

It was Just for Fun:

Taarab and the Construction of Community Identity in Two Kenyan Towns

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Abstract

This thesis chronicles taarab, a popular genre of music, in Lamu and Matadoni, two communities on the coast of Kenya. My thesis argues that taarab, despite growing as popular and widespread in urban areas, developed as a localized tradition in Lamu and Matadoni by emphasizing local styles and public performances where musicians would play for little, if any money at all. This was different from the music's success in urban centers which often emphasized the marketing of cassettes and compact disks. Renowned taarab musicians from these cities could earn money off of their music by performing for extravagant rates. Taarab contributed to the local character of Lamu and Matadoni through its lyrics which promoted evaluation of gender relationships, social problems within the community, and challenged politicians. The thesis explores how the traditions that made taarab distinct in these communities in the past are changing due to economic problems that challenge musicians' ability to dedicate time to play music recreationally in addition to the impacts of globalization that have been impacting cultural practices in Lamu and Matadoni. While local taarab in Lamu and Matadoni has had to adjust in order to incorporate these changes, it still remains a popular form of entertainment for the people of these communities.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A Lamu Afternoon

The band began to play at two o'clock in the afternoon. The members of the group were dressed in *khanzu* and *kofia*, traditional Muslim robes and hats. At the request of the event organizers I was also dressed in this clothing. The musicians sat at the back of a large stage that the community had set up at the south end of the town square in Lamu, a coastal town in Northeastern Kenya. The stage was a large wooden platform. The musicians sat on the back of the stage behind microphones. Directly ahead of the band, were empty chairs, waiting to be filled. The group leader, thirty-three year old Khalid Kajenje, in his high-pitched voice ordered the group to play a popular song titled “Shike Pole Pole Mimi Bwana Mwe Nyewe”, which meant in English “Touch me slowly, slowly, I am the husband of somebody”. Members of the band played bongos, local ngomas (drums), a wooden organ, as well as a tambourine. The group members were particularly proud of the organ instrument. The device looked like a small wooden piano, with iron handles on the sides for the musicians to carry it. The picture (appendix A fig 4) illustrates the uniqueness of this instrument. Everyone in the group proudly explained that it originated its origin in India. The music they played clearly showed a connection to India and the Middle East; however, the rhythms, bongo and local drums, reminded listeners that they were listening to a music that was distinctly East African.

From my vantage point on the back of the stage with the band, I could see a crowd of all ages begin to gather in the square. Mixed in with the local African crowd were the pale faces of European tourists who had come to watch the show as part of a three-day series of cultural events at the 2008 Lamu Cultural Festival. While I observed

the audience, I could not help but feel slightly disappointed; the crowd was surprisingly subdued, most of the people stood stoically as they listened to the music. Some people were interacting. One Lamu local dressed in a white tee-shirt climbed the stage and danced—swinging his torso and hips—as he tipped Kajenje one-hundred Kenyan shillings (about one dollar and fifty cents in the United States). Meanwhile several local politicians and foreign ambassadors began to fill the empty seats on the stage in front of the musicians. Sitting to the front of me was the ambassador of Morocco, whom I had helped construct an exhibit of Moroccan artifacts and furniture at the Lamu Fort Museum the day before. I looked around for the American ambassador who was sure to be in attendance at this event, due to the amount of money his embassy had contributed to the Lamu Cultural Festival. Eventually, I spotted him sitting next to the French ambassador. When the seats were almost full, one of the community leaders from Lamu stood up and delivered a speech in Swahili, praising the community’s history and cultural traditions. This was immediately followed by an extended ceremony in which the German ambassador presented the Director of National Museums of Kenya a copy of seventeenth-century manuscripts of a Swahili poet.

At the conclusion of the ceremony the band began to play again. Many of the people, particularly the foreign tourists, who had come to see the exchange of manuscripts, left the town square to watch the nearby boat and swimming races. A strong local following remained and listened to the music. The band began to play a number with the chorus exclaiming “Bibi sitaki tena” (I Do Not Want My Wife Again). As was in the case before, the audience appeared to be very subdued, only listening to the music.

Following the conclusion of the music, Kajenje ordered the group to play the song again, but this time in *chakacha*. *Chakacha* is an up-tempo and heavy rhythmic dance that is popular along the coast of Kenya. As they played the song a second time, with a faster beat, the crowd went wild. All around the square people were clapping their hands, smiling and dancing. Women, and some men, sang along with the band's chorus, knowing all the lyrics by heart. People in the crowd whistled or called out to the group expressing satisfaction with the band's music. Crowds climbed the stage dancing in various styles as they gave shillings to the musician. When the song came to an end, the crowd applauded, while some screamed for more.

The performance I describe illustrates some of the ways people in contemporary Lamu negotiated a culturally complex and continually dynamic social environment. The group's Islamic clothing reflected the importance of Middle Eastern styles in shaping the tradition of the musical genre. The compositions, a blend of African and Eastern modes, reflected the complexities of the music's character and by extension the nuances of Swahili identity. The song "Shike Pole Pole", describing a situation where a man divorces his wife for another woman, confronted the dynamics of gender roles and the power relationships between men and women. By tipping the musicians, the audience interjected themselves into the center of the performance and publicly affirmed the song's value. The presence of this music in the town square, commemorating a larger celebration of the exchange of historical manuscripts, was an example of the types of contexts in which individuals and community leaders apply the music in contemporary

times. The significant number of foreigners and tourists further underscored the changing dynamics that affected the music.

The change in mood as the band began to play *chakacha* reflected the development of the music. I spoke with numerous older performers who made it clear that they thought that *chakacha* was a new innovation to taarab music that diminished the music's value as a tool for social education because everybody wanted to dance instead of listening to the lyrics. The use of *chakacha* reflected the conflicts and negotiations between the older and younger generations; of tradition and the "modern". Khalid Kajenje and his group were in the middle of this conflict, wanting to appeal to both the older and younger audiences.

Zanzibar, Mombasa, Tanga, and Dar es Salaam are the centers of taarab along the East African coast, producing the most prominent musical groups.¹ The map of the coast (see appendix A fig 1) shows the locations of these urban centers. The music, however, is also popular in smaller communities, such as Lamu and Matadoni. Both of these towns are located on Lamu Island, part of the Lamu Archipelago in northeastern Kenya (see appendix A fig 1). Matadoni is a small rural fishing village of just over two thousand people. The town is built around two creeks that are used to build and repair dhows, mostly belonging to wealthy merchant families of Lamu.² The town is not impoverished, but neither is it a place of very much wealth.³ Lamu represents a small urban center of around eighteen thousand people (informal conversations with locals serve as the basis

¹Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 22-23.

² John Middleton, *the World of the Swahili* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 72

³ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 73.

for this number), although nobody has done a precise census of the community.⁴ During the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, the town was a thriving cosmopolitan center, full of wealthy merchant families. However, the town has been on a steady economic decline since the abolition of the East African slave trade in 1907.⁵ Most of the patricians who once lived in the large stone houses overlooking the city have migrated to Mombasa.

The Lamu region includes the communities of the Lamu town, Matadoni, and other islands within the archipelago. The map of the Lamu archipelago (see Appendix fig 2) shows the various dwellings that make up the Lamu region. Matadoni is on Lamu island, about a one hour boat ride from Lamu town. I was drawn to conduct my research in Lamu and Matadoni, as opposed to other towns, because of the region's long history as one of the main ports on the East African coast, the personal connections I had already established in Lamu (I stayed there for three weeks prior to my extended research period), the Lamu Cultural Festival, and my own personal affection for the communities.

A Brief General Background and History of Taarab Music

The word taarab derives from the Arabic word “joy” and “pleasure”.⁶ In Swahili culture it is a form of sung poetry that is most commonly performed at weddings and emphasizes themes of marriage and love. Taarab poetry consists of three lines of eight syllables that an orchestra, consisting of three or more members and a singer, accompanies. Popular instruments in the orchestras are tablas (popular Indian hand

⁴ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 77.

⁵ Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast* (Stockholm, Studies in Social Anthropology, 1994) 49.

⁶ Fargion, “Consumer-led Creation: Taarab Music Composition in Zanzibar,” 207.

drums), tambourines, violins, zithers, accordion, and flutes.⁷ The music follows a long poetic tradition of sung poetry along the east coast of Africa.⁸ The strict adherence to poetic structure and extensive use of metaphor are the distinguishing features of taarab, separating it from other popular music and dances on the East African coast. Jan Knappert emphasizes that in an oral culture such as that of the Swahili, distinctions between poetry and music are never sharp.⁹ In the absence of the written word, sung poetry and dances were a form of popular media used to recount historical events and share news of the community.¹⁰

Popular accounts of the early history of taarab attribute the genre to the court of Sultan Barghash (1837-1888) who sent his musicians to Egypt to study music after hearing the orchestra ensembles played there.¹¹ The musicians returned to his palace with the knowledge they acquired in Egypt and entertained the aristocracy and members of the royal family. Early clubs began to form, most prominently the Ikhwari Safaa Club.¹² These groups played taarab in strict formal concert settings without dance. Members of the upper class attended events in their nicest clothes, sat in chairs and listened to the orchestra play taarab.¹³

⁷ Jan Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1979), 51; Fargion, "The Role of Women in Taraab in Zanzibar," 115.

⁸ Mohamed Abulaziz, *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry* (Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979) 1-113; Jan Knappert, *A Choice of Flowers: Swahili Songs of Love and Passion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1979) 1-15.

⁹ Jan Knappert, *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*, 66.

¹⁰ Usam Ghadian, *Lamu a Study of a Swahili Town* (Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975).

¹¹ Fargion, "Consumer Led Creation," 200. Fair, *Politics and Pastimes*, 172; Graebner, "Between Mainland and Sea," 173.

¹² Graebner, "Between Mainland and Sea," 175.

¹³ Fargion, "The Role of Women in Taarab in Zanzibar," 115.

Siti Bint Saad was the artist most successful in the popularization of taarab. Fargion argued that Sinti Bint Saad “took the style out of palaces and into the hearts of ordinary Kiswahili speaking Zanzibaris.”¹⁴ A descendant of slaves, Siti Binti Saad was famous for being the first Kiswahili speaking musician to have her voice recorded in 1928; throughout Zanzibar and the entire East African coast, including Lamu and Matadoni, people could turn on a gramophone and listen to the music of one of their own. Prior to Siti’s recordings, the only records available were “in the language of the economic and political overlords of the colonies.”¹⁵ Siti Bint Saad’s popularity—not just in Zanzibar, but the whole coast—stemmed from her ability to speak to the everyday experiences and concerns of ordinary people.¹⁶ The music of Siti Bint Saad popularized the music among everyday people and helped to make taarab a means by which groups, with limited power and access to public forums, could discuss issues of everyday life that were important to them.

The gramophone and the success of taarab musicians such as Sinti Binti Saad contributed greatly to the spread of taarab along the East African coast, including small communities such as Lamu and Matadoni. These towns incorporated this style into their already established local musical traditions. Taarab in these smaller communities developed an identity that was able to absorb, but was not dependent on, the musical trends and that developed in Zanzibar and East Africa’s other urban centers.

¹⁴ Fargion, “The Role of Women in Taarab in Zanzibar,” 116; Fargion, “Consumer Led Creation,” 200.

¹⁵ Fair, “Voice Authority, and Memory,” 251; Graebner, “Between Mainland and Sea,” 178.

¹⁶ Fair, “Voice Authority, and Memory,” 247; Fargion, “Consumer Led Creation,” 197.

The Role of Taarab in Lamu and Matadoni

Taarab has had a prominent role in shaping the communities of Lamu and Matadoni. However, when I arrived in the fall of 2008, local performers and performances were very scarce. In Matadoni there were no taarab clubs—another word people use for ensembles—actively performing, although many of the musicians were still alive. These artists included individuals such as Mohamed Halef and Ali Bakari Liongo, who had many memories of their experiences playing taarab. People continued to listen to the music, but mostly from recorded media, by purchasing cassettes and compact disks that vendors sold on the streets of Lamu. I did not see any of these local vendors in Matadoni. Al Noor was the only taarab group left in Lamu, a town that previously hosted several musicians. This group was led by a native of Matadoni named Khalid Kajenje (pictured center in Appendix A figure 3). Kajenje’s band included approximately seven other musicians. Kajenje is unmarried. His father was a prominent musician in a local group of *beni*, which was a popular *ngoma* along the East African coast during the early twentieth century.¹⁷ He began playing music when he was in primary school, but did it “secretly” because his teacher and family wanted him to concentrate on his studies instead of playing music.¹⁸ Khalid and his band Al Noor had a devoted local following of Lamu inhabitants who attended their performances and appreciated their music’s contribution to the local discourse concerning issues such as love relationships and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. His group performed regularly at local wedding celebrations, national holidays, and public events, such as the Lamu cultural festival.

¹⁷ Terence O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in East Africa: the Beni Ngoma* (Nairobi Heinemann, 1978).

¹⁸ Khalid Omar Kajenje, interview by author, audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya, 6 October 2008.

My work documents the history of taarab music's relationship with the social, cultural, and political values of the communities of Lamu and Matadoni. I discuss how traditions and social factors have influenced taarab in Lamu and Matadoni differently than in larger cities such as Mombasa or Zanzibar. I explore the ways that these traditions shaped the music's application as a local instrument for education and public discourse of social, cultural, and political issues of these communities. For example, a taarab song could define the roles and duties of a loving husband, or challenge a local politician. I also consider how economics and politics contribute to the music's role in contemporary times and how Lamu and Matadoni negotiated the balance between continuity and change in terms of how they practice taarab. In addressing these issues, I contend that taarab music provided inexpensive entertainment to the people of Lamu and Matadoni that was different from the music's success as a commercial enterprise in urban areas. Within the context of recreation, local taarab musicians and audiences employed the music to discuss issues that affected the everyday life of people living in these towns. A decline in the local economy and the growing prominence of western culture has challenged the local character of taarab in these communities.

My research in the communities of Lamu and Matadoni revealed that taarab established a localized tradition as a form of recreation where musicians' primary interests were to make music and entertain people, rather than to make money. This contrasted with the commercial successes of eminent artists, such as Juma Bhalo and Maulidi Juma from Mombasa, who were able to use their music to earn a comfortable living. This is not to say that musicians in these smaller communities did not occasionally

try to profit financially from their music, or that urban artists only sought financial gain; but rather musicians in Lamu and Matadoni lacked the population and capability of marketing their music to regularly support taarab superstars. Members of these communities closely followed the songs of the most prominent musicians of the East African coast—and there was a constant demand to see them perform at local weddings and festivities—however most people could not afford to regularly invite these artists to perform.

People in Lamu and Matadoni instead engaged with the music by listening to the radio and cassettes, occasionally inviting the “big-name” musicians to perform at local weddings and public celebrations. Local taarab groups also entertained people for very low cost, if not for free. While this detail seems small, it had a profound effect on the practices of taarab and its development in these communities. Taarab was a source of inexpensive amusement that allowed people to escape the burdens of everyday work and chores. Local musicians, while borrowing often from popular trends developing in Mombasa, Tanzania and Zanzibar, created a style distinct to them and wrote poetry that addressed issues regarding the daily life experiences of their communities. The local context of leisure provided a powerful platform for people to exchange ideas that influenced the values of the local community. This contributed to the development of a musical tradition that was different from other areas on the East African coast.

The use of taarab for popular entertainment subjected it to economic hardships that made it difficult for people to dedicate time for leisure—particularly the problems of inflation that rampantly grew in Kenya beginning in the 1980s. Many people chose to

work more in order to help with the raising costs of living. Local versions of taarab in Lamu and Matadoni faded out in favor of “modern taarab” or “tarabu ya sasa” (taarab of now) spreading from mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. Modern taarab is an urban phenomenon, which has enjoyed tremendous commercial success due to its use of contemporary dance beats and ability to mass produce compact-disks and audio cassettes. This form of taarab incorporates electronic guitars and drums and contemporary rhythms and beats, replacing the local instruments and musical style that artists previously played. The commercial success of modern taarab and its permeation into Lamu and Matadoni popular culture created social tensions; performers and audience members, particularly many of the older generation, who did not feel that modern taarab conformed to the conventions and values of the genre, in which they had taken part of in the past.¹⁹

In my research I found that music was a compelling medium to understand the attitudes and feelings of individuals regarding their community and place in society. Christopher Waterman eloquently conveyed this argument: “In many sub-Saharan African cultures reality and social experience are inextricably linked. Under conditions of pervasive political and economic change, music continued to play a crucial role as a medium of symbolic interaction and a means of forging and defending communities.”²⁰ Music performances often convey alternative perspectives regarding community life, social justice, and the roles of men and women than the hegemonic ideals of the ruling

¹⁹ Salim Mohamed, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, assisted by Muna, Lamu, Kenya, 27 November 2008; Mohamed Halef, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, assisted by Ali Abdella Famao, Matadoni, Kenya. 11 November 2008.

²⁰ Christopher Waterman, *Juju: a Social History and Ethnomusicology of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 6.

elite.²¹ An evaluation of taarab provides historians with an alternative way to understand the concerns of daily life of the people living on the East African coast, and how individuals evaluated and responded to these issues.

