

**The Rhythm of Reconciliation:
A Reflection on Drumming as a Contribution to
Reconciliation Processes in Burundi and South Africa**

A working paper of Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

by
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The Rhythm of Reconciliation: A Reflection on Drumming as a Contribution to Reconciliation Processes in Burundi and South Africa

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I start to breathe hard. Sweat is covering my brow and my muscles are heating up. It's been more than an hour of uphill climbing in the steep hills of rural Bujumbura. The same hills that I see every day from a distance, looming like a bodyguard over the lakeside capital city of Bujumbura, dotted with brown mud houses, perched on the steep slopes, surrounded by green banana trees.

I follow Edouard's robust stride. He is in his milieu and walks this narrow path so elegantly I imagine he could do it blindfolded. Then, as we turn around a bend, I hear the sound. Ka goo goo Ka goo goo Ka Ka Ka Ka Ka Ka goo. No drummers in sight. The rhythm continues, echoing off the steep hillsides all around, making it impossible to localise the source of the rhythm. At one point, the banana grove looks as though it is quivering in time with the rhythm; maybe the drummers are nestled amongst the banana stalks?

A few more uphill strides, the drum sound grows stronger, and we are there, at the top of the mountain. There are the drummers, in a circle on a dirt and rock-littered patch of earth in front of a broken down building belonging to the local authority. The drums are assembled around a makeshift flagpole proudly flying the red, green, and white of a faded and tattered Burundian national flag.

Playing each of the fifteen massive Burundian drums there are at least two or three drummers. Normally one drum would be played by one drummer, the thirst to beat out the rhythm is visible in the intense, focused expressions on the drummers' faces. They pound the rhythm with the sticks, until their turn to dance the rhythm. Then they explode with unimaginable smiles, grins, winks. When they return to join the rhythm on the drums, the concentrated look reappears.

It's only their third rehearsal in nearly five years. This is Rural Bujumbura: the province hardest hit by Burundi's civil war. Each of the drummers has had to flee his home over and over again, often spending months and even years as a displaced person. When the National Liberation Forces (FNL) rebel movement implanted itself in Bujumbura rurale in 1995, fighting between the rebels and the government army became a daily reality. The population was considered by the army to be complicit with the FNL, accused of harbouring the rebels, supporting them, feeding them, and failing to alert the military of impending ambushes. Was this true? Ask anyone living in a war zone how much margin of choice they have whether or not they "support" a rebel movement or the military. "Cursed if you do and cursed if you don't," is often the response.

True or not, the Burundian military, after years of being accused of either deliberately targeting civilians or taking little care to avoid them being caught in the crossfire, decided on a third option: remove everyone from their homes, and leave Bujumbura rurale empty so that the army and the FNL could have it out once and for all. The term "regroupment camp" was invented, meaning a camp where all the population is forced to live, leaving their fields and homes and livestock behind, under the control of the government.

For many, these regroupment camps more closely resembled concentration camps. There was a sense that the population was being punished, that they were to blame for the existence of the rebels in their communities. Conditions were abominable and the government authorities cooperated reluctantly if at all with local and international organisations attempting to bring food, water, and other essentials to the camps. Not until 2000, when as part of his role in negotiating a peace accord for Burundi, former South African President Nelson Mandela visited the camps and condemned them outright, did they slowly begin to be dismantled.

When the drummers returned to their homes, absolutely everything had been stolen or destroyed by the military or the rebels. “Everything had been stolen from our houses, even the roofs. The fields were ravaged,” remembers Edouard, the leader of the drumming group. “And our drums, which we had left in the school and in our homes, were completely destroyed, even burnt. I wasn’t in peace after that.”

Rebuilding their life from nothing, one might not imagine that drums would a priority. Some of the answers emerge as I ask the drummers how they feel now, reunited with their drums. Drummer Donatien Manirakiza explains, “I can’t lie. Before, I was someone who didn’t want to be with others, I preferred the solitude. I was always sad without knowing why. But I’ve learned to be with others through the drumming. With this crisis, there are so many problems and rumours, sometimes it’s just important to go and play drums to rest my head.”

Emmanuel Nshirimana agrees. “Before, I was someone who stayed alone, avoiding others and even staying away from home. But now, with the drums, I have friends around me, we help each other, and we share songs that we have amongst each other. The drums bring us together again.”

The drummers are not the only ones smiling. Around their circle of drums and drummers is another circle: one of women, men, children looking on eagerly, smiling. Scattered around, looking on with a observable yet subtle interest, are members of the CNDD-FDD rebel group now in control of this part of Bujumbura rurale following a cease-fire with the government six months earlier. The weary-looking soldiers with patched up rifles, Aks, and rocket-launchers strapped around their bodies look on with empty expressions. Their tattered uniforms are wrong-sized, boots too big for many of them who are clearly less than 18 years old.

The rebel leader in the area, clad in a casual track suit with guards in the shadow, inquires about our visit, and laughs when we ask whether he’d like some of his rebels to join the drummers. “Maybe, yes. But the drums have brought people together in this community, and that’s a good thing.”

“It is so good to have the drummers playing again. It is a moment for people to relax,” adds the village mayor (Chef de Zone). “For so long people have been so rigid, mistrustful, scared, traumatised. It is good for them to be able to come together and watch the drummers, and just relax a bit. It’s been so long.”

Restoring the Relationships Broken by Conflict

Feeling good, having a moment to think less about the daily stresses, and sharing a moment of joy with one's neighbour are simple pleasures that many of us take for granted in our daily lives. They are less gratuitous in a context of war and conflict. Of the many casualties of war and conflict, one of the first is trust. Suspicion and rumours replace accurate information; insecurity makes the verification of information difficult if not impossible; manipulators seeking to rally support amongst one group against another foment negative stereotypes and outright lies. The result: relationships break down. Solutions to problems become suddenly in short supply when one cannot approach one's neighbour or friend for advice and help. In Burundi in 1995, the country had become a patchwork of ethnically defined habitation zones. Tutsis and Hutus lived in separate worlds, cut off from each other. Crossing into a zone of another ethnicity meant risking your life. In South Africa under apartheid, the state legislated essentially the same system of dividing communities along racial lines. It was illegal for African South Africans to live in zones reserved for White South Africans, and vice-versa. When outright conflict ends, a major challenge in any post-conflict society is the repairing of these relationships. This begins with restoring the relationship between the individual and him- or herself: enabling the individual to put the stress and problems in a perspective that is manageable and tolerable; handling the trauma of the past and the fear of the future; rediscovering the present, the now, the moment; feeling in tune with one's soul, one's spirit, one's inner identity. A second step in restoring relationships pertains to the creation of a neutral space where people whose trust in each other has been shattered feel safe to converge. It involves finding a space where one might be able to go beyond the stereotypes that each group has of the other. A third step is the facilitation of the expression by each of the groups, in the most nonthreatening manner possible, of thoughts and feelings that might be hurtful to those from the other community. It entails discovering how to express one's sadness, anger, bitterness, indifference, fear, vulnerability, despair, or profound solitude. Often words are not the best option. A drawing, a song, a rhythm, a movement: each of these is an expression of self, yet so different from a speech or a written text. This is where arts and culture can play a role, by opening up a nonthreatening space for expression that is nonverbal, that resonates not with the head, but the heart and spirit of the individual and his/her former adversary.

Many peacebuilding initiatives recognize that steps such as these, taken to rebuild relationships, are fundamental to reconciliation.

Reconciliation can best be understood as a process of change, through which former adversaries move gradually from states of alienation to greater appreciation for their interdependence, from hatred and mistrust to greater trust and trustworthiness. It involves learning about both self and other, as well as the enhancement or restoration of capacities.

Reconciliation usually involves some or more of the following processes:

- Appreciating each other's humanity, culture, and moral sensibilities
- Telling, revising, and listening to personal and collective narratives
- Acknowledging harms and mourning losses
- Empathizing with each other's suffering
- Expressing remorse, repenting, apologizing, and asking forgiveness
- Letting go of bitterness, forgiving
- Acknowledging and addressing injustices

- Imagining and creating a new future.
- Cynthia Cohen²

It is the desire to understand the link between these processes and the phenomenon of drumming that inspires this article. It is the fundamental question that I asked to approximately thirty drummers from seven different drumming groups in Burundi and approximately the same number from South Africa and five other countries. What they told me reassured me, first of all, that the question was worth asking. Over and over again, I heard a common resonance in the answers of drummers, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds and cultural contexts.

