

East African Taarab as a contemporary mediator of the diversity and vitality of a musical tradition within Islamic culture

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In this paper I address the reception of the East African music style, *Taarab*, in the light of the increasing reappearance and importance of religions in world and mass culture. My interpretation is based on many years of research into East African and especially Zanzibari musical cultures, in which I have in particular paid attention to Western and global images of the Muslim coast area. It is my impression that the external interest in *Taarab* has undergone a considerable change and that the internal response to this has been both creative and dynamic. In this way a dialogue between Western and even global mass culture and Muslim musical identity has emerged.

The return of religion in popular music

In 2004 one of the leading African world music artists, Youssou N'Dour, gave out his album *Egypt*, which is homage to the power and quality of African Islam. According to N'Dour his music, inspired by both Sufi traditions of the Senegalese Mouride sect and modern urban Egyptian mass culture from Cairo, *“praises the tolerance of my religion, which has been badly misused by a certain ideology. At a time when there is a debate on Islam, the world needs to know how people are taking over this religion. Our religion has nothing to do with the violence, with terrorism.”*¹

The statement shows how impossible it is to separate music and dance from ideological and political features, and it testifies to the powerful role of music in the staging of religious ritual and popular culture alike. Not least does it demonstrate how Sufi related musics have gained a strong influence in the global music scene at a time in which a clash between world systems and civilizations and an ongoing “othering” of the Muslims are continuously debated.

Moving from West Africa to the other end of the continent the syncretic culture of *Taarab* on the East African coast offers an equally interesting example of a music which plays a crucial role in negotiations over Muslim identity. The culture of *Taarab* is tightly related to the historical encounters of the region and the presence of Arabs, slavery, colonialism, modernity, and Islam. It is also firmly tied to wedding celebrations and an increasing number of public events. In sound and in images *Taarab* balances the many diverse musical influences which have followed the historical movements and it is and was always related to Sufi mysticism and organization. In the following I will discuss the role of Sufi/Islamic musical culture in Zanzibar and examine its interchange with local and global musics as well as its influence on social dynamics.

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¹ See chapter on Youssou N'dour on <http://www.nonesuch.com/main.html>, Copied June 25th 2006

Music and society

My point of departure for this discussion is that music is inseparable from human action and identity making. Always at places and points where people meet to manifest and highlight their views sound is an unavoidable element. The discourse has occupied musicologists and ethnomusicologists over time, still it is hard to qualify the exact relation between a society and its culture. The connection between social movements and musical events is in many ways a complicated one, as Phil Bohlman has stressed.² Whether music mirrors the happenings in society or whether it has absolute meaning is constantly debated. I suggest instead that the performance or the musical event should be seen as an active field in understanding the world, in which identities and meanings are negotiated and through which the 'non-verbal' messages of the musical sound assists making sense of the world.³ Music does not have essentialised meaning, neither is it the voice of God, but is a man made and humanly organized network of codings perpetually exchanged and negotiated through performance and listening. (Blacking 1973, Stokes 1994, Feld 1994)

Sufi Music - Popular Islam and culture

Some musics in Africa are tightly connected to Muslim movements, and often in a seemingly paradoxical relation. On the one hand music is mistrusted and must be regulated, on the other its powerful capacity is needed and accordingly redefined in order to comply with the rules and norms of the society in question. Nowhere are these dilemmas more clearly expressed than in Sufi Mysticism, where brotherhoods and the idea of *Ihkwan saafa* (Brethrens/Brothers of Purity) highlight the discourse on music within Islam. The Sufi brotherhoods use cantilation, movements and music as ways to reach Allah, but styles are musically very diverse and their practice of merging indigenous and Islamic traditions has led to an interpretation of Sufism as popular Islam.⁴

Vocal music, at all levels so to say, is ranked higher than instrumental music, and the prominence of the voice is both the background to the controversial status of music in Islam and the key to understanding the role of music within Sufism. Repeating Martin Stokes' emphasis on the negotiating of meaning through actual performance Seyyed Hossein Nasr states "*Music's spiritual power is one which enhances whatever is there in the first place*"⁵. Pleasure should serve to calm man and it is endowed man by God. It is therefore impossible that the law of God can be against pleasure; it only requires discipline (according to Mahmoud Shaltut). In this way Sufi musical mysticism bridges the gap between controversial activities and everyday human practices.

