



Talking Drums

by Kate Pershing



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT



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Getting the News

When something important happens in your town, how do people find out about it? Is it shown on television? Do people read about it online? Do they hear it on their phones? Today, news gets around in a flash. But what did people do before television or email?





🔊 Hundreds of years ago, news traveled by messenger. A runner took news from one place to another. This was often difficult. In places like West Africa, for example, it could take days to hear important news.

🔊 West Africans came up with a creative idea to solve the problem. They invented a way to **communicate** using drums. They made special drums that could “talk” to people far away.

Drums in West Africa

Drums have always been an important part of West African life. Drum music was used for dancing, singing, and storytelling. When people danced, drums added volume and energy to the music. The beat of a drum made a performance very exciting.

So it made sense that West Africans found a new and important use for the drum. They found a way to use drums to send the news.



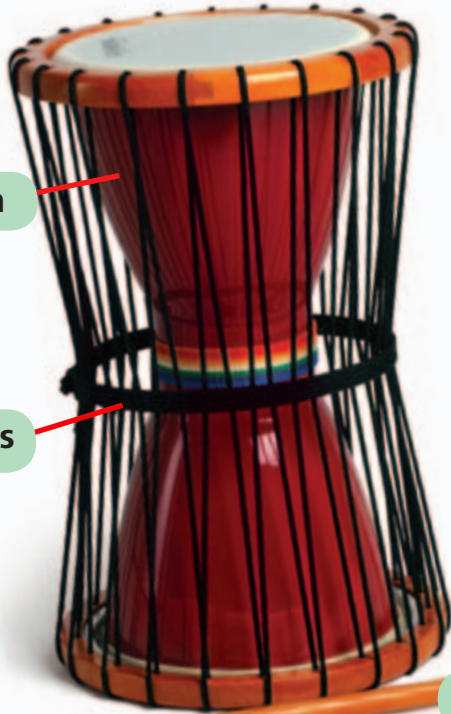


🔊 The **languages** of West Africa are unusual because they have musical tones. The tones are high and low, soft and loud. The drums had to sound like a voice speaking a West African language. So West Africans built a new drum, called the “talking drum.”

🔊 The talking drum does not look like a drum that you have seen before. Its shape is different from a drum in a band or in a parade.



drum



straps



hourglass



drumstick



A Special Drum

Long ago people used an hourglass to tell time. West Africans used this shape to make their special drum. They made the body of the drum out of wood. The top and bottom were covered with leather. Leather strings held the parts together. The drum was played with a curved drumstick.

🔊 The drummer could hold the drum under his arm to play. Sometimes he held it between his knees. When he squeezed the strips, the leather moved up and down. He hit the drum with the curved drumstick. It made a vibration.

🔊 A good drummer could make the drum sound high or low, soft or loud, like the sounds of his own language. The drum was talking. What messages did it send?



Warnings and Wars

Drums were used as an expression of danger. If **elders** in the village saw a dangerous lion prowling, drums were used to warn the next village. Then the people of that village would warn other villages with their own drumbeats.

Drums
told about
danger.





🔊 Sometimes two villages fought a battle or a war. Talking drums sent news of the fighting. Sometimes drummers beat out secret codes on their drums to send secret information.

🔊 Talking drums could be used to settle **disagreements**, too. A drummer in one village would drum about why he was angry. The other drummer would add his ideas. When the argument was settled, drums beat out the news.



Good News

When a dangerous animal was caught, or a big fire was put out, the good news was sent by drum. The villagers would be relieved to hear it.

Talking drums also could announce an important visitor. Then people from other villages would travel to the meeting.



News of other important events traveled by drum. When a new leader was chosen, a village often had a big party. Drums invited neighbors to come celebrate.

At the party, the drums beat out a happy tune. The people danced and sang and celebrated.



Drums helped people celebrate.