Methodology and Review of Literature

Researching taarab in small communities offered me unique experiences and perspectives that I would not have had studying the music in a larger city. The people I spoke with are not career musicians; they had many responsibilities such as jobs and families. Only in their free time did they engage in performing or listening to the music. These individuals offered a unique perspective of what their life was like in these communities. The musicians I interviewed spoke about many topics other than taarab, addressing their work, families, and personal relationships that have affected their music and their lives. A fisherman from Matadoni named Ali Bakari shared with me that he began performing taarab because he “had a wife that he loved very much and wanted to dedicate songs to her.”²² Faragi Mzee, a prominent early musician of Lamu, similarly recounted how he and his fellow band members sang to the women whom they loved.²³ The intimacy of these details was profound to me as a student of history, revealing that music to these individuals was very personal. The people I interviewed reacted to my inquiries with enthusiasm and eagerness to discuss their experiences; many openly expressed gratitude that their stories and lyrics would be shared with others. Their stories

²¹ Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community and Identity in Post-Abolition Zanzibar 1890-1945* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001) 169-209.

²² Ali Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Halif, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

²³ Faragi Mzee, interview by author, audio recording, Lamu, Kenya, Swahili, with assistance by Yusuf, 26 November 2008.

and experiences in taarab reveal important aspects and tensions of Swahili identity that contribute greatly to understanding the music.

Audio-recorded interviews that I conducted with people living, or with origins, in Lamu and Matadoni was the basis for most of my research. I conducted my interviews over the course of a three-month period from September to December of 2008. Of the twenty-one interviews I conducted, seven were with women. Swahili customs, which restricted men and women's social interactions, and the fact that men (with a few exceptions) continue to dominate music production explain the disparity in the amount of men and women I interviewed.²⁴ Three of my interviews concerned background issues, six were with present or former musicians, and the remaining twelve were with people who participated in the music by attending performances or listening to recordings. I approached potential people to interview by stating the purpose of my research and requested that they discuss their experiences of participating in taarab. I orally asked participants for their permission to audio record our discussions and to use the interviews for my senior thesis. People were very helpful and willing to share their experiences. Initially I anticipated that people would resist using the audio recorder; however, all of my participants agreed to my use of the recorder after an explanation of the device and my intentions with the recordings. The success of my methodology also owes credit to the contributions of people who functioned as cultural guides, introducing me to their friends who were affiliated with taarab music. These cultural guides were people who lived in the community for a long time and had relationships with the local population. A

²⁴ For more information on being a male researcher of taarab in Kenya see Mwenda Ntarangwi, *Gender, Identity and Performance: Understanding Swahili Cultural Realities Through Song* (Trenton: African World Press, 2003) 1-42.

few of the cultural guides, such as Omar Famao, were prominent community members and had considerable influence. I met these cultural guides with the assistance of Athman Lali Omar, the director of the School of International Training, who has an extensive social network in Lamu and its surrounding communities. Having the support and endorsements of these individuals allowed me to meet many important contacts and contributed to the community's trust in me, as an outsider doing academic research.

Collecting information from oral sources was necessary because there is little written primary material related to the history and traditions of taarab music in Lamu and Matadoni. The musicians I interviewed did not write down any of their lyrics; I collected them from their memories during our conversations. Often times somebody would recite a taarab song, which I (with the help of a translator) would transcribe on to paper and then translate into English. I collected few entire songs due to the difficulty people had in recalling compositions; however, individuals provided me with several verses that were rich in information for this project. I collected about three entire songs from Khalid Omar who wrote his verses in a notebook, which he allowed me to copy. Khalid, who spoke English very well, also translated his songs into English for me. I was a novice Swahili speaker, having studied it at the University of Oregon and the School of International Training, which was the organization that sponsored my study abroad program. While I understood basic ideas and vocabulary in songs and interviews, the help of translators was necessary for me to fully comprehend interviews with Swahili speakers.

Formal discussions with individuals provided me the opportunity to understand the interactions between taarab and ordinary people. Most of the interviews I conducted

in Lamu were with people who spoke very good English. People living in the bigger town of Lamu generally had better access to education, including English classes. My work in Matadoni involved mostly individuals who spoke only Swahili. People in Matadoni, especially older residents, typically were poorer and therefore tended to work to support their families instead of attending school. In addition, all of the people I interviewed were Muslims, and the older generation conveyed that their parents had been suspicious of secular education because they saw it as a colonial institution that threatened to undermine their Islamic identity. The parents of these individuals chose not to send them to school where they otherwise would have developed western ideals. People of the younger generation generally spoke adequate English to allow me to conduct interviews, indicating that parents of today were far more willing to allow their children to attend public schools. In the Swahili interviews, I relied on the assistance of a local school teacher named Ali Abdulla Famao to translate.

Whether in English or Swahili, people in Lamu and Matadoni discussed their participation in taarab in very personal terms, sharing the everyday challenges that they faced. I frequently discussed these issues with musicians such as Khalid Kajeje, and numerous former artists including Faragi Mzee, Ali Bakari Liongo, and Mohammed Halef. Our discussions often covered issues of love and family life, the inadequacy of local members of parliament in serving the town's interest, and economic challenges. From these interviews, I was able to develop a better understanding of the social factors and traditions that shape taarab in these communities.

I also had various opportunities to see taarab music in practice. Over the course of the three months I was in Kenya, I attended numerous performances. In Lamu town, I shadowed the local band Al Noor, led by Khalid Kajenje, when they played at the Lamu Cultural Festival. The festival was held from the twenty-seventh to thirtieth of November 2008. Prior to the festival I spent time with the band during their rehearsals. Some of these rehearsals were private practices held at a local coffee shop in the stone town district of Lamu; others were performed in front of people. Over the course of the festival, I attended five performances by Al Noor and a *kesha* (all night) performance of a modern taarab group from Zanzibar. Covering these events allowed me to observe taarab performance in contemporary times and better understand the music's impact within the local community who came to watch the musicians perform.

My research also relied on the contributions of existing scholarship regarding taarab music. Laura Fair's numerous works on the life of Siti Binti Saad and the early history of taarab in Zanzibar have been particularly helpful in relating the music to the construction of community identity. Fair's work demonstrated that Siti Binti Saad was an international singing star. She was the first Swahili-speaking person to have an opportunity to record and market her music, and her songs established a special connection to the people of Zanzibar because she spoke directly to the issues that affected their daily lives during the early twentieth century.²⁵ Fair's ability to relate taarab to the localized struggles of people living in Zanzibar contributed greatly to my understanding of the role of taarab in shaping other communities, such as Lamu and Matadoni. As Fair's

²⁵ Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 169-209; Laura Fair, "Voice Authority, and Memory: The Kiswahili Recordings of Siti binti Saadi," editors David William Cohen, Stephen F. Miescher, and Luise White, *African Words, African Voices* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001) 246-263.

discussion of Siti Binti Saad illustrates, taarab artists were not only performers, but also community leaders and educators that helped shape public discourse. Janet Topp Fargion also wrote about the early history of Taarab in Zanzibar, giving particular emphasis on the music's movement from the court of the Omani sultans, governing the East African coast, into popular entertainment amongst the Swahili population.²⁶ Her work complements Fair's accounts, describing how the music became a vehicle for the middle and lower classes to provide entertainment and communicate ideas regarding the ideals of their society.

Kelly Askew's book *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* was helpful in addressing the social contexts surrounding taarab. She articulates a very important argument that musicians do not exclusively dominate the power of performances; rather audiences through their interpretation of the music and participation contribute to the communicative and entertainment effectiveness of taarab.²⁷ When I examine taarab in terms of social dialogue, I pay careful attention to the responses and interpretations of the participating audience. The discussions of community ideals and education that occurs within the context of taarab performances is not a one-way conversation; rather the music's ability to affirm or negotiate social values comes from the relationships that audience members construct between their own lives and the music. Many musicians I spoke with expressed similar sentiments to those that

²⁶ Janet Topp Fargion, "The Role of Women in Taarab in Zanzibar: An historical Examination of a process of Africanization," *The World of Music* 35, no 2 (1993) 109-25; Janet Topp Fargion "Consumer-led Creation: Taarab music Composition in Zanzibar," Editor, Malcolm Floyd, *Composing the Music of Africa: Composition, Interpretation, and Realization* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999) 202.

²⁷ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 22-23.

Askew articulated in her work.²⁸ For example a single song such as “Shike Pole Pole”, would have various interpretations depending if the listener was a man or woman, or based on the individual experiences of the listener.

Scholars have addressed the globalization and marketing of taarab in contemporary times. Werner Graebner offered a history of the spread and commercialization of taarab music in Zanzibar.²⁹ His work is important for understanding the movements and shifts of taarab over time, and the contemporary factors that are presently shaping the music. The contributions of Mwenda Ntarangwi were useful because he was one of the few scholars that concentrated specifically on the Mombasa style of taarab that is popular along the Kenyan coast.³⁰ Mombasa, as the closest cosmopolitan center to Lamu and Matadoni, had the greatest effect on the traditions and ways people enjoy the music in these communities. His account of the famous Bhalo and Maulidi rivalry was helpful because the feud was very famous in both Lamu and Matadoni. It underscored social issues, such as gender roles, that taarab addresses and the tensions that the commercialization of taarab generated with listeners and musicians in Lamu and Matadoni.³¹

While the above research was helpful in increasing my understanding of taarab music in general, this paper will focus on the role of taarab in smaller communities, places that are isolated from the urban centers that the above writers described. Lamu and

²⁸ Interview, Mohamed Halef; Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

²⁹ Werner Grabner, “Between Mainland and Sea: The Taarab Music of Zanzibar,” Editor Kevin Dawe, *Island Musics* (New York: Berg, 2004)171-198.

³⁰ Mwenda Ntarwangwi, *Gender, Identity and Performance*, 103-299.

³¹ Mwenda Ntarwangwi, “Malumbano or Matukano: Competition, Confrontation, and (De)Construction of Masculinity in the Taarab of Maulidi and Bhalo”. Editors, Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2000) 55-66.

particularly Matadoni do not have large enough populations to sustain commercial musicians. This paper will emphasize that even in the absence of an urban setting, taarab developed as a local tradition and as a way for people to interact with one another and discuss social issues of love, marriage, and community issues. It is important to underscore the argument that taarab is a form of entertainment and developed within that context in both Lamu and Matadoni.

Many of the above scholars dedicate much of their work to exploring the social communication that occurs in taarab lyrics and performances. Evaluation of this is important, and my paper aims to further discuss the social and political dimensions of taarab. However, it is also important to emphasize that taarab is a leisure-driven activity that relies heavily on the ability of participants to freely enjoy the music. Laura Fair's research in Zanzibar after the 1963 socialist revolution revealed that when government regulation removed certain elements that made taarab entertaining to women, there was a significant decline in women's performance groups.³² While Lamu and Matadoni did not experience the stress of government involvement, economic pressures in these communities made it difficult for artists to find enjoyment in playing music. Recreation requires people to take time for activities they enjoy instead of working or performing household tasks. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza states, "To many people, leisure is perceived in terms of time after work, or in relation to particular activities, or with reference to a specific quality of experience, or on the basis of its utility for individuals or society. In other words, leisure is conceived as residual time, as activities, as freedom, or as

³² Laura Fair, "It's Just Not Fun Anymore: Women's Experiences of Taarab Before and After the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no 1 (2002) 61-81.

functional.”³³ Poor economic conditions put a strain on the abilities of taarab performers in Lamu and Matadoni to take delight in playing music; instead these individuals were concerned with working more in order to earn money. As a result, at the time of my research taarab clubs in Lamu and Matadoni have declined almost to extinction.

Chapter Overview

The conventions and early history of taarab shaped the development of the music’s tradition in Lamu and Matadoni, creating an identity for the songs that distinguished it from styles that people were already performing in Lamu and Matadoni during the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, Lamu and Matadoni had a history and tradition that allowed the music to develop differently than what occurred in Mombasa Zanzibar. The second chapter of this thesis will discuss these factors in-depth. The second chapter argues that unlike taarab in urban settings, where musicians were able to use the music to make a profit, in Lamu and Matadoni the style occurred through an entertainment setting where musicians played for little if any money at all. Artists played because of their appreciation for the music and a desire to show off their skills to their friends and neighbors. The third chapter will show that through the context of entertainment, taarab was a way to educate and construct community ideals regarding relationships between husbands and wives, as well as the political and economic conditions of the local society. The fourth chapter discusses how the economic conditions have strained people’s ability to make time for leisure activities, causing a decline of local taarab performances in Lamu and Matadoni societies. The chapter will also discuss

³³ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Creation and Consumption of Leisure: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations,” introduction to *Leisure in Urban Africa*, edited by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Cassandra Rachel Veney (Trenton, Africa World Press, 2003) xi.

how modern taarab, a commercially driven and urban based phenomenon, entered Lamu and Matadoni society and impacted the local scene. I will relate how contemporary economic conditions and media have impacted the consumption of this style within these communities. Modern taarab, with its emphasis on electronic instruments and commercial success has created tensions with the older generation of taarab listeners and performers. The chapter will also dedicate time to discussing some of the changes that Al Noor, the one local group still performing in Lamu, made in order to adjust to these changes. The concluding chapter will highlight how taarab in Lamu and Matadoni has negotiated the boundaries between continuity and change. This chapter describes how taarab in Lamu and Matadoni remains a dynamic form of entertainment absorbing popular trends, however maintaining local practices that make the music in these communities distinct.

Chapter 2

“First For Leisure”:

Situating Taarab in a Local Context

For much of the twentieth century, taarab music was a source of leisure for people in Lamu and Matadoni. Most literature situates the origins of taarab in urban areas such as Zanzibar, however, smaller communities also participated in the genre. These towns and villages had their own social and musical traditions that were influential in shaping how people exercised and regarded taarab. People in Lamu and Matadoni emphasized public performances—where community members came together to hear the music and celebrate festivities such as weddings or national holidays—over the commercial practices of marketing cassettes and holding expensive concerts, which were common in the cosmopolitan urban centers. Local musicians contributed to taarab by incorporating their own popular styles and instruments. Taarab in Lamu and Matadoni was distinct both in sound and practices from the style of other population centers. Community conditions and customs shaped the nature of the music’s context in people’s lives.

Early Taarab in Lamu and Matadoni

Taarab in Lamu and Matadoni borrowed from the styles of Zanzibar, however, local musical and cultural traditions defined the ways in which people experienced taarab in these communities. Taarab developed independently in the Lamu region as a result of the dhow trade which brought commercial and cultural interaction with societies along

the Indian ocean, most prominently Arabia, Oman, India and Persia.³⁴ Archeological evidence shows that Lamu had been established by the fourteenth century.³⁵ The merchant trade from the Indian Ocean benefited the town. Monsoon winds blowing south-west would take sailors from India and the Middle East to Lamu. By the middle of the eighteenth century Lamu was an important port and trade center. Dhows came and went, carrying ivory, mangroves, oilseed, hides, grains, cowries, tortoise shells and hippopotamus teeth.³⁶ Merchants and sailors would stay there until July when the winds carried them back to their homes.³⁷ This relationship created an important social identity for Lamu as the sailors and merchants often intermarried with the local African population and introduced their social paradigms, religion, and culture into the community. The people of Lamu and Matadoni developed an identity that blended elements of both Africa and the Middle East.

The interactions and marriages between the traders from the Indian Ocean and various indigenous groups along the coast of East Africa localized Swahili identity. Swahili identity is far from homogeneous; rather various ethnic groups have shaped the cultures and customs within their region of residence. A map of the east coast of Africa (see Appendix fig 2) reveals that there was tremendous diversity. Matadoni is primarily a Bajuni community. The Bajuni are a prominent ethnic group that originated on the north coast of Kenya and southern Somalia.³⁸ Lamu in its earliest days was controlled by

³⁴ John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 9.

³⁵ Usam Ghadian, *Lamu a Study of a Swahili Town* (Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1975) 38; see also J. de V Allen, *Lamu Town: a Guide* (Mombasa, Lamu National Museum Trustees of Kenya, 1974) 38.

³⁶ Ghadian, *Lamu*, 38.

³⁷ John Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 9.

³⁸ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 72.

wealthy Arab patricians and members of the Mijikenda (an ethnic group composed of nine different tribes) who viewed themselves as the “proper Swahili”.³⁹ Today almost half of the population are descendants of Bajuni groups.⁴⁰ Social customs in Lamu and Matadoni are therefore distinct from other regions such as Mombasa and Zanzibar. Mombasa, like Lamu, has a significant affiliation with the mijikenda heritage, but did not initially have a large Bajuni population. The Tumbatu and Hadimu are indigenous to Zanzibar. While people in the community describe themselves as part of a larger Swahili heritage, local culture, customs and traditions have contributed significantly to the shape of these communities’ different social identities.⁴¹ Even Lamu and Matadoni are ethnically distinct from each other, with Lamu having more Arab heritage, despite their geographical proximity. While this thesis examines music in both of these towns, there were cultural and societal differences between the communities.

The dhow trade that helped to construct a localized cultural identity, economy and society in Lamu and Matadoni, also brought music traditions. For the sailors, voyages to and from Lamu island would not be complete without an instrument or two; dhows going to Lamu often carried a violin, harmonica and some tablas (popular Indian hand drums).⁴² East African musical traditions incorporated musical styles and instruments of their foreign visitors. Athman Hussein Athman, who is a devoted fan and scholar of taarab

³⁹ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 1 & 77.

⁴⁰ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 77.

⁴¹ Middleton, *World of the Swahili*, 1.