Drummers told me how, through their different experiences with drumming, they have been able to understand themselves and be open to discovering the other. Drumming has given them a means of self expression, especially when dealing with pain, stress, and trauma. Through drumming, they have regained hope and been able to imagine a new future. Sharing the rhythm of the drum, new relationships of trust and solidarity have been created and maintained, and self-esteem raised through drumming has led to personal transformation. When it was difficult for White South Africans, Indians, and African South Africans to find a safe space to share, it was the drum that offered that opportunity. In the Burundian context, drumming groups have not only withstood the societal turbulence of decades of violence, but have confronted divisionism with moving examples of inter-ethnic solidarity.

The Story of Déo and Maurice: Positive Solidarity

Over a few bottles of warm beer in a Bujumbura roadside bar, I begin to discover Déo Ntakarutimana and Maurice Gasabanya. We laugh when we realise we were all born the same year: 1967. That's pretty much where the similarities end. Déo is from what we call in fading colonial language in Burundi 'the interior.' Anything that is not the capital city Bujumbura qualifies. He is from the drumming heartland of Burundi, the province of Gitega in the centre of the country. From the age of five, Déo would wake up before dawn, wrap up some food in banana leaves, and walk 12 kilometres to learn to play drums with one of Burundi's most ancient and well-known drumming groups, in Gishora. When the sun went down, Déo would arrive back home, often welcomed by severe reprimands and punishment by his father who opposed his young son's exhausting daily routine. The punishments became so extreme that Déo gave up the drums for two years. But that was as long as he could bear it. At the first opportunity, he left his village and headed to the capital in search of being able to play drums to his heart's delight. Déo grew up largely oblivious to ethnic tensions and violence. He was five years old in April 1972, when a Hutu rebellion attacked several Tutsi communities in the south of the country, massacring thousands of civilians. The response by the Tutsi-dominated military was a massive crackdown on the Hutu population, arresting and murdering at least 250,000 Hutus. The target was all those who had access to education or any position of social status. Students who had been sent on scholarship to Europe were recalled, met at the airport, and carried away to be executed; Hutu secondary school teachers were either murdered or fled into the refugee camps in Tanzania; Hutu military officers were locked up and murdered, even secondary school pupils were arrested and massacred.

But Déo grew up not knowing his ethnic identity. Unlike many other Hutus, Déo did not lose his father, or uncle, or older brother in the killings of 1972. His parents were members of the Uprona political party, the primary political party in Burundi since independence in 1961. But in the late 1980s, a new political party, Frodebu, was created, rallying especially the Hutus as its members. As the 1993 election campaign got underway, Déo soon found himself with a Frodebu card, more by imposition than choice.

Over the same quarter of a century, Maurice was growing up in Buyenzi, a neighbourhood of Bujumbura characterised by its diversity and vibrancy. Full of Congolese, Tanzanians, Rwandans, and other Africans, famous for its abundance of mechanics and large Muslim community, Maurice's Buyenzi reality was unlike that of Burundians anywhere else in the country.

Maurice was born to a judge and a traditional midwife. Both were respected in the neighbourhood; his father settling disputes in the local court and his mother ushering new lives into the community. His mother adored traditional culture, being a singer and dancer in her younger years. As Maurice fell in love with drumming, his mother and father were proud that he would perpetuate the Burundian culture.

Maurice didn't think of himself as a Tutsi. His identities as drummer, resident of Buyenzi, and Muslim far outweighed his ethnicity. That changed at the height of the electoral campaign in 1992. On his way back from performing in the neighbouring province, his drumming group came under a hail of stones by a group of Hutu Frodebu supporters. One of the stones hit Maurice on the forehead, just above his left eye. It was a wakeup call to the differences that would, within less than a year's time, lead to massive inter-ethnic massacres around the country.

On 21 October, 1993, just four months after being elected, Burundi's first Hutu president was assassinated by a group of Tutsi military. Maurice remembers how he heard gunshots for the first time in his life, followed by mortars and bombs for five hours just before dawn. When people began to open their doors, all was quiet. Four hours later, the radio began broadcasting military music. Via the radio from neighbouring Hutu-controlled Rwanda, Burundian Hutu politicians denounced the assassination of the president and called on Hutus to react. Around the country, Hutus attacked Tutsis: their neighbours, their friends, their classmates. Hundreds of thousands of Tutsis who escaped the massacres fled to displaced persons camps in the provincial towns. In response, Tutsis created local militias, especially well-organised in Bujumbura, to protect themselves, seek vengeance, and 'cleanse' neighbourhoods of Hutus. Hutu militias and rebel movements soon formed, thus completing the balkanisation of Bujumbura and almost the entire territory of Burundi.

By this time, Maurice and Déo were already members of the same drumming group, Ruciteme, named after one of Burundi's sacred drums. All ethnic groups were represented in Ruciteme and ethnicity was not a source of problems amongst the members. Little did the members know that this foundation of inter-ethnic trust and solidarity would end up saving their lives on more than one occasion in the coming months and years.

Between March 1994 and March 1998, the building that housed Ruciteme's drums and rehearsal space was home to approximately 2,000 displaced people, Hutus who had been chased from now

exclusively Tutsi neighbourhoods, and vice-versa. People slept everywhere. There was not enough space inside the building for everyone, so all around the building, people slept on mats or on the bare earth. During the day, humanitarian agencies distributed food and medicine. At night, the military guarded the site, in collaboration with a security committee set up by the displaced people themselves.

Amongst the displaced were Ruciteme members from other neighbourhoods. Maurice and Déo, with other Ruciteme members, often spent the night at the displaced camp with other drummers, especially when there were rumours of an attack. Three months after the assassination of the president, the group decided to restart its rehearsals—in the middle of the displaced camp. “People loved it,” recalls Maurice. “It distracted them from their problems, and united everybody.”

Everybody indeed. Suspected of harbouring Hutu militia or rebels, the Buyenzi displaced persons camp was targeted on several occasions by the Tutsi militias known as *sans échec*, French for “no failure.” On several occasions, *sans échec* members attempted to throw grenades at the Ruciteme group while they were rehearsing.

I remember once when we were rehearsing and a group of *sans échec* approached. Then I noticed that Maurice disappeared from the rehearsal. I didn't see exactly where he went. A few moments later I saw him leave with the members of the *sans échec*. After a few hours he came back and told us how he convinced them to leave.

- Déo

Ruciteme was protected not only in Buyenzi. They were able, despite the extreme balkanisation of the capital Bujumbura, to access exclusively Hutu or Tutsi neighbourhoods. On numerous occasions, Ruciteme's Tutsi members warded off an attack by Tutsis against the group; similarly Hutu members prevented attacks by Hutus on the group.

Déo remembers several times when the group went to perform in a Tutsi neighbourhood, only to be threatened with death when trying to leave. Maurice and other Tutsi members of Ruciteme intervened and saved everyone's lives. “Maurice saved my life from the *sans échec* more than once,” said Déo. “They wanted to kill me because I was a Hutu. But Maurice convinced them that they shouldn't kill me because I was a drummer.”

Maurice benefited from the same protection when the group performed in Hutu neighbourhoods. Normally, this would have been a no-go area for Maurice. The threat was real. Maurice's uncle was beheaded in a Hutu neighbourhood after he strayed into the neighbourhood in a drunken state one evening. Just being a Tutsi merited death.

But Maurice and the other Tutsi members of Ruciteme were protected by the Hutu members of their group. This same inter-ethnic solidarity held fast after Buyenzi's largest massacre during the crisis on 21 March, 1995.

