

Taarab and Chakacha in East Africa: Transformation, Appreciation and Adaptation of Two Popular Music Genres of the Kenyan Coast

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Introduction

Taarab and *chakacha*, the popular music genres of Mombasa, Lamu and Malindi in Kenya, are illustrative musical examples of intercultural production, transformation and adaptation in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Taarab* and *chakacha* popular music styles are found in several countries of Eastern and Central Africa. While they are related, often they are differentiated by the types in contemporary popular classification and in denomination at times due to the Egyptian, Saudi Arabian and Indian roots of the original *taarab* instruments, structures, aesthetics and belly dancing. *Chakacha* as a popular urban phenomenon on the Kenyan coast incorporates traditional Kenyan instruments, rhythms and articulations of traditional dancing.

In this paper, I present three major positions. Firstly, I contend and agree with the position of other scholars that *taarab* existed on the Kenyan coast in the indigenous form of *kinanda* and when it was introduced to Mombasa via Zanzibar, it overshadowed *kinanda* (Ntarangwi 2003: 17, Graebner 2004).¹ *Taarab* gained dominance because the Arabic *ud* was more versatile than the traditional *kibangala* lute of the WaSwahili² (ibid). Secondly, I contend with the fact that Swahili *taarab* draws its lyrics from Swahili *mashairi* poetry and Kenyan audiences have embraced the *taarab* sound because it incorporates local popular genres such as Kenyan *chakacha* and *benga* and Congolese *lingala*. My third argument is that Swahili *taarab* has undergone transformation in the recent past, judging from the marked rise of female bandleaders who use the space to undertake social commentary, particularly regarding male behaviour. I illustrate this by using the case studies of two recordings of Malika Mohamed's 1993 "Vidonge," and "Hakuna," a 2005 composition by Jemmimah Thiong'o, a gospel musician.

The Arabic word *tarab* is derived from *tariba* that means to be moved, to excite, to sing and make music for enjoyment and dance (Khamis 2005: 133, Graham 1992: 155, Bakari 1994: 4 and Musau 2004:176). In Swahili culture of the Kenyan coast, the WaSwahili refer to accapella singing as *mashairi*, Swahili poetry, and becomes *taarab* when accompanied by musical instruments. Islam perceives sensuous music as *haram* (illegal), while religious music is *halal* (legal or acceptable) (Ntarangwi 2003: 149, Khamis 2005: 141). Most *taarab* musicians as exemplified by iconic Zanzibar diva Siti Binti Saad (a.k.a Mtumwa)³ received training in *kasida*, the singing component of Islamic ritual music (Khamis 2005: 144). Evidently *taarab*, a largely secular genre, feeds off a sacred Islamic foundation in terms of vocal approach and appreciation.

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¹ *Taarab* was introduced on the Kenyan coast through direct trade collaborations between Mombasa, Saudi Arabia and the Arab world as well as the Zanzibar trade connection.

² The word WaSwahili denotes the Swahili people.

³ This Kiswahili word means a slave and Siti Binti Saad was of slave parentage.

The WaSwahili People of Kenya

The history and development of *taarab* and *chakacha* on the Kenyan coast is synonymous with the history of the WaSwahili. The word Swahili is derived from the Arabic *sawahil* that means “coasts” (Ntarangwi 2003: 50). The history of the people locates them in African, Arabic, Portuguese and Indian heritage. In East Africa, the WaSwahili are mainly found in Mombasa, Malindi, Siu, Shanga, Manda, Takwa and Fanza with Mombasa as the main locality. The Persians named Mombasa after Mombaza, a town in Oman. Mombasa Kenya’s second largest city is an international tourist destination, and most importantly the region’s gateway through its port that serves landlocked neighbouring countries Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda (ibid: 17). Mombasa has for centuries been occupied by foreign groups such as the Portuguese in 1593, the Yarubi dynasty of Oman (1698), the Mazrui family (1730), the British (1895) until Kenya gained independence and autonomy in 1963 (ibid: 17). With tourism as one of Kenya’s highest revenue earners, the coast especially Mombasa attracts international and local tourism. The WaSwahili have continuously maintained contact with other cultures and define themselves with the Islamic religion, culture, especially negotiated through dress.⁴ The Kiswahili language, English and Arabic are used on the Kenyan coast. WaSwahili culture is also adapting to the current climate of globalisation and popular culture.

