from the woodcutter and begins the carving process, using an intricate series of hand tools.

*An IROKO drum in the early stages of being made in Oyo, Nigeria.*





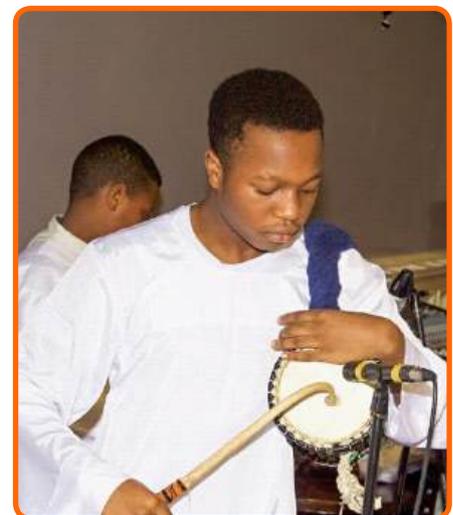
Once the wood has been carved into an hourglass shape, the drum is ready for skinning. Each open end is covered with thin goat or calf skin, which is stitched on wet, one at a time, using narrow thread made from goat skin and additional lines of thick twisted goat skin rope is used to join the two opposite drum faces together. During this process a leather ring that protects the rim of each drum face is also sewn on. Once left in the sun to dry for a day, the skin is re-stretched, a leather strap is attached and then the drum is ready to play, using a curved wooden stick known as "opa".

*IROKO's drums close to completion!*

### Teaching and learning

As we have already mentioned the art was taught from a young age, first through learning to play the lesser drums of the ensemble before moving on to master the Talking Drum. This remains the practice in Nigeria today. The process is always done orally - as scholar Dr Yomi Daramola says "Writing dundun music down (i.e.: with symbols) only confuses things!" Discussing how he learned to play dundun, Lekan Babalola describes the hard work he put in as a child:

*"On a daily basis, you go to school and you come back from school and you play the 3 o'clock service. Every 3 hours there is a service in the church so I came out of the church, and this is every day I have to play music three times, maybe six times a day, every three hours. So 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 9 o'clock. Every day!"*



*Church service in London.*

### Traditional Uses

Historically the Talking Drum has been used for a huge range of things, including to communicate across large distances and from village to village, bringing people together, settling disputes and serving as a memory device to help people remember important events. It is important that the Talking Drum has a living history, with traditional uses being practiced and developed today.

Funmi Adewole, had very interesting things to say about what 'traditional' really means:



*“My understanding of a traditional form does not mean the form is out of use or it never innovates, or there is no innovation. It continues to become innovated, but it is used in a context which pre-dated colonialism.”*

Funmi was speaking about dance, but we can see how the same argument applies to the Talking Drum and the other non-verbal language systems we have considered. For example, think of the contemporary artists who use Nsibidi and Uli alongside other scripts and symbols in their practice.



*Young girl playing an English Nursery Rhyme during ‘Speaking without Voice project’ launch.*

Perhaps one of the Talking Drum’s first uses (and one which it still fulfils today, despite the onset of modern communication systems) was as a broadcaster and instrument of summons. The sound of the *iyá ilù* would have everybody stop in their tracks and listen to its message. Scholar Oyeniyi Osundina puts it this way: “everybody owes allegiance to it and does everything it announces” and notes that the drums were put to lively use communicating messages during the debates surrounding independence in 1960.

Oral poetry, proverbs, songs and chants can be rhythmically replicated on the drum and used in ceremonies. Another reason why the Talking Drum is so deeply interwoven with Yorùbá culture is its rich ties to the language. Just as the tradition replicates proverbs, it also creates new ones. According to Ayan De First:

*“The talking drummers themselves, they actually sat down and composed so many proverbs, so many words, and many expressions”*





For a current example, young people of British-Nigerian heritage are using and adopting the modern Nigerian ‘Tungba’ musical style (rhythmic dance hall tunes with catchy repetitive melodies of Yorùbá language origin) to modify the tradition of speaking with the Talking Drum. They use rhythms to talk about issues that resonate with them and their lives in the UK. They are using the Talking Drum and ‘Talking Drum Beatboxing’ to communicate amongst themselves, make social commentaries, pass on advice amongst their peers and find a lighter way to deal with heavy social issues affecting them e.g. knife crime. For example:

*‘Òmòdé ju beef sí lè, ju beef sí lè’: (Young one, drop the argument, drop the argument!) – a reference to the knife crime within the Black community in Britain.*

*‘Òmò èlè, ògbón yín ni mo rí, kì í she fingernails’: ‘Young girl, my love is for your intellect, not for your fingernails!’.*



*‘Bata drummer. Source: <https://jiji-blog.com/2017/05/nigerian-traditional-dances-wont-able-resist-joining/>’*

So, when the Talking Drum speaks it is voicing Oriki (Yorùbá poetry), proverbs and the oral tradition of documenting events, carrying a social history of the Yorùbá people or making social commentaries in its rhythms.