There were rumours that our neighbourhood was harbouring the head of the main Hutu militia. So the military came. They shot everywhere. It happened during the day, in a big rainstorm. They would enter the compounds and just shoot everyone. About 2,000 people

were killed that day, and many more fled the area. In my neighbour's house, there were 16 people killed. It was horrible. We drummers stayed in the area, and when it became quiet again, we had to leave where we were hiding and go in search of food. We went out in teams of two or four people, always with Hutus and Tutsis mixed. This was a way of protecting especially the Hutus who were targeted then.

– Maurice

Two months later, a similar scenario occurred.

In May 1995, we were attacked at the displaced people's camp by people who wanted to destroy the camp, especially targeting the Hutus who had fled from their neighbourhood. During the night, they threw grenades at us. There were 4 people killed and 12 injured. But we drummers, Hutus and Tutsis alike, we stayed together.

– Maurice

This positive solidarity was not without risk.

The Tutsis who came and saw us together with the Hutus, they hated us. They pressured us not to remain together. But I chose rather to be disregarded or hated by my Tutsi friends rather than abandon my Hutu friends. It was the same for the Hutus: they were accused of being together with the Tutsi assassins and told that they should leave us. It was a choice. If we didn't adopt that attitude we would have been with others who were killing.

– Maurice

The Pride of Ingoma

Listening to the testimonies of Déo and Maurice and remembering the ecstasy of Edouard's drumming group in rural Bujumbura sparks a flood of questions in my mind. What kind of connection did drumming create between Déo and Maurice and the Ruciteme drummers to permit them to take such personal risks? What made them trust the bond created through the drum, even to the point of being considered traitors by others of their own ethnic group? What is it about sharing the identity of the Burundi drummer that enabled them to surpass other divisions? What is it about drumming in Burundi that symbolises the well-being of the individual and the community?

Some of these answers can be found in an examination of the historical and ritual significance of the drum – known as *ingoma* – in Burundian culture, history and society.³

The word *ingoma* itself, used to describe the Burundi drum, is also used to describe power and status. When one says in kirundi, “the King is seated on his throne,” one literally says “the King is seated on his drums” (*umwami arikungoma*). During the centuries of monarchic rule in Burundi, dating back to the 17th century, the Burundi drums were only played during royal occasions. In the same way in which the Olympic games in ancient Greece were both a rallying point for the community and a communion with the Gods, so were the playing of the drums during the era of Burundi's monarchy.

The most noted of these occasions was the annual harvest festival, or *umuganuro*, during which the sacred *Karyenda* (pronounced ka-genda) drum would be taken out of its shrine and beaten three times by the king. For the rest of the year, the *Karyenda* was housed in a special shrine and guarded by a priestess named literally “the wife of *Karyenda*.” The *Karyenda* was covered with three different skins: one of zebra and the other two of bulls of different colours.

During the *umuganuro*, all of the king’s subjects (represented by large delegations from each commune) were obliged to be present. Before the *Karyenda* was beaten, all of the kingdom’s drumming groups would be united to play a special rhythm, ushering in the special moment of the *Karyenda*. During this era, to be Burundian meant to be present at the *umuganuro*. It symbolised the identity and prosperity of the nation, the communion with the king and the ancestors and the perpetuity of the Burundi nation.

By authorising the beginning of the planting season, the beating of the drum at the *umuganuro* symbolised the fertility of the nation and its regeneration. The terminology used to describe the different parts of the drum reflects the same reproductive allusions: the skin is likened to the baby’s cradle, the pegs to the mother’s breasts, and the body of the drum to the stomach.

Drumming during the era of Burundi’s monarchy was reserved for a handful of clans who passed down their knowledge from father to son. Other clans were not permitted to make or play the drums. Only royal occasions merited the playing of the drums. In addition to the symbol of fertility captured in the *Karyenda* drum and its role in the *umuganuro* ceremony, there were seven other sacred drums, each with its own well-defined role. Amongst these sacred drums was *Nyabuhoro*. Gguarded preciously in the royal court, it was believed that this drum ensured peace throughout the kingdom.

The *umuganuro*’s regularity and cultural significance give it a ritual dimension. It sparks the question: to what extent did the *umuganuro* facilitate the resolution of conflicts within the Burundian kingdom during its centuries of existence? What is clear is that it played an important symbolic role in preserving the unity and identity of the nation, and in this sense, as with other rituals, it held the potential for conflict resolution. This point is underscored by Lisa Schirch.

Ritual and ritual-like contexts are the age-old ways the symbolic aspects of conflict are addressed in cultures around the world. Rituals regulate relationships in communities, serving as ways of defining identity and providing the social lubricant to relate to others and the surrounding world. Rituals are special contexts conducive to the symbolic transformation of identity and the reframing of conflict towards sustainable, coexisting relationships.⁴

Over the last 40 years, the role of the drum has broken away from its sacredness and elitism. The last *umuganuro* was celebrated in 1965; a year later a coup d’etat essentially dissolved the monarchy along with its rituals and symbolism. Now, the right to be a Burundi drummer no longer belongs to specific clans; throughout Burundi there are traditional drumming groups comprised of people of diverse clans and ethnic groups. In Bujumbura alone there are approximately 20 drumming groups that perform primarily at official functions, festivals, and, increasingly, at private functions such as marriages.

Nevertheless, the mythology and aura of drums as symbols of unity, harmony, and peace remains strong. For many, the seven sacred drums still exist (though versions of precisely where vary greatly), uniting Burundians with their ancestors. What possibility do these beliefs hold for the linking of drumming, ceremony, and ritual with the needs of reconciliation?

Ingoma, the Call of Peace

It is this question that I ask when I head up to Gishora, 150 kilometres away from Bujumbura, to meet one of the oldest Burundian drumming groups. Originally belonging to a special clan and performing exclusively for the King Mwezigisabo in the latter half of the 19th century, the Gishora drummers are a legend.

Their leader, 69-year-old Hantime Barashankaje, is a feisty, extremely agile man who beams with pride, confidence, and a charming sense of humour. He is old enough to have clear memories of all of the cycles of violence in Burundi's history since independence. He vividly remembers the massacres of Hutus in 1972, following a Hutu rebel attack on Tutsis. He also remembers how his drummers played a role in bringing people back together after the violence subsided.

Nearly everyone had gone into hiding. They feared being arrested and killed. Even myself, I was hiding. But when things calmed down, and the killings stopped, the army who were in charge of keeping the security on our hillside (Mashitsi) wanted to send a message to the population that it was safe now and encourage them to return home. The population told the army that they should go and contact the head drummer where he had sought refuge. I was the chief drummer. I was contacted by the captain of the army and asked to call together the drummers. After ensuring that we had the permission of the governor and the local administrator, we started to play the drums. We saw, slowly, one after another, the people come out of their hiding places. Within a short time there was a crowd of people around where we were playing the drums. It was the very first sign of hope of peace. The people who had come out thanked us the drummers, saying "we were able to find the strength, courage and hope in peace when we heard the drummers playing."

Hantime Baranshakaje, group leader, Gishora

When another crisis of ethnic violence broke out in 1993 after the assassination of the first democratically elected Hutu president in October, the Gishora drummers were once again called upon to drum to encourage people to return home from their hiding places, once there was safety again.

The community was dispersed until we started to play. Then they understood that there was really peace. Without realising it, the Hutus and the Tutsis found themselves together watching us drum. Little by little, they forgot about their divisions because they have the same joy of watching the drumming.

– Kurera, member of Gishora

These recollections teach me that in the minds and hearts of Burundians, drumming conveys something positive, something hopeful, something reassuring. I recall the looks on the faces of the spectators of Edouard's group on the dusty patch of land in Bujumbura rurale. And the local mayor's sense of relief that at last, something could unite his community after so many years of fear, mistrust, and isolation. It reminds me of the stories that Déo and Maurice told me of their insistence on continuing to rehearse and play drums even during the most tense and difficult times of the crisis in Buyenzi between 1994 and 1996.

At a certain time, there were people who had fled from the neighbourhood. As soon as they came back, we played drums for them, to show them that we are united, and the love for the next person and the love of peace is possible through dialogue. Before the crisis, our songs were based on traditions and culture. But with the crisis, we saw that people were violating the national unity. So we sang songs saying that a Hutu is a Burundian, a Tutsi is a Burundian, and that they should sit down together.