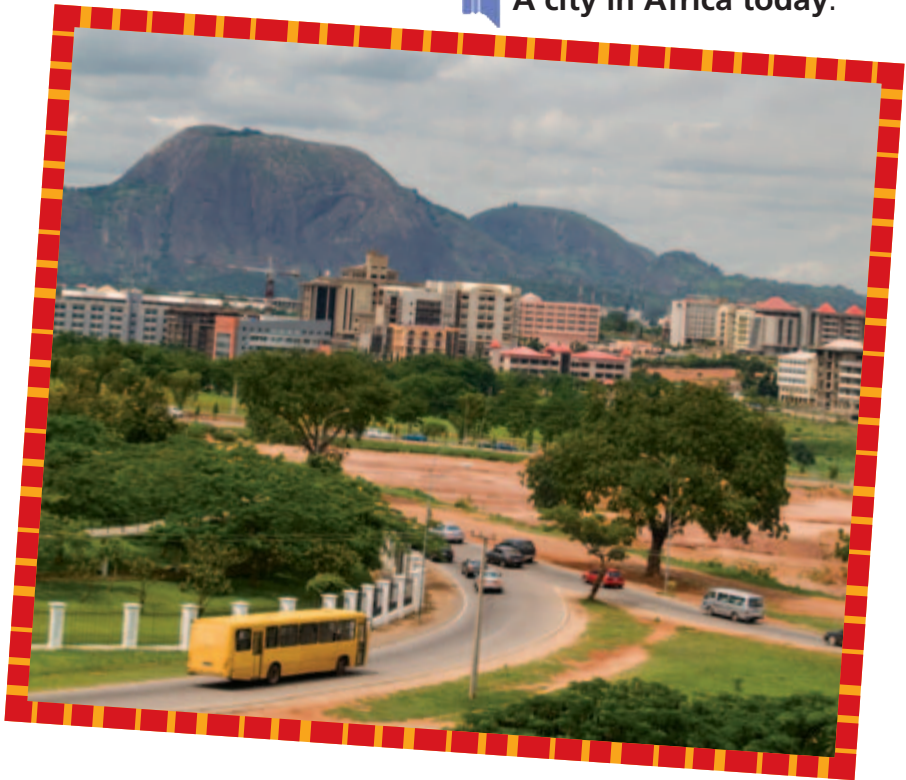
Spreading the News Long Ago and Today


Long ago, the elders of West Africa used talking drums to tell the story of their villages. The children listened. They learned to drum, too. That way, their history would not be forgotten. Some of what we know about West African history comes from the language of the drums.

Drums told stories.




 A city in Africa today.



 Today, West Africans use cell phones and email, just like we do. Like us, they concentrate on spreading news in a flash! But when you see a drum performance or listen to drums in a song, think of West Africa. Long, long ago, these people did not need television to send important news. Their drums did the talking.

Sending Your Own Message

 Can you send a message without words? Think about these sentences. Then try to tell a friend what you mean without saying a word. Try to say it by drumming the message.



Wake up!



You're great!



I'm sad today.



Watch out!



Responding



TARGET SKILL Text and Graphic

Features What do the photos and labels in this book help you understand about drums? Copy and complete the chart below.

Page Number	Photo/Label	What it Shows
7	Photo	Shows how to hold drum



Write About It

Text to Self You just read about a special kind of drum. What kind of drum would you like to play? Write a few sentences to tell why you picked that instrument.



TARGET VOCABULARY

concentrate
creative
expression
performance

relieved
tune
vibration
volume

EXPAND YOUR VOCABULARY

communicate
disagreements
elders

hourglass
languages



TARGET SKILL **Text and Graphic**

Features Tell how words go with photos.



TARGET STRATEGY **Question**

Ask questions about what you are reading.



GENRE Informational text gives facts about a topic.

Level: P

DRA: 38

Genre:

Informational Text

Strategy:

Question

Skill:

Text and Graphic Features

Word Count: 714

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