Talking Drums also have a sacred function which pre-dates both Christianity and Islam and is intrinsically connected to the traditional religion of òrìṣà devotion, and particularly the Sàngó, Egúngún Èsù and Oya cults. Separate from the dundun tradition, the drum used in these religious contexts is called a bàtá. This instrument is hard to make, even trickier to play than dundun and also harder to understand, in many cases demanding knowledge of sacred texts. With the spread of Christianity, the bàtá drum with its association of òrìṣà worship became less popular, whereas the dundun continued to be used both in secular contexts, and gradually within the church. Lekan Babalola describes how the bàtá drum is used differently to the dundun as follows:

*“It is not a drum that we bring out every day. It is like your bagpipe... So, when we are doing a party, marriage, everything, we play dùndún, but it is only when we are doing a ritual that we bring out bàtá.”*

Finally, the Talking Drum had an important role in celebrations. Historically in Yorùbáland, palace musicians would often entertain the oba (the ruler) and his ijoye (chiefs) in the evenings. This celebratory role remains prevalent to this day, with dundun drums being played at occasions such as naming ceremonies, housewarmings, chieftaincy, weddings, coronations and anniversaries.



The drumming tradition has thus long sat alongside that of traditional dance. Communication between drummers and dancers during performance is sometimes characterised by a specific rhythmic language called eno which instructs the dancer on which movement to make, but the relationship is more dynamic than this would suggest. Contemporary African dance researcher and practitioner Funmi Adewole described this to us as follows:

*“It is a kind of play on stage... like an improvisational play. The drummer is giving the dancer these instructions and the dancer is interpreting them in creative ways. Sometimes the dancer subverts what the drummer is saying, by doing what the drummer is asking but in a way the drummer did not expect... and the audience would know that and laugh and cheer, at how the drummer and the dancer are playing off each other.”*

This is important during Egungun (Yorùbá masquerades) - annual festivals of ancestral reverence which involve elaborately costumed and masked figures. The Talking Drum is used to instruct, praise, warn and inspire the steps of the masquerade.



Egungun masqueraders, Source: Freedomonline.





## CONTEMPORARY AND TRANSNATIONAL USES OF TALKING DRUMS

*“The Talking Drum was, for me, the first sound that really excited me when I was a child in Nigeria.” Femi Elufowoju, Theatre Director*

Today the Talking Drum is still frequently found in churches, festivals, wedding ceremonies and at carnivals across Nigeria. The Talking Drum has survived and stood the test of time, more robustly than the other three systems that we have looked at on Speaking Without Voice, with a vibrant life right up until the present generation, both in Nigeria and her diasporas. Whereas traditionally, it would have only been played by men, nowadays women also play the instrument.

In the twentieth century its uses were diversified as it became incorporated into the popular music of West Africa. In Nigeria’s Jùjú music, smaller drums from the ensemble, such as the omele are played alongside modern synthesizers, the electric bass and saxophone, to follow the pitch of popular melodies.



*Drummer, Simisola Omoayan*

Musicians such as King Sunny Adé and Ebenezer Obey incorporated the talking drum to Jùjú music in this way, to great acclaim and its influences can also be found in the internationally successful genres of High Life, Afrobeat and Jazz and other musical forms. Diverse examples of the Talking Drum in popular Western culture include the Grateful Dead’s drummer, Bill Kreutzmann, incorporating the instrument into the band’s live shows, and Ludwig Göransson’s score for the 2018 Black Panther film which features talking drums at the core of a leitmotif associated with the film’s protagonist, T’Challa.



