

The Swahili Art of Indian *Taarab*

A Poetics of Vocality and Ethnicity on the Kenyan Coast

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When Kenyan musician Juma Bhalo passed away in April 2014 at the age of seventy-two, his loss was felt most acutely among the coast's Swahili-speaking urban Muslims, particularly those who, like Bhalo himself, identified as "Swahili." At the funeral in Mombasa, Ahmed Yasin of the National Museums of Kenya discussed Bhalo's role in preserving Swahili dialects. Meanwhile, Stambuli Abdillahi Nasser, a politically active intellectual from Bhalo's clan, celebrated Bhalo's renown in Swahili towns and villages across the East African coast.¹ It was not the first time Bhalo had been eulogized in this way. Similar pronouncements about his importance to Swahili culture, language, and community had been proffered by Swahili men and women in private conversations as well as on local talk radio after Bhalo had declined to perform at the 2005 Swahili Culture Festival in Lamu, and again in 2007, after he had announced his retirement. The eulogies at Bhalo's funeral were merely the most poignant airing of a discourse that had already been well established. In light of this, it is remarkable that the melodies Bhalo sang and performance style he employed throughout his career were drawn not from the Swahili coast but from the other side of the Indian Ocean. Bhalo's poetry may have been Swahili, but his music was "Indian."

Bhalo was a practitioner of what many on the Kenyan coast refer to as "Indian *taarab*" (*taarab ya kihindi*), a subgenre of Swahili *taarab* music that features Swahili words set to melodies from Hindi film songs performed in a distinctly Indian style.² The practice of setting new words to popular Hindi film melodies—what, borrowing an esoteric musicological term, I propose to call "Bollywood *contrafacta*"—is

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1. Mwakio, "Taarab Maestro."

2. Following the East African convention, I refer to people and cultural artifacts of South Asian extraction as "Indian." The term *South Asian* is rarely used in East Africa; *Asian* is more common, but like Aiyar I find it unsuitable because it is an "inheritance from colonial racial categories" with no corollary in Swahili (Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*, 20).

common in parts of the global south where Hindi films and their soundtracks are popular.³ Hindi film music invites this sort of play by virtue of its propensity for intertextuality and cultural borrowing.⁴ It is a promiscuous art, open to reinterpretation. That Africans engage in this play should not be surprising, given Bollywood's global reach, the demonstrable taste for hybrid forms in African popular arts, and the fact that Indian melodies, rhythms, and timbres are not wholly foreign to "African ears already sensitized to Arab and Persian musics."⁵ But that said, each example of Bollywood *contrafacta* on the African continent has a unique sound and represents a unique engagement with the source material.⁶

The Swahili art of Indian *taarab* stands out among the documented examples of Bollywood *contrafacta* on the African continent for two reasons that would seem to be in direct conflict: its highly cultivated "Indian" sound and its status as a sonic icon of a non-Indian ethnic group. Indian *taarab*'s ability to signify Swahiliness despite sounding markedly Indian presents something of an ethnomusicological puzzle. How can coastal Kenyans, including self-identified Swahili, hear this music as iconically "Swahili"? One might surmise that the answer to this question lies in the overriding emphasis on poetic form and content in Swahili *taarab*. If *taarab* is "a form of sung poetry with instrumental accompaniment," as many scholars maintain, then perhaps its musical elements are heard as merely incidental.⁷ But a skilled Indian *taarab* singer, as Bhalo himself exemplified, does not simply borrow melodies from Hindi film soundtracks; he cultivates an Indian style in his voice and the orchestration of his ensemble. Why go through all this trouble if the (Indian) music is merely a convenient vehicle for Swahili poetry?

My conversations with Swahili musicians and

music lovers during my research in Mombasa between 2004 and 2006 convinced me that Indian *taarab* performers and audiences derive pleasure and meaning from the genre's paradoxical presentation of Indian sounds as Swahili expressions. I am interested in this aspect of Indian *taarab* for how it situates the genre as a vehicle for "public reflexivity," in Victor Turner's sense of a reflexive sociocultural analysis manifested dialogically in public performance.⁸ The sounds of Indian *taarab*, I argue, enable and entice Kenyan Swahili to collectively examine an aspect of their shared sociality that is rarely acknowledged in everyday life—their cultural, genetic, and geographical proximity to India. By taking an ethnographic ear to the careers and works of certain Indian *taarab* performers, I follow these performers in situating Indian *taarab* as a site in which to explore understandings and experiences of Swahili ethnicity on the Kenyan coast.

The Voice of Indian *Taarab*

Indian *taarab* is a singer's art, and singers are the primary agents of the genre's reflexivity. As an instrumentalization of the bodily faculty that is most involved "in the production of social and cultural being," the singing voice can serve as a powerful technology of public reflexivity.⁹ A human listener, endowed with his or her own body, voice, and innate orientation toward mimesis, necessarily confronts an other's singing voice as a reflection and refraction of the self.¹⁰ When exploited for expressive purposes, as it often is, this inherent reflexivity in the reception of the singing voice becomes more than phenomenological; it becomes dialogical, public. Nina Eidsheim illustrates this point in her discussion of the reception of jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott. By flouting normative gender expectations, Eidsheim argues, Scott's voice "holds up a mirror to the audience."¹¹

3. Ethnomusicologists and anthropologists have documented examples of this practice in India (Booth, "Traditional Practice"; Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 131–52; Marcus, "Recycling Indian Film-Songs"; and Marcus, "Parody-Generated Texts") and West Africa (Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, 129–30; Larkin, "Bandiri Music"; and Waterman, *Juju*, 2).

4. See Novak, "Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood," 50.

5. Shain, "Roots in Reverse," 89n2.

6. Brian Larkin brings this point across very well in his article on the Hausa *bandiri* genre—though, along the way, he paints a picture of East Africans' engagement with Hindi cinema that I take issue with, as it leaves little room for the familiarity and intimacy I emphasize here (Larkin, "Bandiri Music," 100).

7. Topp Fargion, "Hot Kabisal," 39.

8. Victor Turner discusses reflexivity in numerous published works. I draw primarily upon his *Anthropology of Performance* and "Frame, Flow, and Reflection."

9. Feld et al., "Vocal Anthropology," 334. See also Meizel, "A Powerful Voice."

10. Meizel, "A Powerful Voice."

11. Eidsheim, "Voice as a Technology of Selfhood," 235.

Indian *taarab* singing similarly holds up a mirror, albeit at a different angle, offering an image of Swahili ethnic identity for Swahili listeners. Swahili listeners find this image compelling, I suggest, for its particular refractions. It provides a productively strange view of the Swahili ethnic community that does not rest upon, and so potentially challenges, the pervasive and (in the Kenyan context) politically deleterious emphasis on the “ambiguity” and “elusiveness” of Swahili identity.¹²

Indian *taarab* singing becomes most deeply reflexive in the hands (or mouth) of a particular type of singer I refer to as the Indian *taarab* “clown.” By using this term I mean to connect this type of Indian *taarab* singer to the cultural archetype of the harlequin or trickster, whose role in ritual or art is to upend and invert norms and expectations.¹³ The Indian *taarab* clown upends the ethnic categories of coastal Swahili society by drawing attention to and playing with the paradox of an Indian voice emanating from a Swahili mouth. This move constitutes a *poetics of Swahili identity*, a performative exploration of the “network of interrelated tropes” through which social actors on the Kenyan coast understand what it means to be Swahili.¹⁴ Drawing on the locally salient ethnic schema of “Swahili-space” (*uswahili*), I describe this poetics below as a matter of *making audible the Indianness that already resonates in Swahili bodies and places*.

