

Preserving Indigenous Knowledge through Dundun Drum Construction: Apprenticeship, Craftmanship, and Music Education at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory, Lagos

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Abstract

This study investigates the preservation of Yoruba indigenous knowledge through the construction and apprenticeship system of the *Dùndún* (talking drum) at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory, Nigeria. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photographic documentation, and participatory engagement with traditional craftsmen. The findings reveal that *Dùndún* construction extends beyond instrument production to encompass indigenous technology, apprenticeship, spirituality, craftsmanship, and cultural identity. The study identifies traditional apprenticeship as the primary mechanism for transmitting drum-making knowledge through observation, imitation, practical participation, and mentorship. The apprenticeship system incorporates cultural rituals, including symbolic acceptance ceremonies and progressive stages of learning, reinforcing social values and community identity. Despite challenges such as declining youth interest, scarcity of raw materials, and the growing dominance of modern musical technologies, Ayan Jesu Drum Factory continues to function as an important centre for cultural preservation and informal music education. The study concludes that integrating indigenous craftsmanship into contemporary music education would strengthen cultural sustainability while enriching practical approaches to African music pedagogy.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Dùndún, Talking drum, Yoruba music, Apprenticeship, Music education, Cultural heritage, Drum construction.

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems represent an invaluable component of Africa's cultural heritage and constitute an essential means through which communities preserve their history, technology, artistic traditions, and social values. Ajenifuja (2009) observes that among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, the *Dùndún* talking drum occupies a central position within traditional musical practice. Beyond its musical function, the instrument serves as a medium of communication, historical documentation, ceremonial expression, and cultural identity.

Despite its significance, the transmission of drum-making knowledge faces increasing challenges due to modernization, urbanization, and changing occupational preferences among younger generations. While previous studies have examined Yoruba drumming from performance and ethnomusicological perspectives, relatively little attention has been given to the indigenous knowledge embedded in the construction process itself.

This article examines *Dùndún* construction as a system of indigenous technology and vocational education through a field investigation conducted at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory. The study explores the craftsmanship involved in drum production, the apprenticeship model employed in knowledge transmission, the cultural significance of the instrument, and the implications for contemporary music education.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design to document indigenous knowledge associated with *Dùndún* construction. Fieldwork was conducted at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photographic documentation, and practical participation in drum performance.

The principal informant was Mr. Dada Anuoluwapo Babatunde (popularly known as Ayan Jesu), the founder and master craftsman of the workshop. Interviews focused on his personal background, training, construction methods, apprenticeship practices, cultural philosophy, and challenges affecting traditional drum-making. Observations were recorded throughout the production process, while participatory engagement enabled the researcher to gain experiential understanding of the relationship between instrument construction and performance.

Findings: Ayan Jesu Drum Factory as an Indigenous Learning Centre

The findings of this study reveal that Ayan Jesu Drum Factory functions not merely as a centre for the production and repair of indigenous Yoruba drums but also as an important indigenous learning centre where traditional knowledge, practical skills, and cultural values are transmitted through experiential learning.



Figure 1. Ayan Jesu Drum factory, Ojo Lagos

Located at Abule Era Roundabout, Iyana Era, under Oto Awori Local Council Development Area (LCDA), Ojo Local Government Area, Lagos State, the workshop occupies a strategic position along Era Road, which connects directly to Alaba International Market.

This accessible location has enhanced its patronage by musicians, cultural practitioners, researchers, students, and members of the public interested in indigenous musical instruments and Yoruba cultural heritage. This finding is consistent with Euba's (1990) discussion of the Dùndún tradition, which demonstrates that Yoruba drumming is embedded within a broader cultural system in which knowledge of the instrument, its construction, performance, and social functions is sustained through active participation in Yoruba musical life.

Established in 2022 by Mr. Dada Gabriel Anuoluwapo, popularly known as Ayan Jesu, the workshop reflects the founder's transition from being a renowned Dùndún (talking drum) performer to an accomplished drum maker and repairer. Findings from interviews indicate that his decision to establish the workshop was inspired by practical experiences encountered during his years as a performing musician, where he discovered his exceptional ability to diagnose, repair, and eventually construct indigenous drums. This background has enabled him to combine performance knowledge with technical craftsmanship, thereby enriching the quality of instruction provided within the workshop. The close relationship between performance and instrument knowledge observed in this study is in line with Euba's (1990) treatment of the Yoruba Dùndún tradition, where knowledge of the drum is not restricted to performance alone but is connected to an understanding of the instrument, its construction, sound production, and cultural application. Field observations further demonstrate that Ayan Jesu Drum Factory operates as an informal educational institution where learning occurs through direct observation, demonstration, imitation, guided participation, and continuous practice. Knowledge is transmitted in accordance with the traditional Yoruba apprenticeship system, where apprentices acquire skills through prolonged interaction with the master craftsman rather than through formal classroom instruction. This indigenous pedagogical approach emphasizes patience, discipline, practical engagement, and mastery of techniques acquired through repeated participation in everyday workshop activities. This finding agrees with Olaniyan's (1999) emphasis on the importance of direct field engagement and experiential approaches in the study and understanding of African cultural practices. The learning process observed at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory similarly demonstrates that indigenous musical knowledge is effectively understood and acquired through participation, observation, interaction, and practical experience within the cultural environment in which the knowledge exists.