In Nigeria, innovation of the form continues. As Femi Elufowoju explains:

*“In recent years there has been a huge renaissance in the arts in Nigeria. Despite the crippling economy and the testing times, the entertainment industry, and particularly the theatre industry is undergoing a new birth... The West is looking to Africa for insights into how to improve their sounds”*





As we saw with Nsibidi, Yorùbá drumming traditions were first transported across the Atlantic with the slave trade in the 1800s. According to Mark Corrales the first batá with añá (sacred batá) was created in Cuba in around 1830. By 1951, there were about 15 to 25 sets and the Afro-Cuban tradition is still very popular and thriving today. When drummers in Nigeria faced pressures from Christianity, across the Atlantic the tradition benefited from the influences of European musical notation and Latin swing. Nowadays, musicians in Latin America and Africa are mutually inspired and influenced by one another and other musical forms.

In Cuba, Talking Drums do not mimic speech, as Spanish – unlike Yorùbá – is not a tonal language. It can however be used to intone Lucumí, which is an Afro-Cuban language melding Yorùbá vocabulary with Spanish phonetics and pronunciation, that is used for liturgical purposes.



Three batá drummers, with the kpuataki (or chief drummer) in the centre. Source: *The Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum*. Roberto Nodal.

The drum of choice is the batá (rather than dundun) which has similar sacred functions in Cuba, as it does in Nigeria. However recently the form has also taken a secular form; these instruments are called aberínkula, or profane Batá drums, and may be used by an uninitiated person. The diverse, sophisticated and innovative secular forms of Afro-Cuban drumming – such as the conga and bongos – are also deeply indebted to the heritage of the Talking Drum.

In Brazil there is a similarly rich fusion tradition, with Afro-Brazilian Rhythms including Maracatu, Ijexá, Côco and Samba. African traditions nurtured and expanded in Cuba, have also been assimilated by progressive jazz drummers world-wide.



Afro-Cuban Drum Master -- Alejandro Berillo

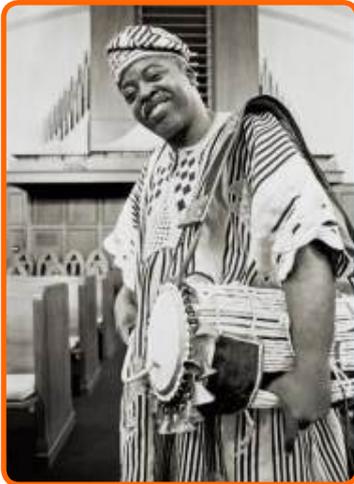
Here in the UK there is also a vibrant and growing community of talking drummers, which we at IROKO are proud to be part of. For many practitioners, such as Ayan de First and Richard Olatunde Baker, the focus is on the traditions of Yorùbá talking drumming, while groups like Egbe Oduniyi School of Batá Drumming and other Afro-Latino batá drummers give workshops that incorporate traditions from the Yorùbá diaspora, including Cuba, Brazil and Equador.





*“Right now British people are now embracing Talking Drum” - Ayan De First*

Of course, playing to audiences who do not understand Yorùbá language has its challenges but, as Ayan De First says:



Francis Awe

*“You have to play the best rhyme for the right person. If I am to entertain you with my talking drum now, it will be different from if I have to entertain a Yorùbá person, because they will understand what I am saying with my drum. But you might probably not. So I will just do something that will entertain you.”*

Many people across the world are embracing these challenges. For example, master drummer Francis Awe, who formed his Nigerian Talking Drum Ensemble in 1985 has travelled to the USA, Mexico, Italy, Germany, and India, adapting dũndún to new languages and contexts. The ensemble “aims to make Yorùbá music accessible and meaningful in new contexts while at the same time retaining the particular symbols and organisational principles that ground it in Yorùbá musical heritage.”

### A role reversal for Nigerian Churches

Throughout the history of talking drumming, it has been recorded that the instrument faced a lot of pressure from Christianity, because of its use in traditional religious settings. As a consequence, the talking drum, and particularly the batá drum, was banned from being used in Nigerian churches.

Nowadays, there has been a complete reversal of this approach and Nigerian churches have become the abode where talking drumming is now thriving and surviving. The most encouraging and impressive aspect of this development is how young Nigerians here in the UK are becoming self-taught talking drummers. This has fundamentally been facilitated by their regular attendance to the Nigerian churches and membership of the churches’ musical groups. The young people are combining their knowledge and skills in music technology with the practical application of talking drumming, both live and on synthesizers and through talking drum beatboxing.

