

THE STORY OF EUGENE SKEEF'S UDU PROJECT

In my post as Director of Music Development at the Pavarotti Music Centre in post-war Mostar, Bosnia & Herzegovina, I experienced a lot of interest in the udu (the Nigerian clay pot drum) when I carried it on music-healing journeys. It was the first one brought to the region. I also used it on a recording with Brian Eno at the Pavarotti Music Centre. On that session we featured Oha Maslo and Atilla Aksoj, two young Bosnian musicians I taught to play the udu. Even after I had returned to my family in London the resonance of the udu stayed with them. Oha and Atilla were left with the idea to create this instrument in Bosnia.

Another project I initiated with Atilla and Oha was to translate the negative effects of war into a positive healing experience. The idea was to hunt for weapons of destruction scattered around the war-torn environment and transform them into drums and other musical instruments of peace. Whilst searching for these items I found that there was a pottery tradition in Bosnia, but because of the devastation of the war the potters were not easy to locate. The dream back then (1997) was to create an udu-making industry for the shattered economy and also to contribute towards the rehabilitation of this country's damaged communities. In my absence, Atilla and Oha found the potter Avdo Besic.

At the turn of the century I was presenting a BBC Radio 3 concert programme by Ladysmith Black Mambazo from Durban in South Africa to celebrate the dawn of the new millennium. The festival included me performing on the udu alongside poets Benjamin Zephaniah from Britain and Pitika Ntuli from South Africa. The readings were held at a museum that had been converted from a government building that was once the headquarters of the city's infamous Native Administration Department, a regional centre of apartheid's insidious system of Black labour control. While the museum was now a place that was seeking to reflect Durban's urban growth and the history of its residents, it was felt by members of the audience that the building still carried a residue of that negative pre-democracy history.

At the end of the performance a group of women in the audience came forward to comment on what they felt was the "healing sound" of the clay pot. They thanked me for soothing them and immediately wanted to know more about the instrument, asking me if I could teach them to make and play it. I told them that the instrument was called an udu, and yes I could teach them to play it, but no I could not teach them to make it as I was not a potter; but I told them that I knew a potter called Clive Sithole with a studio not far from where we were, who was about to become a part of my international udu project, who I would ask to teach them.

These women were in the company of Sam Moodley, a stalwart member of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement. I knew Sam from our activist days in the seventies. She told me that the women were participants of the community work she was doing, and that they were all victims of domestic violence. I vowed to embrace their cause through the udu project.

This was the main impetus for me to develop the Udu Project into an international inter-cultural initiative. To achieve this I set up Umoya Creations as a charity. Umoya is the Zulu word for spirit, breath, wind, temperament and rumour.

The originators of the udu are Igbo women from the eastern region of Nigeria, who use it mainly for ceremonial purposes. I figured they would be the best people to consult on the making of this beautiful instrument. So in 2005 I traveled to Enugu in eastern Nigeria, where I met expert udu makers Victoria Eze, Angelina Okoro, Grace Ugwoke and Uzor Amaka Ugwoke. I filmed these amazingly gifted women in their village of Umuoyo Esimba Nrobo demonstrating the whole process of making an udu, from kneading the clay to firing and playing the completed pot drum.

The udu is currently very popular among recording artists in the west and it is fast becoming, like the djembe, one of the most sought-after percussion instruments in world music. However, the commercial interest in the udu has had no meaningful benefit for its originators. It is this inequality that has also challenged me to implement an ambitious programme to bring about an equitable exchange for the Igbo and the communities worldwide who participate in the Eugene Skeef Udu Project (So far projects have been established in Nigeria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, South Africa and Britain).

Eugene Skeef