⁴² Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 110. Fair, *Politics and Pastimes*, 173-174; Kelly Askew, “Following in the Tracks of Beni: The Diffusion of the Tanga Taarab Tradition,” editors, Frank Gunderson and Gregory Bar. *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2000) 21-38; Athman Hussein Athman, interview by author, audio recording, English, Mombasa, Kenya, 24 October 2008.

music with origins in Lamu, offered a detailed oral history of the early foundations of taarab in these communities. The sailors entertained themselves by playing *Gunri*, a popular musical style, for spectators along the sea fronts of Lamu and Matadoni. At these events there would be an exchange of poetry; one of the sailors recited a poem—usually influenced by an Egyptian or Indian melody—and somebody from the local community responded with a Kiswahili verse. Each song could last for one-half hour, or even in some cases, one full hour because every community member contributed a verse to the music. *Gunri* was an early foundation for taarab in Lamu and Matadoni.⁴³ During the early twentieth century taarab emerged as a distinguishable genre within these communities. The conventions of entertaining the population by sharing music and verses were an important component of taarab’s appeal in both towns.

Muhamed Kijuma (d. 1945) contributed greatly to the local traditions of taarab in both Lamu and Matadoni in the early twentieth century. He incorporated popular instruments from the area and made taarab available to people who otherwise would not have received the opportunity to hear the music. Kijuma was born in Lamu to wealthy parents in the late nineteenth century. He was a man of many trades; amongst other activities he was a calligrapher, scholar, craftsman, poet, musician, and a captain of a group of the popular *ngoma* known as *beni*.⁴⁴ He received an opportunity to perform for Sultan Sayyid Hamoud (reigned 1896-1902) of Zanzibar, when the ruler visited Lamu. The sultan, impressed with his music, invited Kijuma to stay at his palace. During his sojourn, he learned from the court musicians playing taarab in the sultan’s palaces.

⁴³Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

⁴⁴ Mohammad Ibrahim Mohamed, “The Life and Works of Muhamid Kijuma” (PHD Dissertation University of London, 1983) 1-106.

Mohammad Ibrahim Mohamed, in his dissertation on Kijuma's life and music, argues that Kijuma took this taarab from the palace and imported it to Lamu when he returned there in 1908.⁴⁵

While Kijuma brought a few instruments and some of the conventions of taarab music from Zanzibar, localized traditions were the foundations of taarab in the Lamu archipelago. Kijuma's own style, along with other musicians who were performing at the time, drew upon local methods, contributing to the development of a Lamu aesthetic that was different from those of the that Zanzibari musicians. Instead of playing the lute—which was the most prominent taarab instrument in Zanzibar— Kijuma played the *kibangala*, a local seven stringed instrument.⁴⁶ Local *ngoma* groups, such as the *beni* clubs, of which Kijuma was also a member, helped to localize the sound and style of the music.

While other musicians were playing styles that resembled taarab, Kijuma was among the most enduring artists because he contributed significantly to the popularity of the music in Lamu and Matadoni. He often appeared at weddings, often for no cost, where he sang verses to the bride and groom to wish their marriage good fortunes. People often approached Kijuma to ask for songs which would express their feelings.⁴⁷ In this way somebody who lacked talents in writing verses, or did not have the time to perform songs could pass messages on to a specific person or the entire community. Kijuma made taarab accessible to everyday people who did not have access to the cosmopolitan culture of the sultan's court. Even decades after Kijuma's death in 1945, there were several

⁴⁵ Mohamed, "The Life and Works of Muhamid Kijuma," 68.

⁴⁶ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

⁴⁷ Mohamed, 92, 106.

groups in Lamu singing his songs or otherwise imitating his musical style, underscoring the musician's appeal within the community. Kijuma built on a tradition of community performance where villagers could listen to the music for no cost.

The Effect of Bollywood on Taarab Music

Following the end of the Second World War Indian film and music flooded into Lamu culture and had tremendous influence on local taarab. The Indian film industry is the second largest in the world producing 800-900 movies each year.⁴⁸ Beginning in the 1950s the works of renowned film directors Satyajit Ray, Gura Dutt and Mrinai Sen gained acclaim within Lamu's populace.⁴⁹ These movies had Kiswahili subtitles so that people on the East African coast could understand the dialogue and songs within the films. People living in Lamu could recount details of the plot, structure, and music of the Hindi films. If a person could not afford to see the latest Indian film they would be able to turn on the radio or listen to records of the popular Hindi songs.⁵⁰ Influenced by these movies, musicians incorporated Indian aesthetics to the taarab that musicians played on the entire coast of Kenya, including Lamu and Matadoni. Juma Bhalo and Maulidi Juma of Mombasa were the most popular musicians along the coast of Kenya, including the Lamu archipelago. They regularly incorporated Indian instruments, sounds, and even entire songs into their music. Bhalo, in particular, developed a reputation for taking popular Hindi songs and translating the lyrics into Kiswahili.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast* (Stockholm, Studies in Social Anthropology, 1994) 302.

⁴⁹ Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos*, 302.

⁵⁰ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman; Fargi Mzee, interview by author, audio recording, Lamu, Swahili, With Assistance by Yusuf, Kenya, 26 November 2008.

⁵¹ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

These popular entertainers heavily influenced taarab in Lamu and Matadoni. Although he was based in Mombasa, Bhalo regularly performed in Lamu and occasionally in Matadoni during the 1970s and 1980s. Bhalo enjoyed both fame and commercial success that allowed him to turn his music into a full-time career. His music gained a devoted following, especially amongst women. According to a local school teacher and taarab fan Buno Said, popular rumors circulated, many perhaps true, regarding the musician's sexual exploits with women when he visited; this included affairs with people's wives.⁵² During the 1980s, groups of jealous husbands virtually banned Bhalo from appearing in Lamu after he sang a song at a wedding performance saying that if you have a goat that is wandering around, people might steal it. He proclaimed "if you want your goat to be safe tie it to a rope."⁵³ The song created a tremendous uproar as men quickly understood the meaning of the singer's metaphors. They stopped the performance and some men even threw stones at the musician, forcing him to flee Lamu. Bhalo was not able to return to the community for nearly five years until he received an invitation to return.⁵⁴ Although many men barred Bhalo from performing, his popularity did not fade in the community, even amongst men; the episode, in fact, enhanced his image as an iconic superstar, cementing Bhalo's credibility of a performer of love songs. Even in his absence, people in Lamu continued to listen to his recordings. Since the debacle Bhalo continued to perform through the 1990s. His last

⁵² Buno Said, Interview by author, audio recording, English. Lamu, Kenya, 25 November 2008.

⁵³ Interview, Buno Said.

⁵⁴ Interview Buno Said; Mwenda Ntarangwi, "Malumbano or Matukano: Competition, Confrontation, and (De)Construction of Masculinity in the Taarab of Maulidi and Bhalo," Editors, Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2000), 66.

appearance was at the Lamu cultural festival in 2002. He since suspended his musical career, and no longer makes trips to Lamu.

The popularity of Indian music also contributed to the ways that people practiced taarab in Matadoni. Mohamed Halef, the band leader of one of the major taarab groups of Matadoni, spoke of learning music directly from Juma Bhalo during the late 1950s; whenever the artist would visit Lamu, Halef would take the opportunity to consult the musician for more skills.⁵⁵ Now an elderly man who fishes during the morning and constructs baskets during the afternoon, Halef spoke proudly about getting the opportunity to study taarab with a musician as important as Juma Bhalo. Halef's group Wakti were tremendous supporters of Bhalo and often played his songs during their own performances.⁵⁶

While Maulidi Juma of Mombasa did not achieve the same degree of iconic status as Bhalo, he was one of the most popular musicians in Lamu and Matadoni and regularly received invitations to perform. Maulidi, like Bhalo, achieved tremendous commercial success and made a living from his music. He built a connection with the community of Matadoni that paralleled Bhalo's relationship with Lamu. Maulidi maintained a powerful following in Matadoni even rivaling Bhalo's popularity in that village. One of the

⁵⁵ Mohamed Halef, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, assisted by Ali Abdella Famao, Matadoni, Kenya. 11 November 2008. The decade ascribed to Halef learning taarab was based on his response that he first stated learning taarab from Bhalo in a few years before Kenya's independence in 1963. This would put the time he first started learning taarab to be during the end of the 1950s, or perhaps very early 1960s.

⁵⁶ Ali Abdulla Famao, interview by author, audio recording and written, English, Matadoni, Kenya. 11-18 November 2008; Ali Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Halif, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008; Abdella Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

wealthiest members of Matadoni, Ali Babusi, was a Maulidi patron and frequently requested him to perform for the community.⁵⁷

Economic factors contributed to Maulidi's success in Matadoni, smaller and poorer than the town of Lamu. Maulidi performed for significantly cheaper rates than Bhalo; whereas Bhalo charged as high as ninety-thousand Kenyan schillings for one wedding performance, Maulidi played for fifty thousand.⁵⁸ The cheaper rate that Maulidi offered was appealing to families who were trying to raise thousands of dollars to pay for a wedding. An acclaimed artist performing for less money, as was the case with Maulidi, was appealing to people of Matadoni who typically lacked tremendous wealth. Due to the frequency of his visits and content of his songs Maulidi developed a connection with the Matadoni community much in the same way that Lamu regarded Bhalo. Maulidi's songs also addressed issues dealing with the conditions of low-income people. Maulidi discussed the hardships of living in poverty and the importance of hard work. These songs resonated with the concerns of inhabitants of Matadoni, many of whom struggled to support their households.

The popularity of "bollywood" also inspired numerous musicians in the Lamu area, and along the Kenyan coast. People today still recall popular local musicians such as Faragi McZee, Mariam Matrele, Bernardi, and Tenge.⁵⁹ With the exception of Tenge, who later moved to Malindi (a city on the Kenyan coast), the popularity of these local musicians was limited to the Lamu area. These artists performed for local audiences in

⁵⁷ Salim Mohamed, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, assisted by Muna, Lamu, Kenya, 27 November 2008; Interview Ali Abdulla Famao; Ali Hippy, interviewed by author, audio recording, English 22-23 November 2008.

⁵⁸ Interview, Ali Abdulla Famao.

⁵⁹ Sherifa Bakari, interview by author. audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya, 22 November 2008.

Lamu for considerably less money than the prominent musicians coming out of the city. While these artists charged money—although significantly less than musicians like Bhalo—and collected tips, they played with the understanding that they were not going to make a significant profit or achieve widespread acclaim. Nevertheless, these musicians were the most accessible to the average person living in these communities who generally did not have enough resources to hire big-name musicians such as Bhalo. Bunu Said of Lamu, who has listened to taarab all of his life, recounted that when he was getting married he decided to hire a local musician, Bernardi, rather than Bhalo to play at his wedding.⁶⁰ He explained that Bernardi played for considerably less money than Bhalo. While musicians in Lamu and Matadoni did not have the hopes of earning tremendous fame or commercial success, they earned a powerful following by playing for cheaper rates that made it easier for people with lower incomes to hire the performers.

Mariam Matrele's experience highlights the important, yet litigious, role of women in taarab and musical performances in a conservative community such as Lamu. Athman Hussein Athman contended that Matrele's direct participation in taarab as a musician was somewhat controversial in the communities amongst conservatives and religious leaders who objected to a woman performing. According to Athman, Lamu society is far more patriarchal and conservative than communities such as Zanzibar, where women have long more freely participated in the performance of taarab. While women have always been contributors to popular music, social leaders have often challenged their role in public performances. Swahili culture in particular restricts women's freedom to participate in public activities. Mishi wa Abadal, a woman whose

⁶⁰ Interview, Bunu Said.

narrative appears in Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel's book *Three Swahili Women*, demonstrates the way that some men sought to restrict women's participation in the popular *lelemama* ngoma, which was popular with women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

I danced after I had been divorced. But Halima's father didn't want me to dance or to go outside. I was inside only, cooking. He sent the servant out to buy everything and bring it in the kitchen for me to cook. Lamini did not forbid me to dance. I threw myself into it completely. If I wanted a dress, he would take the material and sew. He would sew it himself; he sewed for a living. He could sew anything you wanted to. For two or three days he came and saw me and came back home. He didn't ask questions. But Halima's father—you didn't dare show your face outside. He would beat you until he got tired. He was very strict.⁶¹

The objections that men raised to women's participation extended to Mariam Matrele. As a musician, she would be assuming a highly public role that threatened the social structure of a patriarchal society such as Lamu. The restrictive structures of Lamu society discouraged women from participating in taarab as musicians. Most of the musicians in Lamu and Matadoni, with the exception of Matrele—and perhaps a few others that nobody thought to name in my interviews—have been men. This is very distinct from the taarab practiced in mainland Tanzania, Zanzibar, and even Mombasa where women have become very popular local performers.

Taarab Music as a Form of Leisure

Local taarab groups in Matadoni incorporated the village's rich musical traditions; the villagers regularly performed the popular *ngomas* (popular dances that heavily involve drums) *chama*, *lelemama*, and *vugo* in order to entertain themselves when they

⁶¹ Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 85.

had time away from work. A local man from Matadoni named Salim Mohamed, who played taarab in a local group, recalled there being taarab bands in the 1950s.⁶² He remembered that Chumba, Lipi and Mangazo were among the groups playing at this time; however, these groups disbanded by the end of the decade. Yote Huwa and Wakti were the two most prominent local groups playing taarab.⁶³ Wakti began playing shortly after Kenya became independent in 1963 and Yote Huwa followed soon after.⁶⁴ Wakti and Yote Huwa did not achieve commercial success, playing for small amounts of money and tips—however, their performances and song lyrics helped shape the community. Until the late nineteen-nineties, when both clubs broke up, Wakti and Yote Huwa regularly provided entertainment for the community and competed vigorously for supporters within the village.

People in Lamu and Matadoni have long practiced taarab as a form of recreation. The local poet and politician Sherifa Bakari shared that music is “first for leisure, for entertainment”. She said, “As a human-being you must have time to entertain yourself, to refresh your mind.”⁶⁵ Sherifa, in addition to her work as a community leader, is a performer in local *ngoma* groups in Lamu. She has listened to taarab since she was a

⁶²Interview, Salim Mohamed.

⁶³Interview, Salim Mohamed; Interview, Mohamed Halef; Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo; Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo; Adija Shee, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni Kenya, 15 November 2008; Adija Fadhili, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 12 November 2008; interview, Ali Abdulla Fahmou.

⁶⁴This is based on interviews with Mohamed Halef and Ali Bakari Liongo. People I interviewed in Matadoni in general could not recall dates, particularly as far back as when they were beginning. I therefore depended on asking them for information based on large scale events and time periods in Kenya history. Mohamed Halef told me for example that his club was the first one in Matadoni and was formed about after a year since Kenya got independence. It also appeared from discussions with Halef and Ali Bakari Liongo that Yote Huwa was there close to the same time period as Wakti. However, the date should be treated as absolute time rather an approximation based on local memory of when these groups appeared.

⁶⁵ Interview, Sherifa Bakari.

child and was familiar with the local musicians of the community. Similarly, almost all individuals who performed or listened to taarab explained that they did it “just for fun.”⁶⁶ Salim Mohamed said that “taarab is something I do to keep myself busy. When I may make it [taarab] I am so happy.”⁶⁷ To the performers of Lamu and Matadoni this meant that taarab—while offering financial rewards such as payment for concerts and tips—was not an activity they could turn into a career; rather taarab’s main function was to provide recreation for people after they completed their daily jobs and household chores. Playing taarab required a personal financial investment on the part of musicians, as artists did not receive sponsorship or significant income from their music to purchase new instruments. According to Mohamed Halef, each band member contributed money to acquire instruments.⁶⁸ Faragi McZee recalled scheduling practices on weekends because the members of the group had jobs that they needed to finish before they could partake in playing music.⁶⁹ Similarly Wakti and Yote Huwa groups rehearsed in the evenings after returning from fishing, often meeting either at the home of one of the members or at a hangout.⁷⁰ Rehearsals were a time at the end of the day where the musicians would get together, socialize, and exchange poems and music. Ali Bakari Liongo provided a description of such rehearsals: “During that time it was very busy time so we planned a time after the *Isha* (evening) prayer at eight. So whoever has a new poem he was giving

⁶⁶ This direct quote was taken from my interview with Adija Fadhili (see footnote number 32); see also interview, Sherifa Bakari; Interview Ali Bakari Liongo; Interview Abdella Bakari Liongo; Faragi Mzee, interview by author, audio recording, Lamu, Kenya, Swahili, with assistance of Yusuf, 26 November 2008.

⁶⁷ Interview, Salim Mohamed.

⁶⁸ Interview, Mohamed Halef.

⁶⁹ Interview, Faragi Mzee.

⁷⁰ Interview, Mohamed Halef; Interview Ali Bakari Liongo; Interview Abdella Bakari Liongo.

it. Our peoples in the club were listening for it and they start following our taarab music.”⁷¹

While members of the group were predominantly men, women also contributed to taarab by joining the band during their rehearsals and performances. Adija Fadhili and Adija Shee both recalled singing and clapping alongside the musicians while they performed. Abdella Bakari Liongo, a male, said that women would sing the choruses with the musicians; however their role was restricted to the background. While these women were not official members of the band, they were able to participate in the music by showing their support for the band during rehearsals and performances, giving them a role in the way the community experienced taarab.