It can be gainfully said that worshipping in Nigerian churches i.e. Celestial, Cherubim and Seraphim, and even in some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and in the Diaspora including here in the UK, is not complete without the sounds, rhythms, melodies, praise singing and religious proverbs emanating from the dundun and the batá drums.





## TALKING DRUM – QUIZ AND ACTIVITIES

Help us keep the heritage alive! See how much you have remembered about the Talking Drum by taking the quiz....

- 1) The Yorùbá talking drums are made from the wood of:
  - a. the tall Apa tree
  - b. the tall iroko tree
  - c. the tall palm tree
  - d. the tall rubber tree
- 2) Traditionally, who is taught to play the Talking Drum?
  - a. Ifa priests
  - b. Young girls
  - c. Young boys
  - d. Warriors
- 3) Once talking drumming became a hereditary calling, passed down from generation to generation, drumming families became known by the name of:
  - a. Okonkwo
  - b. Ayodele
  - c. Alhaji
  - d. Ayan
- 4) What is the largest drum in the ensemble called?
  - a. iyá ìlù
  - b. Omele Batáb
  - d. Opa
- 5) What is the bàtá drum used for?
  - a. Creating new proverbs
  - b. òrìṣà devotion
  - c. Wedding ceremonies only
  - d. Naming ceremony of twins
- 5) The curved wooden stick used in playing the talking drum is known as:
  - a. Opa
  - b. Ilu
  - c. Ayan
  - d. Batá.
- 6) The larger talking drums are worn:
  - a. On the head
  - b. Round your waist
  - c. On top of your shoulder
  - d. Lower, hanging from the shoulder down to the thigh.
- 7) The talking drum's first uses (and one which it still fulfils today, despite the onset of modern communication systems) was as:
  - a. The only adviser to the king
  - b. A broadcaster and instrument of summons
  - c. A master storyteller
  - d. A predictor of rainfall





- 8) According to Lekan Babalola, it is only when we (Yorùbá people) are doing a ritual that we bring out:
- a. Djembe drums
  - b. Kpanlogo drums
  - c. Ekwe drums
  - d. Bàtá drums
- 9) Which people call the talking drums Gangan or Dundun:
- a. Ghanaians
  - b. Senegalese
  - c. Malians
  - d. Yorùbá people
- 10) Young people of British-Nigerian heritage are using the talking drum to:
- a. Contact their teachers
  - b. Write all their GCSE exams
  - c. Make commentaries on social issues affecting them and pass on advice amongst their peers
  - d. Send message to the Queen
- 11) Which contemporary Nigerian musical genre has the Talking Drum been most incorporated into?
- a. Reggae
  - b. Swing
  - c. Jùjú
  - d. Highlife

- 11) c  
10) c  
9) d  
8) d  
7) b  
6) d  
5) a  
4) b  
3) a  
2) d  
1) c

**TALKING DRUM – QUIZ ANSWERS**





## PROJECT RESEARCH VOLUNTEERS

**Isobel Parkinson**



Isobel Parkinson is a research volunteer for Iroko, graduated Biomedical Sciences BSc (Hons.) from the University of Manchester. When she isn't working she can be found at art galleries or exhibitions with an interest in communications that lead her into joining this research team.

**Lois Dalphinis**

Lois is a BA graduate from Westminster University where she studied Contemporary Media Practice and majored in Curation and Presentation, with a further educational grounding in Graphic and Web Design.

Lois has worked in Education and on a number of Lottery Funded Heritage Projects including work with Richmond Theatre and Rainbow Steel Band. Both projects were celebratory projects of the cultural history of the theatre and the oldest Steel Band in Bath. Lois has also worked on a freelance basis on an educational project, designed for use in schools; commissioned by Bristol Council Clean and Green department to inform and educate young adults on the practice and law surrounding Graffiti and Street Art.



Lois continues her love and interest in art and design by focussing on jewellery; designing and making pieces with an ecological awareness that incorporate gemstones and cultural elements.



### Minna Graeber



Well, I couldn't believe my luck when IROKO took me on to do some research on the Talking Drums. This is the sort of thing that has been bubbling away, either in the back or foreground of my life for many years.

I am a music graduate who always tended towards the folk music end of the spectrum. That led me a merry dance, first, via a folk music camp in Romania, into an English teaching job over there. Those were 6 very happy years of my life. Next, I made the mistake of taking my fiddle up to the Isle of Skye and was seduced into taking up a degree in Scottish Gaelic. I completed this last October.