– Maurice

Léonidas Ndayisenga, a resident of Buyenzi, remembers well the hope that the Ruciteme drummers gave him during these difficult moments.

The drummers didn't stop playing during the crisis. I was with them in the displaced camp. They gave us hope and the ability to handle our worries. After the big attack when everyone fled, they were back very soon, and began to play the drums again, even though people were afraid. This encouraged people to come back. And the songs that they sang were full of advice for us. And when they played, everyone came to watch, regardless of our differences.

In my three years of living in Burundi, I have witnessed how deeply drumming resonates with Burundians. Be it during a wedding, at a festival, or passing by one of the many outdoor rehearsals of Bujumbura's many drumming groups, Burundians are entranced by the drum.

Some Burundians even make a point of showing up at the right place and time to watch the rehearsals. Philippe Nzeyimana almost never misses the Ruciteme's rehearsals in Buyenzi.

The drum reminds us of the value of our ancestors. It's the drums that reconcile us. During this crisis, the people didn't have something to bring them together. But when there is a drumming show, everybody comes to see, regardless of their ethnicity. Divisionist ideas disappear little by little.

When I'm watching, I feel that all my problems are vanishing. They come back when the drumming is finished. My wish is that they wouldn't stop playing, but every beginning has an end.

These ethnic and regional problems shouldn't exist. Everyone should identify as a Burundian citizen regardless of political or other differences. The drum helps to reconcile because it reinforces the cultural identity. When I watch the drummers, I don't think about which ethnic group they belong to.

Athanase Nduwimana is a student who walks four kilometres each day of the Ruciteme rehearsals, and explains why he is always there to watch the rehearsals:

When I come home after watching the drumming, I feel very very good and at ease. Even if I have problems that weigh on my head, they disappear and I don't know how to explain it, but I don't feel them anymore. It's unimaginable!

These reactions have been observed by Déo himself, as a drummer.

These days, when people are stressed with so many problems, the drum is a consolation. I remember once there was a big fight between two mechanics just near where we rehearse. Their friends were looking on and not stopping them. We started to play the drums, and within three minutes, the mechanics stopped fighting and just watched the drumming.

These comments suggest that remnants of the ritual nature of drumming are perhaps still felt, even subliminally, by many Burundians. It opens the possibility to harness this ritual nature towards more deliberate conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. This possibility will be examined later in the article.

Drumming as Personal Transformation

What is going on inside the drummer and inside the spectator, when the drum is being played? How can we understand the importance placed on drumming? Another memory that Maurice shared with me gives a clue. Through his mother's work as a traditional midwife, she caught the HIV virus. By January 2002, she was seriously ill and hospitalised. Maurice and Déo went to visit her. They had a performance the same day. Déo suggested that Maurice shouldn't perform, but Maurice insisted. "Playing the drums helped me to deal with the pain I was feeling," he said. "I was able to put it aside for a moment. And I was proud of being a drummer, of continuing the culture that my mother respected. I know I did the right thing to perform that day."

Déo has a similar story. Upon learning of the death of his sister in 1994 and the death of his father in 1998, Déo deliberately decided to go and play drums. He considered it a type of grief management. "The drum distracted me and made me able to deal with the pain. The feeling of suffering came back to me later, but I was able to hold the feeling with dignity while I was playing drums."

Maurice and Déo's conviction that drumming helped them during their moments of stress and pain resonates with many of the other interviews and conversations I have had with drummers over recent years. Be it in Burundi, South Africa, the U.S., Britain, or Ghana, I have listened to drummers' testimonies of the drumming experience as one that transports the drummer to another mental space, away from past and future, to a recognition and celebration of the moment. For drummers with stress and problems, the drumming experience appears to be in itself a form of therapy to help the drummer think away from the problem, and gain a new perspective. A key aspect of this is the joy and happiness that people feel when they play the drums.

I feel good and I feel that all the troubles that I have lived through are forgotten.

– Mashoc, 22, street child, member of Terre des Hommes drumming group,
Bujumbura

My heart is full of joy when I drum. It's as though all the people are only watching me. And I wish that they will have the same joy that I feel. There is also the warmth that I feel from the drum. It's like a fire in my heart. And I become crazy with the songs, and especially when I'm on the central drum with all my fellow drummers supporting me.

– Aimé Nshimirumuremyi, 23, president of a drumming group at Kiyange displaced persons camp

It kind of stops time for me. Puts me in a different reality. It's like meditation. I stop thinking. It's a freeing experience. I feel expanded afterwards, and a lot clearer, my mind doesn't seem to be as busy.

– Catherine, 41, careworker, South Africa

I feel ecstatic when I am drumming. I'm out of my normal reality, out of the past and the future, I'm in the moment.

– Niyana Sterling, 40, cultural facilitator and former fashion photographer, South Africa

It makes me feel good because people like me, I'm HIV+, you need something that will make you strengthened and have power. And learning the beat and doing it, you don't need anybody to make you happy. It's only the drum that can make you happy. It's boosting my life more. It's my happiness. You live with happiness. With anger you die.

– Kennedy Matsipe, 33, craft maker, Lesotho⁵

Joy and happiness. Some would give the same qualifications to eating a chocolate bar. But when pressed to explain more, these drummers make an important connection that helps me put this joy in perspective. They tell me that through this joy, the drumming transports them to another place, where they can put aside their worries. This joy of drumming re-centres them and helps them face their problems again in a new light, with a new perspective.

Drumming changes the mind of the person. He doesn't have any time for bad thoughts. Perhaps it will come back later, at home. Even if he has lost a member of family the night before the drumming, he finds comfort in drumming.

– Hantime Baranshakaje, 69, leader of Gishora drumming group, Gitega

When we drum together, we can't remember all the misery that we've lived through. We forget it all.

– Pierre Nurwaha, 23, orphan, resident of a displaced persons camp and drummer in Kiyange drumming group

Drumming releases stress and creates inner harmony. And that is then mirrored out. When I play I have to concentrate on the rhythm. This takes me out of my stress. And when I finish playing, the stress comes back to me, but it finds me a more peaceful person who can handle that stress – a more enthusiastic, enriched, empowered person.

– Eric Nkosingithi Hadebe, 35, poet, actor, performing artist, cultural facilitator, South Africa

If I've had a rough day I go to my drum and try to beat through it. The constant rhythm brings a solution somewhere along the way.

– Rutendo Ngara, 28, biomedical engineering researcher, Zimbabwe/South Africa

It calms me, it settles my mind, it gets my anger away. When I'm tense, I take my drum and play, and it just calms my mind.

– Elena, 46, sales consultant, Pretoria, South Africa

I feel rhythmic and relaxed. I arrived here very stressed out from work issues, but I haven't given them a thought since I've been here. Music is the exact opposite of work, which allows me in my personal capacity to balance my life. I can release my tensions in rhythmic patterns. Golf just doesn't give you that inner well being and relaxation.

– Roger Mettlecamp, 54, managing director, Pretoria, South Africa

I use the drum when I'm not feeling fine. Sometimes I just put my hands on it without playing. And then if I start playing, I just let my inner emotions tell my hands what to do. I can go into a trance, close my eyes, and it changes my mood. When I finish and open my eyes, I feel like I have traveled, and I see things differently.

– Emmanuel Gomado, Ghanaian master drummer⁶

Healing the Self

Joy, refuge from stress, a new perspective. A recognition of a connection with an inner well being. Feeling centred, grounded. All positive repercussions of the drumming experience. But how does this translate into an individual's ability to cope with real-life problems? When the soul and spirit have been shattered by massacres, violence, and displacement, what can drumming offer? In a survey conducted by Search for Common Ground in Burundi in 2001, 92 per cent of respondents replied "yes" to the question "Have you lost a member of your family during the crisis?" The challenges are unending: coping as an orphan, coping as an unemployed youth with no money for school fees, coping as an HIV+ person with no hope for anti-retrovirals, coping with the injustice of the ongoing impunity.

In South Africa and around the world, desperation due to poverty, family difficulties, or broken relationships is part of the human experience. Can we begin to say that drumming has a reconstructive effect on these broken lives?