Unlike the popular musicians from the big cities who often charged high rates to perform in the Lamu area, many of the groups in Matadoni and Lamu performed for little, if no money at all. Members of the group played mostly for their own entertainment and to refresh their musical skills. Performing for little money provided the artists with the benefit of showing their skills off to the community, or sometimes a male musician performed to impress a woman. Mohamed Halef recounted how taarab gave his group an opportunity to demonstrate that they were as skilled as the prominent artists playing for money, “We started the clubs because we learned that our people were really losing money. They were paying a lot of money. We were just doing it [taarab] to show that we can also do it.”⁷² Halef contended that his group could play just as well as popular musicians such as Bhalo without costing the village money. In Lamu the group of Faragi

⁷¹ Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

⁷² Interview, Mohamed Halef.

McZee often performed at weddings for no charge: “We used taarab just for recreation. In weddings for free. We just did it freely. We were charging nothing.”⁷³ Yote Huwa and Wakti both held weekly performances in the town square. There would be an announcement in town regarding the time the group would be playing, inviting everybody to hear the music. The group charged no money. Such performances brought taarab to the general public who did not have the money to hire a famous musician such as Bhalo.

The performing artists earned a little extra money from these impromptu concerts by receiving tips. However, more importantly to them, was the pleasure of getting to play their instrument, recite a new poem, and impress their neighbors with their musical talents. A musician’s exhibition of his skills enhanced his role within the community; performers demonstrated talents that others in the village did not possess and provided their neighbors with opportunities to remove themselves from the monotonous tasks of work and chores.

For people living in Lamu and Matadoni, the taarab events were anticipated occasions where they could socialize with friends and neighbors and enjoy music. Many people remembered taarab events they attended even as far back as their childhoods. Sherifa Bakari provided a very vivid description of these performances that she attended when she was a child:

They used to spread *majamvi* [mats]. People don’t used to go to the hall. They just make use of Kiranda in front of their houses. So they spread *majamvi* down. People sit on the *majamvi*. The taarab is just there in front of the stage. The stage was very well prepared for the bridegroom and then they sing taarab music and it

⁷³Interview, Faragi Mzee.

was very entertaining. Women were seated down there clapping their hands. They sang after the soloist. They responded.⁷⁴

Other individuals I interviewed provided very similar accounts to the recollections of Sherifa. There would be long *majamvi* lying on the ground. People would sit on these mats—women on one side, men on the other— around the musicians.⁷⁵ Faragi McZee recalled that there were no microphones so people formed a circle around the musician to hear the words. More prosperous attendees brought chairs to sit in as they listened to the music.”⁷⁶ At the time Faragi Mzee was performing, Lamu was very small; even larger wedding celebrations would have only around one-hundred guests—contemporary weddings often have seven hundred or more guests.⁷⁷ Although small in size and lacking the equipment that people expect from concerts by modern groups, the events contributed to the community by giving people an opportunity to come together, socialize, and share in a common activity.

Disputing Factions: Competition and Rivalries

Competitions in music have a long tradition on the East African coast, and even throughout the whole African coast.⁷⁸ During the nineteenth century *beni* and *lelemama* dances were ways that men and women got out of their houses, wore extravagant costumes in the style of British colonial uniforms, and competed for social position

⁷⁴ Interview, Sherifa Vakari.

⁷⁵ Interview, Bunu Said; Interview Mohamed Halef; Interview, Faragi Mzee.

⁷⁶ Interview, Faragi Mzee.

⁷⁷ Interview, Faragi Mzee.

⁷⁸ Lisa Gilman, “Putting Colonialism into Perspective: Cultural History and the Case of Malipenga Ngoma in Malawi”. Editors, Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2000) 321-345; Christopher Waterman, *Juju: a Social History and Ethnomusicology of an African Popular Music*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

within the community by being the best singers or dancers in the town.⁷⁹ The events offered people not just recreation but opportunities for exercising their talent, energy and leadership.⁸⁰ In Mirza's and Strobel's book *Three Swahili Women*, a woman named Shamsa Muhamad Muhashamy discussed her experiences dancing *lelemama*, "The whole of Mombasa was rooting for us. We were wearing the colors and skirts and blouses of the Royal Air Force. We came down with drums like the Royal Air Force. Now my life was completely spoiled because of dancing, like this, because I had danced nearly naked [that is without *buibui*]. But it was our intention to win."⁸¹ These performances offered ways for people to depart from the rules and restrictions of daily social protocol, enjoy music, and outmaneuver their rivals. In Lamu, members living in the rival north and south parts of town would meet in the village square. Some wore bagpipes and called themselves Scotchi, while others wore full sailor suits and called their group Marini.⁸² The slaughtering of cows would be a feature of these events representing the prestige of each group: "sometimes they would kill up to one-hundred cows and play at their dhows. Sometimes nobody can eat the meat; they have to throw it into the sea."⁸³

Taarab incorporated the competitive spirit of music and dance competitions. In the 1970s until the late 1980s a popular rivalry between Bhalo and Maulidi epitomized the extent to which these feuds could be carried out.⁸⁴ Their dispute, which the musicians

⁷⁹ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 43-49. Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1979); 9-13; Frederick Cooper, *On the Water Front: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1987) 38-39; To Ranger, *Dance and Society in East Africa: the Beni Ngoma*. (Nairobi Heinemann, 1978).

⁸⁰ Cooper, *on the Water Front*, 39.

⁸¹ Mirza & Strobel, *Three Swahili Women*, 106-107.

⁸² J. de V Allen, *Lamu Town*, 92.

⁸³ Interview, Ali Hippi.

⁸⁴ Ntarwangwi, 60.

fought through the production of audio cassettes, was very famous along the coast of Kenya, including Lamu and Matadoni; almost everybody in Lamu and Matadoni had memories and owned tapes from their battle.⁸⁵ According to Buno Said, a school teacher and lifelong fan of taarab, people in Lamu generally supported Bhalo, while Matadoni favored Maulidi, aligning themselves with the musician that was most associated with their community.⁸⁶ Bhalo and Maulidi's competition began in 1974 over a dispute concerning money and popularity. Their sparring then escalated.⁸⁷ Maulidi accused Bhalo of being a voyeur, peering into people's houses to watch them have sex. Bhalo responded by accusing his rival of being a homosexual.⁸⁸ Their attacks greatly transgressed proper Swahili etiquette, which did not permit individuals to publicly make personal accusations against another individual. In Lamu town the rivalry generated controversy and offended some listeners. Buno Said explained that when the competition started he stopped liking both of their music: "they were going out of songs that educated people on better love, better kind of living."⁸⁹ Religious leaders, concerned at what they believed to be great violations of conduct, raised objections to the songs and sought to discourage people from listening to them. Sometime in the late 1980s, the chief kadhi—Islamic judge responsible for handling most disputes—in Mombasa asked the musicians to stop the dispute.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Interview, Buno Said; Interview, Ali Hippi; Hala Afmed, interviewed by author, audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya 23 November 2008.

⁸⁶ Interview, Buno Said.

⁸⁷ Ntarwangwi, "Malumbano or Matukano", 94.

⁸⁸ Interview, Ali Hippi; interview, Hala Afmed; interview, Buno Said. For the texts of some of the songs transcribed and translated into English as well as fuller descriptions on what the artists said to each other see Ntarwangwi, "Malumbano or Matukano."

⁸⁹ Interview, Buno Said.

⁹⁰ Ntarwangwi, "Malumbano or Matukano," 58.

Despite the objections of many, the rivalry between Bhalo and Maulidi offered people a source of recreation. People eagerly waited for the latest cassette and often got together with friends to decipher its meaning. Bunu Said shared that, “during that time they [Maulidi and Bhalo] sold so many cassettes because they will see what Bhalo will reply to Maulidi. And when Maulidi produces new cassettes they sold a lot because people just want to know a lot of stuff about Bhalo.”⁹¹ Men and women could meet with their peers, socialize, and converse over the latest events in the feud. Taarab songs gave people the ability to discuss issues that they would not normally be able to talk about in standard social interactions. By discussing their song lyrics, people renegotiated the social boundaries of what they could express in their society.⁹² Under the pretext of talking over the latest Bhalo or Maulidi songs, issues of homosexuality and perverse behavior would inevitably enter into their conversations. For example Hala Afmed, at the time a young woman of about twenty years at the time of writing, provided a recollection of their songs, including the controversial issues of voyeurism and homosexuality.⁹³ When such people engaged in such discourse with their peers—which according to Bunu Said was the case in Lamu—they expanded the limits of social interaction.

These types of competitions and rivalries were part of local taarab performances, as groups competed for the best instruments and popularity.⁹⁴ These competitions often involved the whole community; in Matadoni half of the village supported Yote Huwa,

⁹¹ Interview, Bunu Said.

⁹² Ntarwangwi, “Malumbano or Matukano,” 56.

⁹³ Interview, Hala Afmed.

⁹⁴ Interview, Mohamed Halef; Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo; Interview, Faragi Mzee.

while the other half favored Wakti.⁹⁵ Their rivalry occasionally incorporated the *beni* tradition of slaughtering an animal, usually a cow to feed the community.⁹⁶ Abdella Bakari Liongo, a local musician, had memories of this tradition. He was associated with Yote Huwa and helped them to set up their instruments. He occasionally played the drums for the group when “there was a shortage of participants”.⁹⁷ He recounted how the groups competed over who could slaughter the most livestock: “We were competing by singing and also by making big parties. We contributed [verses] then slaughtered a cow. If Wakti slaughtered one then Yote Huwa slaughtered three to show we were better.”⁹⁸ The slaughtering of cows communicated the group’s prestige, indicating that the group had enough income to purchase an animal to provide to the community. Abdella Liongo’s comment reflected that the practice was done as a means to have fun and contributed to the festivity of the event. The slaughtering of the cows also provided the town with a good feast, as the villagers would typically eat the cows at the end of the celebration. In a resource-limited society such as Lamu and Matadoni the ability to slaughter livestock to feed the village contained tremendous ramifications for social power within the village; the band’s status increased by being able to contribute more food than their rival group.

Yote Huwa and Wakti incorporated their rivalry into their song lyrics. The musicians refrained from the distinct personal attacks that characterized Bhalo and Maulidi’s feud; rather members of the groups stuck to jabs on their rival’s singing ability

⁹⁵ Interview, Salim Mohamed.

⁹⁶ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

⁹⁷ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

⁹⁸ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

and musical talent. While Yote Huwa wrote their own compositions, people of Wakti often performed popular tunes by Bhalo.⁹⁹ One of the musicians of Wakti would even sing in the Hindi language, instead of Kiswahili. Ali Bakari recalled an example of a verse of such a song that his group sang criticizing this practice:

*Mahindi wa telelani leo na kuaridhia
Umetia muunguni zombo ulokitumia
Ulikuwa nahudha sakunu*

Hindu of tree tops today and I am telling you
You have hidden your tools under the bed
The ones you are using, you are the strong captain.¹⁰⁰

The singer reprehended the leader of the rival group for singing in Hindi, as opposed to Yote Huwa's ability to compose its own poetry in Kiswahili language. It suggested that the singer of Wakti was hiding his talents by singing in Hindi. The lyrics demonstrated that rivalries and competition existed for the sake of fun and recreation, avoiding the attacks on the rival's character that Bhalo and Maulidi propagated. The rivalries contributed to the localization of the genre by creating allegiances within the village. The participants of the rivalry, the lyrics that people sang and the memories were tied to the local community, making them distinct from the experiences that people had in different communities. The disputing factions helped to establish a new layer in the social identity of the community. People declared allegiances to Wakti or Yote Huwa by cheering for them at events or by discussing the merits of their favorite group with their friends and neighbors.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Interview, Ali Abdella Famao.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Ali Bakari.

¹⁰¹ Interview, Ali Abdella Famao.

While these alliances were meant to add to the celebratory atmosphere of taarab events—as opposed to any actual hostility—they also created an alternative way for people to identify themselves. Beneath the surface, *Yote Huwa*'s lyrics offered a moral message that could be extended to all members of the community; people should not hide their talents, rather they should take pride in sharing them with others.¹⁰² In this way taarab allowed the villagers to access information that would help them experience more satisfying lives and live within the community.

¹⁰² Interview, Ali Abdulla Famao.

Chapter 3

“Awakening the People”:

Swahili Poems and the Construction of a Community Ethic

In the 1920s, at the height of her popularity, Siti Binti Saad composed and sang a song addressing the gender inequalities of Zanzibar’s court system. The song was called “Kijiti”. It recounted the true story of a woman from Dar es Salaam who came to Zanzibar to visit friends. Her friends took her out for an evening of entertainment, and a man named Kijiti later raped and murdered her. The murderer escaped to the mainland, while the female friends of the murdered woman had to stand trial and were convicted for the woman’s death.¹⁰³ The conservative judge chastised the women for their consumption of alcohol. The song ends by cursing Kijiti:

*Kijiti nakuusia Darisalama usende
Utamkuta kibabu kakuvalia kiwembe
Watu wanakuapiza mola akupe matende*

Kijiti, I warn you, do not go to Dar es Salaam
You will meet an old man and he is carrying a razor just for you.
People are cursing you, may God give you elephantiasis.¹⁰⁴

The lyrics of this song invoked a system of justice in which God would punish the guilty for their wrongs.¹⁰⁵ Kijiti, who escaped punishment from the corrupt courts in colonial Zanzibar, would not be able to escape his fate. The audience listening to these lyrics

¹⁰³ Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community and Identity in Post-Abolition Zanzibar 1890-1945* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001)197.

¹⁰⁴ Fair, *Politics and Pastimes*, 198.

¹⁰⁵ Fair, *Politics and Pastimes* 198.

would find themselves in a position of questioning their community's system of justice while affirming the importance of fairness and righteousness as community values.

Siti's lyrics underscored the important relationship that taarab has had with local communities along the East African coast. Between 1895 and 1910, as taarab moved out of the sultan's palace and into the public sphere, people appropriated the music's symbolic power and used it for their own ends.¹⁰⁶ Taarab joined a long musical tradition through which people strived to educate the public and bring into discussions the rules, protocols, and ethics governing East African Coast society. For example *Lelemama* music groups and performances gave women the ability to "transform dissent into political action."¹⁰⁷

Social communication is not unique to taarab, but it has become a defining feature of the music that audiences in this region expect. Adija Fadhili, a woman in Matadoni, described taarab as "education". She described taarab as a way to "open the brain. It's a path to education when you listen to music like taarab. It's a part of leisure, it's a part of education, it's a part of keeping one busy."¹⁰⁸ Music provided a means of learning, alerting audiences to the problems facing their society, and it challenged individuals to work together to construct a just and moral world. Sherifa Bakari said that it is easy for the musician to get the attention of the listeners because the audience is having fun listening to the songs.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 172.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1979)172.

¹⁰⁸ Adija Fadhili, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 12 November 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Sherifa Bakari, interview by author. audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya, 22 November 2008.

As was the case with other musical traditions, the content of taarab lyrics was local in nature. Musicians in Lamu and Matadoni appealed to the domestic and social concerns of their communities. These songs, as was the case with Siti Binti Saad's "Kijiti", often called into question the hegemonic order of government officials. Other songs addressed domestic themes such as marriage and relationships between men and women. These songs both affirmed and challenged the social paradigms within these small East African communities.

Love Poems: Discussion and Negotiation

Love songs were the most popular form of taarab. Musicians performed taarab most commonly at wedding ceremonies; therefore it was appropriate that their songs concerned love and relationships between men and women. Faragi McZee, a past performer from Lamu, explained that when performing his group "prayed that the mighty God would give the couple a long time and a peaceful time."¹¹⁰ These songs contained underlying messages that strove to educate members of the community regarding the ways of married life and negotiated social boundaries concerning relationships between men and women.¹¹¹

Many men described beginning to play taarab because of the love for a woman—or women in general—and wanted a means to pass messages expressing their feelings to the women. As the first chapter mentioned, Ali Bakari Liongo recounted that he began to sing taarab at a time when he had a wife whom he loved a lot and because he "wanted to

¹¹⁰ Faragi Mzee, interview by author, audio recording, Lamu, Kenya, Swahili, with assistance of Yusuf, 26 November 2008.

¹¹¹ Also see Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 126.

form more poems towards her.”¹¹² He was able to recall verses that he had recited for his wife:

*Ewe nyonda uniondao toa itikadi
Usiitie mashangao katika wako fuadi
Kae Sura unipendao yawa mimi nizaidi*

*Ewenyenda umangao. Moyo towa hikadi
Usiitie mashangao kwa sura unipendao
Ewe fuadi upendao mimi ni zaidi*

My words are accurate or you my love
With powerful light which occupies the whole body.
You are the only my soul

Are you my lovely removing your doubts and sorrow in your heart?
For the way you love me
I love you better¹¹³

The verses allowed Bakari to publicly voice his affection towards his wife. In addition to his wife being moved by the verses, the poem demonstrated to an audience that the composer was a good husband who had tremendous devotion towards his spouse. Many informal discussions with men revealed that there was a huge emphasis for men to be devoted and supportive of their wives. In Minou Figlesang’s examination of youth culture in Lamu, she found that young men readily agreed that the marriage relationship should be a place where the couple are emotionally involved, giving and receiving support and intimacy.¹¹⁴ Cultural norms expected both genders to be conscious of their

¹¹² Ali Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Halif, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

¹¹³ Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

¹¹⁴ Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast* (Stockholm, Studies in Social Anthropology, 1994, 265.

spouses' feelings.¹¹⁵ For men, to be a modern Muslim—i.e. a person with education and social sophistication— requires them to offer companionship, monogamy, and exclusive affection.¹¹⁶ Men spoke of the importance of caring for the wife both in terms of making sure the woman had enough money to manage the household and meeting her emotional needs. Ntarwangi argued that the latter is especially important for many Swahili men because they look to their wives in order to express themselves emotionally. According to Ntarwangi:

Whereas men undoubtedly have emotional needs such as anger and happiness that require emotional support from their society, Swahili men are not, as a rule allowed to display emotions such as affection, fear, and worry, especially in public space, where they spend most of their time. It is thus in the institution of marriage (which is conveniently shielded from public scrutiny) where such a need can be expressed and given support.¹¹⁷

Ali Bakari's verses, when performed for the community, taught men the importance and value of their spouse, as well as the fulfillment of sentimental expression. The poem reconstructed the social gender roles and expectations of men by instructing them to be loving husbands, devoted to the feelings of their spouses.