My focus on articulations of ethnically marked voices and bodies in musical practice places my work here within the interdisciplinary research area that Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels term “vocal anthropology.”¹⁵ Following other works in this area that explore the intersections of vocality and identity, I home in on the multidimensional materiality of the voice as sound “produced through bodily actions.”¹⁶ Specifically, I attend to the dialogic cultivation and choreography of the Indian voice in In-

dian *taarab*, in order to get at its social meanings.¹⁷ My analytical approach thus draws together ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology as well as sound studies. My temporal perspective, however, falls more in line with historical musicology.

Rather than focusing on the ethnographic present of the early twenty-first century, I examine Indian *taarab* from the beginnings of the genre in the late 1940s through its golden years of the 1980s. While Indian *taarab* is still around today, its heyday had already passed by the time I had arrived in Mombasa for the research on which this article is based. The genre was still resonant for local Swahili, but it no longer literally resonated in Swahili neighborhoods, because of increased religious opposition to secular activities like the traditional Swahili women’s wedding celebration (*kupamba*), once Indian *taarab*’s primary live context.¹⁸ There were few active Indian *taarab* performers in Mombasa during my time there. The most active, Mohamed Yusuf “Tenge,” was relatively young, offering some hope for the future of the genre. But while his cassettes sold well, his only performance opportunities were for mixed Mijikenda-Swahili audiences on the outskirts of town, where ensembles working in the more danceable “modern *taarab*” idiom presented stiff competition.¹⁹

To reconstruct the history of Indian *taarab*, I have relied upon the memories of consultants with first- and secondhand knowledge of past figures and events. In the course of hanging out nearly every evening for more than a year at the home of the late Swahili poet and musician Zein l’Abdin in Mombasa Old Town, I conducted informal and formal interviews with middle-aged and older musicians and aficionados of Indian *taarab*. All these subjects were male, self-described “Swahili” and “Arab-Swahili” (Swahili speakers with Arab paternal lineages), ranging in age from their mid-forties to their mid-sixties. I sometimes listened with them to recorded performances of Indian *taarab* to elicit

12. On the “ambiguity” of Swahili identity, see Middleton, *The World of the Swahili*, 198, and Salim, “The Elusive ‘Mswahili.’”

13. See, among other discussions, Turner, *Communitas*.

14. I borrow this definition of poetics from Fox, *Real Country*, 29. See also Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*.

15. Feld et al., “Vocal Anthropology,” 340.

16. Weidman, “Voice,” 235.

17. See especially Eidsheim, “Voice as a Technology of Selfhood”; Eidsheim, “Synthesizing Race”; Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*; and Fox’s and Samuels’s contributions in Feld et al., “Vocal Anthropology.”

18. See Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos*, 111.

19. Modern *taarab* groups use some Hindi film melodies, but their true appeal lies in their Latin-tinged rhythms.

free-flowing talk about the music. Zein was particularly helpful, as he had been a performer of Indian *taarab* in the 1960s before developing his “Arabic” style.²⁰ But it was his nephew, Jamal Hafidh Jahadhmy, who served as my key interlocutor and collaborator. Jamal is not himself a musician, but he recorded and promoted Indian *taarab* groups during the 1980s, and he has long been an avid collector of Swahili cultural artifacts. He supplied some of the recordings I worked with and assisted me in collecting and analyzing other recordings. Most significantly, he assisted me at the private archive of a local Indian business owner, where, over the course of seven weekends, we obtained digital copies of rare Swahili music recordings published between the 1930s and the 1970s—leftover stock from Mombasa’s Indian-owned Assanand and Sons, which closed up shop in the 1970s.²¹ I supplemented my work with Jamal Hafidh and other members of Zein l’Abdin’s circle with conversations and interviews with other *taarab* experts, including noted Swahili poets and local Indian musicians who had worked closely with Swahili Indian *taarab* musicians during their careers.²²

The Subject of Swahili Ethnicity in Kenya

My analysis of Indian *taarab* is intended to open up new perspectives on ethnic identification and subjectivity (that is, social positioning and self-understanding in relation to ethnic categories) on Kenya’s historically Muslim Swahili coast. Such perspectives are sorely needed in light of continuing tensions between Muslims and the state in Kenya. The pervasive stereotyping of Swahili-speaking coastal Muslims as merely a loose collection of deracinated Arabs and Arabized Africans—an unfortunate legacy of colonial-era

identity politics²³—has made it difficult even for native-born coastal residents to secure government jobs, national identification documents, and title deeds, and as such contributes to the growth of Islamism and coastal separatism as alternative political imaginaries among Kenyan Muslims.²⁴ My aim in this article is to offer an ethnographic account of Swahili ethnic subjectivity that can stand in productive tension with the necessarily reductive journalistic and policy-oriented writings on identity and citizenship on the Kenyan coast.

The ethnonym *Swahili* (derived from the Arabic *Sawāḥil*, or “coastlines”) is used multifariously in East Africa, because of the role of the Swahili language as a regional *lingua franca*. But on the Kenyan coast there exists a coherent (which is not to say uncontested) idea of a “Swahili” person as a town- or village-dwelling Muslim of the coast who speaks a dialect of Swahili as his or her primary language and identifies with the rich cultural heritage fostered by the coast’s once-thriving “mercantile civilization.”²⁵ This idea has deep historical roots, but it has taken on greater definition since Kenyan independence, as tribal identities have become essential bases for claims to rights and power in the country.²⁶

While there is no shortage of scholarship on Swahili ethnicity, a great deal of it has focused on a single problem: the ontological status of the Swahili ethnic category.²⁷ Since the mid-1980s, historians and ethnographers have sought to move the literature beyond this problem and into investigations of the local understandings and experiences of being and becoming Swahili. This turn toward ethnic subjectivity has been productive but uneven. On the ethnographic side, scholars have focused mainly on the experiences of the Mijik-

20. See Eisenberg, “Zein l’Abdin Ahmed.”

21. At the time of this writing, I am working in conjunction with the NYU Abu Dhabi Library and the NYU Abu Dhabi-funded research project “Multimodal Approaches to Rhythm,” directed by Carlos Guedes and Godfried Tousseint, to make available an annotated archive of these digital copies. The Mombasa-based custodian of the original recordings wishes to remain anonymous. Jamal Hafidh aided me in searching through the piles of dusty Swahili 78s that had not been organized. In re-

turn, I supplied him with digital copies of all the rare music I managed to capture, which he shared with other members of the local Swahili community.

22. In addition to Zein l’Abdin, I interviewed three noted Swahili poets: Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, and Bi Khuleta.

23. See Salim, “‘Native’ or ‘Non-Native,’” and Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*.

24. Kresse, “Muslim Politics in Postcolonial Kenya,” 578; Mazrui and Shariff, *The Swahili*, 131–49; Mazrui, “The Black Intifadah?”; Prestholdt, “Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism”; and Yahya, “Who Owns the Kenya Coast?.”

25. Middleton, *The World of the Swahili*.

26. See Eastman, “Swahili Ethnicity.”

27. For a recent overview, see Fleisher, “Situating the Swahili House,” 75–76.

enda, a coastal Bantu ethnic group whose members have historically “become Swahili”;²⁸ on the historiographic side, the emphasis has been on shifting ethnic categories in relation to political contexts.²⁹ Along the way, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the roles of Arabs and notions of Arabness in Swahili subject formation. But questions of how Swahili ethnic subject formation has been shaped by interactions between Swahili and their Indian Muslim neighbors have been left untouched. The present article seeks to fill this lacuna.

