

## Out of Africa, 1993

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Richmond, VA  
November 13, 1993

(originally published without pictures in Style Weekly, Richmond, Virginia, November, 1993)

Holiday season, according to the stereotypes and the overdose of media specials that will soon begin, is supposed to be a joyous time. In recent years, there has been a counter-current of articles and news features about holiday depression—sometimes brought on by missing a loved one who was with us last year at the holidays, sometimes by feelings of inadequacy at not providing the right gifts or the right setting for the festivities, sometimes by sheer exhaustion after the frantic rounds of parties and preparations we subject ourselves to.

I have to admit that the past few seasons have left me feeling less than ecstatic, but not for any of the reasons given above. One year we greeted Christ's birth by sending soldiers to Panama to strong-arm a former dictator who had been bested in his country's most recent elections. The following year, we tensely awaited the beginning of the Gulf War. Last year, the Marines landed in Mogadishu, where this year they're still bogged down, caught in the middle of a deteriorating clan war. However, my sadness this year is not mainly about Somalia, tragic as the situation there seems. It's about another, less publicized African civil conflict.

I had a temporary home in Africa, not so very far from the site of Isak Dinesen's farm in the Ngong hills of Kenya. I lived at the edge of a U.N. housing compound in a small city called Bujumbura, in a small and little-known country called Burundi. Though I had no blue helmet or rifle, I was in a sense on a peace-keeping mission—trying to assist the functioning of a set of locally owned consumer cooperatives whose aim was to provide basic goods at fair prices to a largely rural population with little formal education. Like many expatriates who arrive in "developing" countries intent on redeeming the place, I found by the time I left that I had received far more than I had given, learned a great deal more than I had taught.

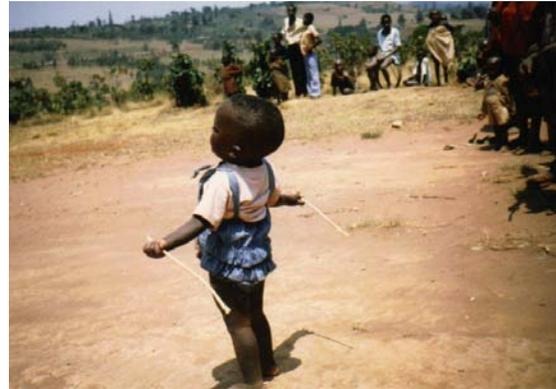


Burundi had no great white hunters when I was there. Nearly all of the wild game, except for small creatures like monkeys and for crocodiles and hippos in Lake Tanganyika, had long since disappeared in the face of the need to cultivate all available land to feed a growing population. The European adventurers and pioneers of Dinesen's time had given way to functionaries and international bureaucrats, of whom I was one. What Burundi did have was some beautiful people.



Shortly after my arrival in-country, I was given a chance to see a performance by a local drumming and dancing troupe. We expatriates paid about \$8 each for seats at a small parade ground near Gitega. Word spread quickly among nearby villagers, who turned out in equal numbers to see the spectacle for free. With their brightly colored wrapped skirts and their

knowledge of the dances, they became part of the spectacle, too. The drummers wore simple flowing costumes of red and white, and combined expert drumming on large, hollowed tree drums with high leaps and twirls. At one point, they were briefly upstaged by a local toddler who had escaped his mother and stood at the edge of the parade ground, drumming the air with two small sticks.



Not many people are dancing in Burundi these days, from what I can gather. In the wake of a late-October military coup that overthrew a newly-installed elected government, ethnic hatred between Burundi's two main tribes has again erupted into violence. The elected president, Melchior Ndedaye, was murdered during the course of the coup. Since then, most of the countryside has been engulfed by reprisals and counter-reprisals between the numerically superior Hutus and the minority Tutsi population, who still control most of the military and are generally much better armed. So far, estimates of the death toll do not approach the 100,000 to 300,000 who were killed in the previous major tribal war in 1972, but at least 10% of the country's 5.5 million people have fled to refugee camps in neighboring countries, and very little planting is going on as this year's delayed rainy season finally begins.

I am not sure what can be done to help Burundi at this stage, other than to mourn the tremendous losses and to try through publicity and aid to maintain some semblance of normal life in the refugee camps. Certainly Burundi is not unique in providing contemporary evidence of ethnic bloodshed. The more highly publicized trio of Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti remind us that hatred and violence are no respecters of continents. Our own cities reverberate nightly with sounds of gunfire.

What helps me keep perspective through the grimness, during this supposedly festive season, is the image of those drummers. What gives me hope is the sure knowledge that, though we can kill each other, we can also care for each other, entertain each other, rejoice in each other the way we all did that sunny afternoon in Gitega. Maybe the antidote for holiday depression is not a new dress or the latest toy or gadget, but getting in touch with our deeper need to participate actively in the human adventure. As you push yourself away from that last piece of mince pie, or burp up some essence of stuffing during half-time of the televised football game, you may want to take a minute to think where

your own personal Burundi lies this holiday season. Write a check, make a phone call to a volunteer organization that needs your time and talents, send an encouraging note to a friend, write a letter to a newspaper or your Congressional representative about an issue you care about. Make your New Year's resolutions a little earlier than usual. Make no mistake: someday, somewhere, the Gitega drummers will dance again. All it will take is a lot of effort and caring from the rest of us to get them back to the performing ground, where we can again listen to the beat of humanity resounding in their joyous drumming.