Songs also often encouraged men to be loyal and honest with their wives. Adija Shee remembered a poem that Ali Bakari wrote called "Kuacha Shada la Zari" ("To Leave Your Wife").¹¹⁸ According to her, the poem discussed a duel between a man's actual wife and his "street wife": the man had a wife at home but when he saw a street woman, he forgot about his home wife and thought about the street wife. The song

¹¹⁵ Mwenda Ntarangwi, *Gender, Identity and Performance: Understanding Swahili Cultural Realities Through Song* (Trenton: African World Press, 2003) 221.

¹¹⁶ Fuglesang, *Veils and Video*, 260.

¹¹⁷ Ntarwangi, *Gender, Identity and Performance*, 135-136.

¹¹⁸ Adija Shee, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao. Matadoni, Kenya, 15 November 2008.

entreated the man to go back to his wife at home and leave the street wife. The street wife would run off when she sees another man, but the home wife would always be together with him.¹¹⁹ The poem spoke to issues such as romantic temptation that married men would have faced at some point in their lives. Swahili culture traditionally permitted men to explore extra-marital sexual relationships; concubinage was a widespread practice along the East African coast during the early twentieth century.¹²⁰ The song sermonized the proper way to live in marriage with somebody; a man should remain loyal, valuing his wife above all others. The message of Bakari's verses reflected a changing culture where society increasingly expected men to live faithfully with their wives. Minou Fuglesang argued in her book *Veils and Video* that western influences and the growing popularity of Islamic reformist ideology contributes to these changes. She stated that "messages of modernization from various centers have taken work promoting local debates about being 'modern' and still retaining one's identity as a Muslim in the context of a secular and Westernized Kenya."¹²¹ Likewise, the verses affirmed the ideal that the wife should be steadfast and caring of her husband. In this way Ali Bakari's verses generated a public evaluation between the singer and those listening that affirmed the values of fidelity and devotion to one's married partner.

Love songs not only reaffirmed proper social boundaries, but negotiated and occasionally challenged the paradigms of Swahili society concerning relationships between men and women. For example Abdella Bakari Liongo recalled verses:

¹¹⁹ Interview, Adija Shee.

¹²⁰ Ntarwangwi, *Gender, Identity and Performance*, 226; Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Mombasa 1890-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 49.

¹²¹ Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos*, 53.

“Natamani sikupati kuzumgunza na wewe/ kutizime mfikati zukushie. (I did not get to speak with/ you were handcuffed)¹²² The lyrics described a situation where the future wife of a man refused to speak with him; the man wanted to speak with her, but the woman “was handcuffed” and not able to move.¹²³ Social tensions were very apparent in the text of these verses. Islamic culture forbids premarital love relationships; many men do not privately speak with their wives until they are married. In this way the poem raised discussions and challenges to Islamic parameters concerning courtship and romantic relationships between men and women.

Taarab songs concerning love also provided a way for men and women to work out disputes with each other. According to Mohamed Halef, love poems could move women in ways that simple dialogue and discussion could not.¹²⁴ Halef recalled composing and singing poems to his wife when they were quarrelling:

“My wife will come back because of the words given to her and be kind and sympathetic to me. But when we would talk she might come up harsh. We used songs so by the time she listens to the song then when she goes back home, she will start thinking about me what I had said that day she might give up and go back to me.¹²⁵

A very popular song in Lamu, written by Khalidi Omar Kajenje, described a dispute between a man and his former wife concerning a woman he had recently married:

Ni sheka pole pole mimi bwana mwe nyewe

Uniendemeki tambo kutaka kunivundiya

¹²² Abdella Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

¹²³ Interview, Ali Abdella Famao.

¹²⁴ Mohamed Halef, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, assisted by Ali Abdella Famao, Matadoni, Kenya. 11 November 2008.

¹²⁵ Interview, Mohamed Halef.

*Nami mita nita sema jambo upate kulisikiya
Kwangu hujawa mrembo kuna walo tanguliya*

*Usinishikemkono hebutafadhali sana
Mimi sina hajambo na kueleza bayana
Wala sitakimaneno ninawe tumeko sana*

*Pole pole ndio mwendo ilowazina kwambya
Uniendeme kwa vishindo kutaka kuni vundia
Kuna anipaependo kwako sito regeleye*

Touch we slowly I am the husband of somebody

You follow me a long time ago, so I may divorce my wife
I will say something, so you may listen to me
To me you are not beautiful, there is [somebody] more beautiful than you.

Don't touch my hands, I request please, please.
I don't want any quarrel.
I don't want any cause to be separated.

Slowly slowly is better, I am telling you truthfully.
Follow me so I may divorce my wife
I have somebody who has a better life so I cannot return back to you.¹²⁶

Kajenje's verses highlighted tensions of love relationships in Swahili society. Jealousy, divorce, and sexuality are underlying themes in this song. The man told the woman that he had divorced her and married another woman who was more beautiful than her. The woman meanwhile still loved the husband and continued to pursue him despite the presence of a new wife. Through the song, the husband admonished his former wife for her persistence and begged her to leave him at peace.

While Kajenje intended his song to support the man's cause, people in the community would have developed their own opinions regarding who was right, based on

¹²⁶ Khalid Omar Kajenje, interview by author, audio recording, English Lamu, Kenya 6 October 2008.

their own individual experiences and values. Kajenje, although composing the lyrics, did not have control over how they were interpreted. In East Africa, first marriages often end in divorce, contributing to a high divorce rate. Strobel argues that the divorce rate is as high as fifty-percent. Under Islamic law practiced on the coast, a man may divorce his wife without providing a reason.¹²⁷ The song's lyrics indicate that while divorces were common, they were not always mutually agreeable to both parties in the marriage. Kajenje's song, in the context of performances, brings these conflicts to the attention of the public. Was it fair for the man to divorce his wife? Does the woman then have an obligation to stop trying to seduce her former husband, and allow the man to carry on with his new life? Kajenje, although composing the lyrics, did not have a monopoly over their meaning. A woman, for example, might have a different sense of righteousness than the view Kajenje initially put forth in the song. The taarab music provided a venue for the public to examine and negotiate such disputes concerning fairness in love relationships.

The sensual nature of the poem—"touch me slowly, slowly"—transgressed what was permissible to express in normal Swahili conduct. Swahili paradigms consider discussions of sexuality, particularly men in front of an audience that includes women, to be crossing the boundaries of what is acceptable to say in public. Many religious leaders object to taarab because of its overt sensuality.¹²⁸ A singer openly discussing a sexual relationship brought issues that were previously confined to private bedrooms to the forefront of communal discussion.

¹²⁷ Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 10-11.

¹²⁸ Ntarwangwi, *Gender Identity and Performance*, 161

Community Discussion in Taarab Songs

While not nearly as common as love poetry, musicians wrote and sang taarab songs that educated people on the issues facing the community and society at large. These songs sought to stir to engagement those listening and brought to the forefront social, economic, and political principles to which their society should be built.¹²⁹

Songs expressed deeply felt frustrations of the inaction of the problems that touched upon people's daily lives. Many people in Matadoni referred to a song by one of Yote Huwa's members Ali Die discussing food shortages that impacted the town during the 1980s and the 1990s: "Mara mchele hakuna mara zucari hakuna/ Kitu sahali michumui nyo ime kose kana." In English the verse is, "there is no rice, there is no sugar/ And the salt that is the smallest of things is missing."¹³⁰ During the time of this song, the roads between Mombasa and Lamu Island were run-down and perilous; thieves would regularly rob vehicles trying to pass. As a result food shortages were common in Matadoni and Lamu. Local officials and the Kenyan government in Nairobi were doing little to alleviate this problem.¹³¹ While community members would have talked about these complaints privately at home or with friends, taarab raised these grievances to a civic forum where, as the community listened to the lyrics, they could openly think about, discuss and evaluate these issues. The fact that so many people were able to recall this verse and agreed with its message verified the song's ability to become part of the community discourse. Fair, in describing Siti Binti Saad's music, argued that "each time

¹²⁹ Fair, *Politics and Pastimes*, 8.

¹³⁰ Interview, Mohamed Halef; Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo; Interview, Adija Shee.

¹³¹ Interview, Ali Abdulla Fahmou; Interview, Adija Shee; Interview Mohamed Halef; Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

the song was repeated, be it by Siti, a woman washing clothes, or a fisherman hauling a catch, alternatives to the colonial discourse of the just and selfless bureaucrat were advanced.”¹³² While Fair described a different setting and time period, her argument applied well to the situation of Matadoni; these songs when performed or recounted, questioned the image of progress that the national and local governments were promoting.

Khalid Omar Kajenje, who began playing in Lamu during the nineteen-nineties, deliberately emphasized subjects of civic and communal concern to the forefront in his taarab performances. A native of Matadoni, Kajenje began by performing for Waktu but left the group to come to Lamu during the early nineties. In Lamu he began to sing taarab with a group called Al Noor.¹³³ Kajenje’s compositions often addressed themes of HIV-AIDS, drug use problems, and community harmony.¹³⁴

Kajenje’s music concerning social issues generated a following within the Lamu community. Buno Said recalled listening to Kajenje and his band as they played their music along the oceanfront road: “the songs were about day-to-day things like AIDS, relationships between people, you do not have to undermine somebody’s business. It was educating people to live in harmony, love one another. If you have a good thing, share it with others.”¹³⁵ He recalled one particular verse that warned people not to “play football without boots.”¹³⁶ Said understood that the meaning of the verse was not to have sex

¹³² Fair, *Politics and Past Times*, 194.

¹³³ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

¹³⁴ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje; Ali Hippy, interview by author, audio recording, English 22-23 November 2008; Said Buno, interview by author, audio Recording, English. Lamu, Kenya, 25 November 2008.

¹³⁵ Interview, Buno Said.

¹³⁶ Interview, Buno Said.

without wearing a condom. Condoms—as well as other means of birth control—are controversial subjects in Swahili culture, and not topics that one would discuss publically. The verse succeeded in getting its meaning across using humor and metaphor so that the poem’s message would reach the audience without upsetting local protocol.¹³⁷ The message’s presentation as a humorous song verse allowed Kajenje to candidly discuss the HIV virus in ways that social and political codes would not normally permit.¹³⁸ Kajenje shared that he wrote the poems about HIV/AIDS to warn his neighbors, friends and family about the dangers of the epidemic: “I consider the dangerous diseases so I warn my pupils, my brothers and sisters don’t involve in sex, without things like condoms.”¹³⁹ The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevalence rate in Lamu district was lower than the national rate of Kenya, as was the case for most predominantly Muslim populated areas.¹⁴⁰ However, the threat of the epidemic remained of concern for many people living in Lamu. Kajenje’s poems encouraged abstinence and regard for one’s spouse to circumvent passing the disease on to them:

*Thadhai ilioko na waomba musikie
Aluni Akija Kwako ni ukweli uwambiye
Kuwa ikimi uko bora sasa chuchulie*

*Si mzuri mambo hayo na menzana na kubusia
Kumwambokiza menzio sababu mufu pamoya
Nimaniuwe nayo Lilo kweli kumwambia*

Nikuambiya ukweli si mtiematesoni

Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 22-23.

¹³⁸ Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: South African Voices in History* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia, 1991) 43.

¹³⁹ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

¹⁴⁰ Peter B Gray, “HIV and Islam: is HIV prevalence lower among Muslims?,” *Social Science and Medicine* 58, no 9 (2004), 1751-1756. Prevalence is a term meaning the percentage of a given community infected by the HIV virus.

*Boraa muwembali japoni mke nyumbani
Musije kufa wawili wana kawa mashakani*

*Wengi meabukizana goncha lahatari
Wazee hatadhijana wao bila kufikiri
Na kisha wao hunena kufa pweke hawakiri*

*Tama tutie akili chufa nyo ni makosa
Hali zetu kukubali hivi sasa tulo neo
Tu simpase wapili kwakimwi kumchesa*

To mean a lot to someone, I request that you listen to me.
When somebody comes to you tell him/her truthfully
To tell someone to be alert, there is AIDS so we must be patient.

My partner to tell you to be alert also
To give partner some disease that you may die together
To be with faith to be with truth. It is better to tell somebody the truth.

Tell him/her truly don't put him/her in a problem.
It is better to be separately even if it is wife/husband
Won't become die by two. You put children in extreme danger.

A lot you have given to each other without thinking
Old man dangerous disease without thinking
You are not ready to die alone you must get somebody to die with you.

At last we must get thinking that what we have done is a mistake
We must agree that how we are in this time.
You will not give another the disease so if he may got a problem¹⁴¹

The verses emphasized the importance of fidelity and honesty in a marriage and warned against the selfishness of not telling one's spouse that a person has the illness. It is better for somebody to die alone, than to make his/her partner share the same fate. Kajenje used the public domain of a performance to relate people's private domestic interactions with the larger interests of the community. The lyrics did not address the details of HIV, nor does Kajenje outright tell his listeners that they should not sleep with people outside of

¹⁴¹ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

marriage—or even be honest with their spouses when they did go astray.¹⁴² Direct discussion of these topics would have crossed the boundaries of what was acceptable to say in public. Nevertheless, anybody listening would have understood the meaning and the message of Kajenje’s song; the lyrics approached, but did not cross the boundaries of what was traditionally permissible in Lamu society.

“Part of Our Rights”: Taarab Music and Governance

Local politicians and taarab musicians sometimes worked together to advance each other’s interests. Ali Maharusi the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) chairman in Lamu during the 1970s and 1980s regularly invited musicians like Maulidi Juma, as well as local clubs from Lamu town and Matadoni, to perform at public events and national holidays.¹⁴³ Sheriff Nasser, the Minister of Culture during the nineteen seventies, was very fond of taarab and requested musicians to perform whenever high ranking government officials such as President Daniel Arap Moi would visit the coast.¹⁴⁴ Groups benefited from invitations to participate in these celebrations, while politicians used taarab musicians to provide entertainment before and after their speeches.¹⁴⁵

In 2000 civic leaders in Lamu launched a governance program, a collaboration between local artists, including taarab musicians, and activists. The program sought changes in the way that the national politicians governed. Widespread emigration from the mainland to Lamu had created conflicts over the settlement of land, which was an especially limited resource in the archipelago; many people felt that the government was

¹⁴² Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

¹⁴³ Interview, Ali Abdulla Fahmou; Interview Abdella Bakari Liongo; Interview, Ali Hippy.

¹⁴⁴ Athman Hussein Athman, interview by author, audio recording, English, Mombasa, Kenya, 24 October 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 247-264.

unfairly giving land to these non-Swahili immigrants at the expense of the ownership rights of the Swahili people who already resided on the island. Furthermore, the national Kenyan government often discriminated against Swahili people when they applied for passports and visas.¹⁴⁶ Omar Famao, a member and former chairman of the Lamu council explained the purpose of the governance program: “Beginning in 2000 we thought there was a need to come up with a governance program to enlighten the community, for the community to understand that passports, birth certificates, ownership of land is part of our rights, it’s not a privilege.”¹⁴⁷ The project received the financial support of several aid organizations including the Ford Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which sponsored the project as a civil education program.

The success of the governance program relied on the cooperation of local poets, who composed lyrics that educated the public on the right to access passports and landownership, and the importance of civic engagement. The program hired local musicians, such as Kajenje’s club to perform and produce cassettes that featured these poems. Famao and other organizers of this project wanted to employ taarab, which was already a popular form of entertainment for the Swahili people, to communicate their message to the public “Mainly in the Swahili society they have been using Swahili songs and poetry mostly for weddings and also love songs, circumcisions, farmers if they want to clear off their farms for the next season and that has been a tradition. So we thought by

¹⁴⁶ Interview, Omar Famao, Interview by author, audio recording, English Lamu, Kenya, 26 November 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Interview, Omar Famao.

us using the same methodology we will get a lot of our people to listen to the message which we want to give them.”¹⁴⁸

According to Famao the event was extremely successful in promoting discussion of the issues that the musician’s songs addressed. He said that since the program, there were improvements in national land policy and the passport application process, although Famao stressed that the government needed to take more actions.¹⁴⁹ The governance program demonstrated the capacities of governments or political activists to align themselves with entertainers in order to promote an agenda. According to Kelly Askew this was also a practice in Tanzania when the government requested the local musical group Tanzania One Theater to perform at local events and promote the agenda of the national government.¹⁵⁰ However, Omar’s governance program reflected a much more localized struggle to achieve demands from the national government.

