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Do You Udu?

BY ROBERT J. DAMM

The udu is a clay-pot percussion instrument that originated with the Ibo tribe of Nigeria. Demonstration of the udu in Alex Acuna's *Drums and Percussion* instructional video led me to purchase my own udu, a useful instrument for a variety of live performances and studio sessions. This unique instrument naturally sparked many questions from listeners about its origin, leading me to discover more about its place in Ibo culture.

Ethnomusicologists have classified the udu as an idiophonic aerophone because the body of the pot is a "sonorous substance which is struck" and its tone is created by manipulating "an enclosed column of air." Musical clay pots come in a range of sizes, from 6 to 12 inches in diameter (Nicklin 54).

In Nigeria, the udu is cradled between the knees in the lap of the performer, who sits either on a mat or on a bench (Echezona 85). The udu is traditionally held on the lap with the side hole facing upwards (Nicklin 53), and typically emits two varied tones when the player alternately strikes the open side hole and the top end hole (the mouth of the pot) with the palms of the hands.

A traditional Nigerian technique involves the performer striking one of the openings while rhythmically modulating the tones of the air chamber by opening and closing the other hole with the palm (Blench 48; Echezona 86; Euba 5; Nicklin 53). "The performer can beat very complicated rhythms on the [openings of the] udu and, at the same time, produce another quality of sound by rhythmically beating on the body of the instrument" (Echezona 86).

Sometimes a flat beater made of plant fiber or a piece of hide is used to strike the top hole (Euba 5; Omibiyi 32). Pebbles and other objects are often put into the udu; these create additional timbres as the instrument is struck or "when the performer agitates the instrument while performing on it" (Echezona 86). "Performers display a considerable degree of ingenuity in playing the instrument, with individual and regional variations in techniques and

standards of performance" (Nicklin 54).

Perhaps the most significant fact about the udu is that in Nigeria it is principally played by women (Akpabot 23; Blench 48; Echezona 20; Euba 5; Nicklin 53; Omibiyi 32). Very little has been written about the udu, and of the fewer than ten sources I found about the udu, none were written by Ibo women or specifically acknowledged the perspective of a Nigerian woman. In order to truly understand the cultural significance of the udu, it is imperative to solicit the views of a culture-bearer.

Therefore, I contacted Elizabeth Udemgba, an Ibo woman now living near my community. Although her experiences are not necessarily representative of all Ibo women, she has conveyed valuable first-hand information about the use of the udu in traditional Ibo culture.

Udemgba explained that "udu" is not only the name for the musical instrument but also refers to water pots and cooking pots. The word "udu" also relates to the word "udo," which means "peace" in the Ibo language. The name for the musical

instrument correlates with the culturally accepted notion of peacefulness as a feminine quality. Women are peaceful, and the udu is a women's instrument. A war dance, considered masculine, would be accompanied by drums and bells played by men. By contrast, there are feminine categories of music which are performed by women and will, therefore, utilize the udu. The female musical genre called "egwu obi" literally means "song of the heart" and is performed with udu (one or two, three at the most).

Women also use the *aja* (wooden blocks with handles used as clappers) and the *ncheka* (gourd rattle) to provide accompaniment for the udu. Another instrument used by women is the oenamapoeic *yom-yom*. These tiny jingle bells are strung together and tied around the ankles and waist of the dancers.

A clear delineation of gender attributes and gender roles pervades Ibo culture. In *Things Fall Apart*, a novel by Nigerian Chinua Achebe, the conflict results from the main character's obsession with being masculine and his fear of turning out to be like Ukoy, his father. Ukoy, a musician, is considered feminine and as such a failure to his son. The character development of Ukoy includes references to Ibo music: "He could hear in his mind's ear the bloodstirring and intricate rhythms of the ekwe [wooden slit drum] and the udu and the ogene [iron bell], and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colorful and plaintive tune." The novel provides many insights into Ibo culture through descriptions of material traits, family and social organization, government, war, religion, and mythology.

According to Giorgini, the udu "is the invention of some ancient village potter who struck a second opening in the side of a traditional clay water vessel and discovered the resonating sound it produced." Udemgba recounts the story told to her by her father when she was very young and asked why the udu pot had a hole in the side:



Elizabeth Udemgba with her udu

A young girl had gone to the stream to

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fetch water, and on the way she fell and dropped her water pot, breaking the hole in the side. She sat down and cried about what had happened and she cried by singing (which in Ibo is called “mbem”). She began tapping on the pot to accompany her song and found that is created a lovely sound. That is how the udu became a musical instrument.