An interest in other cultures tends to blend in with an interest in walking – it's the best way to get to interesting places and people. I walked across Europe from my home in Romania back to my London home, via Santiago de Compostela. And did a 72 mile trek (London to Canterbury) in order to raise money for the homeless charity, The Connection at St Martins in the Fields.

I've heard more great music and met so many fine people in the course of my work for IROKO. Thank you. (Wish I spoke Yorùbá)

### Rachel Hunter

Rachel studies MA English via distance learning at the University of Nottingham after previously gaining a first class degree at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She also currently works in television at Multi Story Media, a part of ITV Studios.

Rachel loves learning and has particular interest in the history and evolution of languages. When she's not studying or working you can find her hanging around in the air off hoops and silks - she's a big fan of aerial circus!!





*Additional help with the voluntary research on Speaking Without Voice came from:*

Aisha Parmenster  
Chrys Chijutomi  
Eva Vasil  
Michelle Harewood

**Kate Kelsall – IROKO Heritage Support Officer**



Having recently graduated from a History Masters at SOAS - her thesis 'Picturing Palestine in British Newspapers: 1947 – 1948' won the department's prize for best dissertation - Kate is passionate about the social value of engaging with the past. She has thoroughly enjoyed coordinating the volunteers and collating research for 'Speaking Without Voice' and is excited by the prospect of presenting little-known heritage in accessible formats. Her own research interests include British colonial history and its legacies, Palestine, the history of photography and the medium's possibilities as a source material.

Prior to her MA she worked in the arts and cultural sector, in marketing, publicity, arts criticism and as a copywriter, and was selected for the Trainee Curator Programme at Brighton Photo Fringe 2018. Outside of IROKO she can be found writing press releases for performers, learning to find her way around a darkroom, volunteering at the Migration Museum, buried in novels and going on long walks.



## INTERVIEWEES

The following six individuals were interviewed during our research – their knowledge and insight is found throughout the Speaking Without Voice Resource Pack.



Ayan De First

*Nigerian Master Drummer based in the UK*

*“To become a real McCoy talking drummer is like obtaining a PhD or becoming a professor. It is very, very deep. As a talking drummer what we have in our brain... is unquantifiable!”*

*“What the future holds [for the Talking Drum] depends on our generation. I don’t think email or mobile phones has anything to do with it... you still need the talking drummers!”*

*Nigerian contemporary artist based in the UK  
Founding member of Nigeria Art Society UK (NASUK)*

*“Uli art is the spectacle by which the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria record their world views and cosmology. Uli is a genre inseparable from the life and experience of the people, which continues to inspire contemporary arts practitioners.”*



Chike Azuonye



Femi Elufowoju

*Award winning British Nigerian actor, performer, director*

*“Before technology, what was there? What were the means for communication? We had to find the most inventive, the most intelligent, and the most plausible way of communicating. And I don’t think anyone would need to tell anyone else how incredibly inventive the Nigerian man is – or woman – we are arguably the most inventive race in the world! The Japanese are renowned for innovation... I think Nigerians, especially musicians and the cultural leaders from the past had these wonderful ways of creating dialogue with each other...”*





Contemporary African dance researcher, practitioner Lecturer at De Montford University

“As black people, as Africans, but also as black people in general, there is often a sense of loss that occurred as a result of slavery and colonialism. There is a sense of rupture that has occurred as a result of migration, whether this is economically driven or not. And there is a sense of leaving things behind. The power of continuity, of being able to take what you have learned growing up, or gathered from older people – even from your peers who live back home as we call it, in order to continue to do work here, it [traditional heritage] makes great possibilities for the future. Not just for the actual artistic work, but also in the way we think about life, the way we reflect on our experiences and the way we continue to create and renew society. And that helps overcome these experiences of loss.”



Dr Funmi Adewole



Lekan Babalola

UK Based, Grammy Award winning Nigerian Musician

“Really nobody in the whole world plays the Talking Drum like us. Nobody! We sing with the drums”

Nigerian-British Master Drummer based in the UK

“I always wanted to learn the Talking Drum, I was so moved by its deep, rich tones and evocative sounds. The use of language when playing this drum gives it a magical touch that transcends other instruments.”



Richard Olatunde Baker





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