Musicians used taarab to influence political elections. In 1975 a fiercely contested election had involved the use of taarab. Abubakar Madhubuti was the member of parliament representing the Lamu district, which included both Lamu and Matadoni, in parliament.¹⁵¹ Mzamil Omar Mzamil was challenging him. Both candidates were running under the banner of the KANU party. Madhubuti was unpopular with many people in Lamu and Matadoni because he often favored the interests of the rich, and neglected the development of underdeveloped areas. According to “Ali Hippy”, a long time resident of Lamu who entertains tourists by cooking meals at his home and playing

¹⁴⁸ Interview, Omar Famao.

¹⁴⁹ Interview, Omar Famao.

¹⁵⁰ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 246-58.

¹⁵¹ Kimani Njogu, “Kimondo, Satire, and Political Dialogue: Electioneering through Versification”, *African Literatures* 2, no 1, 2001, 1-12.

music, Madhubuti even coercively recruited “volunteers” to engage in work projects such as the building of an airport on Manda Island—immediately across the channel facing Lamu—for no pay.¹⁵² Despite his unpopularity Madhubuti stayed in power by bribing people to vote for him.

Taarab played a crucial role during the election process in Lamu.¹⁵³ Those in opposition to Madhubuti succeeded in securing enough votes from discontented people to vote him out of office. After Madhubuti lost the election, the minister’s opponents sung songs in the town square and along the sea front criticizing his policies and corruption, as well as mocking him for his defeat:

*Ilikuwa alasiri wala si mchana
Mambo hayo ya kajiri macho ya kuona
Hazi kuuka uzuri ndege zika gongona*

It was in the afternoon and not morning
when these things happened while eyes were open
The airplanes did not fly well and collapsed.¹⁵⁴

The song’s text suggests that even by bribing voters, Madhubuti could not get enough supporters to win the election. People understood that the airplane was the symbol for Madhubuti; instead of reading the candidate’s name when they voted, those supporting Madhubuti would select the image of an airplane on the ballot.¹⁵⁵ The people of Lamu branded this form of confrontational political poetry as *kimondo*.¹⁵⁶ While in the past local taarab had steered away from direct confrontations with local politicians, musicians

¹⁵² Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo; Interview, Ali Hippy.

¹⁵³ Njogu, “Kimondo, Satire, and Political Dialogue,” 1.

¹⁵⁴ Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

¹⁵⁵ Interview, Ali Abdulla Fahmou; Interview, Ali Hippy.

¹⁵⁶ Njogu, “Kimondo, Satire, and Political Dialogue,” 1.

felt the need to use this style of poetry to alert the people to the actions of their bad representative in parliament. The use of *kimondo* in taarab allowed the people of Lamu to communicate their feelings of anger, indignation, and frustration at those who had political power.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the song alerted listeners to the situation, telling them of the necessity for good government; by mocking the bribery and use of intimidation by one political leader, the artists and people listening to the songs affirmed the importance of integrity for politicians. Ali Bakari Liongo recalled his memories regarding the impact of these verses in the area: “people were very attracted by their thoughts in the poems so that many people came. We awakened the people to the bad MP that was ruling us.”¹⁵⁸

Musicians, including taarab artists, sought to promote national unity in Kenya following the violence that occurred after the December 2007 election. Mwai Kibaki, a member of the Kikuyu ethnic group, the largest in Kenya, ended with more votes than his opponent Raila Odinga. Odinga was a Luo but was supported by almost all of Kenya’s ethnic groups. Kikuyus represented Kibaki’s main support base. Almost all evidence showed that the president’s party had rigged the election. The aftermath resulted in chaos. The Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence, which Kibaki and Odinga’s unity government set up following the power sharing agreement to investigate the causes and perpetrators of the violence, stated that the “violence that shook Kenya after the 2007 general elections was “unprecedented”, affecting all but two of Kenya’s provinces.¹⁵⁹ While the communities of Lamu and Matadoni did not experience much physical violence, there were certainly divisions and tensions within the community concerning

¹⁵⁷ Njogu, “Kimondo, Satire, and Political Dialogue,” 4.

¹⁵⁸ Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

¹⁵⁹ Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence, *Waki Report* (Nairobi, 1965), vii.

the disputed election. The issue of land rights was at the forefront of the conflicts in Lamu; the Kikuyu people were often the recipients of land in Lamu.¹⁶⁰ While international coverage of the election highlighted the conflicts between the Kikuyu and Luo tribes, the Swahili and Bajuni peoples that lived in Lamu shared many of the same concerns and hostilities towards the Kikuyu. The election, which people in the area perceived as stolen, confirmed existing feelings of many people in Lamu that Kikuyus were infringing upon the rights of the local Swahili population. Moreover, the 2007 turmoil severely jeopardized the tourism industry, which was very important for the sustainability of many people's livelihoods in Lamu. Although it is still too recent for scholars to understand the election violence's ramifications on the tourism industry, local sources indicated that the chaos had a negative effect on tourism in Lamu. Abdul Sawamad Basheikh, for example, who was organizing the Lamu Culture Festival, spoke of the importance of the 2008 festival as a means to revitalize the tourist economy in Kenya.¹⁶¹

Kajenje, who as a musician in Lamu who was dependent on tourist related events such as cultural festivals to make a living, had an interest in seeing a peaceful resolution. He wrote a song praising the president and his opponent for their compromise. Kajenje spoke generally of the economic rationale for writing his song: "I tried to compose that song so to make our people happy because there was a war in our country, it was very

¹⁶⁰ Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence, *Waki Report*, 220. I attained this information from informal conversations with Lamu residents. Due to the sensitive nature of this issue and the fact that I did not receive consent for this information, it would be grossly unethical to divulge specific citations.

¹⁶¹ Abdul Sawamad Basheikh, interview by author, written, English, Lamu, Kenya, 20 November 2008.

difficult. We can't eat. We die because of hunger. So we're happy when our country brought peace."¹⁶²

Many religious and political leaders also encouraged Kajenje to write the song, illustrating the community's desire for a peaceful resolution to the conflict: "There were a lot of people, also some counselors, some leaders, a religious leader also talked to us to write that song."¹⁶³ People of political or religious power recognized the ability of taarab to communicate to the public. They directly encouraged artists to translate that power into music that promoted consensus and harmony within the society.

Kajenje's song promoted peace and reconciliation in Kenya. His lyrics praised Kibaki and Odinga for their commitment to peace and urged Kenyans to move forward:

*Twa shukuru bwana mola Kenya kurudi amani.
Kibaki na Raila waliwekeana saini.
Raia kila mahala kwa msifuani.*

*Na hapa sasa nakoma tatosha machache haya.
Kenya izidi salama maisha kufarahiya.
Watu wasirudi nyuma, ila mbele tusongeya.*

We are so thankful for God, Kenya has returned to peace.
Kibaki and Raila have given their signatures.
Citizens everywhere give praise.

And here is my end these few lines enough
Kenya remains safe so that people can enjoy life
People should never return back, but move forward.¹⁶⁴

While typically taarab verses in Lamu were directed to the local audiences, Kajenje's verses invoked a nationalist sentiment. People should celebrate because Kenya's leadership had made the country whole again. While musicians used taarab to criticize

¹⁶² Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

¹⁶³ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

¹⁶⁴ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

politicians, Kajenje's lyrics indicated that artists were willing to praise politicians when credit was due. The verses most significantly instructed the citizens of Kenya to put their ills behind them and "move forward" as a unified country.

In addition to the efforts that artists such as Kajenje were promoting in Lamu, many musicians throughout East Africa employed taarab, and music in general, to celebrate the power sharing agreement between Kabaki and Odinga and encourage the advancement of peace in Kenya.¹⁶⁵ In early October 2008 two prominent taarab artists from Tanzania, Khadija Yusuf and Khadija Kopa, performed live concerts in Nairobi and Mombasa. Mohammed Sadia who was the event's promoter, said that the objective of the artists was "not only coming to entertain but also urge Kenyans to preserve peace and ensure that what bedeviled this country earlier this year doesn't occur again."¹⁶⁶ The efforts of these musicians promoted a vision of harmony and consensus within the country.

While taarab has traditionally appealed to the people of the East African coast, the concerts after the election also demonstrated the far reaching potential of the genre in contemporary times. The musicians played in Nairobi, which would have an audience of inland groups such as Luo and Kikuyu, rather than the Swahili who traditionally were audiences in the coastal areas. Taarab has grown in popularity beyond the traditional groups that previously listened to the music. Although performers and musicians continue to be predominantly East African and Swahili, the music is building an audience of groups from Western Kenya. The artists' objective of national peace reflected a broader

¹⁶⁵ Fred Orido, "After Election Turbulence Peace is Now Music to Kenyan's Ears," *Daily Nation*, October 4, 2008, Lifestyle section.

¹⁶⁶ Orido, "After Election Turbulence Peace is Now Music to Kenyan's Ears."

outlook than the localized songs of the past. The use of taarab by musicians following the aftermath of the 2007 election violence reflected the increasing global appeal of taarab in contemporary times and the music's extension beyond the local community.

Chapter 4

“They Just Want to Play”:

Decline of Local Taarab and the Music in Contemporary Times

On November 18th 2009, I interviewed Abdul Sawamad Basheikh, a community leader in Lamu who was in charge of organizing the Lamu Cultural Festival. During the interview, he explained that, “taarab is the music of the Swahili people”.¹⁶⁷ The author of an article in the *Mombasa Daily Standard* echoed the sentiment of the importance of taarab in East Africa: “the genre has defied the test of time and myriad foreign rhythmic elements and influences – to stamp an indelible mark as a distinctive, East African musical style.”¹⁶⁸ Basheikh’s comments and the author of the newspaper article expressed the importance and popularity of taarab in the musical tradition of the East African coast. Nevertheless, Kenya’s declining economy and rising inflation in recent years made it difficult for local groups who were not earning income from their music to continue playing. There were changes in the musical preferences of the younger generation that challenged the traditions that defined taarab in Matadoni and Lamu. Khalid Kajenje went as far as to declare that “taarab is now dead.”¹⁶⁹

Kajenje’s opinion on the status of taarab was indicative of the economic hardships and the social tensions that were a result of the changes in taarab music that occurred during the 1990s. However, in contrast to Kajenje’s belief that the music “is now dead,” taarab continues to remain a popular form of entertainment for people of Lamu and

¹⁶⁷ Abdul Sawamad Basheikh, interview by author, written, English Lamu, Kenya, 20 November 2008.

¹⁶⁸ Emmanuel Mwendwa, “Taarab Melodies Defiant of Foreign Influences,” *Mombasa Daily Standard*, November 28, 2008, Entertainment section, 35 & 37.

¹⁶⁹ Khalid Omar Kajenje, interview by author, audio recording, English Lamu, Kenya 6 October 2008.

Matadoni, albeit in dramatically different ways than in the past. The developments of taarab in the contemporary period reveal a negotiation between continuity and change. Local traditions adapted in order to succeed under the economic realities of present-day Kenya and the global influences that have increasingly affected East African culture.

Lamu Cultural Festival: a Place for Performance

The Lamu Cultural Festival is a major annual event in the town that features both local taarab as well as modern taarab performers from Tanzania. The event was founded in 2001 as a means to revitalize the tourist industry in Lamu that collapsed during the nineteen-nineties and to reach out to the youth in the community, whom the older generation feared were losing their heritage to western culture.¹⁷⁰ In our interview, Basheikh underscored the importance of starting the celebration as a means to help attract tourists to Kenya, particularly after the bombings of the United States embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 and the September 11th attacks in the United States. The festival budget in 2001 was very small, allowing for just a few exhibitions and donkey races. In later years, foreign investment has been a large contributor to the growth and success of the festival; the Spanish, American, French and German embassies were the primary sponsors for events in 2008. This allowed the organizers of the Lamu Cultural Festival to increase the number of events, including the additions of musical and dance performances including taarab. While the 2008 festival held in late November highlighted other coastal music and dance groups, the organizers of the event emphasized taarab as the main musical attraction. The festival hired Khalid Kajenje's band and

¹⁷⁰ Interview, Abdul Sawamad Basheikh.

invited a modern taarab group called “Zanzibar Stars” from Zanzibar to perform an all night (kesha) performance.

During the festival, Kajenje’s group performed at a number of events for official ceremonies. Many of the people that attended these functions were Europeans visiting Lamu for the Cultural Festival. Tourists offered a way for taarab musicians to make money. The picture (see appendix A fig 3) highlights the potential for musicians to make a small amount of money through tips. One evening a wealthy European business woman tipped each of the musicians in Kajenje’s group one-thousand schillings (about fourteen dollars). This was significantly more than the usual one-hundred schillings that everyday Lamu residents usually tipped the band. On another occasion the German ambassador approached Kajenje’s group, expressing appreciation for its music; he offered to hire the group to perform at the German embassy. There were also a number of white tourists who owned houses in Lamu and hosted functions where they occasionally invited Kajenje’s band. Over the course of the festival I got the sense that these tourists enjoyed the music; however, the performances did not have the same interactive dynamic that people had described of taarab events of their past. Many of the tourists did not speak Kiswahili and demonstrated little interest in the lyrical content of the songs.

Even when the group was playing at a venue where locals were in attendance, the mood seemed subdued. While attending the all night concert of the modern taarab group “Zanzibar Stars”, the local women were just sitting and watching what was happening on the stage; it was only a few men that were dancing and tipping the musicians. I suspected that the reason for the austere tone was that the event was open to both men and women.

Women usually attended performances at gender exclusive weddings where they are able to remove their *buibuis*—a black veil that Muslim women wear on the East African coast—and dance freely to the music. Many individuals in Islamic culture do not approve of women dancing, particularly when men are present.¹⁷¹ Therefore it is possible that the sobriety of the event was due to the mixed-gendered audience watching the performances. The Lamu Cultural Festival created a venue where people could enjoy taarab performances, and in the process supported local music groups such as Kajenje's band. Nevertheless the festival's events did not bring out the interaction between the musician and the audience that made taarab a compelling form of entertainment in other contexts.

Economics and the Decline of Taarab

The tradition of entertaining people with taarab music for very little money had been in decline over the past ten years in Lamu and Matadoni. During the late 1990s, the Matadoni clubs Yote Huwa and Waktu broke up. There were no longer clubs in the village. People now must enjoy taarab primarily by listening to cassettes or compact disks.¹⁷² In Lamu today, Kajenje's group Al Noor was the only band still performing. However, unlike other musicians who performed for little or no charge, Kajenje's group charges the host in order to garner a profit. He considered his music to be his career.¹⁷³ His band also introduces modern innovations into their music to appeal to the younger audiences.

¹⁷¹ Ali, Seif, interview by author, audio recording, English. Lamu, Kenya, 25 November 2008.

¹⁷² Adija Fadhili, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 12 November 2008; Adija Shee, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 15 November 2008.

¹⁷³ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

Economic hardship has been one of the driving forces behind the decline of local taarab. Kenya, beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, experienced a growing and continuous inflation rate that made it increasingly difficult for people to meet the financial demands of providing food and other provisions for their families.¹⁷⁴ In 1980 consumer prices rose by an average of 13.2 percent. Inflation since then remained at around ten percent during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁷⁵ During the 1970s and 1980s, Kenya's economic leaders had heavily promoted the export of coffee and tea to the outside world. These policies initially helped to make Kenya one of the fastest growing economies on the African continent. However, a global decline in coffee prices during the 1980s stunted the country's growth. Farmers were not growing adequate amounts of food to sustain the country's population; instead they exported their products to other countries. Norman Miller and Rodger Yeager argued that "part of Kenya's failure to regain food self-sufficiency relates to arable land shortages, part to an officially encouraged shift in registered small-farm production from subsistence to export crops."¹⁷⁶

The national economic hardships had an especially negative impact on small communities such as Matadoni. While there is not a lot of scholarship regarding agricultural policies in Lamu, discussions with Ali Abdulla Famao of Matadoni indicated that the success and failures of agricultural strategies affected Lamu. While the people of Lamu and Matadoni were successful in the cultivation of coconut, mango, and tamarind, they have relied heavily on the success of inland agriculture to provide their basic

¹⁷⁴ Norman Miller and Rodger Yeager, *Kenya The Quest for Prosperity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) 127-137.

¹⁷⁵ Miller and Yeager, 128-129.

¹⁷⁶ Miller and Yeager, 132.

commodities of sugar, wheat flour and corn.¹⁷⁷ As national policy makers directed land and labor toward export products, Lamu and Matadoni received less food to support the needs of the community. As a result the prices of food (corn, wheat flour, sugar), arguably the most important commodity for the average Kenyan, increased to a point that a single person's income was not enough to support the needs of the family. Many individuals in Matadoni said that the price of basic products such as flour and sugar had gone up to an extent that people were having to work more to keep up with the inflation; for example whereas the price of flour ten years ago was around fifty shillings, it was now over one-hundred shillings.¹⁷⁸

The difficulty of providing for families reduced the leisure time that artists in Lamu and Matadoni could dedicate to the music. Many former musicians described the "maisha gumu" (difficult life) as the reason for quitting music.¹⁷⁹ These people stopped playing taarab because they needed to dedicate time to a second occupation. Abdella Bakari Liongo explained, "People are fishing, people are farming, people are doing different work. The problem is that the amount they are earning is not enough for the purchasing of items. Therefore they don't get time to do taarab anymore."¹⁸⁰ Former performers indicated that practicing taarab no longer provided them with enjoyment because they were exhausted from the extra work that they had to do to sustain their

¹⁷⁷ John Middleton, *the World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 77.

