

The Pulse of the People

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In most parts of the world, the drum is just one of many musical instruments. However, in Africa its beats are more than just notes dancing in the air – they are the continent's heartbeat. By Naomi Doumbia.



For visitors to the vast and culturally rich continent of Africa, much of the allure and fascination with this great destination lies in its diversity of customs and tradition. Whether you are visiting the lush tropics of the west, the sultry deserts of the north or the rolling savannahs of the east and south, Africa is an abundant and multifaceted continent sure to satisfy just about every season, style or reason. Amidst this immense assortment of experience, however, there is a powerful, unifying element that bonds the entire continent together: the deep, resounding beat of the rhythmic drum. The very pulse of the motherland is the

tempo of her drum, reverberating in the fields of the harvesters, echoing throughout the plains of the tribal ceremonies, and journeying among the shamans of the deep bush.

While in much of the world the drum serves primarily as an instrument for entertainment, the African drum, called by various names in various places, serves just about every purpose, time and function throughout most of the continent. Whether it is to entertain, to communicate, to heal or to worship, this timeless symbol of tradition and spirituality is truly what sets Africa apart from much of the world.

The most common of the African drums known to the Western world is the djembé. Thought to have originated in the Mali and Guinea regions of West Africa, its name in the Mande languages means 'to come together and share the music'. This hourglass-shaped, wooden drum, covered with a taut piece of shaved goatskin, is the universal symbol of this African instrument. While this hand-played drum is quickly becoming a popular instrument all over the globe, enjoyed by children and adults of all regions for its nuanced and colourful tones, most are not aware of its deep historical roots and cultural significance.

Like most African drums, the djembé was probably the first telephone, speakerphone and radio ever invented, transmitting signals between families and local communities. Not only does the drum announce to nearby villagers the rites of passage of life, such as the birth of a child, the coming of age of a young adult, or the death of an elder, the rhythms might also communicate something as mundane as "Hey Mamadou, bring us two beers out here in the field. We are working up a sweat." Most djembé players outside the continent might not be aware that the rhythms they play are actually speaking a real language, specifically the Bamana language. Still, for many, this is not a surprise to learn, considering the immense complexity of the polyrhythms which are no easy feat to master. Indeed, many non-Africans initially find their ears not very fine tuned or well trained to catch the complex, dissonant and cacophonous sounds that the African drum seems to make. Once familiar with African tempos, however, there is little that is more rhythmically gratifying or musically inspirational.

In addition to actually speaking a language, many rhythms of any African drum have a specific name

and function. There are particular rhythms for a variety of events, including courtship rituals, battle cries, and the honouring of mother. African song, dance and story rely upon the drum to guide them with poignancy and grace. Bringing the community to its feet in celebration and to its knees in reverent prayer (and often its heart to joyful tears), the drum is the staple of any vibrant and functional village.

While this magical tool is a talking instrument among people, it is perhaps, most importantly, the sacred mouthpiece for the spirit world. The drum petitions, exalts and offers gratitude to spirit on behalf of the community, and similarly, guides, chastises and praises the community on behalf of it. Because of the drum's powerful, sacred connection, not everyone receives the calling to serve as medium to the community by conveying these messages. In many cultures, particularly the Mande, certain families possess a genetically potent level of energy to handle this consecrated instrument. Members of the griot or bard families, specifically, represent the more popular musicians suited for the drum-beating task. Some African shamans may play the instrument to encourage spirit possession, or more accurately, spirit visitation, where messages can be both wanted and painfully uncomfortable to the community. Similarly, it is common for a friend, or a member of the family to avoid certain rhythms that might invite an unwanted spirit, which can come to create disturbance or upheaval.

Accordingly, many legends and rituals accompany the sacred drum. How a musician approaches the drum, nurtures the drum, and lays the drum to rest varies significantly across African cultures. There are more auspicious or ominous times to sound the drum, particularly in relation to the rising or setting sun. One thing, however, that never changes at any time or in any location, including among the African Diaspora, is that the drum deeply moves, effectively sustains and universally inspires the collective spirit of the people.