Kiswahili language and Swahili Poetry

The use of Kiswahili, a regional language spoken widely in East and Central Africa, with both Arabic, Indian, Portuguese, English and Bantu roots has made local *taarab* adaptable regionally. Kiswahili, the national language in Kenya and Tanzania has had much more pronounced use in Tanzania. The Kiswahili spoken on the Kenyan coast as well as mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar is the Kimvita dialect that differs in style and lexicon from the easier *bara* dialect spoken in much of Kenya. The Swahili people and the Mijikenda⁵ speak the Kimvita dialect, one that is susceptible to multiple interpretations and double meanings illustrative of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism theory through traditional Swahili *mafumbo* (riddles), *methali* (proverbs) and *mashairi* (poems). Mombasa *taarab* with the Kimvita Kiswahili dialect targets the Swahili audience.

Taarab music is found in Mozambique, East Africa, the Great Lakes Region including the Congo,⁶ North Africa in the Maghreb and Mashreq countries, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and India (Khamis 2005:133). Given the diverse spread of the *taarab* musical genre, it is without doubt that cultural inputs of the local peoples have assisted in shaping the regional sound in a bid to negotiate authenticity and adaptation. I would therefore like to make a distinction between the obvious *taarab* of the Arab world with that of sub-Saharan Africa, specifically the Kenyan coast where the traditional musics have aided in localizing *taarab* through traditional *chakacha* music and dance.

⁴ With *buibuis* dresses and veils for women and *kanzus* (white flowing gowns) for men with skull hats.

⁵ Mijikenda literally means nine towns comprising of the Ribe, Giriama, Kauma, Digo, Rabai, Kambe, Jibana, Chonyi and Duruma peoples.

⁶ Historically Arabs were slave and ivory traders among the Kiswahili speakers of Congo.

Kinanda on the Kenyan Coast

As opposed to the introduction of *taarab* in Zanzibar through the aristocracy and then its subsequent inclusion into the popular music genres of the local peoples, *taarab* was transmitted informally as a result of trade on the Kenyan coast in the early 1900s. Trade collaborations with Tanga, Dar es Salaam and the Arab world were possible in the Indian Ocean through the ports of Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu. It has been argued by contemporary *taarab* musicians on the Kenyan coast that *taarab* existed in Mombasa and Lamu as *kinanda*, a popular music genre incorporating the *kibangala*, a seven-stringed lute, and two drums before the 1900s. The decline in the use of the Swahili *kibangala* lute is attributed to the popularity, availability and versatility of the *ud* and may account for the demise of the *kibangala* lute. Additionally, popularisation of Arabic *tarab* in the 1930s by Umm Kalthum and Mohammed Abd Al Wahhab may have contributed to sidelining Mombasa *kinanda* (Ntarangwi 2003: 171).

Traditional and Modern Chakacha

Some scholars such as Ntarangwi (2003), Topp (2000), Askew (2002) and Musau (2004) contend that *chakacha* has been integrated into Kenyan *taarab*. Traditional *chakacha* a female wedding dance of the Mijikenda people has been incorporated into the WaSwahili's all night wedding celebrations alongside their traditional *vuga* dance (Senoga Zake 1986: 55). The popularity of *chakacha* is rooted in wedding music, and wedding as a celebration. *Chakacha* is also a dance style, performed by women and a main feature is the pelvic gyration. Percussion instruments such as the *chapuo* and *msondo* drums and the *siwa* trumpet accompany the *chakacha* dance. Modern urban popular *chackacha* gained currency in the early 1980s and was popularised by Mombasa bands *Them mushrooms*, *Safari Sound* and *Mombasa Roots*. Western band instruments such as the guitars, keyboard, saxophones, trumpets and the drum kit are used alongside the traditional drums with traditional melodies juxtaposed on the chord progressions VI-V-IV-III. These popular beach hotel based bands replaced the Mijikenda instruments with popular Western band instruments. *Taarab*, traditional and modern *chakacha* exist side by side with *taarab* drawing from both sacred (Islamic and recently Christian) and secular sources while *chakacha* is largely secular. For the most part, *chakacha* draws from the traditional musics of the Mijikenda peoples. On the whole, the instrumentation of both musics is an admixture of Kenyan coastal, Arabic, Indian (Kenyan *taarab* incorporates Indian instruments like the *harmonium* and *tabla*), Euro/American popular band instruments and voice. In all, the rhythmic, melodic, vocal and harmonic aspects of *taarab* and *chakacha* are evidence of borrowing from Arabic, Indian, East African and Euro/American popular musics. Ideally, these are musics that are developed and sustained by global influences and somehow manage to maintain authenticity and socio-cultural relevance and functioning in the WaSwahili society. Other local and regional styles such as *benga* and *lingala* have assisted in developing a Kenyan coastal *chakacha* sound that is defined through *taarab*. Additional influences from Indian *ghazal* film music, Bollywood and numerous popular Western and Latin American musics continue to transform the sound.