The udu I showed Udemgba was the LP Claytone #4, which has a diameter of approximately 11 inches. She said that this size was typical for the traditional udu but that smaller ones were also common. Larger clay pots are too big to be held on the lap and are placed on the ground, where they are played with a paddle. These larger pots may have clay feet attached to the bottom to keep them from tipping over but do not feature the side hole. The Ibo udu always has a handle near the spout for carrying and can be played with one hand while held in the other.

Echezona wrote that the udu, as a work of art, is often decorated with artistically placed lines and rounded protuberances. Udemgba said that the udu is made from fresh clay and traditionally has a rough clay finish of black or brown. The woman who plays the udu may decorate it with

lines or carvings (of animals for example) but it is usually kept in its simple form.

In Ibo villages, girls and women meet each week according to age groups for music rehearsals. The song and dance practice is held at the home of the person responsible for storing the instruments. Some women sing, some dance, and some play instruments. The udu is the major instrument to accompany women’s dance because the udu rhythm indicates the dance steps. “The two predominant pitches employed serve to tell the dancers whether they are expected to use the right or the left leg, or, when one foot is doing the motion, whether that foot should move up or down” (Echezona 87).

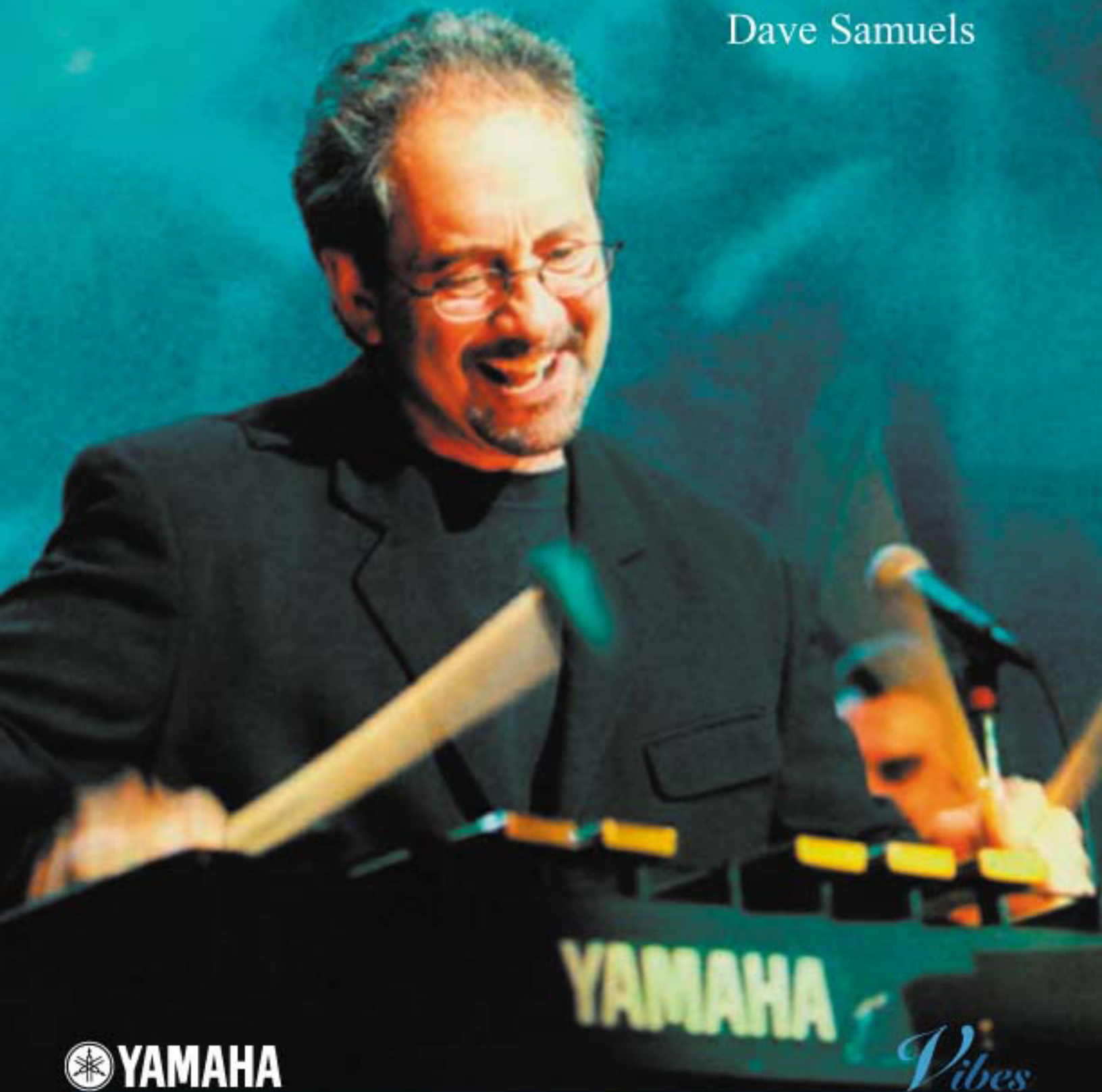
The udu is used to provide social and ceremonial music, for entertainment, to supply rhythms for dancers, and to accompany singing (Echezona 89). It is also used to accompany hymns in some churches (Nicklin 53). In the Ibo tradition, storytelling often includes call-and-response songs to highlight certain parts of the narrative and to allow the listeners to participate. These songs, when told by women, are accompanied by udu and rattle. Udemgba shared several very entertaining stories with me in which she demonstrated the use of antiphonal songs while accompanying herself on udu.