² Bohlman, Philip V. (2003) Music and Cultures; Historiographies of Disjuncture, in Clayton, Herbert, & Middleton: *The Cultural study of Music, a critical Introduction*, Routledge

³ Stokes, Martin (1994) Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity an Music, in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music, The musical construction of place*, Berg

⁴ In the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians – musical Sufism is found under "Popular Islam" , Grove Online, visited may 2007

⁵ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1997) Islam and Music; The Legal and the Spiritual Dimensions, in Lawrence E. Sullivan *Enchanting Powers: Music in the World's Religions*

Zanzibar and *Taarab*

Sufi mysticism is organized in Muslim, religious brotherhoods, the *Tariqas* which are also found on the Swahili coast. Sufis actively use music as a means in their mission, and narratives of how the *Dhirk* was used clearly show, how historically important the performance was in spreading the Muslim faith. Zanzibar was one of the leading cultural centres in East Africa and the phenomenon of Sufi brotherhoods spread from here to the mainland. According to Laura Fair the number of adherent to Sufi brotherhoods particularly the *Qadiriyya* expanded dramatically in Zanzibar at the start of the 20th century. Through its institutions and performative platforms former slaves could raise their social standing in society, as “*status within the Sufi brotherhoods was based on religious devotion rather than heritage or having studied with the most prestigious scholars*”⁶

East African Muslims never received Islam in a passive way but created a synthesis of the new influence and the existing customs and habits. Traditionally, Swahili brotherhoods included both men and women, and provided an opportunity to cross the highly gendered borders of everyday life. Women were actively participating in the Sufi religious rituals – mostly in the performance of the *dirkh* as early as the 1910s. The possessions or trances following the *dhrik* were close - but not identical - to the worship in the Swahili spirit-associations, the *chama's*, known all over the coast. Today they have lost importance in many regions but they flourish in Zanzibar. The traditional spirits even for the devout Muslim are compatible with Islam, but they are always considered inferior to Allah.

The people of the coast – the Swahilis - through the use of the Shari'a felt part of the total Islamic community - the *umma*, and they also saw themselves as clearly differentiated from the 'impure' people of the inlands.⁷ But when the powerful Omanis settled in Zanzibar in the 19th century, they regarded the Swahili coast as the periphery of the Arabian world and therefore on the borders of the civilization. This became the background to the development of an elite court culture which included music and poesy, and which also appealed to outsiders. It is well known that Europeans regarded Muslim civilisation as superior to Black African cultures, and that British colonials and guests admired Arab culture and favoured it to the disadvantage of those of the mainland. Thus both in the past and in the present the cultural struggle over power and status is related to the encounter of Arab-Muslim and mainland ways.

As a result of this contested position exchange with and openness to new ideas have marked the history of the *Taarab* music. The cultural encounters between local and foreign musics over possibly more than a 1000 years have resulted in mobility and complex musical borrowings, but in the court culture of the Omani Sultans the main inspiration for the style came from musical centres of the Arab world and most distinctly from Cairo in Egypt where popular music culture was flourishing. Many types of instruments and musical structures were exchanged and the rulers of Zanzibar made their court musicians visit Cairo just as renowned musicians made trips to the Islands. At the time of independence a change of order became visible. The new leaders of the radical revolution in 1964 also favoured *Taarab*, but they embarked on a process to

⁶ Fair, Laura (2001) *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community and Identity in Post-abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Eastern African Studies), James Currey, p. 90

⁷ Middleton, John (1992) *The World of the Swahili, An African Mercantile Civilization*, Michigan

(re-)Africanize the style and accordingly many Arab signifiers in sound and language were avoided and even forbidden.⁸ In the 1980s international interest in Muslim *Taarab* music emerged, and at the end of the century the official cultural policy draws on all available styles within *Taarab* – a pluralism which echoes the diversity of globalisation and world music strategies. The inherent discourse over social and religious identity is however still present, and as I will later describe how the influence of medialization played an important role also in early and mid 20th century developments.