I asked this question, and the answers surprised me. The people I spoke with were overwhelmingly positive in attributing individual change to the drumming experience. I received this response so often that at a certain point in the interviews, I deliberately inserted the question "what are the problems that you have that *cannot* be resolved through drumming?"

Here are some of the extracts from interviews with orphans and street children who had taken up drumming, testifying to its transformative effect on their personal attitudes and behaviour. These changes were also observed by their trainers and advisors.

Drumming really changed me. Before I started to play, I was a delinquent, a thief. But today, the time that I used for stealing, I use it to play the drums. I stopped the thieving, the alcoholism, smoking – all this I stopped because I realised all these weaknesses don't go together with the drum. I had tried without success before to abandon these things, but always without success. I wish for many more centres for children to learn drumming; this would diminish the bad behaviours like stealing and drugs.

– Mashoc, 22, street child, member of Terre des Hommes drumming group,
Bujumbura

In the beginning, there were some of the street kids who didn't even greet [the trainers]. They didn't talk. But with time, playing the drums, they began to change. Through the drumming, their relations began to change and strengthen. Even when they're not rehearsing on the drums, you can see them in the street together playing the rhythms on a tire or something. This is a big change, because before, it was each kid for himself. But now, through the drumming, they have strengthened their social circle.

There were at least eight street kids who didn't talk, aside from saying yes or no. Even the trainers had a difficult time to communicate with them through the training. But now, after becoming drummers, they have been transformed. They laugh, they talk. The drum is a very good remedy for certain psychological illnesses and traumatism.

– Wensislas Nyabenda, 24, former street kid, now trainer of the Terre des Hommes drumming group

A lot of us were living in the street, were criminals, smoking drugs. I was also like that. But we have changed.

– Venant, 21, street kid, drummer, Burundi

Ten-year-old orphan Dieudonné Ndayisaba lives on the streets of Bujumbura. Two years ago, he began to play the drums as part of a project to assist street children run by the organisation Terre des Hommes. The organisation facilitators have observed a remarkable transformation.

When he started with [Terre des Hommes], he absolutely never spoke or laughed. He had a large protruding stomach. But without any other medicine or treatment apart from being in the drumming group, Dieudonné has been transformed. Now he plays, dances, and laughs with the others. And his stomach is normal.

– Wensislas Nyabenda

Dieudonné recognises the personal transformation as well.

It's true that I didn't laugh before starting to play the drums. But now I'm OK and I know how to play the drums. Before, the adults used to lie to me, and I did some delinquent things. But I don't do that anymore. I feel good when I drum, and when I can't, I feel a pain in my heart.

Drummers living in relatively peaceful societies also told me how drumming had helped them personally to deal with different problems and challenges. While cofacilitating a drumming

workshop in South Africa in 2003, I interviewed one of the participants, who participated fully but almost never spoke during the workshop. Her testimony revealed to me her deep respect and attachment to the drum, and its role in her own personal transformation.

A few months ago, I was ill for about five months. I couldn't do anything because my body was very weak. I started singing and also drumming very very loud. I was afraid of what the neighbours were saying, and then one came down and said it was so lovely and asked me to teach her. It was really good. I felt more free. It was good that there was a space I could put my feeling into, I didn't have to carry it. I put it into the sound and the sound then goes. I didn't have to carry it in my heart, it was out.

– Anke, 29, Germany

Emmanuel Gomado is a Ghanaian master drummer who teaches and performs in Ghana and around the world. I have observed him and collaborated in performance and teaching with him in Ghana and South Africa over a number of years. On several occasions, his teachings have unleashed feelings that have obliged him to transform his role from drum master to counselor.

Many times I have been teaching and people will start to cry. When we talk about it, you find that the drumming creates all other kinds of reactions. It reminds them of problems they have, either with their relationships or from their childhood. Others feel a strong love for the drum, and they are overcome with emotions. Many times I have to stop the workshop and talk about things with the participants. They tell me how the drum has helped them to realise certain deep emotions and problems, and then they're able to deal with it better.

The Collaborative Structure of Drumming

Over and over again, drummers told me of a “space” created during the rhythmic dialogue of drumming together with others. How does this happen? An examination of the structure of drumming in Burundi and West Africa provides some clues.

In Burundi, this structure is extremely defined and has changed little over the centuries. A striking feature is the limited space for improvisation in the traditional manner of drumming. The drummers (who are also the dancers), number between 12 and 30, and present themselves in a semicircle facing the audience or distinguished guest(s). All of the drums are structurally the same, but differ in diameter of the face of the drum, thus giving a difference in the pitch of the smaller versus larger drums. All drums are played with two wooden sticks, which are used to play on the skin and on the wooden belly of the drum, producing two essentially different sounds. Between four and eight drummers play a straight, constant rhythm, called the *amashako*. Between five and eight other drummers play the main rhythm, called the *ibishikizo*, which guides the music and the dancers. In the centre of the semicircle is a sole drum, called the *inkiranya*, which is played by the sole drummer and dancer in the middle.

Each drumming performance entails the rotation of the lead drummer/dancer who dances to the centre, signals which dance he will present, and then proceeds to lead the rhythm, with the *ibishikizo* drummers providing the drum song to accompany his dance. When he has finished his dance, he regains his place among the drummers, and cedes the centre to another drummer who

repeats the same process, with a different dance accompanied by a different rhythm. This continues, so each drummer provides basic support for the team of drummers, accompanies the lead dancer with the main melodic rhythm, and takes centre stage as the lead dancer/drummer.

The repertoire of the majority of drumming groups is comprised of an assortment of the estimated fifty traditional rhythms – the rhythms that have become “traditional” – developed over the centuries. More and more, in addition to learning and performing traditional rhythms, songs, and dances, new drumming groups are creating new arrangements of the traditional works as well as altogether new compositions.

In West African drumming traditions, groups use djembe and many other West African hand drums, to create polyrhythmic conversations between the different drummers. Other traditional percussion instruments such as bells and shakers contribute to this rhythmic dialogue. What each drummer plays alone transforms once others join with their distinct rhythms.

This polyrhythmic element of West African drumming is distinct. It parallels a choir, in which diverse voices harmonize with each other, resulting in a whole that is far more than the sum of its parts.

In general, West African drumming leaves space for improvisation, at least on the part of the lead drummer. But supporting this lead drummer is a structured, highly complex pattern that weaves complementary rhythms performed both on drums and other percussion instruments. This pattern provides a rhythmic mat onto which the lead drummer can add his solo and individual expression. The result is a rhythmic dialogue that supports expression on diverse levels. The collaborative structure requires, supports, and adds meaning to each participant's contribution.

Restoring Relationships

I am curious to find out about the impact of the sharing of this nonverbal, rhythmic dialogue. By drumming together, a universal language belonging to no one and understood by everyone has been spoken. A neutral space emerges where people with broken relationships can safely express themselves. When the rhythm is over, something has been created. Drummers from diverse backgrounds told me over and over again, in different ways, how they sense a feeling of trust and connectedness that develops through drumming together.

I trust the drummers most of all. Even when we are playing the drum, it can be seen in our eyes that we are united and in solidarity.

– Mashoc

We don't hide anything amongst us. We love each other. If one member has a party, we help him; if he's sick, we're the first to come. He's not like just anybody, he's our brother.

– Joachim Mpfayokurera, 43, member of Ruciteme drummers, Buyenzi

It's nonverbal. It's just there. My whole interface with the world is with words: I sit at a computer, I sit in meetings. Drumming and making music is completely nonverbal: it

functions from a different part of your brain, a different part of your being. When people come together and make music there is a common bond, a common energy which is positive which is created. I feel like I know these people because we've been making a common rhythm and sharing an energy.

- Barbie Shriner, 45, senior civil servant, Pretoria, South Africa

I have moments when I'm not very sociable. I'm not concentrating on getting it right. It's a way of communicating without words, through rhythm, just being together. It's easier for me now to speak to people because of that.