The udu also is used for “talking” in the same manner as other drums in Africa. Udemgba said, “The udu is always talking.” The Ibo have a tonal language, so by playing the rhythms of speech with corresponding tonal relationships available on the instrument, the udu can be used to “talk.” The rhythms can reproduce a woman’s name, telling her to listen for a message. Although the udu does not project well enough to be heard throughout a large town, villages are sufficiently small that the udu is effectively used as a communication device.

Do men ever play the udu? Answering this question requires an understanding of the complex spiritual beliefs and sacred ceremonies of the Ibo people. When ancestral spirits return to the village to visit, they appear as *mmo* (masquerades) via initiated males dressed in ceremonial costumes. Women are not allowed to be near the masquerades and will run screaming in fear when they see the costumed men enter the village. The spirits may be male or female ancestors, and if the spirit is feminine, she will require feminine music for ceremonial dancing; thus, appropriate music will be played on feminine instruments such as the udu. This is the only occasion in which an Ibo man will play the udu. Udemgba added that the men would

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RESOURCES

Instruments

Frank Giorgini has been creating udus for nearly 30 years. His instruments are available through the LP Udu Drum Claytone Series. In addition to traditional Nigerian-style udus, he has created several new shapes of clay drums. His designs, such as the Udongo II and the Mbwata, feature two pots in one instrument. His collaboration with percussionist Jamey Haddad resulted in the Hadgini. This dual-chambered drum relates to the design of the Indian tabla. He also developed the Utar and the Tambuta, which have a wide, flat surface to accommodate traditional hand drum techniques.

Joe Agu, founder of the Rhythms Exotic Afro Percussions company, designs traditional musical clay pots and creates unique hybrid instruments. His catalog includes the Udu Igbah, which has a single drumhead mounted on one side; the Bata Udu, which incorporates two drumheads mounted on opposite sides; the Umkhonto, which has the drumhead on the top with the two playing holes on opposite sides; and the Udu Guiro, which includes a drumhead, two playing holes, and a ribbed surface for scraping.

Stephen Wright is the owner and operator of the Wright Hand Drum Company. His clay percussion instruments include *Ubangs*, bongos, dumbeks, *ghatams*, claypans, and shakers. The *Ubang* is an adaptation of the udu that has a flatter playing surface while maintaining the traditional top end and side hole openings.

Barry Hall builds unusual ceramic musical instruments and performs on them with the Burnt Earth Ensemble. The Burnt Earth shop offers unique ceramic clay drums, didjeridus, the hybrid "didjibodhrans," horns, flutes, and rattles.

Search the Web for "udu" and you will find other sources for instruments.

Instructional Video

Brian Melick, through LP Music Group, has available *How To of Udu* in video or book and audio package. The video features demonstrations of basic techniques and six improvisations applying the techniques.

Joe Agu of the Rhythms Exotic Afro Percussions company offers *Udu Magic: The Art of Udu Drum Playing*. This video, with companion CD, features the

company's udu products in solo and ensemble settings.