Examples from Zanzibar

The story of Siti Binta Saad who is remembered as the first and most skilled *Taarab* female singer can possibly be an example of this. Siti was a legend along the entire Swahili coast already in her own lifetime, and her fame became international through recordings in India. Siti Binta Saad was born Zanzibar around 1880 and both her parents were immigrant workers from the mainland. When around 1910 Siti moved to Zanzibar town, she met several musicians and was introduced both to music, to the Arabic language, the Qur'an and the Arabian literature. Siti became the first woman in Zanzibar to be a popular star and her fame quickly made her a frequent guest in the house of the Sultan.⁹ This was a rather paradoxical position for a woman singer in a traditionally male-dominated culture. Also her band was small and the male musicians in the group were in no way connected to the elite in Zanzibar Town. It included a *dumbak* - the small drum which gave name to the *Taarab* style *Kidumbak*. Siti often sang in a veil, but she did sing in public - an otherwise forbidden activity in Muslim culture of that time. Fair discusses the often put question of why Siti Binta Saad covered her face in the *buibui* when she sang. Traditionally it has been believed that the reason was that Siti was ugly. Fair gives reasonable evidence that she was in fact not ugly per se, rather she was African and looked like it. The *buibui* – itself a signal of urbanity and modernity - concealed both class and ethnicity, and gave access to recognition otherwise not available for people of African origin. Perhaps her musical skills further enabled her to transcend the social order and make her way into the elite milieu of classical *Taarab*. We don't really know.

Audio example 1:

Siti Binta Saad: Njia Ungurusumbwe. Recorded February 1930, in Zanzibar by Columbia WE 40, released on "Echoes of Africa, Early Recordings", Wergo 2002.

⁸ Kirkegaard, Annemette (1996) *Taarab na Muziki wa Densi*, unpubl. Thesis for the Ph.d. Degree.

⁹ The late ud and violin player of Ikhwan Saafa, Seif Salim Saleh remembered that Siti used to sing there once a week and primarily on Thursdays. Personal communication with Seif Salim Saleh, Zanzibar Oct. 1994



Photo 1: Siti Binta Saad's portrait in the Peace Memorial Museum in Zanzibar Town, 1994

Siti Binta Saad was never directly involved with the Sufi organisations, but my second example the *Taarab* group Ikhwani Saafa Musical Club of Zanzibar in both history and musical style follows many of the issues already discussed. Organised in line with the tariqas and believed to be founded in 1905, the club was also a brotherhood in which the members own their instruments, sponsor each other, care for family and children, and adhere to an amateur attitude towards music making.¹⁰ Through its history this club has been subject to both success and defeat and both in the days of revolution and in modern time under multi party rule, it was and is associated with the Arab side of Zanzibari social life.¹¹ Ikhwani Saafa Musical Club – in fierce competition with the younger, rivalling Culture Musical Club - is the quintessence of classical, orchestral *Taarab* and the instrumentation is very broad and versatile – always however dominated by the full string section of violins, celli and bass. Even if modern times have resulted in many changes and a conspicuous contact with the World Music environment, the old club adheres to values of elevation through sound and in this way the popular sound of East African *Taarab* is still in dialogue with the religious culture of Islam.

However, as in the discussion of Sufi musics generally, globalisation and medialization also play important roles in *Taarab*. One of the reasons that Siti was so successful in breaking the social barriers in Zanzibari society – apart from her artistic supremacy – was the fact that she was helped by the spread of modern technology in the

¹⁰ Personal communication with Seif Salim Saleh, Zanzibar Oct. 1994 and Oct. 1998.

¹¹ In 1964 the club was forced to change its name to Malindi Musical Club as part of the process of africanisation and in the 1990 it has occasionally been associated with the political party Civic United Front (CUF).

form of commercial recordings. In her lifetime she is believed to have made some 300 records and like her Egyptian contemporary Umm Kulthum, her recordings and concerts were broadcasted to a very large audience. In this way the emerging modern media of the 1920s and 30s went hand in hand with an aesthetic and ideological need to unify the culture in the area,¹² and ever since the local cultures of the Islamic social movements have been exposed to an increasing globalisation – but also using it as a tool in their effort to gain visibility. Since the 1980s Ikhwan Saafa Musical Club has been recorded numerous times for shifting world music labels and their orchestral Egyptian style has become a marker of Zanzibari national, Muslim culture.

Audio example 2:

Ikhwan Saafa Musical Club: Afkari 'thoughts'- Bashraf,
Recorded in February – March 1988, released on Music of
Zanzibar vol. 2, Globe Style Records.