- Rutendo Ngara

To play with other people is a very intimate way to be with other people, communicate and share the space, break down artificial barriers that people have between them, communicate on a deeper level. It puts you into that deeper part of yourself. If you can get into that magical space where everyone is holding each other, then that space makes something magical happen.

- Shannon, 33, teacher, Cape Town, South Africa

I feel more connected to people when I'm drumming with them than when I'm talking to them, because I feel this spiritual communication that happens between people when they're in the same rhythm. The real communication is in the spirit.

- Niyah Sterling⁷

Many drummers talked concretely about how the drumming has helped them to solve personal and relationship problems.

I've had arguments with people, and said, well let's just play drums. And you can just sit opposite to each other and get into the same rhythm, and it calms everything down and then it heals. I'm going through a separation with my husband, and the drum was an amazing communication device. We weren't seeing eye to eye, but then we'd sit down and get into a rhythm and realize that there's a connection on another level. So it doesn't matter what we're arguing about, it confirms a bond. And with strangers as well, it's the most unifying thing. If you play drums with someone, you're mates. I think everyone should have a drum. You know, like everyone has a toothbrush, everyone should have a drum.

- Angela, 42, web designer, Zambia

This same unity echoes with the solidarity between Déo and Maurice and the Ruciteme drummers, described earlier in this article. They are not alone in their experiences of strong relationships developed through drumming, and withstanding the pressure for division and collapse during the ethnic crisis in Burundi. Member of several other drumming groups told me of similar experiences.

When the others were divided by the political parties' ideas, we never accepted to play for one party. We remained neutral, even up until today. We always stayed together. We

feel we are drummers and not Hutus or Tutsis. Even in the time of our grandfathers, there was never divisions amongst the drummers.

– Kurera, member of Gishora drumming group

During the crisis, we played despite the insecurity. We hid the sticks in our underwear. We would meet and play, Hutus and Tutsis mixed. The problem was to get home safely again, but we would accompany one another to be sure that they arrived safely.

The drumming is an exchange of ideas. It helps us to speak. During the crisis, when we were going to play somewhere, the Hutus and Tutsis were together, not fearing each other. It enabled us to have access to all the neighbourhoods and be safe.

– Francois Manirakiza, member of Rohero drumming group

Drumming as a Unifying Force in South Africa

In South Africa, a multicultural society with approximately eleven different cultures, there is no one single definition of the social or cultural role of the drum. Zulus have a tradition of using drums as part of their social and war dances; Vendas use their drums as part of ceremonies to contact ancestors; Afrikaaners have kept the European tradition of marching bands with snare drums; Indian South Africans have perpetuated the traditional drums such as the tabla from the subcontinent. This means that there is no one drum or drumming style with which all communities in South Africa identify. It is thus intriguing how in the late 1990s, drumming - particularly using West African djembe drums – became a positive force for reconciliation. I was able to observe this phenomenon first hand.

I left South Africa a few months after the first democratic all-race elections in April 1994 and headed up to West Africa. I had been in South Africa for more than four years, coming in early 1990 to contribute to the struggle against apartheid through working with the independent media. Prior to leaving, I was already a drummer, playing percussion and drums in a popular reggae band as well as other township-based theatrical and musical productions. Up until 1994, I had rarely spotted a traditional African drum being played in public. Where drums and percussion were played, imported metal and fibreglass Conga drums were used.

I returned to South Africa in 1998, after three and a half years of intense musical learning and discovery, undertaken alongside my social-change oriented journalism in Accra. I had learned the basics of the traditional Ghanaian xylophone (*gyile*), the traditional flute (*atenteben*), and had spent more than one year as a performer with a top drumming and dancing cultural group in Accra, the Odehe Dance Company. I had in no way mastered the drumming, but had some basic notions, some rhythms and songs to share, and the passion deeply implanted inside my heart and soul.

Out of this passion I created Field of Rhythm, a small retail outlet specialising in the sale of African traditional musical instruments, especially drums from West Africa. It was the first of its kind in Durban, KwaZulu Natal province. Although there were some others beginning to sell drums in Cape Town and Johannesburg, it was a complete novelty in Durban.

The shop attracted people from all of the cultural groups in South Africa. I observed white South Africans who were entranced by the sensitivity of the djembe drum, which enabled any touch to produce a sound. Many Indian South Africans seemed drawn to the same phenomenon, as well as the ability to play a drum without having to identify with their Indian heritage. African South Africans appeared to initially feel slightly intimidated by an African drum with which they were unfamiliar. Some mentioned how they initially felt their African identity threatened, especially by seeing a non-African outplaying them. But this soon passed as they found their voice and personal expression in the drumming, often integrating it alongside traditional Zulu or other indigenous South African drums.

Within no time, there were drum circles popping up everywhere: people of all races getting together just to beat the drum spontaneously. They would gather in nightclubs, in people's homes, under the moonlight, during festivals, and cautiously begin to beat out a simple rhythm. One by one, others would join in, each contributing their voice to the emerging harmony, which inevitably grew and grew with passion, rage, joy, and whatever mixture of emotions the drummers were injecting into the circle.

I was often invited to teach groups of people, or, in a less structured format, to facilitate drumming circles. Schools, NGOs, conference organisers, and local associations began requesting that Field of Rhythm facilitate workshops and team-building using drums. Around the same time, I also created a pan-African musical ensemble with a Mozambican and a South African (*Umgqumo weAfrica*: "the rhythm of Africa" in the Zulu language), in which we used instruments and drums from about a dozen African countries to play our own compositions and re-arranged versions of traditional songs. The group responded directly to a need for this "new South Africa" to vibrate with the rhythms and sounds of the continent.

The culture of the djembe had come to South Africa. Everyone seemed to want one of these drums; they too responded to a need for "new South Africans" to feel somehow African. The djembe connected all races of South Africans to the African continent, without necessarily giving African South Africans an upper hand. White South Africans were better able to afford the drums and pay for lessons, and thus were taking the lead in learning and even making the drums. They linked their love of the drum with their desire to love Africa, and found joy and inner peace in a nonthreatening way through playing the djembe. Their attachment to the djembe enabled them to find an individual expression through the drum, and a connection to other drummers of all cultures.

To nourish this wave, I began to invite Ghanaian master drummers to South Africa. Between 1998 and 2003, I organised approximately ten such visits, which included teaching, facilitating drum circles, and performance by between one and four Ghanaian artists in various regions of South Africa with a diversity of communities.

In 2001, Ghanaian master drummer and dancer Nicholas Kotei Djanie, popularly known as "Africa," was invited to this cultural exchange.

I could see South Africans were crazy about drumming, especially the djembe. But they didn't know the power of the drum, or how to really use it to make music. They just wanted to play it and express themselves. I tried to help them to see the drum as an

instrument, and share with them how they could, by listening to each other and learning about the drum, make music and be in harmony with each other.

A new industry had sprung up: drum facilitation and team-building using drumming, which enabled people to express themselves and communicate in a nonhierarchical, nonthreatening structure. Communication across differences in South Africa had been made difficult, both by the history of apartheid and by the country's cultural and linguistic diversity. South Africans had been living alongside – not with – each other for centuries. They had not had opportunities to mingle socially. Language differences meant that even in a company where the majority of employees had worked together for twenty years, they hardly knew each other, particularly across the racial divides.

Organisations like the Drum Café, Drums and Rhythm, and Field of Rhythm facilitated drum-based team-building workshops for these companies. During 2001-2004, Africa worked with all three companies and shares some of his observations.

We build the sense of team spirit by having people play rhythms and also listen to each other. Sometimes if we let them just find their own rhythm, all playing together, they will end up all playing the same thing. This shows them how important it is to be sensitive to listening to the other, and to be in tune with the rest of the team.

When the managing director is drumming with the lady who makes the tea, they see other things about each other that they couldn't before. They can laugh and sing and dance, because of the drum, and they begin to see each other differently. The trust starts there. Eric Nkosinathi Hadebe is a cultural facilitator and performing artist working for Field of Rhythm. He has facilitated dozens of drum workshops around South Africa for the last six years. People in South Africa work together but they don't know each other. There are all kinds of rumours and stories and not real communication. When I do a session, I sometimes find out what are some of the problems in the place before I start. Then, during the fun-making that comes out of the drumming, I can introduce these things, but in a different way. The people will laugh about something that otherwise would have made them tense and stressed. They are put into a mood where they transform their animosity into something positive.