The Indian Muslim population in East Africa is extraordinarily diverse, comprising various Sunni and Shia communities that arrived at different points in history from different parts of what is now northwestern India and Pakistan.³⁰ Indian communities in East Africa have always been among the most endogamous and socially insular in the region. But at the coast, Indian Muslims have interacted across ethnic and communal boundaries, coming together and engaging with other Muslim communities—including the Swahili—through participation in religious festivals and the formation of Muslim clubs and associations, and sometimes through intermarriage.³¹ By taking an ear to how the long history of contact with Indian Muslims resonates in Swahili expressive culture, I hope to offer a particular approach to Swahili ethnic subject formation that draws from and extends the nascent conversation between Swahili studies and Indian Ocean studies.

Indian *Taarab* Origins

Swahili *taarab* (also *tarabu*) takes its name from the Arabic *ṭarība*, denoting musical artistry and

the rapture it ideally evokes. Beginning as a syncretic merger of Swahili poetry and Arab court music in late nineteenth-century Zanzibar and coastal Kenya, it was initially popularized across the region in the late 1920s by the recordings of the female Zanzibari singer Siti binti Saad and her ensemble (recorded by His Master’s Voice [HMV] in Bombay).³² A descendant of slaves, Siti became a champion of the downtrodden even while maintaining patrons among the Arab elite, thereby framing Swahili *taarab* as a form of entertainment for all strata of Swahili-speaking coastal society.

Various forms of *taarab* developed on the Swahili coast during the twentieth century.³³ From the start, these incorporated Indian elements. A perusal of the earliest commercially recorded *taarab*, dated back to the late 1920s, reveals influences from Urdu genres such as *qawwali* (Muslim devotional music) and early recorded *ghazal* (light classical song).³⁴ The most obvious reason for the Indian tinge of early Swahili *taarab* is that Indian recordings “were available almost to the exclusion of any other type of music on the Swahili coast” at the time.³⁵ Another possible reason lies in the influence of Arabs from Hadramawt (southern Yemen), who have participated in Swahili *taarab* as musicians and listeners since the earliest days.³⁶ Southern Yemeni music has long borne Indian influences, and the legendary Hadrami singer Mohammed Juma’a Khan, whose recordings were likely to have been circulating in the Indian Ocean world around the time of the earliest Swahili *taarab* recordings, was half Punjabi and enjoyed importing Indian elements into his music.

Indian *taarab* emerged as early as the late 1930s. At least two Swahili singers, Chuba Shee and

28. See Parkin, “Being and Selfhood”; Parkin, “Swahili Mijikenda”; Parkin, “Language, Government, and the Play on Purity and Impurity”; and McIntosh, *Edge of Islam*.

29. See, for example, Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, and Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*.

30. See Bakari, “Asian Muslims in Kenya,” and Salvadori, *Through Open Doors*.

31. Salvadori, *Through Open Doors*, 270–71.

32. See Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, “Mapisi Ya Twarabu,” and Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 169–225.

33. See Askew, “Following the Tracks of Beni”; Graebner, “Taarab”; Graebner, “Between Mainland and Sea”; Graebner, “The Interaction of Swahili Taarab Music and the Record Industry”; and Topp Fargion, *Taarab Music in Zanzibar in the Twentieth Century*.

34. Besides my own experiences collecting and listening to old *taarab* recordings with local consultants, I rely here on Graebner, “Between Mainland and Sea.” Based on focus-group work, Graebner divides the melodic/rhythmic content of his samples into eight stylistic categories: “Swahili *ngoma*” (music of traditional rites), “*kitaarab*” (the sui generis style of early Swahili *taarab*), “Arabia/Gulf/Red Sea,” “Arabic

(general)” (presumably Arab music of luminaries from Cairo), “Indian,” “European,” “Latin,” and “*Kimanyema*” (Congolese). “Indian,” Graebner writes, “refers specifically to Indian film music.” This cannot be the case for the earliest recordings he deals with, which he dates around 1928–30, as this was before the advent of sound in Indian cinema. It is more likely that the five early Zanzibari *taarab* recordings that Graebner’s specialists recognized as “Indian” were based stylistically on *qawwali* or *ghazal*.

35. Topp Fargion, “Poetry and Languid Charm,” 7.

36. See Topp Fargion, *Taarab Music in Zanzibar in the Twentieth Century*, 37–62.

Jumbe Ali, recorded recognizable Indian *taarab* for HMV between 1938 and 1946.³⁷ But the ground for Indian *taarab* became more fertile after the Second World War, as denizens of the Kenyan coast fell in love with Hindi musical films.

It is tempting to assume that Indian *taarab* during the postwar years borrowed from the popularity of Hindi musical films, just as it borrowed from the content of these films. But it may also be the case that the already established Swahili proclivity for Indian music helped attract Swahili audiences to Hindi musical films. There are, of course, reasons why Swahili audiences took to Hindi musical films that have little to do with music: as Brian Larkin argues in relation to Hausa cinemagoers in northern Nigeria, Swahili cinemagoers in the postwar period were surely attracted to Hindi musical films for their “images of a parallel modernity to the West, one intimately concerned with the changing basis of social life, but rooted in conservative cultural values.”³⁸ And as historians Ned Bertz and Laura Fair discuss in relation to Zanzibar, the films were also attractive for how they enabled African audiences to imagine new global alliances and social futures on the eve of decolonization.³⁹ But given the importance of music to the affective power of Hindi musical films, it is clear that the Swahili familiarity with and fondness for Indian sounds played a role in the reception of these films on the Kenyan coast—which, in turn, means that Indian *taarab* is not an ancillary offshoot of the Swahili love affair with Bollywood, but a key component of it.

That the popularity of Indian *taarab* continued to grow during the 1950s is suggested by the success of an odd mini-genre of Swahili-language Bollywood *contrafacta* produced *in India, by Indians*.



Figure 1. A Young India record in its original packaging. Photograph by the author

This was the effort of the Young India record company in Bombay, an early “‘indigenous’ effort at record production” that focused mainly on “amateur and upcoming artists.”⁴⁰ Presumably spurred by the presence of Swahili-speaking Indian singers who had recently relocated from East Africa, Young India produced a few dozen such songs during the latter part of its years of operation (ending in 1955). These recordings, some of which can now be heard on the British Library website, feature song texts that appear to be mostly direct translations of the original film songs, all sung in distinct Indian accents over lush orchestral accompaniments.⁴¹ Whether or not these recordings were considered to be *taarab* at the time, they nevertheless left a lasting impact on some Swahili musicians and listeners, as we shall see below.

It was during the 1960s, when small *taarab*

37. These recordings were produced in Nairobi by the Indian-owned Shankardas Company and distributed on the HMV MA series. Examples from both singers can be heard on the compilation *Bellyachers, Listen—Songs from East Africa, 1938–46* (Honest Jon’s Records, 2010). I also managed to find other examples (presumably reissues) in Assanand and Sons’ leftover stock.

38. Larkin, “Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers,” 410.

39. Bertz avers that early Hindi musical films “described a similar colonized experience at the

hands of the British,” and later ones “dealt with issues of globalization and liberalization, developments which coincided in South Asia and Africa” (Bertz, “Indian Ocean World Cinema,” 69). Fair, meanwhile, maintains that for Swahili youth in the post–World War II era, the films’ narratives of romantic love resonated with the ideas of liberation and self-determination that were in the air (Fair, “Making Love in the Indian Ocean”).

40. “EAP190: Digitising Archival Material Pertaining to ‘Young India’ Label Gramophone Records,” Suresh Chandvankar, British Library,

accessed August 1, 2016, eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP190;r=41.