Introduction and Development of Taarab in East Africa

Taarab has existed in East Africa for over a century and its history may be divided into four periods (Khamis 2005: 138). From about 1905 until 1920 with the initial

inception in Zanzibar in 1870 through Sultan Seyyid Bargash who established a court with musicians from Egypt who performed Arabic *taarab*. Bargash ruled Oman from Zanzibar and during this time Muhammad Ibrahim, a local Zanzibar musician, was sent to Cairo to learn the Arabic lute *kanoon*, therefore reinforcing collaboration with Egypt and the transmission of Arabic *taarab* to local Zanzibar musicians (Askew 2000: 2). This clearly denotes the borrowing and adaptation of *taarab* on the East African coast with patronage sensibilities in its inception. I further deduce and posit that class inclination was enshrined in the creation and development of *taarab* as it was initially court music. That said, *taarab* music moved beyond the walls of the Sultan's palace as it was gradually adapted by the locals.

The second period 1920s to 1940s was characterised by the dissemination of *taarab* music through live performances and the phonograph record industry largely available to the middle class and affluent members of society. Music transmission during this period favoured the economically privileged members of society who could afford to invest in the record player. Siti Binti Saad (1880-1950)⁷, whose parents were freed slaves, is credited with developing *taarab* using Kiswahili in Zanzibar and Tanzania. Her popularity and musical prowess surpassed geographical regions given her ability to sing in Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic and Kiswahili. Her diva status is comparable to that of iconic Egyptian musician Umm Kalthum. Saad spent much time in India recording albums, prior to studios being established in East Africa thus musical cross-pollination was experienced. Siti Binti Saad among other local Zanzibar musicians developed *taarab ya ng'ambo* that borrowed from Swahili music and culture, Egyptian and Indian musics (Khamis 2005: 135).⁸

The 1950s to the 1960s forms the third period heralded by the radio. A class sensibility was in play given that the dissemination through the "free" radio waves was a way to democratize *taarab* music however, the radio was not easily available to all as it was expensive.

The fourth period from 1970s to date has seen the dissemination of *taarab* championed by the cassette recorder, the compact disc, video, TV, the internet and ipods (Khamis 2005: 138). Since many more people could afford these various types of technology the musical dissemination had been successfully democratized. However, technological innovations especially the compact disc and other forms of digitized media have on the contrary aided music piracy supported by lax copyright laws in the industry resulting in depriving the musicians the much needed income.

Performance Practice in Taarab

Taarab music is largely performed during WaSwahili wedding ceremonies where the primary focus is the social gathering. Social status in society is affirmed if a family can afford to hire an expensive *taarab* band for the wedding celebrations. Swahili *taarab* songs are dynamic and recomposed for each performance with interaction from the

⁷ Saad was very popular from 1928 onwards and some of her famous songs are "Uchungu wa Mwana," "Waimbaji wa Juzi," "Siweke Tamaa Mbele," and "Ela Kafa Ndugu Zangu." For lyrics and translations of these songs, see <http://groups.msn.com/SitiBintiSaad/lyricsbysiti.msnw>. Topp Fargion (2000), Fair (2001) and Khamis (2005) offer more information on Siti Binti Saad.