And the drum just attracts everybody. I remember I was invited to a function organised by Indian South Africans. I arrived with another African, wearing African outfits, with our drums. Everyone else there was Indian. At the beginning it was awkward, because sometimes things are tense between Indians and Africans. But with the drum, we were able to share the fun of the rhythm, and in a short time, they were open and wanted to come up and play with us. I was surprised myself how much the drum had been able to bridge those gaps.

Ghanaian master drummer and teacher Emmanuel Gomado, who has done workshops in South Africa and many countries around the world, explains aspects of the drum that facilitate this type of trust-building.

The drum is a medium which has a language which is neutral. It is the language of the drum. It doesn't belong to anyone. So when people find this new language, it brings out a lot of inner emotions.

All of these sentiments ring true in my own experience. I remember facilitating a drumming workshop with one hundred White, Indian, coloured, and African women, in August 2001. The room was full of women smiling just to hide the fact that they felt uncomfortable and wary about what was going to happen. If we had tried to use words to break that air of mistrust and suspicion, I believe the process would have been heavy and drawn out. But using complementary rhythms, combining different groups of women on different instruments, and using rhythmic voice techniques, the icy climate was quickly dissolved. After about twenty minutes, the room was in a groove, with people smiling and spontaneously dancing, sharing the present, a moment of joy and trust that is so precious and yet so rare.

Cultural and Ethical Dilemmas

Collaborating with master drummers through the years, who intimately know and understand the powerful importance of the drum in their cultures and traditions, has raised cultural and ethical dilemmas about using traditional drums in a deliberate way in the service of reconciliation. In Burundi, drumming is no longer reserved for specific clans or exclusively presented to the king. Every weekend in Burundi's capital Bujumbura, young couples invite traditional drumming groups to grace their weddings, much to the delight of an increasing number of career drummers. Traditionalists scoff at this notion that ordinary people should be able to have such simple access to such a powerful and sacred Burundian cultural icon.

The use of the djembe and other traditional West African drums for team-building in South Africa poses similar dilemmas. Like most traditional drums in Africa, djembe have a historical and traditional role related to communication by or for the kingdom, communication with the ancestors, and/or ceremonial uniting of the community. I have witnessed the near outrage and disgust felt by master drummers from West Africa, newly arrived in South Africa, upon realizing the banal usage of the djembe in South Africa. Taken out of its context, it has lost all of its sacredness, and is no longer reserved for certain players or occasions.

This raises questions: how far should we go in bringing the drum out of its historically sacred role toward modern usages? Is not negation of its ancestral, spiritual powers a negation of the very potential of those related forces to contribute to the reconciliation processes? Without a cultural recognition of the drum, can the drum still be used effectively as a tool of healing, bringing people together, and repairing relationships?

In June 2004, when the United Nations Mission in Burundi took over officially from the African Union, Burundian drummers played at the handover ceremony. Many Burundians were particularly horrified at the implication of playing the Burundi drums for foreigners, as one would for a king in days past. The analogy was too strong; it resonated with the negative reminiscence of colonialism, and the Burundi drummers' presence signified the submission of Burundian culture to an outside force.

As stated earlier, drumming is nonetheless no longer reserved for specific clans and only played for the king. But not all barriers have fallen, not all of its sacredness has vanished. There remains an initiation ceremony for those who want to become traditional drummers in Burundi. The ceremony involves the drinking of a specially prepared banana beer, called *amazi y'igiti*, which is used to bless the drummer and the drums and confirm the initiation. In Burundi and many parts of Africa, women are not permitted to play drums. Of the seven Burundian groups visited for this article, only one group permits a female to play, a particularly persistent and passionate young woman.

This has implications: bringing together a group of government ministers in Burundi to play the drum as part of a team-building or reconciliation activity (as has been done time and again in South Africa) would encounter extreme cultural resistance, if not outright refusal. Substituting Burundian traditional ingoma drums with drums from another culture could be one way around this obstacle. But the sacred nature of the drums, their link with the royal history of Burundi, and their masculinity pose certain limits in terms of their adaptability as a tool of reconciliation for all groups.

Searching for Impact

What can we reliably assert as the real impact of the drumming on reconciliation processes? Did the Buyenzi drummers' playing really convince residents who had fled that there was now peace and stability? So long as Edouard's drummers remain poor and destitute, how much will the drumming be able to hold them together? How sure can we be of the 'inner calm' to which the South African drummers refer? How long-lasting and durable is the trust and team spirit created by the corporate workshops between different race groups in South Africa? How much of the positive feeling expressed by Burundian drummers is linked to the fact that drumming is just, simply, a whole lot of fun?

Another question: in many parts of Africa, drumming was indeed used to rally warriors and entire communities behind war and violence. Like all art forms, its power to mobilise people has been used both positively and negatively. In Burundi, even during the time of interethnic, tribal, or royal wars, these drums have not been used to promote war and violence. But how sure are we of drumming's capacity to strengthen peace and build relationship across differences?

Part of the answer lies in the realization that in some cases, relationships can be restored simply by providing opportunities for adversaries to do something together. This point is underscored by Antonia Chayes and Martha Minnow, writing in the introduction to their book *Imagine Coexistence*,

Creating occasions for people from previous warring groups to work side by side or in parallel efforts towards common goals can be effective starting points for fostering coexistence. They may provide a better setting than dialogue alone in building trusting relationships. It may often be more effective to promote coexistence indirectly, not by talking about it or by directly tackling intergroup tension, but by building shared experiences, addressing pressing needs in ways that involve people from different groups, or enhancing their daily quality of life in ways to enlarge hope for the future.⁸

Through this inquiry, I have found many examples showing that the phenomenon of drumming has been a positive catalyst for coexistence and reconciliation.

- Drumming has a positive emotional and spiritual impact on drummers and observers:
 - All drummers interviewed explained how drumming helped them feel centred, grounded, and better able to deal with problems and stress.
 - Former street children cited drumming as one of the transformative elements that enabled them to restart their lives anew.
 - Residents of Buyenzi walk long distances to watch the drumming rehearsals, simply because it helps them mentally, psychologically and spiritually.
- Drumming as an activity can play a unifying role:
 - Drummers in Bujumbura rurale were able to come together and unite their community after the overt war came to an end.
 - By identifying with themselves as drummers, various groups comprising Hutus and Tutsis were able to rally around their uniting identity of being drummers, and resist the balkanisation that characterised Burundi during the crises.
 - The united Hutu and Tutsi members of the Ruciteme drumming group presented a vision of unity amidst a violent, balkanised society, and demonstrated what was possible.
- Drumming as a nonverbal form of communication positively impacted on relationships:
 - Drummers in South Africa cited examples of how drumming helped them to concretely resolve problems and repair relationships when verbal communication failed.
 - Drummers in South Africa told how the shared drumming experience facilitated trust-building between formerly alienated individuals.

The Rhythm of Reconciliation: Ritual Possibilities for Reconciliation Through Drumming

I conclude this article by sharing a vision, an imagination. It is a dream, inspired by different ingredients of this inquiry contextualised in my own personal reflections. It combines the rational and emotional, the aesthetic and the scientific. It attempts to place the learnings together as building blocks to create a new sculpture.

Here are the ingredients: As per quotations from Schirch, I have likened the *umuganuro* ceremony to a ritual. Drummers have spoken of the joy, the “neutral, third space” created through drumming, and the association of drumming with peace. Through drumming, people have rallied around the shared identity of the drummer, challenging preconceived stereotypes and recognising and defending their shared humanity.