The study also found that the workshop performs multiple educational and cultural functions simultaneously. Beyond serving as a production and repair centre, it preserves indigenous knowledge relating to drum construction, material selection, instrument maintenance, tuning techniques, and the cultural significance of Yoruba drums. The workshop therefore provides an environment where technical competence is developed alongside an understanding of the historical, religious, and socio-cultural roles of indigenous musical instruments within Yoruba society. Ajenifuja (2009), whose work on the Yoruba Dùndún tradition illustrates the inseparable

relationship between the physical characteristics of Yoruba drums, their musical functions, and the cultural contexts in which they are used. The activities at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory similarly show that drum-making knowledge constitutes an important component of the wider cultural knowledge associated with Yoruba musical traditions.

Observation of daily activities revealed a well-organized learning environment consisting of distinct sections devoted to wood carving, leather preparation, drum assembly, instrument repair, finishing, and storage. Apprentices are systematically introduced to these units according to their level of competence. Beginners are first assigned relatively simple responsibilities, such as preparing materials, handling tools, and observing construction procedures, before progressing to more complex activities including carving drum shells, fitting leather membranes, rope lacing, tuning, and complete drum construction under the close supervision of the master craftsman. The progressive and participatory nature of this learning process reinforces Olaniyan's (1999) position on the value of close observation and active participation in African field-based cultural research. In the context of the present study, these same processes demonstrate how indigenous technical knowledge is acquired through sustained participation rather than through the transmission of abstract theoretical information alone.

The findings therefore establish that Ayan Jesu Drum Factory represents a vibrant indigenous learning centre where traditional craftsmanship is sustained through apprenticeship, practical participation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Its educational role extends beyond vocational skill acquisition to include the preservation of Yoruba musical heritage, indigenous technology, and cultural identity, thereby contributing significantly to the continuity and sustainability of traditional drum-making practices in contemporary Nigeria. The findings are consistent with Euba's (1990) documentation of the cultural and musical significance of the Yoruba Dùndún tradition and with Nzewi's (1991) emphasis on experiential engagement in understanding African cultural practices. Ayan Jesu Drum Factory can therefore be understood as an indigenous knowledge institution in which musical craftsmanship, cultural memory, practical skills, and social values converge to facilitate the continued transmission of Yoruba drum-making traditions to younger generations.

Indigenous Knowledge and Craftmanship

The interview with Mr. Dada revealed that Dùndún construction cannot be adequately learned through written instruction alone. Rather, knowledge is embodied in observation, repeated practice, and direct interaction between master and apprentice. According to Mr. Dada:

“Dundun making is something you learn with your eyes and your hands. You must watch the person who knows it, follow the process carefully, and practice repeatedly until you understand the work.”

This statement illustrates the experiential nature of Yoruba indigenous knowledge systems, where practical engagement remains central to skill acquisition. The finding is in line with Abiodun (2000), who emphasizes the relationship between Yoruba artistic knowledge, cultural experience, and practical processes through which indigenous traditions are transmitted.

Cultural Significance of the Talking Drum

The findings demonstrate that the Dùndún possesses cultural functions extending far beyond entertainment. It serves as an instrument of communication capable of reproducing Yoruba tonal speech, thereby transmitting praise poetry, historical narratives, greetings, ceremonial messages, and social identity. Mr. Dada emphasized:

“The talking drum has a voice. It can praise people, announce important events, and carry messages.”

Consequently, drum construction is regarded not merely as technical production but as the creation of an instrument carrying profound cultural and spiritual significance. This finding is consistent with Adeogun and Adedokun (2014), who identify traditional Yoruba music as an important medium for preserving indigenous cultural identity and social values.

Materials Used in Dùndún Construction

Field observations at Ayan Jesu Drum Factory revealed that the construction of the Dùndún depends on carefully selected indigenous materials, each of which performs a specific structural, acoustic, and functional role in the completed instrument. The quality of these materials significantly influences the durability, tonal characteristics, and performance efficiency of the drum. According to the master craftsman, the selection and preparation of these materials require extensive practical experience acquired through years of apprenticeship and continuous practice.