Sufis on the world music scene; Sufi music - the favoured image of Islam

As mentioned before, one such Cairo inspired sound is audible on Youssou N'dour's 2004 album, *Egypt*, which with lyrics inspired by and in honour of the Mouride learned brother, Amadou Bamba and music in the popular *Mbalax* style is a feature of globalisation as well as of local and religious matters. The ideological connection to the Sufi movement is clear and the cover notes explain:

Music life in Senegal is centered in the country's Sufi communities. In their modern adaptation to the rhythms of post-independence Africa; in the social initiatives their teachings inspire among people in all walks of Senegalese life, and in the ecumenical nature of popular response to their programs, celebrations and rituals. (Egypt, 2004)

N'Dour's album also presents an Egyptian string orchestra from Cairo and various elements from an imagined, trans-Muslim and Arab musical heritage, similar to the sound of classical *Taarab* (ISMC) in Zanzibar. Still, discourse over both stress the particularity of place: Youssou N'Dour: "Religious expression in Senegal is so much a part of the fabric of everyday life as to be nearly indistinguishable from popular culture."¹³ And in Zanzibar: "The best example of this creative blending [from all over the Indian Ocean and beyond, ed.] is *Taarab* [i.e. Muslim] music, the national sound of the Islands."¹⁴ The statements initiate a discussion over diversity and universalism, which is central to the understanding of how and why a music which is clearly intended for something else (here: religious absorption) can move to other strata of social life (here: commercial popular culture) and become part of an imagined new spiritual experience. (here: the commercialised Sufi style)

In N'Dour's album Sufi music becomes the tool for balancing the universal and the particular, claiming at one and the same time to be both Senegalese and part of a more

¹² The area is today either promoted through the launching of a 'Dhow countries' area (Zanzibar International Film Festival and Dhow Countries Music Academy) or 'Indian Ocean' culture (Mariam Hamdani and the Ministry of Culture) Personal communication with Emerson Skeen and Mariam Hamdani in October 1998.

¹³ See chapter on Youssou N'dour on <http://www.nonesuch.com/main.html>, Copied from homepage June 25th 2006

¹⁴ Dhow Countries Music Academy website: <http://www.zanzibarmusic.org/Taarab.htm> Download June 24th 2007

general and shared Sufi tradition where brotherhoods, clubs and societies host the celebration of religious music. In *Taarab* as Werner Graebner has documented it is much the same.¹⁵ Through these references to older forms of organisation, history, age and heritage are claimed.¹⁶ But the process also clearly highlights the use of expressive culture with an ideological, political or religious meaning in a globalised world.

This notion of a popular and open Islam is welcomed by audiences both in the West and in Africa as the mystic and secretive aura of the Sufi performers apparently works well with the demand of the world music environment for exotism and otherness.

The examples from Zanzibar highlight this. The renewed popularity of *Taarab* in the 1980s and its relative success on a global scale are remarkable. As in the case of N'Dour it was related to the emergence of the phenomenon of world music, but the reason why precisely *Taarab* was favoured is still puzzling. In my understanding it was due to the particular sonority of the music which indicated, and to many Westerners represented, an ideal of a pleasant and friendly people, who lived a life in balance and was united through their music. It of course also expresses a romanticised exotism.

To the Zanzibaris it was the other way around; the music of *Taarab* was increasingly in that same period used as an agent in the process in which the Islamic social movement tried to gain visibility during the transition to multi-party democracy, and in that process the return to acoustic forms and older instruments associated with the Arab world provided a possibility to express identity. That it could match the interests of the recording business and bring international attention was not a problem.



Photo 2: Seif Salim Saleh (ney) and Abdulla Moussa (qanun) playing at sundowners in the Serena Hotel in October 1998. The music is acoustic and only for a small group of instruments and the dressing stylised in white Kanzu and Kofia (Gown and kalot)

¹⁵ Graebner, Werner (2004) *Between Mainland and Sea: The Taarab Music of Zanzibar*, in Kevin Dawe (ed.) *Island Musics*. Berg ; Oxford, New York

¹⁶ Bohlman (1997) op.cit.

Let me briefly include a last example from Zanzibar. Sufi musics of the *madarasas* and their particular musical events called the *Maulidi* are beginning to surface in festivals and on CDs. *Maulidi* is primarily a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet, but the music is very often performed at weddings. The music shifts in turn between recitation of chapters from the Qur'an in Arabic and the singing of the *kasida* – the hymns and praises of the prophet – in Kiswahili.¹⁷

The Kilimani Muslim school in Zanzibar was recorded by the label Caprice from Sweden already in 1996, and on the cd we hear children singing from the repertoire of the school. The songs all start with a chanting followed by solo performance of the text. Later again the choir enters and the drums set off to punctuate the rhythm. As the songs progress the children start to move – often on their knees – but still increasingly powerfully – and the sight is like that of a moving sea. This is the movement which in Sufi tradition brings the worshippers closer to Allah.