41. Fourteen songs are available for streaming on the British Library’s website: “Young India record label collection,” British Library, accessed February 5, 2017, sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Young-India-record-label-collection. It is unclear just how many Swahili Bollywood *contrafacta* songs Young India produced, but this is only a small sampling. I have collected twenty-eight examples from sources in Mombasa, only one of which also exists in the British Library collection.

ensembles were beginning to replace the large orchestras of the colonial-era social clubs in Mombasa, that Indian *taarab* came to dominate Kenyan coastal *taarab*. As a music performed by small groups led by individual stars, Indian *taarab* thrived in this new environment. Juma Bhalo and other Indian *taarab* stars became popular along the entire stretch of the Swahili coast, from Dar es Salaam to Mogadishu. But it was on the Kenyan coast that the genre really took hold, becoming the primary form of live entertainment for Swahili women's wedding celebrations and a staple of local record production and radio broadcasts.⁴²

Making *Taarab* Indian

Three musical instruments imported to East Africa by Indians during the twentieth century helped spur the development of Indian *taarab*: the hand-pumped harmonium (largely supplanted by the synthesizer since the 1980s), the paired *tabla* drums, and the *taishogoto* (a two-stringed zither with typewriter-like keys). The harmonium and *tabla* drums are typical South Asian instruments, widely used across the Indian subcontinent. The *taishogoto* (rendered as *tashkoto* in Swahili) is of Japanese origin. Originally imported by Indian traders as a novelty item, it quickly became a professional instrument among the Swahili. While it has been used by Swahili musicians in a variety of contexts, its timbral similarity to Indian chordophones used in Hindi film music make it an especially good fit for Indian *taarab*.

But as with Hindi film music, the most important instrument in Indian *taarab* is the human voice. Unusually for Swahili *taarab*, Indian *taarab* is predominantly associated with male singers. While female Swahili *taarab* singers may sing songs based on Hindi film songs, they rarely, if ever, come to be known as Indian *taarab* singers in the generic sense. The most famous Kenyan female *taarab* sing-

ers of the late twentieth century, Zuhura Swaleh and Malika (Asha Abdo Suleiman), each performed and recorded some Bollywood *contrafacta* during their careers. Both achieved their greatest renown, however, for songs set in the style of the Swahili women's dance known as *chakacha*. Malika's "Vidonge," based on traditional *chakacha* song, was not only Malika's most popular song; it was arguably "the most popular *taarab* song to appear in the early 1990s."⁴³ More to the point, neither Zuhura nor Malika ever truly adopted the vocal style of a Bollywood playback singer. One can perhaps hear in their voices shades of the constricted vocal timbre developed by Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle. But female *taarab* singers have cultivated a similar timbre since at least the days of Siti binti Saad, who predates Mangeshkar and Bhosle. Mastery of the Mangeshkar/Bhosle vocal style was never a primary concern for either of them. When asked about their influences, Zuhura mentioned the American country singer Jim Reeves, while Malika mentioned male *taarab* singer Ali Mkali.⁴⁴ Sitara Bute, whose career was cut short by her untimely death in 2001, seems to my ear to have been the female *taarab* singer with the most abiding interest in developing a Mangeshkar/Bhosle style. Her reputation, however, was more that of a modern *taarab* singer.⁴⁵

The gender disparity in Indian *taarab* singing seems to stem in part from local understandings of Hindi film song as having a special power to stoke romantic passion. Swahili women's use of Indian *taarab* as a vehicle for romantic fantasy in their celebratory gatherings created a steady demand for suave male singers like Juma Bhalo during the years when the genre was obligatory at any such event. A sense of how this situation was understood locally can be garnered from a one-man comedy performance recorded by Assanand and Sons during the 1950s or 1960s.⁴⁶ In this record-

42. On the contexts of *taarab* music recording in Mombasa during the twentieth century, see Graebner, "The Interaction of Swahili Taarab Music and the Record Industry." Shortwave broadcasts of Sauti ya Mvita (Voice of Mombasa) helped popularize Mombasan *taarab* within and beyond Mombasa. Zanzibari journalist and musician Mariam Hamdani recalls listening to Juma Bhalo and other Indian *taarab*

artists on Sauti ya Mvita during her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s (recorded interview by the author, Zanzibar, January 7, 2010).

43. Graebner, "Wape Vidonge Vyao," 251.

44. Zuhura Swaleh, interview by the author (recorded), Mombasa, September 18, 2004; Malika, interview by the author, Mombasa, May 8, 2006.

45. See Ntarangwi, "A Socio-Historical and Contextual Analysis."

46. Lamu Omari, "Boi," Mzuri AM 430, date unknown.

ing, a talented vocal acrobat named Lamu Omari acts out a scene in which a Swahili man catches his new Mijikenda *boi* (male domestic servant) serenading his wife with a Hindi film song performed in an uncannily authentic tone and accent. A number of norms and expectations are at play in this scene, including the notion that the cultivation of an “Indian” voice is an inherently Swahili practice. But most of all, the joke is on the passion of Swahili women for Hindi film song and the anxiety it provokes in Swahili men. One might expect that this anxiety would have stoked opposition to male Indian *taarab* singing, if not the genre as a whole, among Swahili men. To be sure, Swahili women’s attraction to male Indian *taarab* singing has proved controversial in coastal Muslim society—Juma Bhalo was on more than one occasion accused of wooing married women—but the situation was accepted, or at least tolerated, by Swahili men for decades, until the rising influence of Islamic reform began to curtail *all* live musical performance in Swahili neighborhoods toward the turn of the twenty-first century.

Another possible explanation for Indian *taarab*’s gender disparity lies in the similarity between Indian *taarab* singing and other traditionally masculine Swahili activities like speaking Arabic or Omani-style men’s dancing.⁴⁷ All of these activities involve intensive mimetic engagement with other Indian Ocean cultures. Given that female *taarab* singers have been defying normative gender roles since before the advent of Indian *taarab* by becoming leaders of *taarab* ensembles, one might expect that they could also inhabit the masculine role of culture broker. But perhaps not, as the mimetic engagement in Indian *taarab* happens through a cultivation of the voice, and the *taarab* “singer’s voice is . . . not neutral but situated and gendered.”⁴⁸

An Indian *taarab* singer takes pains to cultivate an “Indian” voice in his performances. In at least one important respect—the preparation of the words that are sung—this cultivation may entail a collaborative process. A Swahili poet working

in the realm of Indian *taarab* takes great pains to marry his or her poetry to a Hindi film song. At the semantic level, this means paying close attention to the thematic content of the source song. While Indian *taarab* poetic texts are hardly ever direct translations of Hindi film songs, they often reference the imagery and narratives of the source film, especially when the source film is well known or very popular at the moment. For instance, Yaseen Mohamed’s “*Sina Nyumba*” (“I Have No Home”), recorded in the 1950s by Assanand and Sons, references the theme of the film song upon which it is based, the global hit “*Awaara Hoon*” (“I Am a Vagabond”) from the 1951 Raj Kapoor classic *Awaara (Vagabond)*.⁴⁹

Indian *taarab* poets take even more exacting care at the level of prosody. The late Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, a Swahili poet and acknowledged expert in Swahili verbal art, argued that the goal of the poet in Indian *taarab* is to set a Swahili text to a Hindi film melody so perfectly that Indian listeners might even be fooled into thinking that they are listening to their own language.⁵⁰ To accomplish this, the poet pays close attention to the structure of the song’s melody—Indian *taarab* is the only form of *taarab* in which the poetry is set to an existing melody—as well as the phonetics of the original Hindustani words. At least one poet, Ahmad Nassir (discussed below), would study the original song texts in great detail as part of his process, demonstrating the multilingualism that has traditionally been held up as an essential aspect of Swahili *umalenga*, “poetic genius.”⁵¹

Not surprisingly, Indian *taarab* poets take advantage of any Hindustani-Swahili cognates that might be present in the source song. Such cognates occur as a result of the presence of Arabic lexemes in both languages.⁵² Since Arabic-derived words have mostly entered Hindi film music via the Urdu poetry tradition, they typically relate to key romantic and philosophical themes.⁵³ In some instances, cognates are used to forge a thematic connection to the original film song. Such

47. Eastman, “Waungwana Na Wanawake.”

48. Ntarangwi, “A Socio-Historical and Contextual Analysis,” 24.

49. Jamal Hafidh provided me with a cassette dub of this recording.

50. Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, interview by the author, Mombasa, October 10, 2005.

51. Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo’s 1971 poetry collection *Umalenga wa Mvita* includes poems composed in Bajun, Hindi, and Giriama, inter-

persed among his characteristically difficult poetry in often-archaic Mvita Swahili.

52. Urdu is a central component of Hindustani, the most commonly used dialect in Hindi films.

53. See Ganti, *Bollywood*, 22–23.

is the case in Yaseen's "Sina Nyumba." The poet (presumably Yaseen himself) inserts the Arabic/Swahili/Urdu word *duniya* (world)—a word loaded with philosophical connotations for Muslims⁵⁴—at the same climactic point at which this word occurs in the original song. Yaseen's performance amplifies the connection, by employing the exact melismatic ornamentations that occur in the original performance.⁵⁵ Given the phenomenal popularity of the source film, *Awaara*, the effect for a Swahili listener in the mid-twentieth century must have been synesthetic. She would have pictured the vagabond (Raj Kapoor) standing in a humble, dusty village—not unlike what much of Mombasa looked like at the time—lifting two naked children to his chest as he sings.

Of course, achieving an "Indian" voice takes more than just getting the right words to sing. An Indian *taarab* singer must also train his vocal apparatus for the task. This is not a formalized process—there are no schools or formal apprenticeship programs for Indian *taarab*—but it certainly takes concentrated effort, as I will show. I insist on the term *cultivation* to describe the work of the Indian *taarab* singer, in order to keep in view that he does not simply adopt an Indian voice for the purpose of a song or album. In every case that I know of, the Indian *taarab* singer's Indian voice is the *only* singing voice that he ever presents to the public. While it is the product of "a highly sophisticated and evolved choreography," it comes off as completely natural.⁵⁶ To accomplish this, the Indian *taarab* singer engages in an embodied learning process, what Pierre Bourdieu calls "practical mimesis."⁵⁷ Bourdieu sums up this idea with the axiom, "What is 'learned by body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is."⁵⁸

A well-cultivated Indian voice blurs the boundaries between the Swahili and Indian languages and styles. For the Indian *taarab* clown, as

I have already intimated, this blurring is about subverting given ideas about vocality and identity. But not all Indian *taarab* singers are clowns. For many Indian *taarab* singers, including the most successful one—Juma Bhalo—the blurring of languages and styles is, rather, about eliminating any sense of parody in order to enable listeners to lose themselves in the performance. While I am most concerned with the Indian *taarab* clown, a closer look at Juma Bhalo is in order, as his case teaches us a great deal about the cultivation of the Indian voice.

The Professor

Juma Bhalo—"Professor Bhalo," as he was often called—is the quintessential example of a type of Indian *taarab* singer I call the "professor." His vocal performance was expressive yet controlled—even understated. Seated at his keyboard in his buttoned-up suit, moving slightly as he sang, he exuded a debonair detachment that reflected the seriousness with which he took his craft.

Like Siti binti Saad and many other Swahili *taarab* singers, Bhalo first realized his vocal talent studying *tajwīd*, the science of Quranic recitation.⁵⁹ He began singing professionally in the late 1950s in Tanga, Tanganyika, at first accompanying himself on the mandolin. Around 1966, he moved to Mombasa, where he replaced his mandolin with a hand-pumped harmonium and began to establish himself as a wedding performer and recording artist.⁶⁰ He made his first studio recordings with the Indian-owned Assanand and Sons. By the late 1960s, he began releasing longer recordings (including live performances) on magnetic reel and, later, compact cassette, through Mbwana Radio Services. In the 1980s, following a dispute with Mbwana over royalty payments, he set up his own studio and cassette kiosk just across the street.

In the traditional fashion of Swahili poets and musicians, Bhalo fostered his fame through

54. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 229.

55. I have juxtaposed the relevant sections of "Awaara Hoon" and "Sina Nyumba" in an audio file available for streaming online: "Duniya Comparison," SoundCloud, 0:45, posted by Andrew J. Eisenberg, accessed February 5, 2017, soundcloud.com/andrewjeisenberg/duniya-comparison/s-HU8FQ.

56. Eidsheim, "Voice as a Technology of Self-hood," 268.

57. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 73.

58. *Ibid.*

59. There is a similar link between religious and secular vocal training in the Arab world. See Danielson, "'Min Al-Mashāyikh,'" 21–27, and Shannon, *Among the Jasmine Trees*, 153–54.

60. These details come from Mombasan interlocutors who are Bhalo's contemporaries. See also Anwar Bhalo, "Something about Juma Bhalo," accessed June 5, 2013, jumabhalo.com/fr_aboutjb.cfm.

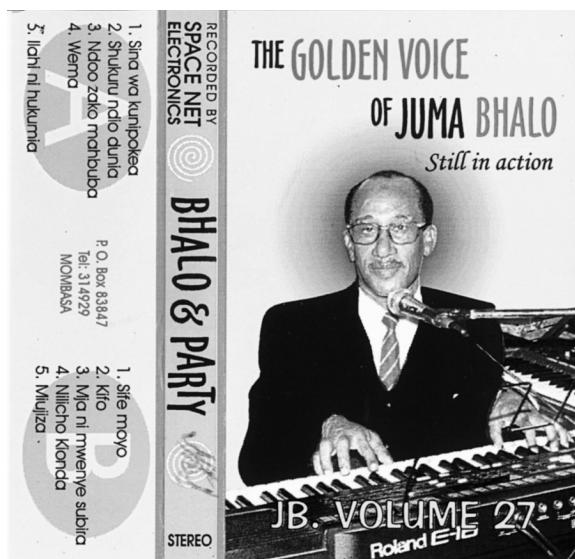


Figure 2. A cassette cover of one of Juma Bhalo's later releases, from the early 2000s. Image courtesy of Anwar Bhalo

competition. His first nemesis was another Indian *taarab* professor, Swaleh al-Abdi.⁶¹ Swaleh might have surpassed Bhalo if he hadn't died relatively young in the 1970s. Two Indian musicians I spoke with who had performed with Swaleh praised his flawless Hindi and Urdu pronunciation, which they attributed to his being an Arabic speaker. After Swaleh's death, Bhalo began a long and bitter dispute with rival singer Maulidi Juma Iha, which played out both on and off stage.⁶² Residents of Mombasa Old Town remember this dispute vividly. Maulidi had become Mbwana Radio Service's new star. And so, for a while, recordings of salacious insult-songs were continually broadcast from each of the competing kiosks, blanketing the central public square of Old Town. The most unseemly aspects of these songs (suggestions of sexual perversion and the like) were veiled with the typical cagey metaphors (*mafumbo*) of *taarab* poetry. Nevertheless, the chief of Old Town eventually intervened in the name of public decency.