We also know that we all learn best by doing. How far can we go teaching tolerance, reconciliation, or even peace? If our leaders sign peace accords but in my community I am still disconnected from my former enemy, what can I understand? Answers to these questions can be found in a recognition that the process of reconciliation goes beyond the mental and intellectual process of peace negotiations and cease-fire accords. It also touches on the emotive elements that motivate behaviour and attitudes.⁹

In addition to reinforcing identities that unite rather than divide, ritual opens up the opportunity to promote a new, 'third' culture. In post-apartheid South Africa, there were efforts on political, social, and cultural levels to define a 'New South African' identity, embodying various attitudes, principles, and behaviours. Cultural festivals and sporting events were key in this process, presenting the South African cultural identity as a newness with which white, black, Indian, and coloured South Africans could identify.

The government was deliberate about its use of ritual. Under apartheid, the month of September was characterised for the commemoration of various massacres/victories of one ethnic or racial group over the other during the centuries of war and strife. What one group considered a victory was a tragedy for the other, and vice-versa. The post-apartheid government declassified all of those holidays and created a new one: Heritage Day on 23 September. This day allows all South Africans to step back and reflect on their history, the history of the country and its struggles, through a lens appreciative of diversity. It is accompanied by festivals and celebrations, historical discussions, and a celebration of the "rainbow nation" of the new South Africa.

In Burundi, the work of Search for Common Ground over the last nine years has often facilitated a pathway to reconciliation of formerly divided communities. This pathway entails creating trust, truth telling, the search for common interests, and the recognition of a common future. Very often, this process culminates in a "positive solidarity day."¹⁰ This day involves a joint celebration by the two formerly warring communities during which gifts are exchanged, there is singing and dancing together, and beer (the symbol of reconciliation in Burundi) is shared. These days are a ritual through which the moment of reconciliation is engraved in the histories of the communities.

They resonate with the traditional reconciliation ritual known under the era of Burundi's monarchy during the 18th and 19th centuries, called *kunywanya* (Kirundi for *mutual drinking*). In this ceremony, adversaries were brought together by the local wise men (*bashingantahe*), who would first, if appropriate, pronounce the sanction or fine on the guilty party. This would be followed by the bringing forward of a sheep, whose ear would be cut. The blood from this ear would then be dripped into a pot of beer, which would be drunk by both parties in the conflict. When the beer was finished, the two parties would take the remains from the bottom of the beer pot and wash their hands with these remnants. Promises of lasting peace were then pronounced by both parties. In other versions of the ceremony, the blood was dripped on a banana which was shared by the two parties, or else dripped on a banana leaf, which was then burned. Parties in this ceremony believed that betraying this blood-laden *kunywanya* ceremony would bring a curse or evil spirits to the person and his entourage.

Along these same lines, these rituals of reconciliation can have a powerful impact in transforming conflictual relationships. Rituals enable the creation of shared identities through the creation of new symbols and a reframing of the problem. As new, positive identities that highlight personal and group self-esteem are created, it opens doors for the healing process necessary for reconciliation and peacebuilding.¹¹

What is my vision for ritual reconciliation in Burundi?

It goes like this. After a new government is democratically elected in April 2005, a series of nationwide consultations would be undertaken to gather the ingredients of the ritual. These ingredients will seek to highlight the positive dimensions of Burundi culture, which unite and make Burundians proud. Avoiding the risk of being perceived as restoring the controversial monarchy, one would nonetheless be inspired by aspects of the *umuganuro*. Traditional systems of reconciliation in ancient Burundi (*kunywanya*) could be adapted to the modern context. Burundi drums would feature in this day or week-long reconciliation ritual; a new sacred drum of reconciliation would be carved and skinned. A special rhythm of reconciliation would be composed: a new rhythm culminating from a collaborative effort of Burundi's best drummers. A reconciliation hymn would be composed; traditional dancers would choreograph a new dance. A specially made beer pot would be handmade for use solely during these special annual rituals. A national day of reconciliation would take its place on the national calendar, and become an annual nationwide event, but with each local community organising its own activities. Gestures of solidarity between formerly divided communities would be encouraged. In some cases the months prior to the reconciliation ritual could pave the way for sincere and groundbreaking sharing between former adversaries.

Humans learn through action. This reconciliation ritual would enable Burundians to see, hear, smell, taste, dance, cry, and laugh. It would not be a top-down organised event, as is the case for Independence Day celebrations or the National Unity Day celebrations, but rather something that every household prepares. It would be an opportunity to bridge relations that may have crumbled through the past year. During this reconciliation ritual, all of Burundi would be alive with song, drumming, dance, and sharing. Exhibitions, debates, and festivals would thrive. The common identity of being Burundian, the ultimate uniting force, agent for development and tool of conflict resolution, would be celebrated and honoured.

The children of Burundi would learn about 2005 as the origin of the reconciliation ritual, its symbolism, its purpose. As I let the vision sink in, I can almost feel the vibrations of a country in celebration. It is a melody that sings of a country transcending division and reconnecting with its positive self-identity. It is a dance that embraces the other, the common humanity we all share. It is the gaze of former adversaries into each other's eyes as they share a pot of beer. It is the rhythm of reconciliation.

Notes

¹ Written in collaboration with Richard Ntawe of Bujumbura, Burundi.

² Creative Approaches to Reconciliation, Cynthia Cohen, Brandeis University – complete this note how? – I quoted from the article you emailed me but somehow it is different than the one that appeared in the book – what do you suggest?

³ Information in this section derives from various conversations with Burundian historians and cultural workers during my time of living and working in Burundi.

⁴ Lisa Schirch, "Ritual Reconciliation, Transforming Identity/Reframing Conflict," in *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Monammed Abu-Nimber, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001, pp 145-161.

⁵ Other quotes along the same lines:

I feel a huge joy. The heart is happy without any bad ideas. - Pierre Nurwaha, 23, orphan, resident of a displaced persons camp, and drummer in Kiyange drumming group

The drummer is like a smoker. He needs it. When I am waiting for the drumming to start, there is joy and impatience. When we have to wait for long, I become uncomfortable. I need to play the drum and then I feel fine. Francois Manirakiza, 40, leader of drumming group of Rohero, Bujumbura

Total joy. It's like I'm in heaven. Before I start to play, my heart is not in place. I am impatient, but also happy. And when I get to the drum, I change, and no one can recognise me because I become like a crazy person. - Déo, Ruciteme drummer, Buyenzi

⁶ Other quotes along the same lines:

After playing, the tiredness goes away, along with any bad feelings. I've never seen a drummer who is angry after the rehearsal. – Francois Manirakiza, 40, leader of drumming group of Rohero, Bujumbura

When I go to sleep at night and there's something worrying me, I play the sound of the drum meditation in my head – gada goo, gada goo – it puts me to sleep and makes me calm. – Sam Cooke, 30, lawyer, Cape Town, South Africa

If I feel depressed, I play the drum and I feel once again centred and grounded. For me it's a way of connecting with whatever's out there – I feel connected and grounded to the earth. – Patrick Dili, 42, facilitator and motivator, Cape Town, South Africa

I always play the drum when I have problems. I used to go to the mountain, there's a cave where King Mosheu buried his wife. And I would just play and play and play and all those things would just wash away. And then in comes another new thing. I really believe that this is a healing instrument. – Kennedy Matsipe, 33, craft maker, Lesotho

⁷ Other similar quotes include:

We become one. If one of the other drummers goes in front to play, I help him so that he'll be happy.

– Venant Ngendakumana, 21, member of drumming group at displaced persons camp, Kiyange
You know something about each other not from having spoken but from having shared and made something together. When you make something together, you feel connected to them in some way. – Sam Cooke, 30, lawyer, Cape Town, South Africa

It's as if there is a core beat inside me, and the collective consciousness. And when I dance and drum, it's like I connect to that. It's very deep and it's inside. That's what I connect to. It's like you get transported to a place that everybody shares. – Thalia, 25, e-learning developer, South Africa

⁸ Antonia Chayes and Martha Minnow, *Imagine Coexistence, Restoring Humanity after Violent Ethnic Conflict*, Program on Negotiation at the Harvard Law School, 2003, pp xxi.

⁹ William J. Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003, p. 73.

¹⁰ See www.sfcg.org under Burundi, Women's Peace Centre

¹¹ Lisa Schirch, "Ritual Reconciliation, Transforming Identity/Reframing Conflict," in *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Monammed Abu-Nimber, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001, p 156.