Odo (Hourglass Wooden Frame)

The Odo constitutes the main body or structural framework of the Dùndún. It is carved from carefully selected hardwood and shaped into the characteristic hourglass form that enables the performer to manipulate the leather cords during performance. The choice of wood is critical

because it determines the instrument's strength, resonance, and longevity. The findings indicate that selecting and shaping the Odo require considerable practical knowledge, as the craftsman must understand how the size, thickness, and shape of the wood influence the quality of the finished instrument. This process reflects the historical continuity of Yoruba musical craftsmanship discussed by Adeogun and Adedokun (2014), while also demonstrating how indigenous technical knowledge continues to support the production and preservation of traditional musical instruments.



Figure 2. Odo (Hourglass Wooden Frame) Used for Dùndún Construction Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Awọ Ewure (Goat Skin)

Awọ Ewure (goat skin) serves as the vibrating membrane responsible for sound production. Before installation, the skin undergoes several preparation stages, including cleaning, drying, softening, and stretching to achieve the desired flexibility and thickness. The quality of the goat skin largely determines the tonal clarity and responsiveness of the instrument.



Figure 3. Prepared Goat Skin (Awọ Ewure) for Drum Construction: Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Osan (Leather Throngs)

The *Osan* consists of leather strips that connect the two drumheads around the body of the instrument. These leather throngs serve both structural and acoustic purposes by maintaining the required tension between the drumheads while enabling pitch variation during performance. Uniformity in width and length is essential to ensure balanced tuning and structural stability.



Figure 4 & 5 Osan (Leather Thongs) and the process of setting

Apa (Strap)

The *Apa* is a leather strap attached to the drum to facilitate comfortable carriage during performances. It enables the performer to suspend the instrument over the shoulder, thereby allowing easy manipulation of the drum while maintaining freedom of movement during musical performance.



Figures 6 & 7. Apa (Leather Carrying Strap)

Okun Idelu (Tuning Rope)

The *Okun Idelu* is a strong rope used to secure and tighten the various components of the *Dùndún*. It plays a vital role in regulating the tension between the drumheads, thereby influencing the tonal quality and pitch flexibility of the instrument. Proper adjustment of the tuning rope requires considerable technical skill and experience.

Opa (Drumstick)

The *Opa* is the curved drumstick used to strike the *Dùndún* during performance. At Ayan Jesu Drum Factory, it is commonly fashioned from guava wood because of its durability, resilience, and flexibility. The size, curvature, and smooth finish of the drumstick are carefully considered to ensure effective sound production while preventing damage to the drum membrane.



Figure 8: Opa (Drum Stick)

Collectively, these indigenous materials demonstrate the sophisticated technological knowledge embedded in Yoruba drum-making traditions. Their careful selection, preparation, and assembly illustrate the intimate relationship between craftsmanship, acoustics, and cultural practice in the production of the *Dùndún*.

Traditional Tools and Indigenous Technology

Field observations further revealed that the construction of the *Dùndún* relies on a range of traditional hand tools that have remained relevant despite advances in modern manufacturing technology. Although these tools appear relatively simple, their effective use requires considerable technical expertise acquired through apprenticeship and prolonged practical experience.

Among the principal tools observed were razor blades for trimming leather, scissors for cutting leather materials, needles for stitching, candles used during leather treatment, shoemakers' awls for perforating leather, *Igi Ikalu* for measuring and aligning leather throngs, and adhesive materials such as Top Bond gum for reinforcement and finishing. Each tool performs a specialized function within the construction process and contributes to the precision and durability of the finished instrument.

Rather than depending on mechanized equipment, the production process relies primarily on the skill, judgment, and accumulated indigenous knowledge of the craftsman. The effectiveness of these tools therefore lies not in their technological complexity but in the expertise with which they are employed, reflecting the ingenuity and sustainability of Yoruba indigenous technology.



Figure 9-14. Traditional Tools Used in Dùndún Construction (Scissors, Razor Blade , stitching Awl, Igi Ikalu Top Bond Gum and Candle light)

Stages of Dundun Construction

Observation revealed a systematic construction process comprising:

1. Selection of suitable hardwood.
2. Carving the hourglass frame.
3. Preparation of goat skin.
4. Preparation of leather cords and carrying straps.
5. Assembly of all drum components.
6. Attachment and tightening of leather membranes.
7. Tuning and final sound adjustment.
8. Performance testing.