Most people who dealt professionally with

Bhalo were keen to call him "professor." One man who was exempted from this protocol was Bhalo's older cousin, renowned Kenyan poet Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo (b. 1936), who is, himself, often accorded the title of "professor," albeit the Persian/Urdu/Arabic version (*Ustadh*).⁶³ Ahmad Nassir is responsible for much of the poetry that Bhalo sang throughout his career. As such, he reserved the right to refer to Bhalo as the "mouth" (*mdomo*) and himself as the "brain" (*ubongo*). Interlocutors familiar with Bhalo's process in the 1980s and 1990s reported that "mouth" and "brain" used to complete each "volume" (sixty or ninety minute cassette) only after a painstaking process that involved choosing the proper material, setting each song with the appropriate poetry, and making various decisions regarding the performances. They were known to place Indian friends in advisory roles during this process. One such friend, deceased by the time of my research, was nicknamed Dugu (literally "Big Brother"). He helped out by transliterating and translating Hindi film songs, aiding both the "mouth" with problems of declamation and the "brain" with problems of content rendering.⁶⁴

Bhalo's meticulous process reveals Indian *taarab* as more than a simple appropriation of popular melodies or attempt at "harnessing the glamour and transnational prestige associated with Indian films" (as Larkin suggests in the case of Hausa *bandiri* music).⁶⁵ As much a discipline as an art, Indian *taarab* requires training and labor in addition to raw talent. An Indian *taarab* song is a true "artistic hybrid" in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms—"stylized through and through, thoroughly premeditated, achieved, distanced."⁶⁶ But when it is done well it doesn't seem this way at all. It seems much more natural, because the "stylization" is not something that happens in the words, melodies, rhythms, or timbres, but in the body. The cultivation of an Indian voice is, to borrow from Judith Butler, a "styl-

61. The only surviving Swaleh al-Abdi recording that I am aware of is a single track on the 1983 Original Music record label's compilation *Songs the Swahili Sing*.

62. Ntarangwi, "Malumbano and Matukano."

63. Ahmad Nassir's full name is Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo, and he is sometimes referred

to as *Ustadh* Bhalo. To avoid confusion with his cousin, I refer to him here as Ahmad Nassir. For information on Ahmad Nassir's life, work, and thought, see Kresse, *Philosophising in Mombasa*.

64. This information comes from more than one anonymous source familiar with Ahmad

Nassir and Juma Bhalo. I conducted one interview with Ahmad Nassir, but he declined to discuss his Indian *taarab* work. Juma Bhalo declined to be interviewed.

65. Larkin, "Bandiri Music," 105.

66. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 366.

ization of the body,” a practice of self-making akin to what every person does in moving through the world as a social being.⁶⁷

The Clown

An Indian *taarab* singer’s stylization of the body is always intensive, but not always quite as *serious* as Bhalo took it to be. Unlike the professor, the Indian *taarab* clown approaches the stylization of the body as a form of play. By placing his performance within a “play frame,” the clown keeps the parodic nature of Indian *taarab* in focus.⁶⁸ He revels in the strangeness of the genre’s “misembodied voice,”⁶⁹ thereby transforming his performance into a work of “cultural translation,” in Homi Bhabha’s sense of a staging of cultural difference.⁷⁰

If the Indian *taarab* professor channels the spirit of Mohammed Rafi, the Hindi-film playback singer who took his work so seriously that another singer once had to be brought in to perform “the nonmusical utterance ‘yahoo’” in a song, the clown channels Kishore Kumar, the playback singer whose skill for comedy made his considerable virtuosity easy to overlook.⁷¹ The tradition of the Indian *taarab* clown seems to go back to the earliest days of the genre: the surviving recordings of Chuba Shee and Jumbe Ali suggest that both were clowns. But the earliest clown that my Mombasan interlocutors recalled was a half-Indian, half-Swahili Zanzibari entertainer who went by the name Musa Maruf (“Famous Musa”).

Musa Maruf frequented Mombasa from the 1940s until he took up permanent residence there after the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar. As a member of the Nizari Ismaili Muslim community, his relocation was a matter of self-preservation: seen as allies of the sultan, Ismailis were targeted along with Arabs in the violent ouster of the Omani ruling class.⁷² He was more than welcome in Mombasa,

however, having already achieved a degree of celebrity there. Older Mombasans remember hearing Maruf’s distinctive voice, not just as it emanated from 78-speed records but also as it resounded in the physical spaces of Mombasa’s Old Town and market area. Just like “mother-of-*taarab*” Siti binti Saad in her precelebrity days, Maruf was a hawker, earning a living from his ability to transmit his voice through public streets and squares.⁷³ His primary hawking work was in promoting *lesos*, colorfully patterned wraps with Swahili sayings. When he wasn’t performing his distinctive hawker’s cry, “*Badilisha! Badilisha!*” (“Exchange! Exchange!”), he enthralled passersby in the *leso* district of Bishara Street with everything from puppet shows to elaborate comedic performances in drag.

While his street performances would have been enough to make him famous, Maruf was also one of the most talented East African musicians of his generation—an expert harmonium player with a piercing tenor capable of performing powerful *qawwali*-style melismata. He began his career recording for the Nairobi-based Jambo label in the late 1940s. His songs set Swahili poems to otherwise authentic-sounding Indian melodies (some of which may have been his own compositions), all sung in a distinct Indian accent.⁷⁴

Maruf’s music is marked by layers of multilocality and intertextuality. His Jambo recording “*Mpenzi Wangu Kanitoka*” (“And Then My Love Left Me”), based on the song “*Jaba Dil Hi Toot Gaya*” (“When the Heart Is Broken”) from the 1946 film *Shah Jahan*, provides a rich example.⁷⁵ In a nasal tenor reminiscent of Bollywood playback singer K. L. Saigel’s performance of the source song, Maruf sings, “*Moyo wangu ‘mevunjika,*” literally “my heart is broken.” This image comes directly from the source song,⁷⁶ but it also recalls the Swahili expression *-vunjika moyo*, which is generally translated

67. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

68. Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 107.

69. Brayton, “Race Comedy and the ‘Misembodied’ Voice.”

70. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 325.

71. Ranade, *Hindi Film Song*, 274, 382–83.

72. See Nagar, “The South Asian Diaspora in Tanzania,” 67.

73. Shaaban bin Robert, *Wasifu Wa Siti Binti Saad*, 5.

74. Two of Maruf’s early recordings may be streamed on the South African Music Archive Project website: “Mohamed,” South African Music Archive Project, accessed February 5, 2017, samap.ukzn.ac.za/mohamed-east-african, and “Sote tu lo uzuriya,” South African Music Archive Project, accessed February 5, 2017, samap.ukzn.ac.za/sote-tu-lo-uzuriya-east-african.

75. Jambo EA 421, date unknown. The song may be heard online: “Mpenzi Wangu Kanitoka by Musa Maruf,” SoundCloud, 3:17, posted by Andrew J. Eisenberg, accessed February 5, 2017, soundcloud.com/andrewjeisenberg/mpenzi-wangu-kanitoka-by-musa-maruf/s-EGrCs.

76. Aditi Deo, pers. comm., January 3, 2011.

as “to be discouraged.” In other words, the song’s lyricist, who I assume to be Maruf himself, is engaging in a bit of esoteric wordplay, which could only be picked up by someone who speaks both Hindi and English. It is possible that the intended audience for this wordplay was Indian Zanzibaris, who have historically been known to adopt Swahili as a mother tongue whether or not they sought to become “Swahili” in any other respect.⁷⁷ But the wordplay could also be taken as a clever attempt to translate the concept of lost love into a Swahili context, just as Hindi films at the time were translating ideas of romantic love for young Swahili viewers interested in ideas of self-determination.⁷⁸ Maruf’s overstressed accent, which turns *wangu* into *wangul*, brings the playfulness to the surface in a way that an Indian *taarab* professor like Juma Bhalo would try to avoid. It is impossible to forget that this is Swahili poetry inflected with Hindi, all wrapped up in an Indian voice emanating from an Indian-Swahili mouth.