¹⁷⁸ Ali Abdulla Famao, interview by author, audio recording and written, English, Matadoni, Kenya. 11-18 November 2008; Abdella Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

¹⁷⁹ Ali Bakari Liongo, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance by Halif, Matadoni, Kenya, 11 November 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

livelihoods. Ali Bakari explained his personal hardships that contributed his decision to no longer play music:

What led us to end the club was the hardship of life. At the time when we had these clubs life was very comfortable we could do things smartly. But life is tough so that we had to fight with life than we could deal with clubs. We didn't have encouragement from anybody or from the MPs, no more developments. We didn't have encouragement from anybody so we just got exhausted after doing things which we didn't get any appreciation for.¹⁸¹

Ali Bakari's sentiments reflected the difficulties that the economic realities posed for musicians in smaller communities, which lacked the resources to fully financially support local groups. People could play taarab only when social conditions were favorable to dedicating time to an activity that promised little pay. Sherifa explained the difficulty people had in making time for recreation: "The people of today, we are very much committed with so many things. We have been mixed up. We have no time to entertain ourselves, to create music."¹⁸² As economic conditions became more severe, and many men had to find a second job to support their families, artists left the groups in order to focus on the hardships of a difficult economic environment.

The poor economic conditions were not isolated to Lamu and Matadoni, rather they affected taarab along the entire East African coast. Live performances at weddings, which provided entertainment for people on an almost weekly basis (during wedding season in December and May) diminished greatly.¹⁸³ Buno Said from Lamu noticed that Bhalo events were not attracting as many people as in the past: "I could see at one time

¹⁸¹ Interview, Ali Bakari Liongo.

¹⁸² Sherifa Bakari, interview by author, audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya, 22 November 2008.

¹⁸³ Said, interview by author, audio recording, English. Lamu, Kenya, 25 November 2008.

the crowd was not as much as it once was some years ago.”¹⁸⁴ Instead of hiring a group, people often paid for disk jockeys who charged considerably less than did taarab musician.¹⁸⁵ These disk-jockeys often mixed recorded taarab hits with other styles of music “collapsing a number of different musical events into a single one.”¹⁸⁶ A taarab musician would perform for between thirty to fifty thousand schillings (around four-hundred to eight-hundred dollars), while a disk-jockey would agree to play for around fifteen to twenty thousand schillings (two-hundred to three-hundred dollars).¹⁸⁷

Gender and Modern Taarab: Conflict and Negotiation with the Past

In place of the local taarab groups, most people in Lamu and Matadoni listened to cassettes and compact disks containing music from mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. These urban taarab groups have enjoyed commercial success due to their ability to mass produce tapes and audio cassettes.¹⁸⁸ The term “modern taarab” refers to a specific style that includes danceable rhythms. The emphasis on dance derives from popular Zanzibari and Tanzanian conventions that Fargion describes as *kidumbak*—named for a type of drum—or “women’s taarab”. “Women’s taarab” is not exclusive to female musicians, but heavily incorporates conventions of local female styles such as *lelemama*.¹⁸⁹ In contrast to Lamu and Matadoni’s version of taarab, this style made dancing a fashionable component of the performance. Additionally, vocalists are predominantly women, while

¹⁸⁴ Interview, Bunu Said.

¹⁸⁵ Interview, Bunu Said; Graebner, “Between Mainland and Sea, 190.

¹⁸⁶ Werner Grabner, “Between Mainland and Sea: The Taarab Music of Zanzibar,” Editor Kevin Dawe, *Island Music*s (New York: Berg, 2004) 190.

¹⁸⁷ Interview, Bunu Said.

¹⁸⁸ Flavia Aiello Traore, Continuity and Change in Zanzibari Taarab Performance and Poetry, *Swahil Forum* Vol 2 (2004), 75-81; Ntarangwi, *Gender, Identity, and Performance*, 18.

¹⁸⁹ Fargion, Janet Topp Fargion “Consumer-led Creation: Taarab music Composition in Zanzibar,” Editor, Malcolm Floyd, *Composing the Music of Africa: Composition, Interpretation, and Realization*,” 205-206.

men continue to play the instruments. The picture of the group “Zanzibar Stars” (see Appendix A fig 6) shows the participation of both men and women in these taarab performances. Modern taarab borrowed heavily from the popular women’s taarab traditions of including prominent female vocalists and dancing elements and added western instruments—electronic keyboards, drums, and guitars—and rhythms.

The taarab enthusiast Athman Hussein Athman underscored the dynamic relationship between taarab and the West. During the 1980s and 1990s new technologies permeated Kenyan society. Many people in Kenya now have access to television and DVD players. Videos and DVDs have given western music, including hip-hop, a much greater audience in East Africa. According to Athman, modern taarab groups incorporated many of these beats and rhythms to make their compositions closer to the changing tastes of the younger generation.¹⁹⁰ The rhythms of Congolese music, which are very popular throughout East Africa, have also influenced taarab.¹⁹¹ Flavia Aiello Traore, in a 2004 paper on “Continuity and Change in Zanzibari Taarab Performance and Poetry”, attributed the success of modern taarab groups to their ability to:

take advantage of the commercial potentialities of the female taarab style, i.e. with more danceable beats and more straight-forward lyrics, shifting it from the separate context of weddings to the open domain of contemporary music industry, in other words, an extraordinary diffusion through radio, television, the selling of tapes, videos, CDs, tours and crowded paid concerts.¹⁹²

Marketing videos, compact disks, and audio cassettes commercialized taarab in mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar, challenging local traditions in small, once isolated communities

¹⁹⁰ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

¹⁹¹ Interview, Ali Abdulla Famao.

¹⁹² Flavia Aiello Traore, “Continuity and Change in Zanzibari Taarab Performance and Poetry,” *Swahili Forum* vol 2 (2004), 75-81, 77; Janet Topp Fargion “Consumer-led Creation,” 205-206.

such as Lamu and Matadoni. Athman Hussein Athman agreed that marketing tapes has been the way that the larger taarab groups stayed successful in recent years.¹⁹³ Only larger groups were able to take advantage of using recording studios and marketing cassettes, displacing local taarab groups that relied on live performances to receive an audience.

The commercialization of modern taarab challenged the ideals of the older generation of listeners and musicians who saw taarab as fun, not as a medium for making money. Many of the older generation complained that these popular groups acted largely in the interest of profit, which deviated from what they felt was the music's purpose of providing leisure for people and educating audiences regarding the important issues facing the community.¹⁹⁴ Abdella Bakari exclaimed, "Previously we were just doing taarab for entertainment. But now a days they are just doing for getting money as business. During our time it was just for leisure."¹⁹⁵

The faster rhythms and electronic instruments of modern taarab were more conducive to dancing than the taarab that musicians of the older generation played. Sherifa Bakari discussed the presence of clapping with the music and singing along with the chorus, however dance was not a convention of the older style.¹⁹⁶ Dancing made the music more appealing to the younger listeners and even women of older generations. Buno Said argued that the dance element in modern taarab has contributed to its growth in popularity over more traditional taarab: "In weddings people would not have a Bhalo

¹⁹³ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

¹⁹⁴ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman; interview, Sherifa Bakari; interview, Bunu Said.

¹⁹⁵ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

¹⁹⁶ Interview, Sherifa Bakari.

CD for example because it didn't have that item of dancing; you just have to listen to the songs.”¹⁹⁷ A young woman from Matadoni named Wahema said that she enjoys dancing to the music “very much”.¹⁹⁸ Hala, a young woman in Lamu, said that at wedding celebrations the women “form a circle, which they go around while dancing. It's more of a fancy walk but they go around in the circle dancing to the song of their choice. Then if they don't like the next song they sit down and stand up for the next.”¹⁹⁹

The emphasis of dance in taarab music was important to women, giving them freedoms that were not normally accessible to them in a gender-restrictive Swahili society. East African Islamic culture traditionally disapproved of women dancing or even undertaking forms of recreation outside of the household, believing such activities to be immodest.²⁰⁰ Men often tried to, albeit often unsuccessfully, to restrict women's participation in *lelemama* groups.²⁰¹ In the past women would merely watch the musicians, listening to the lyrics. Even in today's wedding celebrations—which are free of men and thereby offer women the most freedom—dancing is an activity that people do not automatically condone.²⁰² Kelly Askew writes that women often danced on stage with the purpose of tipping the musician. This allows them to deny that they were truly dancing, instead claiming that they were going to tip the performers.²⁰³ The picture (see appendix A fig 6) shows a man dancing to taarab music as he tips the artists, although in

¹⁹⁷ Interview, Buno Said.

¹⁹⁸ Wahema Bwanamani, interview by author, audio recording, Swahili, with assistance of Ali Abdulla Famao, Matadoni, Kenya, 15 November 2008.

¹⁹⁹ Hala Afmed, interview by author, audio recording, English, Lamu, Kenya, 24 November 2008.

²⁰⁰ Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 140.

²⁰¹ Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 85.

²⁰² Interview, Ali Saif.

²⁰³ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 140.

a venue such as a gender exclusive wedding this action would be only be taken by women. Askew's description shows that a woman would often negate that she was dancing even in situations where there were only other women present.

Gender may be a factor in people's perceptions regarding the relationship between dance and taarab. Men would not have had nearly as much access to gender exclusive wedding parties as women. While men often spoke of the occurrence of dancing at contemporary wedding celebrations, which typically excluded men, there still may have been some forms of dance. However even women did not speak of dancing to taarab, unless discussing contemporary practices of the music. Sherifa Bakari who provided the most elaborate description of taarab performances (see Chapter 2) said that the audience clapped their hands but made clear that listeners were experiencing the music while sitting. Adija Shee also indicated that not all the women danced. She said that some women moved around, while others sat in the back to watch the performers and listen to the music.

The inclusion of westernized beats in taarab music shifted the conventions of taarab from being a style where audiences would sit and listen to one where people could participate in the music by moving their bodies. While men did not express approval for this new behavior they did not see it as something that they could control, especially when the activities took place at weddings where men are not supposed to be present.²⁰⁴ In addition to the beats and rhythms, exposure to westernized culture through music and videos changed values in Lamu and Matadoni, challenging the Islamic paradigms that governed the daily life of people living in these towns.

²⁰⁴ Interview, Ali Seif.

For many women, dancing to taarab (or other styles of music) at these weddings was a way for them to escape the confines of the social regulations that normally controlled their lives and to have fun. Hala articulated the importance of the dance element in taarab: “Weddings here are the only recreation women can go to. When they go to weddings they are like ‘ooh lets have fun’. So they dance till the end of all day and they can’t wait for another wedding.”²⁰⁵ Women and youth appreciated the element of dance in taarab because it gave them an opportunity to socialize and have fun, escaping temporarily the responsibilities and restrictions involved in running a household.

Modern taarab’s emphasis on dance challenged people’s past notions of taarab as an activity mostly for listening and interpreting the singer’s lyrics. Many of the older generation, particularly men, did not like the newer taarab music. Even older women expressed a stronger affinity to traditional taarab over the modern version of which they now participate. A common explanation people offered was that, in the past, people would sit and listen to taarab and absorb the meaning of the song’s lyrics; now a days the youth want to dance, or “to play”, as many people described it.²⁰⁶ Kajenje emphasized the differences between the modern and the local taarab: “Special taarab they sit and listen. But this day they don’t want to sit and listen, they want to dance. That is why they call modern taarab because they almost use a machine, a drum machine, instead of using local drums.”²⁰⁷ Modern taarab challenged the stylistic and social customs of taarab music. Electronic instruments and drums that encouraged dance replaced the traditional

²⁰⁵ Interview, Hala Afmed.

²⁰⁶ Interview Khalid Kajenje; interview, Mohamed Halef; interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo; interview Adija She; interview Bunu Said.

²⁰⁷ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

instruments that, in the past, were a defining feature of the music.²⁰⁸ The aspiration to move with the melodies supplanted the previous convention of sitting and listening to the singer's message. For artists and listeners like Kajenje these alterations stripped taarab of the elements that made the music special.

The people of the older generation also often disapprove of the themes that modern taarab songs address in their lyrics. Athman Hussein Athman articulated his displeasure of modern taarab explaining, "They are actually moving away from taarab because one of the original aspects is to sit and listen and not to dance. But in this particular case people hardly interpret or take consideration of the words that are sort of being sung by the poems that are coming off of the mouth of the musician."²⁰⁹ The older generation shared Athman's perspective that the interpretative and communicative value that characterized taarab was no longer present in the modern version. Abdella Bakari Liongo communicated these sentiments:

Now days taarab is they have the instrument but they just play with the instrument. They have no subject to tell people. If you sing a song it's not based on something. I really liked the taarab that was based on something. To sing a song of taarab music to feel as if I were sing for you. The taarab we have now they just play with the drums, play with the pianos, they have no subjects towards the society or environment.²¹⁰

Many people, men in particular, complained that the issues of taarab shifted from love and worldly situations to problems concerning feuding women competing over the same man.²¹¹ Ogova Odengo in an article for an online arts magazine wrote that, "Modern Taarab music is being blamed for breeding social discord, embarrassing society through

²⁰⁸ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

²⁰⁹ Interview, Athman Hussien Athman.

²¹⁰ Interview, Abdella Bakari Liongo.

²¹¹ Interview Athman Hussein Athman, interview Bunu Said.

vulgarity, vilification of women and also for abandoning convention of the music that was—till recently—considered a unifying force of the Swahili coast, at the altar of money.”²¹² This type of taarab, popularly known as *mipasho*, has become a defining feature of performances in the contemporary period. In *mipasho* songs the “poet causes the person who is the subject of the poem, or to whom the poet is directed, to ‘get the message,’; the message is clear and direct so there can be no misunderstanding about what is meant and to whom it is directed.”²¹³ Men actually are the main composers of these lyrics and distribute them to women to sing.²¹⁴ The primary purpose of these songs is to hurt and degrade the song’s subject in the eyes of the public.²¹⁵ “Utalijua Jiji”, which means “You Will Know the City”, was a tremendously popular song in Lamu and employed *mipasho* poetry. Afua Suleiman, a popular artists from Dar es Salaam, was the singer of this song. The Tanzanian Music Awards program declared “Utalijua Jiji” to be the year’s best taarab song in 2005. The song addressed a dispute between two women over a man:

Mwenzangu huna ujuzi rudi tena kajifunze we mwenzangu
 Bibi acha upuuzi kuishi na mume kazi we mwenzangu
 Mume ataka malezi siyo mambo ya kihuni we mwenzangu
 Pepe na jeuri zako leo zimekuishia we mwenzangu

You are ignorant and need some training
 Stop your nonsense; living with a man requires skill
 A man needs love and care

²¹² Ogova Ondego, “Taarab Under Scutiny as Commercialism Wrestles with Artistry,” *Artmatters.info*, 26 November 2008, <http://artmatters.info/?p=970>.

²¹³ Janet Topp Fargion, - “Hot Kabisa! The Mpasho Phenomenon and Taarab in Zanzibar”, editors, Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa*, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2000) 39-54.

²¹⁴ Ogova Ondego, “Taarab Under Scutiny as Commercialism Wrestles with Artistry.”

²¹⁵ Janet Topp Fargion, “Consumer Led Creation”, 205.

Your arrogance has resulted in shame
I have taken away your man from you and he isn't coming back.²¹⁶

The *mipasho* song highlighted the themes of jealousy and competition between women over who can be a better wife. The singer taunted the opposing woman, accusing her of being too inept of a wife to keep her husband. The direct and the confrontational nature of these refrains instigated conflicts. Ondengo lamented that there was always a physical brawl in the audience whenever this song is played.²¹⁷

Men and members of the generation object to the direct and confrontational lyrics of popular modern taarab songs. Kelly Askew explained that people of older generations “argue that the current period of taarab is concerned with *mipasho* (hidden messages) that are paradoxically less hidden in the texts and that strike a great (to their minds) contrast with taarab performed two decades ago”.²¹⁸ Athman Hussein Athman described the lyrics of this kind of poetry to be “rubbish”, consisting merely of women fighting and baiting each other. He argued:

Now tarabu [taarab] has been central to conflicts because whenever there is, modern taarab performing there will obviously be a fight that will break out because some of the poems will relate to a certain incident that is happening perhaps between women and they deal so much with women's affairs that “you have to take my husband, I am going to take your husband too.” “You know you have slept with this you are a slut.” These are the new lyrics, pure rubbish. They are so liked by women because it talks so much of husband and wife, wife with husband, husband, husband and husband.²¹⁹

Athman Hussein Athman's opinions epitomized the antipathy felt by many of the older generation of listeners, particularly men, who did not consider the new taarab lyrics—in

²¹⁶ Ogova Ondego, “Taarab Under Scrutiny as Commercialism Wrestles with Artistry.”

²¹⁷ Ogova Ondego, “Taarab Under Scrutiny as Commercialism Wrestles with Artistry.”

²¹⁸ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 134.

²¹⁹ Interview, Athman Hussein Athman.

particular their intention to instigate a fight—as representative of the ideals of the style that provided education and evaluation of issues of the world. Athman and numerous others of his generation believed that the motivation of these lyrics was to make money by appealing to the demands of audiences wanting to hear about such feuds, rather than provide for a meaningful examination of the important issues of the community—marriage, political and economic struggles, etc.