Each stage requires specialized decision-making affecting the acoustic quality, structural durability, and cultural authenticity of the finished instrument.

Apprenticeship as Indigenous Music Education

The apprenticeship system remains the primary mechanism for preserving drum-making knowledge. Instruction occurs through observation, imitation, guided participation, and progressive responsibility.

Beginners initially undertake relatively simple tasks such as cleaning materials and preparing leather before advancing to assembly, tuning, and independent construction.

Mr. Dada observed:

"You cannot become a drum maker by watching only once. You stay with the master, you work with him, and gradually you understand everything."

This apprenticeship model demonstrates a highly organized indigenous educational system emphasizing experiential learning.

Cultural Acceptance of Apprentices

The acceptance of new apprentices involves symbolic cultural practices rather than purely financial arrangements. New learners present Oti Adura (dry gin for prayers), a crate of Coca-Cola, and a cash gift. These offerings symbolize respect, communal acceptance, commitment, and spiritual blessing rather than payment for knowledge.

Such practices reinforce social cohesion while emphasizing the moral responsibilities associated with craftsmanship.

Duration of Training

The apprenticeship programme operates with flexible training periods:

- Six months for basic maintenance and repairs.
- One year for intermediate construction skills.
- Two years for complete mastery, including independent production, repairs, customer relations, and training of junior apprentices.

This flexibility enables learners to pursue varying levels of competence according to individual goals.

Participatory Learning

The researcher's participation in *Dùndún* performance provided practical insights into the relationship between instrument construction and musical execution. The experience confirmed that tonal flexibility, playing comfort, and expressive possibilities depend significantly upon construction quality.

The exercise demonstrated the importance of integrating practical participation into indigenous music research.

Challenges Affecting Indigenous Drum Construction

Several challenges threaten the sustainability of traditional drum-making:

- declining youth participation,
- increasing scarcity and cost of quality raw materials,
- environmental pressures affecting wood availability,
- competition from modern musical technologies,
- limited institutional recognition of indigenous vocational education.

Despite these obstacles, the workshop continues to preserve traditional knowledge through active apprenticeship and community engagement.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Dùndún construction constitutes a sophisticated indigenous knowledge system integrating craftsmanship, acoustics, cultural philosophy, music performance, and vocational education. The workshop illustrates how indigenous technology remains relevant despite rapid modernization which is in line with Euba (1990) assertion on the interconnectedness of Dùndún construction, performance, and Yoruba cultural knowledge.

The apprenticeship model reflects experiential learning theories in which knowledge is acquired through guided participation and social interaction. Rather than separating theory from practice, the Yoruba system integrates observation, imitation, repetition, mentorship, and cultural values into a unified educational process. This agrees with Nketia's (2005) view of African musical knowledge as being transmitted through participation and practical engagement within the cultural environment.

The acceptance rituals further indicate that apprenticeship represents both technical instruction and social incorporation into a community of practice. Knowledge is transmitted alongside ethical values, communal responsibilities, and cultural identity. This supports Ayomikun's (2020) observation that music in Yoruba culture is closely connected with communal values, identity, and social life.

The participatory component of this research confirms that practical engagement enhances scholarly understanding beyond what documentary analysis alone can provide. Consequently, indigenous workshops such as Ayan Jesu Drum Factory offer valuable models for integrating

practical craftsmanship into contemporary music education. This is consistent with Nzewi's (1991) emphasis on African musical practice as a creative and participatory process through which knowledge is developed and sustained.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Dùndún construction represents a living repository of Yoruba indigenous knowledge preserved through traditional apprenticeship, practical craftsmanship, and community participation. Ayan Jesu Drum Factory functions not merely as a production workshop but as an informal educational institution dedicated to sustaining cultural heritage. The finding is supported by Enahoro's (2010) discussion of the historical development of Yoruba music and its continuing relationship with cultural practices.

The findings reveal that drum-making embodies complex technological, artistic, musical, and spiritual knowledge transmitted through direct mentorship and experiential learning. Although modernization presents significant challenges, indigenous apprenticeship continues to provide an effective mechanism for preserving traditional craftsmanship. Ojo (2000) similarly emphasizes the central role of music in preserving and expressing Yoruba cultural values and social identity.

Integrating such indigenous knowledge systems into formal music education would contribute significantly to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while promoting culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Greater institutional support for traditional craftsmen, documentation initiatives, and collaborative educational programmes will strengthen the continuity of Yoruba musical traditions for future generations. This recommendation is particularly relevant in view of Daramola's (2017) observation concerning the influence of technology on African music production and distribution, which highlights the need to balance technological development with the preservation of indigenous musical practices.

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