The next Indian *taarab* clown to emerge bore many similarities to Musa Maruf. Junaidi Al Noor, popularly known as Mzee Mombasa (“Old Man Mombasa”), was a Swahili musician and performer who achieved national fame in Kenya. As a young man he endured backbreaking and dangerous labor on Indian Ocean ships in order to avail himself of opportunities to perform music and comedy in South Asia as well as East Africa. Having garnered experience in South Asian musical forms in Lahore, he marketed himself as an Indian musician for Indians and others back in East Africa, “taking [the music] to faraway places that it could not have reached on by itself.”⁷⁹ No doubt his performances were appreciated by discerning Indians in far-off places like Bukoba, on Lake Victoria. But there was also a farcical aspect to his Indian persona, evidenced by the fact that he coupled musical performances with comedic plays in which he always portrayed an Indian man with a “spot” on his forehead.⁸⁰

By the time Mzee Mombasa began playing accordion with Zein l’Abdin’s *taarab* group in 1971,

he had already wrapped up his acting career in favor of more lucrative opportunities in deep-sea fishing. Whether it was the opportunity to perform again or the desire to live a life without the threat of sharks (he was treated for stress after one close call), he began working with Zein full time, going with him as far as Rwanda and Burundi to perform for weddings. This was around the time that Zein began to move away from borrowing Indian melodies, preferring Arab melodies and his own compositions based on Arab *maqāmat* (melodic modes), a move no doubt influenced by the steady influx of Hadrami Arab business owners willing to lay out money for wedding bands to suit both Arab and Swahili tastes. Thus, Mzee Mombasa, who had molded himself into a bridge between the coasts of South Asia and East Africa, was now stretching himself toward southern Arabia.

From the end of his time with Zein l’Abdin until the mid-1990s, Mzee Mombasa worked as a nationally recognized actor in Kenya, first on radio and then later on television. By 1995, however, his failing health forced him to retire. Shortly before his death in 2002, he experienced his last bit of public acknowledgment through the rather odd channel of an Australian cultural studies journal, where his oral history is recorded.⁸¹

On stage, behind the microphone, in the public square—and, it would appear, in the more private quarters of their imaginations—Musa Maruf and Mzee Mombasa each played with the relationship between Swahiliness and Indianness. This play was surely entertaining for Swahili audiences, but also thought provoking. Like clown figures in other cultural and historical contexts, the Indian *taarab* clown exceeds his ostensible role as mere entertainer, becoming a kind of cultural critic working through an embodied methodology, “a rogue who dons the mask of a fool in order to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels.”⁸²

Indianness Resounding

The work of the Indian *taarab* clown accrues particular meanings for Swahili listeners because of

77. Padgaonkar, “Zanzibar’s Desis.”

78. Fair, “Making Love in the Indian Ocean.”

79. Mzee Mombasa, quoted in Muecke, “Mzee Mombasa’s Story,” 182.

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 404–5.

the enigmatic status of Indian identity in coastal Swahili society. While coastal Swahili have at their disposal well-defined ideas about what it means for a Swahili person to be in whole or in part “Arab”—ideas solidified in the late nineteenth century, when Omani Arabs occupied the seat of power, Hadrami Arab Sharifs shaped Islamic practice, and Hadrami Arab peasants occupied the lowest rung of coastal Muslim society⁸³—the same cannot be said for what it means for a Swahili person to be “Indian.” Are Swahili-speaking Indians part of the Swahili ethnic community? Can an Indian be Swahili, or vice versa? While there may be no shortage of opinions on these matters on the Kenyan coast, one cannot find any that are close to universally shared. The late anthropologist John Middleton, relying (perhaps a bit uncritically) on input from Swahili patricians, stated categorically, “Indians are never counted as ‘Swahili.’”⁸⁴ To the extent that this represents a dominant opinion among Kenyan Swahili—and I’m not sure that it does—it sits in a strange relationship with the general understanding that many Swahili have Indian ancestry. The same Swahili who informed Middleton that “Indians are never counted as Swahili” surely knew of the Bhalo clan, which has given coastal society some of its most famous Swahili men, including Juma Bhalo and Ahmad Nassir. As part of the larger Badala community of the Kenyan coast, members of the Bhalo clan trace their roots to Gujarat.⁸⁵ They are Swahili, but also Indian. By drawing attention to the strangeness of an Indian voice emanating from a Swahili mouth, Indian *taarab* clowns bring to the surface the enigma of Indian identity in Swahili society.

The inherent reflexivity of Indian *taarab* clowns’ performances was amplified during the Indian *taarab*’s heyday by the genre’s literal and figurative resonance within the *casbah*-like Swahili neighborhoods of the Kenyan coast. Indian identity holds the same enigmatic status in these concrete spaces as it does in the abstract space of

Swahili ethnicity. In the Swahili stone towns of Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu, one cannot escape the Indian decor, fashion, and cuisine that have been integral to Swahili material culture ever since the coast’s Arab suzerains turned them into signs of aristocratic taste in the late nineteenth century.⁸⁶ Yet the places themselves are never referred to as “Indian.” They are “Swahili” or “Arab” places that just happen to be infused with Indian sights, smells, and sounds.

In discussing Swahili ethnicity, Swahili speakers typically employ the term *uswahili*, which literally translates to either “Swahili place” or “Swahili essence” (Swahiliness). In discourses of ethnic identification, *uswahili* takes on both of its meanings at once, expressing an “ethnic schema” that I translate as “Swahili-space.”⁸⁷ Swahili-space makes sense of what historians and anthropologists often describe in more temporal terms as Swahili ethnicity’s processual nature, by positing ethnic being and becoming as a matter of dwelling within and entering into a particular environment.⁸⁸ For example, in discussing the Mijikenda-born Indian *taarab* singer Maulidi Juma Iha, one Mijikenda community leader told me, “*Ameingia uswahilini sana*” (“He has entered very far into Swahili-space”).

To employ a sonic metaphor, we can say that while Arabness *reverberates* in Swahili-space, revealing its various contours and edges, Indianness *resonates*, existing as a palpable yet ungrounded presence, a “sounding after an unlocatable origin.”⁸⁹ Taking inspiration from Ronald Radano’s discussion of resonance in relation to black music in the United States, I suggest that Indian *taarab* clowns engage in a poetics of Swahili identity by recasting and rearticulating the resonance of Indianness in Swahili-space.⁹⁰ The following section examines this poetics in greater detail, by focusing on one particularly skillful and adventurous Indian *taarab* clown.

83. See Allen, “Swahili Culture Reconsidered”; Allen, “The Swahili World of Mtoro Bin Mwinyi Bakari”; Askew, “Female Circles and Male Lines”; and Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*, 129–30.

84. Middleton, *The World of the Swahili*, 13.

85. Salvadori, *Through Open Doors*, 194.

86. See Allen, “The Swahili World of Mtoro Bin Mwinyi Bakari,” 222, and Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 78–85.

87. Brubaker et al., “Ethnicity as Cognition.”

88. On the processual nature of Swahili ethnicity, see Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*; Mirza

and Strobel, *Three Swahili Women*; Parkin, “Being and Selfhood”; and Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili*.

89. Radano, *Lying up a Nation*, 11.

90. *Ibid.*

Bonzo's Harlequin Poetics

One of the most talented Indian *taarab* clowns was a little-known singer named Mohammed Hassan, who went by the stage name Bonzo (presumably referring to Ronald Reagan's simian costar in the 1951 film *Bedtime for Bonzo*). I want to focus on one of Bonzo's most remarkable performances: a song titled "*Sisi Isilamu*" ("We Muslims"), recorded by my interlocutor Jamal Hafidh in 1985.⁹¹ What makes this performance so valuable for the present discussion is the deliberateness with which it plays with and upon the genre of Indian *taarab* itself.