⁸ Other types of *taarab* musics include *kidumbak* (see Khamis 2001: 2-8) and *mipasho* (see Topp 2000).

audience, who are the co-producers of the music (Ntarangwi 2003: 149). Live *taarab* music making is therefore best summarized as a collective social process.

The two distinct *taarab* styles are *taarab ya ng'ambo*, a rural genre, and *taarab ya majumba ya mawe*, an urban style. *Taarab ya ng'ambo*, also referred to as women's *taarab* or *taarab ya Kiswahili*, is performed during Swahili weddings as *kidumbak*, with fewer instruments to facilitate dancing (Ntarangwi 2003: 152, Graebner 1990 and Khamis 2005: 134 and 143). A distinct stylistic feature is call and response, short repetitive musical ideas, lyrics drawn from Swahili poems, diatonic melodies with instrumentation comprising the harmonium or/and keyboard, *tabla*, *bongos*, electric guitar *chapuo* drum and the tambourine (Ntarangwi 2003: 153).

Taarab ya majumba ya mawe, men's *taarab* or Arabic *taarab* developed in the Zanzibar court and drew largely on Egyptian *taarab* while employing microtonal modes, and performed using the *ud* and some Western instruments. The incorporation of Western instruments is similar to Moroccan Andalusian styles that adopted string instruments such as violins and double basses, and then expanded with clarinets and saxophones to replace *zurnas* and other reeds and sometimes the accordion. For the most part, the lyrics are in Arabic and sometimes in Kiswahili.

Gender Sensibilities and Transformation in Taarab and Chakacha Music

The WaSwahili embrace Islam allowing men to practice polygamy with kinship lineages traced through the father's side. Males are sole breadwinners while females take care of household chores. Contemporary capitalistic driven economies, cultural transformation and education have led to the decline in traditional practices such as polygamy and culturally defined gender roles. Women have thus been actively involved in the informal sector to help subsidize the running of the homes while some work in salaried employment. The transformation of the public image of women has altered the socio-economic status championed especially by female *taarab* band leaders such as Siti Binti Saad and more recently Zuhura Swaleh, Malika Mohamed and Sitara Bure (Ntarangwi 2003: 126). Siti Binti Saad pioneered a model for the place of women in bands. That said, women have traditionally played leading roles in Arabic music⁹ and Swahili wedding rituals.

Following are two musical examples incorporating both *taarab* and *chakacha* genres, composed and performed by two female musicians, Malika Mohamed and Jemmimah Thiong'o. These examples demonstrate the role and place of women in *taarab* and *chakacha* music, and the expansion of *taarab* and *chakacha* beyond Islamic, coastal and secular wedding contexts. Also the music demonstrates the incorporation of national and international popular styles in order to appeal to wider audiences, or as per demand or creativity of the musicians. Finally, these examples show how female bandleaders use the space to negotiate issues in society through social commentary.

“Vidonge”¹⁰ by Malika Mohamed (A.K.A. Aisha Abdo Suleiman)

Malika is a Swahili *taarab* diva who gained fame in Kenya in the early 1990s with her hit song “Vidonge.” This song won her the coveted “1993 Artist of the Year Award.” Malika initially performed in conservative Mogadishu as Aisha Abdo

⁹ A good example is Egyptian music diva Umm Kalthum.

¹⁰ A recording of this song is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVQlqV1VkwM>.

Suleiman and her family forced her to change her name.¹¹ The song “Vidonge” shows that women can be as cunning as men in relationships and the open ridicule enshrined in the lyrics would render “Vidonge” under the *mipasho taarab* sub-category.

