

Lifestyle | Features



Burundi drummers forced to dance to official beat

A troupe of barefoot musicians wearing the national colors of Burundi strike huge wooden royal drums with tremendous force, precision and unabashed joy. Twirling and singing, a stick in each hand, the performers are the custodians of a centuries-old ritual recognized by UNESCO, and one jealously guarded by the Burundian state.

Too jealously guarded, according to some.

"We beat the drum because it's our life, because it's in our blood," said their leader Oscar Nshimirimana, his face dripping with sweat after a spirited performance in Gishora against a backdrop of rolling green hills. "It was not only my father who beat the drum, but all my great-grandparents," the 43-year-old said.

Troupes hailing from Gishora-home of a royal palace and the heartland of this musical tradition-enjoy a lofty and celebrated status. Burundi's President Evariste Ndayishimiye graced one of their performances in January, causing a stir. In the tiny landlocked nation of 12 million people, drumming troupes big and small perform at weddings, religious ceremonies and other celebrations-as well as competing against each other.

Across the globe, too, drummers in the Burundian diaspora are found on at least three continents. "The ritual dance with the royal drum" is the jewel in the country's intangible heritage, declares a culture ministry document. "The prodigious leaps, the pirouettes, the winks to the spectators... all this has always marked this dance, as the bearer of an uncommon tradition, in the whole of African and world percussion."

'Ascended the drum'

The drumming tradition known locally

as "ingoma" dates back to the 17th century, and honored the eternal rule of the royal family at a time when Burundi was a monarchy. Upon assuming the throne, a king was said to have "ascended the drum", which was considered the source of his power.

the ritual dance of the royal drum on its list of intangible world heritage. Since then, the Burundian government-an authoritarian regime that emerged from an armed rebellion-has enforced strict rules around the practice.

In 2017, a long-forgotten edict banning

Nkunuzumwami, adviser to the culture minister, said the government had a duty to ensure "respect for the cultural identity" of the drum, especially since the UNESCO listing. "It is the government that (must) protect the Burundian drum. That is why it has regulated the practice," he told AFP. In February, a troupe of drummers caused a scandal by playing at a festival in non-regulation black suits. The festival was stopped, and the troupe suspended for six months.

'Took something away'

In the economic capital Bujumbura, 27-year-old engineer Calixte Irantije practices twice a week after work in an open-air amphitheatre with his drumming troupe. "These rules have caused a reduction in demand... it has had a big impact on the market we used to have," he said. "Now we play at parties sanctioned by the government. We play at the weddings of those who have a permit, and official government ceremonies."

Some Burundians, particularly those in the diaspora, have balked at what they saw as government overreach. "The drum no longer belongs to the Burundian citizen. It belongs to the government," Pacifique Nininahazwe, a civil society leader living in exile, said in 2017. Julien Nimubona, a professor of political science at the University of Burundi, told AFP the restrictions were less about authoritarianism and more an opportunity for officials to make money off the UNESCO status. "It took away something that was ours," he said. — AFP



Elite drummers perform in front of a re-constructed house of the king's village at Gishora Drum Sanctuary in Gishora, Burundi.

The most hallowed drums are even given names. Many have vanished through the ages but two-known as Ruciteme and Murimiwa-are enshrined in a traditional straw hut in Gishora.

For a long time, these drums could only be carved from the gigantic trunks of "umuvugaangoma", or "the tree that makes the drum talk". In 2014, UNESCO recognized the cultural value of the tradition, inscribing

women from playing the drums was reimposed, while dress codes for performers were mandated. Troupes have since been required to formally register with the authorities, while those wishing to hire drummers for a private event need to apply for special permits costing \$250.

In Burundi, which is the poorest country in the world in terms of GDP per capita, this is no small imposition. Aimable



Elite drummers perform for tourists at Gishora Drum Sanctuary in Gishora, Burundi.



Elite drummers perform in front of the re-constructed house of the king's village at Gishora Drum Sanctuary in Gishora, Burundi.



Drummers bring a drum to keep in a re-constructed house of the king's village at Gishora Drum Sanctuary in Gishora, Burundi.



Elite drummers perform for tourists at Gishora Drum Sanctuary in Gishora, Burundi. — AFP photos

'The world's gone mad': Kate Bush on 'Stranger Things' and chart reprise

Kate Bush, in a rare interview, has described her return to the top of the music charts as "quite shocking" after Netflix drama "Stranger Things" wowed a new generation of fans. The much-loved British singer-songwriter also dwelt on her lockdown experience of binge-watching and gardening, and revealed that she prefers an old-style phone when out and about. Bush's classic song "Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)" has surged to number one in Britain and elsewhere after featuring prominently, and moving, in the fourth series of the sci-fi Netflix series set in the 1980s.



An undated handout picture released by the Fish People record label shows British musician Kate Bush posing at an undisclosed location. — AFP

"It's such a great series, I thought that the track would get some attention," she told BBC radio in the interview, which was recorded Tuesday and broadcast Wednesday. "But I just never imagined that it would be anything like this. It's so exciting. But it's quite shocking really, isn't it? I mean, the whole world's gone mad." The 1985 song now holds the record for longest time taken for a single to reach number one, while Bush boasts the longest-ever gap between chart-toppers — 44 years after "Wuthering Heights" first revealed her astonishing talents to the world.

And at 63, Bush has also become the oldest female artist ever to score a number one hit in the UK. "There was some great music in the 80s, but I think it's an incredibly exciting time we're in now," she said. "I mean, okay, so it's an awful time on a lot of levels for people. Very difficult. But it's also a time when incredible things are happening." Bush has largely spent recent decades out of the public eye, but performed a 22-night residency in London in 2014, with tickets selling out in 15 minutes.

"Gardening is my thing now," she told the BBC, without going into whether she is working on any new music. Bush's last studio album was "50 Words for Snow" (2011), which featured aural trickery of the kind she pioneered in the 80s with the Fairlight digital synthesizer used on her 1985 masterpiece, "Hounds of Love". "Running Up That Hill", the lead single from "Hounds of Love", has become the most-streamed song on Spotify in the United States, the UK and globally. But Bush herself doesn't have a smartphone. "I have a really ancient phone. But I like that because I spend a lot of time on my laptop," she said. "And when I go out during the day, it means I don't have to deal with emails and everyone knows that. So I just get texts and calls on my phone, and it means that I have a bit of peace." — AFP



Sheeran awarded costs for 'Shape of You' copyright win

A High Court judge in London on Tuesday awarded Ed Sheeran and his co-songwriters more than £900,000 in legal costs after winning a copyright trial over his hit "Shape of You". The 31-year-old Sheeran was taken to court and accused of copying a phrase from the British grime track "Oh Why" when writing the worldwide smash.

But judge Antony Zaccaroli ruled in April this year after an 11-day trial that the star "neither deliberately nor subconsciously" plagiarized the hook. On Wednesday, the judge said the artists who brought the claim-Sami Chokri and Ross O'Donoghue-should pay legal costs. He ordered an interim payment of £916,200 (\$1.1 million). Sheeran welcomed the initial ruling but said that "baseless" copyright claims were "damaging the songwriting industry". — AFP