Athman’s comments also underscored that while the older generation of men found little value in the aggressive nature of modern taarab lyrics, this style had appeal and communicated the interests of female listeners. In Swahili culture a woman’s place has traditionally been in the household where she has the domestic burdens of maintaining the household, managing the family, and providing a pleasing and comfortable life for her husband.²²⁰ Polygamy and infidelity of husbands greatly threaten the domestic balance that these women strive to achieve. East African Islamic cultures allow a man to have up to four wives, albeit he must be able to love each woman equally. Jealousy and rivalry are part of the daily experience for many women in Swahili culture. Mariam Bwana Kweli, a woman living in Lamu, said that she enjoyed the modern taarab songs because they spoke to these issues of covetousness and contention that impacted the lives of women.²²¹ She said that women often carry out these feuds in taarab performance by tipping musicians while they play *mipasho* songs or by gesturing

²²⁰ Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women in Momasa: 1890-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 126-127.

²²¹ Mariam Bwana Kweli, interview with author, audio recording, Swahili, Lamu, Kenya, 4 December 2008.

(pointing or waving a finger) towards their opponent while dancing to the music.²²² Kelly Askew, in *Performing the Nation*, further discusses the role of tipping to fulfill this process: “When combined with lyrics that speak to a particular issue, tipping provides people with the means of appropriating those lyrics and claiming them for personal use.”²²³ Kweli’s description of these actions that women take while attending concerts revealed that, far from being rubbish, modern taarab provided a public forum where women could carry out their disputes. Through this process, the audience received opportunities to negotiate social protocol and define the meaning of justice within their local community. The traditions of taarab, which provided an entertaining (yet meaningful) way to construct the norms and values of society, have endured despite the adaption of more direct and aggressive lyrics.

Traditions and Change: Conflicts Between Generations

The negotiations between the continuity of music tradition and the changes of contemporary culture have transformed the way that taarab groups in Matadoni and Lamu performed their music. Kajenje's group in Lamu continued to play with local drums; however, the group made other changes to accommodate the demands of the younger generation who preferred modern taarab. His club incorporated a popular dance beat called *chakacha*, whose rhythms derived from an admired belly dance.²²⁴ *Chakacha* is a popular dance that appears regularly at weddings where the audience is more interested in dancing than sitting and listening to songs.²²⁵ Musicians play *chakacha* with a “fast tempo

²²² Interview, Mariam Bwana Kweli.

²²³ Askew, *Performing the Nation*, 140.

²²⁴ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje; Interview, Ali Hippy.

²²⁵ Ntarangwi, *Gender Identity and Performance*, 161.

and drum pattern.” Pelvic gyrations are the main features of this dance.²²⁶ *Chakacha* drew from the musical traditions of the Mijikenda peoples, the main African ethnic group that interacted with Arab merchants during the early history of the coast.²²⁷ Kajenje’s explanation for the style was that “it was just for playing, they don’t know each other, they are just dancing.”²²⁸ When Kajenje’s group wanted people to hear the message of their lyrics, they would play a song that was slower and softer so that the audience would sit and listen to the words.²²⁹ In this way, Kajenje’s group continued the practice of local taarab, although his band made adjustments to meet the modern demands of people in Lamu. In comparison to the situation in Matadoni, Kajenje’s club also benefited from playing in a larger town that had higher demands for cultural activities and displays. Kajenje and his group were able to maintain a substantial enough income from their music to continue the activity.

People of the younger and middle generation, particularly women, indicate that modern taarab, despite the addition of dancing and changes in the verse’s subject matter, continues to serve as an important vehicle for providing education and highlighting the experiences of everyday life.²³⁰ Hala the woman from Lamu recounted that whenever a new song came out, the women took time to memorize the entire lyrics and interpret the

²²⁶ Everett Shiverenje Igobwa, Taarab and Chakacha in “East Africa: Transformation Appreciation and Adaption of Two Popular Genres of the Kenya Coast” (paper presented at the Conference on Music in the Word of Islam, Assilah, August 2007) 3.

²²⁷ Everett Shiverenje Igobwa, Taarab and Chakacha in East Africa, 3.

²²⁸ Interview, Khalid Omar Kajenje.

²²⁹ Interview Khalid Omar Kajenje .

²³⁰ Interview Adija She; interview, Ali Seif; interview, Hala Afmed; Wahema Bwanamani, interview by author, audio recording, Matadoni, Kenya, 15 November 2008; Nalida Salim, interview by author, audio recording, Lamu, Kenya, 24 November 2009.

poem's meaning.²³¹ Kadija Kopa, a popular female artist performing in Tanga, is a particularly popular entertainer in the Lamu area. Ali Seif, a young man from Lamu, declared that her songs taught that poverty does not "reduce one's dignity because everything is from God."²³² Afua Suleiman, the singer of "Utalijua Jiji" shared her perspective on modern taarab in an article of the Mombasa newspaper *The Standard*: "the lyrics we compose as vocalists are poetic and illustrative of typical daily experiences; hence a musician's role is to serve as the conscience of society. Songs with positive messages can be used to admonish wrong doers in an effort to help them change their minds."²³³ The perspectives of youth and people involved in modern taarab demonstrate the music's continuity of communicating social ideals and educating audiences on the proper way to live in a modern society.

The sentiments of the youth reflect a conflict with the older generation regarding the direction of taarab in contemporary times. The older generation desires the music to return to a traditional time where audiences of men and women sat listening to the message of the music, without the commotion of electronic instruments and dancing. Younger people shared that dancing and electronic instruments do not undermine the purpose and value of taarab, but rather contribute to the music by adding new mediums for which the music can communicate its messages. The conflict between the older and younger generation seem part of a larger negotiation between the continuity of past traditions and the changes that modern times has introduced. The electronic beats of modern taarab invited women to dance, an activity that they never had fully been able to

²³¹ Interview, Hala Afmed.

²³² Interview, Ali Seif.

²³³ Emmanuel Mwendwa, "Taarab Melodies Defiant of Foreign Influences."

partake within that activity before. The movement towards western society, which modern taarab reflects, pulls away from the traditional Swahili values that shaped the lives of the older generation. The tensions of taarab are a small part of a much larger phenomenon as the Lamu and Matadoni communities redefine their identities in the contemporary era.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

As successful as this project has been, there is considerably more research and learning to be done on taarab music and the negotiations between continuity and change that are occurring in the communities of Lamu and Matadoni. Written after only four months in Kenya, with only one of those months dedicated to independent research, this project cannot claim to be exhaustive, and provokes as many questions as it answers. For example more attention needs to be paid to the songs themselves. How does audience participation affect the meaning of the lyrics? This is an issue that requires many more interviews, a stronger grasp of the Kiswahili language, and time to build relationships with the local community. The interaction between Islam and a secular form of music is another issue that merits further exploration. This thesis mentions, but was not able to cover in fuller detail the relationship between African musical styles, such as popular music from the Congo, and taarab. This topic requires further research.

My thesis also did not fully address the issues of gender. How did women participate, interpret, and respond to taarab music? This seems particularly important while discussing modern taarab, because it is through this style that women are the primary force in both the creative and participatory ends. As a man, building relationships with women in a traditional Islamic culture is a task that takes time and patience. I was working against some very strong social conventions regarding how men are supposed to interact with women. I saw many indications that women were flexible and would be willing to talk more in depth about their experiences and feelings regarding

taarab, however I would need to spend more time with them in order to experience the same level of openness that I achieved with men.

More time would also allow me to better situate taarab in historical contexts of these communities. Sadly there is not a lot of scholarship on the history of Lamu, much less for Matadoni. Achieving the ability to provide fuller accounts and context will be a personal focus as I continue research in this field. Although my work does not provide a full picture of what has occurred in Lamu and Matadoni concerning taarab, I believe that it does succeed in demonstrating how a particular form of music became part of the community's cultural character, and how global forces are reshaping and redefining this identity.

Globalization has impacted the ways that communities engage in such traditions as taarab. Modern taarab has become popular in Lamu and Matadoni. This style features electronic instruments and promotes dance activities, which were previously not part of the taarab experience in these towns. While many youth find this form of taarab to be engaging and entertaining, members of the older generation lament on the loss of past traditions. These included the audience sitting and listening to lyrics that engaged listeners in discussions of politics, love, marriage, and the challenges of living in a community with limited resources. However, conversations with women and youth indicate that songs continue to discuss these issues. The differences in perspectives between the younger and older generation indicates shifts in community ideals and values as Lamu and Matadoni increasingly expose themselves to the outside world and the impacts of globalization.

Local economic challenges have facilitated the impacts of globalization, changing the way these communities have had to function. While in the past a man from Matadoni could go out in the morning to catch fish and return in the evening to take part in a taarab band, the economic decline makes this practice no longer possible. A man now must work a second job by constructing mats, or going to work at the *shambas* (farms). This has left very little time to compose lyrics, attend rehearsals, and make public performances. Groups such as Wakti and Yote Huwa traditionally did not request substantial amounts of money to perform. Individuals such as Mohamed Halef viewed playing taarab as an opportunity to show that he was as talented as the popular musicians from the city, a personal rather than financial achievement. Others, such as Ali Bakari, composed and sang songs as a romantic gesture towards their wives. The community's tradition of having a group that would play for little or no money has disappeared as musicians choose to dedicate their time to tasks that were more financially promising. As these local traditions have declined modern taarab has gained influence. People can purchase audio cassettes and even video disks for relatively affordable prices.

The changes in contemporary times are so meaningful to people because they interact with past traditions. These conventions give people in Lamu and Matadoni a sense of uniqueness. Taarab for many years was situated primarily in a local context. While borrowing from widespread conventions and style, taarab developed in Lamu and Matadoni out of traditional music and dances that people had been practicing for hundreds of years. Over the course of the music's history, taarab borrowed from the conventions of traders from the Middle East, Egyptian music played in the palaces of

Zanzibar, Hindi songs from Bollywood films, and Western contemporary music. At the same time, local musical conditions that developed within the community influenced how people experienced taarab in terms of style and performance traditions. Taarab artists in Lamu and Matadoni incorporated their own instruments and established a style based on local *ngomas* that were present in the community as far back as the fourteenth century. *Ngomas* also highlighted some of the nuances of identity. Coastal peoples, or even so-called “Swahili”, do not reflect a homogenous identity. These local groups established musical traditions that they incorporated into the ways that they practiced and listened to taarab. Taarab in Lamu and Matadoni was distinct from the practices of the music in places such as Zanzibar.

The local communities also placed an emphasis on performance. These performances often took place in the context of weddings, public functions, or spontaneous concerts in which the musicians gathered in a central location in town and played for the people. Performances situated taarab within a context of entertainment. Sheriffa Bakari’s reflection of the clapping and singing along with lyrics at taarab events that she went to as a child demonstrate the power that recreation has in shaping community identity. These concerts gave people the ability to get together, socialize, possibly exchange ideas—by listening to taarab song lyrics. It was in this way that taarab shaped the memories, experiences, and values of the people living in Lamu and Matadoni.

The lyrics of the songs that musicians performed at these events created interpretations, contexts, and reminiscences that further localized the town. These songs

addressed problems facing the towns, critiques of politicians and government, and the interactions of men and women. These factors localized taarab, making the music part of that community's individual identity. The declining economy and growth of modern taarab challenged these conventions by extending taarab practices in these towns to be part of a larger global event.

An experience I had while working with Khalid Kajenje's group illustrated the balance between continuity and change in local taarab practices. The night before the cultural festival I attended a rehearsal with Kajenje's group. As opposed to other rehearsals that I observed, which the band held in a secluded café in Lamu's stone town district, the practice took place at the home of an elderly woman. As the group rehearsed, I was sitting beside the woman, as well as a large group of young women clad in their *buibuis*. The women clapped their hands to the music and sang along with those performing. Between songs they shouted requests to musicians, hoping they would play their favorite songs; the performers more often than not honored their requests. When the band began to play the *chakacha* numbers, the women went wild with applause and bellowed encouragement to the musicians. One woman took off her veil and began to dance in the living room and another soon joined her. This event appeared to me most reflective of the local traditions of taarab, as well as its contemporary appeal. Kajenje's group did not charge anything for this performance. Throughout the evening, the singers sang verses concerning love and community issues. In this way the performer and audience shared ideas and discourse. What appeared most fundamental was that people were having fun.

This rehearsal revealed that continuity and change in Lamu and Matadoni's taarab practices have found a way to coexist. Kajenje is an artist that succeeded in merging the traditions that defined taarab in the past with the elements of modernization and globalization that have driven the popularity of taarab in contemporary times. While he declared that taarab was dead, he continues to function as a musician and has achieved a popular following in Lamu, which indicates that support for the music still is alive. The musician and his group have made changes such as incorporating *chakacha* dance rhythms, in order to appeal to a younger generation of taarab listeners who are now accustomed to the dance rhythms of western music. Kajenje nevertheless continues to use local drums and instruments and seeks to incorporate the local traditions of public performances. While Kajenje's band has achieved a following and even earned a little income from their music, they are far from achieving the same level of commercial success as the popular artists coming from cities such as Mombasa and Zanzibar. Kajenje's group reflects an ongoing negotiation between the local traditions that have shaped people's taarab experience in the Lamu region and the forces of globalization that are morphing the music. Their group's continued existence in Lamu's popular culture demonstrates that the traditions and conventions of taarab in Lamu and Matadoni will never disappear, rather they will continue to adapt to changes in the social, economic, political and cultural environments. The way people have experienced taarab in the past through contemporary times provides a meaningful illustration that tradition is not static; rather it is a dynamic and changing reflection of a community's identity, which is also dynamic. This understanding of the relationship between continuity and change helps us

to better predict the direction that taarab will undertake in the future. As the Lamu and Matadoni communities shift their values, taarab music will continue alter in order to adapt to these changes while maintaining the conventions that has defined the music in the past.

Appendix A Maps and Photos

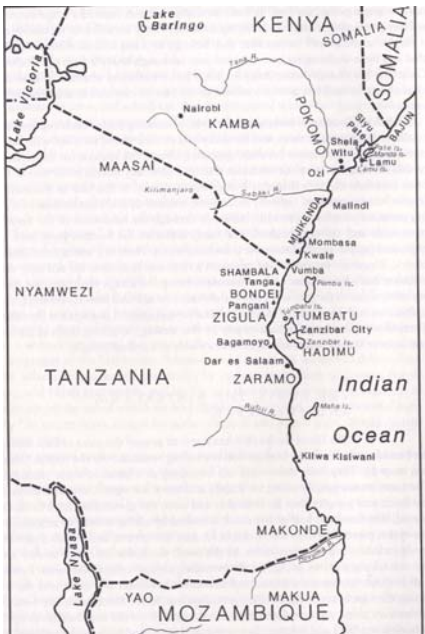


Figure 1 Map from John Middleton, *the World of the Swahili* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 4

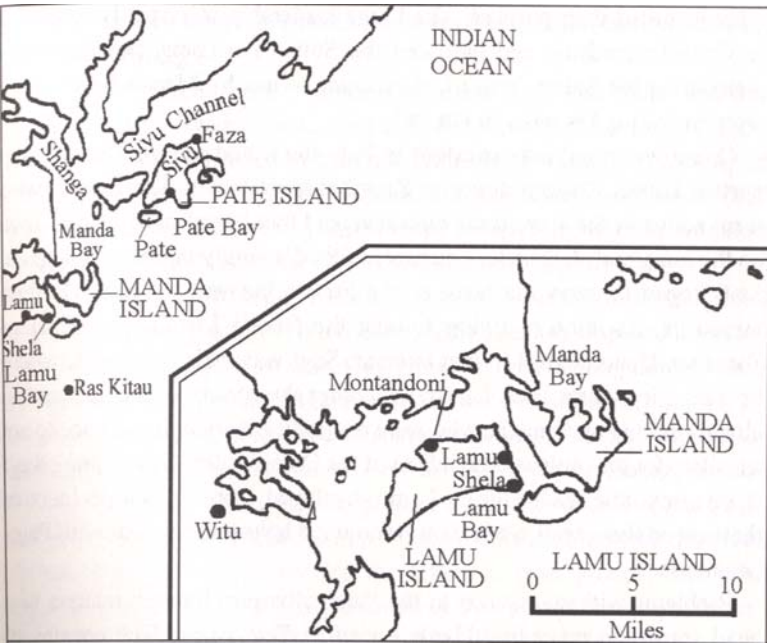


Figure 2 Map from Patricia Romero, *Lamu: History, and Family in an East African Port City* (Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997.) 25



Figure 3 A group rehearsal at a local Lamu restaurant as they prepare for the Lamu Cultural Festival. Kajenje is pictured center as he plays the tablas. His fellow musicians observe. Picture taken by author.



Figure4 Mohamed plays an organ like instrument with Kajenje's group Al Noor at a public performance in the Lamu town square. This performance was part of the Lamu Cultural Festival. Picture taken by author.



Figure 5 A man, pleased with the son, tips a performer at the all night (*Kesha*) performance of Zanzibar Stars in Lamu's town square. Picture taken by author.



Figure 6 A singer from a "modern taarab" group called Zanzibar Stars performing at the Lamu Cultural Festival. Picture taken by author.

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