Chorus

Wape wape ee vidonge vyao, Give them the tablets
wakimeza wakitema shauri yaoit does not matter if they swallow them or spit them

Verse

Wanawake ni wajanja na uerevu wanao, Women are cunning and intelligent
waona baba likija wambiwa ni shemejio, the other man is passed off as a relative
mwalishwa sahani moja kumbe ni mume you eat from the same plate while in fact

mwezio...jomba the other man is your competitor

Kenyans picked up the second meaning with a political inclination during the first multi-party elections in 1992. The analogy of the two men wooed by the same woman symbolized a shift from a single-party state to multi-party politics. The irony of two women wooing one man is different from the more accepted and sanctioned idea of polygamy where men woo and marry multiple wives. Malika sanctions the social liberation of women in relationships while more political parties reinforcing democracy was the meaning coined by Kenyans. Malika incorporates local *chakacha*, *benga* and *lingala* popular music genres in “Vidonge”. This is in an effort to make “Vidonge” appealing to Kenyan audiences and regional Kiswahili speakers.

An analysis of the form reveals call and response with a female voice for the verse and mixed voices for the chorus. The instrumentation includes voice (female and male), lead, rhythm and bass guitars, a horn section, the keyboard and the drum kit. The use of the lead and rhythm guitar with pronounced solos is a deliberate effort to borrow from *benga* and *lingala* styles. Towards the end of “Vidonge,” Malika references *kata kata*, a traditional *chakacha* song that has been popularised in urban areas especially Mombasa and Nairobi by popular bands. The structure of the lyrics conforms to the poetic meters of *mashairi* poetry.

“Hakuna” by Jemmimah Thiong’o

In 2005, Jemmimah Thiong’o, a Kikuyu¹² gospel musician based in Nairobi released the album *Mwenye Baraka* (The Blessed One) containing eight songs. In the song “Hakuna,” (without) Thiong’o draws from *taarab* and the modern *chakacha* styles. Thiong’o’s instrumentation comprises: the electronic synthesizer which references the harmonium, a drum kit, voices and guitar. In order to geographically invoke the musical roots of the style, Thiong’o’s video references Old Town Mombasa focussing on Arabic architecture, the narrow streets, the Indian Ocean with dhows docking in the harbour.

¹¹ In conservative Islamic societies such as in Somalia music is viewed as *haram* (illegal and not conforming Islamic practices) and the social status of Malika’s family was threatened by her music career.

¹² The Kikuyu are traditionally found in central Kenya, the Kikuyu region near Nairobi and the Rift Valley Province.

The form is verse and chorus that is also call and response, a stylistic device of Swahili *taarab* and *chakacha*. Thiong'o draws on the modern *chakacha* chord progressions VI, V, IV and III, while the melody is based on the Western harmonic minor scale.

The lyrics are Christian religious and also conform to the poetic meters of the *mashairi* poetry of the WaSwahili. The first verse highlights Jesus Christ as the remedy to social problems, and this is true to her Christian/gospel association. The second verse comments on the rise of social ills such as drug abuse and alcoholism, with especially men drinking *kumi kumi*, an illicit brew in the suburbs of Nairobi. Thiong'o adheres to the *taarab* tradition of social commentary and positions herself within the Swahili *taarab* tradition by interspersing her lyrics with Nairobi and Kimvita Kiswahili dialects. She therefore markets "Hakuna" to WaSwahili, the wider Kenyan community for whom Swahili is the national language and regional Kiswahili speakers. Thiong'o's music making process lacks audience participation championed with largely fixed lyrics and musical ideas. "Hakuna" is currently disseminated in the Swahili community, and it is possible that the other musicians who cover it may subject it to audience response.

Conclusion

Taarab and *chakacha* the popular music genres of Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu in Kenya, are therefore illustrative musical examples of intercultural production, transformation and adaptation. *Taarab* and *chakacha* have been used as a vehicle to foster social and political critique and continue to shape social life and politics among the WaSwahili through social commentary. Kenyans have embraced *taarab* as illustrated by Malika's "Vidonge" and non-Swahili musicians incorporate it into their compositional repertoire thereby continuing to transform and localize *taarab* as exemplified by Jemmimah Thiong'o.

Local popular music genres such as *benga*, *chakacha* and *lingala* which have been incorporated into *taarab* suggest syncretism and transculturation. This facilitates the marketing of this music to a wider global audience. *Taarab* has the potential to unite people in society and a pacific outlet for social, economic and political views.

Finally, scholarly research is needed to keep up with the new innovations of *taarab* and *chakacha*, while careful attention is required to research the *kinanda* popular music that preceded *taarab* on the Kenyan coast.

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