The djembe is a traditional West African instrument used during ceremonies and other events. It is designed to carry sound over a large percussion ensemble.

African drummers find power in rhythm

The taut snap of the West African djembe drum cut the air like shouted words. Behind it, Bandan Koro drummer Tony Browne smiled.

"Another beautiful thing about music," he said, "it's a language."

Browne knows that rhythm has a voice. He knows that it can plead with our bones and shape us. On a trip to Guinea, he saw boys who were too small to play a djembe be hung in empty coffee cans in the small streets that girls who danced along.

Kids pick it up, it slowly, it's never too late to learn, Browne said.

For over a decade, Browne and his drum and dance ensemble Bandan Koro have spoken the language of rhythm as it exists in traditional West African culture. Their vibrant performances have been a staple of Black History Month at TCC for years—but as a global pandemic hinders live shows, they’re finding new ways to foster awareness of rhythm in the African diaspora.

During a virtual session on Feb. 9, Bandan Koro offered an introduction to West African drumming for the TCC community. They explored the culture of it, the history and—above all else—the fundamentals of drumming itself.

"Each rhythm is traditionally associated with an ethnic group and a purpose for why it’s made," Browne said.

For instance, Soro is a rites of passage rhythm performed by young boys transitioning from childhood to adulthood and Marajin meaning “my most sacred”—it is a rhythm performed by young girls in their transition, he said.

During their session, Browne and fellow Bandan Koro drummer Tom Patterson deconstructed Kuku—a dance rhythm played for the successful harvest of fish in a village. Like most rhythms in African drumming, Kuku consists of multiple polyrhythms—separate rhythms played together—that work in and out of one another.

Browne and Patterson built the rhythm from the ground up, playing sparring parts on a single djembe and a set of bull-horn-shaped dunduns. At several points during their lesson, the vibration of their drumming would shake the camera they were live-streaming with—a visual representation of the power behind their playing.

Patterson believes that power itself is a defining quality of African drumming. Several ethnic groups have used drums as instruments of rebellion through history, he said. In Sierra Leone, they were used as a signal during the Haitian revolution—often consid- ered the largest class rebellion in Western Hemisphere. “This drum has been used to be victorious,” Patterson said.

As I learned the sacredness of the instrument, the responsibility of the musician, those things stuck with me and helped me evolve my techniques," Browne said. "The impor- tant things that are emphasized here are things that can be carried over."

Thus, area studies in higher education and not just famous people,” she said.

"My students and I look at different forms of argument in our lives," she said. "I will add the African drum as one of those examples.

Bandan Koro ended their session with a reflection on how the art of drumming can help better understand the world around us.

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