

African drummers find power in rhythm



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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.

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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 still too small to play a djembe bang on empty coffee cans in the street for girls who danced along.

Kids pick up on it quickly, but 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 played,” Browne said.

For instance, Soli is a rite of passage rhythm performed for young boys transitioning from childhood to adulthood and Manjani — meaning “my sweet child” — is a rhythm performed for young girls in their transition, he said.

During their session, Browne and fellow Bandan Koro drummer Tim 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 weave 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 ballet-style dundun. 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 Saint-Domingue, they were used as a signal

during the Haitian revolution — often considered the largest slave rebellion in the Western Hemisphere.

“This drum has been used to help us be victorious,” Patterson said.

NE assistant professor of English Annette Cole attended the session and was fascinated by the idea of drumming as language.

“My students and I look at different forms of argument in our lives,” she said. “I’ll 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 us better understand the world around us.

“As I learned the sacredness of the instrument, the responsibility of the musician, these things stuck with me and helped me evolve my mindset,” Browne said. “The important things that are emphasized here are things that can be carried over.”