Audio example nr.3:

Harusi Yoyo, Kilimani Muslim School, From Music From Tanzania and Zanzibar, vol 3, Caprice CAP 21577

The style is Sufi, but the sound however very local. The choral parts resemble *Taarab* singing and in the solo parts the lead singer makes use of a more melismatic and refined style. Likewise the role of the drums (the *tar*) – in the notes claimed to be in hocket style on the large frame drums – is close local and traditional structures of Zanzibari music.

Maulidi groups now play in public at the Ziff and the Sauti Ya Busara festivals, which are cross cultural events directed at tourism and building of local identities alike, and they are extremely popular. As in the Senegalese case the groups claim history, here the *Maulidi Ya Homu*: “*Maulidi ya Homu comes from a centuries-old tradition with roots in the Arab World and/or Indonesia – even the people who practise it do not know for sure about its origins.*”¹⁸

As in *Taarab* performances where a clear shift from formal dressing in suits and evening gowns are replaced by Muslim clothing, a conspicuous prominence is given to dressing and visual appearance: “*For many years both women and men participated in Maulidi ya Homu performances, but these days it is mostly performed only by men, who make a spectacular sight on stage in their white kanzu and kofia (traditional Zanzibari Muslim dress).*”¹⁹

In the 1980 new Grove entry on Islamic music Eckhard Neubauer assessed that the prime of the Dervish musical and performative movement had been around the year 1900 and that their importance since then had faded so that their appearances now were mostly as stylised tourist attractions. The decrease of their status, he believed, was due to the disregard of the sensuous elements in their worship, for him a clear indicator that a more sober and less exoticised attitude was preferred by the scholars of Islamic music. But it has not turned out so – in fact the attention to Sufism and especially its music has increased dramatically. So I am back at my initial question: why has it increased so dramatically and why has Sufi sounds been so welcomed?

¹⁷ Fargion, Janet Topp (2000) Booklet to “Zanzibar: Music of Celebration” Topic Records TSCD917

¹⁸ http://zanzibar.net/zanzibar/music_and_culture/music_styles/religious_music Download Feb 17th 2007.

¹⁹ http://zanzibar.net/zanzibar/music_and_culture/music_styles/religious_music Download Feb 17th 2007.

And to sum up...

Religious musics in Zanzibar and other African localities are contested and discursive spaces, containing both the daily struggles for social and economical survival and a path to Allah.

In a discussion of how a kind universalism is presently attributed to Sufi musics counter to the fact that “*sounds are vastly different*”, Philip Bohlman argues that the singular level at which they demonstrate a form of unity is that of the markets for which they are produced. Accordingly, the West has used Sufism to clothe the other, and Sufism has by now become an oriental trope. This was perhaps also the case in 19th and early 20th century Zanzibar where British colonials preferred the sophisticated and elegant culture of the urban Muslims to that of the rough and “savage” Africans: Today the World Music arena likewise have taken on a fancy for the pleasant and smooth sounds of Senegalese Islamic pop and an purified *Taarab*, which increasingly draws on acoustic and spectacular instruments and historical – possibly invented - roots. Whether this also mirrors a shift in Western attitudes towards Islam is an open question which I will not address here.

But the use of these musics can nevertheless also be interpreted in another way. Like the veil at the early decades of the 20th century was used to signal urbanity, civilisation, and a place in the world, so in contemporary times is music being used also by Muslims in an active performance of self.

Music provides a unique possibility of expressing affiliation and even membership. This is what happens when audiences still listen to the classical Musical Clubs of *Taarab* and the *Maulidi* schools. But as with the story of Siti Binta Saad, who despite her African looks could veil herself and sing within the style of the Muslim elite to which she did not belong, it also provides a means of bypassing ethnic and religious borders.

In Zanzibar the interest for and use of expressive culture has increased. It can be seen as a part of globalisation and the emergence of the Dhow Countries Music Academy and the Zanzibar International Film Festival are both clear results of the interests of a tourist industry which tries to promote the romanticised image of Zanzibar. But it is just as much a repercussion of the globalising process that musicians and cultural workers try to hold on to the local culture and to education. It works both ways as a social and ethnical maker of religious identity – balancing exoticism and sound as an external asset and as a means in negotiations of local social identity. There is no contradiction in this - the story of *Taarab* in Zanzibar clearly shows how the internal and the external strategies come together in a dialogue and that the musical performance actively strengthens the process. It forges solidarity and cohesiveness both inwards amongst performers and audiences and outwards toward the world.

This is the background to the strong position of music as both a marker of social distinction and a unifier of social movements. *Taarab* was and is still firmly tied to the Islamic ideals of culture even if it is also an agent on the globalised world music stage.