N. Scott Robinson made a video called *Hand Drumming: Exercises for Unifying Technique*. The first hour is divided into 35 exercises while the last 20 minutes features two percussionists utilizing a variety of clay drums and percussion instruments with bass and guitar.

Barry Hall released *Udu: Clay Pot Drums and How to Play Them*. He explains how udus are built and demonstrates various playing strokes. The video features Matthew Schertz showing how to apply Afro-Cuban, South Indian, and Middle Eastern drumming techniques and rhythms to the udu. Members of the Burnt Earth Ensemble perform several selections using udus with other instruments.

Recital Piece

I composed "Udu Dances," a three-movement recital solo featuring the udu. The suite was published by HoneyRock and reviewed in the April 2002 *Percussive Notes*.

Recordings

Evelyn Glennie: Her Greatest Hits

Evelyn Glennie

RCA Victor, 1997

Evelyn Glennie, percussionist

"Sorbet No. 3: Udu Trail" 1:55

Glennie plays an udu solo while wearing wrist rattles made of llama hooves.

Ghatam

Antenna Repairmen

M-A Recordings, 2000 (recorded 1995)

Robert Fernandez, M.B. Gordy, Arthur Jarvenin, percussionists

"Ghatam" 51:02

Composed and improvised percussion music played entirely on ceramic instruments designed and built by Stephen Freedman.

Inner Rhythms

Randy Crafton

Relaxation Company, 1996

Randy Crafton, percussionist

"Udu Gamelan" 18:04

Percussion music for meditation and/or relaxation. This track features shaker ostinato, repetitive patterns, and improvised solos on seven different udus made by Frank Giorgini.

Live At The Blue Note

Will Calhoun Quintet

Half Note Records, 2000

Will Calhoun, percussionist

"Umoja" ("Unity") 9:31

The first six minutes of this jazz-funk ballad includes Will on udu (he switches to drumset for the last part of the tune).

Percussive Voices

Brian Melick

Hudson Valley Records, 2001

Brian Melick, percussionist

"Shell Shock" 7:45

"Udu Trance" 7:32

"Conversations" 3:25 (originally included on the *How To of Udu* instructional video)

Percussion music with three tracks featuring a variety of udus designed by Frank Giorgini.

Planet Drum

Mickey Hart

Ryko, 1991

"Udu Chant" 3:40

Sikiru Adepoju, Mickey Hart, Zakir

Hussain, Airto Moreira, percussionists

Percussion ensemble music; on this

track, Zakir Hussain plays custom-

made electronic triggers connected to

digitally-sampled udus by Frank

Giorgini.

Rhythm & Beauty: The Art of Percussion

(companion CD for the book by the same name)

Rocky Maffit

Watson-Guptill, 1999

Rocky Maffit, percussionist

"Udu Time" 2:06

Improvised music for udus and clay ocarinas.

Udu Magic

(companion CD for the video by the same name)

Joe Agu

Rhythms, 1998

Joe Agu, Hugh Humphrey, Marquinho

Brasil, percussionists

"Faith" 5:12

Percussion trio featuring Joe Agu's udus.

Vortex

Eddie Palmieri

Tropijazz, 1996

Paoli Meijias, percussionist

"Whirlwind" 8:35

Latin jazz music featuring a one-minute introduction for udu solo.

likely set the udu on a ring of banana leaves on the ground and play it with a paddle rather than hold it on their lap to play it with their hands as women do.

The udu, a domestic implement turned musical instrument in the hands of Nigerian women, is a versatile addition to the percussion cabinet. In light of current interest in women's issues, the udu, as an instrument traditionally played by Ibo women, is perfect for any recital celebrating women in music. Audiences are fascinated to learn that a clay pot can be a very expressive percussion instrument. They also are intrigued to discover that the udu is not simply a novelty item, but is an important musical instrument with an ancient African tradition.

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WEB SITES

- Burnt Earth: www.ninestones.com
Latin Percussion: www.lpmusic.com

Rhythms Exotic Afro Percussions: www.Afro-rhythms.com

Wright Hand Drums:
www.wrighthanddrums.com

Robert J. Damm is an Associate Professor at Mississippi State University. He holds degrees in Music Education from Quincy University, the University of Illinois, and

the University of North Texas. He has served as President of the Mississippi PAS Chapter and currently serves on the PAS Education and World Percussion committees. His book on teaching American Indian music in the elementary school is published by Garland. His compositions for percussion are published by HoneyRock.

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