"*Sisi Isilamu*" uses not one, but two Hindi film songs as source material. Its buoyant refrain is based on "*Door Koi Gaye*" ("Someone Sings in the Distance"), from the 1952 film *Baiju Bawra*. This happens to have been one of the Hindi film songs that were set with Swahili lyrics by Indian singers working with the Young India record company in the mid-twentieth century. Bonzo references this history near the end of his performance, by breaking into the refrain of the Young India version: "*Sauti yako nzuri kama santuri / Napenda nikusikie mara kwa mara*" ("Your voice is as beautiful as a gramophone / I want to hear you all the time").⁹² The second melody of Indian origin is a lively ditty in the Indian mode of *Bilawal* (corresponding to the Western major scale), which is used for the verses. An intervallic relationship of a fourth between the tonics of the two sections gives the song as a whole the semblance of a simple song composed in the Western tonal system.

Like the refrain, the musical material for the verse was retrieved second hand. In this case the source was a Musa Maruf recording.⁹³ Thus, while it may have been perceived only by Bonzo, his band, and others close to them, "*Sisi Isilamu*" clearly references the role of Indians in the development of Indian *taarab*. Bonzo pays a peculiar homage to this history by taking on the persona of



Figure 3. Mohammed Hassan "Bonzo" recording a comedic song before a small audience (Mombasa, ca. 1985). Photograph courtesy of Jamal Hafidh Jahadhmy

a flamboyant Indian vocalist who sings in the pidginized Swahili of an East African Indian who does not live among native Swahili speakers.⁹⁴ Adding another layer of absurdity, we quickly discern that Bonzo's fictitious persona, who sings with gusto about being Muslim, is actually Hindu (*Banyani*), when he interjects a spontaneous "Hare Krishna" after the first line of the first verse.

Bonzo besets his Hindi alter ego—at some point he introduces himself as "Baburao Gabbar Singh Guru," a reference to a character in the 1975 Hindi film *Sholay*, but I will simply call him "Bonzo Banyani"—with an impossible task. Unlike "*Sauti Yako Nzuri*" or any of the other songs recorded by the Young India singers, "*Sisi Isilamu*" cannot reasonably be sung by a Banyani. In the first place, the song text is written from the point of view of a Muslim. Beyond that, the text features a multitude of words with Swahili phonemes that pose the most difficulty for Indians, many of which would be uncommon for any Hindu to encounter in the first place since they have to do with foods eaten during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Despite all this, Bonzo Banyani tackles the song with gusto, seemingly unaware that he is rendering it virtu-

91. The recording may be heard online: "Sisi Isilamu by Mohammed Hassan 'Bonzo,'" SoundCloud, 5:56, posted by Andrew J. Eisenberg, accessed January 30, 2017, soundcloud.com/andrewjseisenberg/sisi-isilamu-by-mohammed-hassan-bonzo/s-dmGG6.

92. Miss Kiran Pardeshi, "*Sauti Yako Nzuri*," Young India, SR-128, date unknown. The recording is now available for streaming on the British Library website: "Sauti Yako Nzuri," Young India record label collection, British Library, ac-

cessed February 5, 2017, sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Young-India-record-label-collection/025M-CEAP190X7X14-005ZVo. I am indebted to Jamal Hafidh for providing me with a cassette dub of the song years before the British Library made it available online.

93. Jamal Hafidh Jahadhmy, pers. comm., June 4, 2005. Jamal believes the original source may be a *qawwali* melody.

94. The word *Banyani* is derived from *Vaniya*, a centuries-old Gujarati term for a particular class of Jain or Hindu merchant. It evidently came into use in East Africa around the mid-nineteenth century, when Hindu traders began arriving in large numbers with the support of the sultan of Zanzibar. See Nagar, "The South Asian Diaspora in Tanzania," 64, and Rechenbach, *Swahili-English Dictionary*, 25. On pidginized Swahili among East African Indians, see Neale, "Kenya's Asian Languages," 73–79.

Table 1. A broad phonetic transcription of Mohammed Hassan's vocal performance in "Sisi Isilamu," with Standard Swahili and English translations

	As Performed ("Banyani" character)	Standard Swahili	English
Refrain	Sisi Isilamu funga marajani	Sisi Waislamu tunafunga Ramadhani	We Muslims fast on Ramadan
	Futari jiji kojoji na samaki makiji	Futari ndizi kojoji na samaki mkizi	Breakfast of soft bananas and cuttlefish
1	Wahindi wa zamani najitendekeze sana	Wahindi wa zamani wakijitendekeza sana	Indians of the past were very proud
	Kama wewe piga ngumi wao baki tajama	Kama wewe ungalipiga ngumi wao wangalibaki na kutazama	If you hit them they would just stand and stare
	Lakini Wahindi wa lewo (...Hare Krishna)	Lakini Wahindi wa leo	But the Indians today
	Kama wewe piga ngumi	Kama wewe ungepiga ngumi	If you punch them
	Wao [inaudible] tajama bali pigaji pijana	Wao hawatatazama bali wakijipigania [?]	They will fight back
2	Segeju iko gombe nami niko gombe zangu	Msegeju ana ng'ombe nami nina ng'ombe wangu	The Segeju has his cows and I have mine
	Mwambia tutanganya naye nanikataliye	Nilimwambia tuungane naye alinikatilia	I told him we should let them mingle but he refused
	Bye bye, <i>mein aawjo</i> , leo naenda zangu		Bye bye, mein [Hindi, "I am leaving"] aawjo [Gujarati, "goodbye"], I'm leaving today
	[...]		
4	Sauti zako nduri kama santuri	Sauti yako nzuri kama santuri	Your voice is as beautiful as a gramophone
	Napenda nizisikize mara kwa mara	Napenda nikusikie mara kwa mara	I want to listen to you all the time

ally incomprehensible. The first line of the refrain, "Sisi Waislamu tunafunga Ramadhani" ("We Muslims fast on Ramadan"), comes out as "Sisi Isilamu funga marajani"; the second line, "Futari ndizi kojoji na samaki mkizi" ("Breakfast of soft bananas and cuttlefish"), as "Futari jiji kojoji na samaki makiji." Later on, Bonzo Banyani encounters his most difficult challenge when he breaks into an old Swahili children's song about a Segeju man who refuses to have his cows mix with other cows.⁹⁵ The song is completely nonsensical in the given context, but it contains the phrase "my cows," and therefore offers a perfect opportunity to underscore the two most glaring errors that Indians typically make in speaking Swahili: the velar nasal *ng'* [ŋ] in *ng'ombe*, the Swahili word for cow, becomes a simple *ng*, and the possessive modifier *wangu* becomes *zangu* (a construction that suggests the cows to be inanimate objects) (see table 1).

Unlike most *taarab* poems, "Sisi Isilamu" has little coherence on the written page. This is because the point of the song is not the text but *the text in the mouth of the singer*. Its meaning lies in what Roland Barthes terms the "diction of the language," "that apex (or depth) of production where the melody really works at the language—not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds—signifiers, its letters—where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work."⁹⁶ In the "diction" of "Sisi Isilamu," Bonzo's ludicrous presentation of a Swahili (Mohammed Hassan) parodying a Hindu Indian (Bonzo Banyani) parodying a Muslim (the supposed composer of "Sisi Isilamu") parodying a Bollywood playback singer (the performer of the original Hindi film song) takes on a critical edge as a play on mimesis. Take the case of the letter *w* in Bonzo Banyani's declamation. Each

95. The Segeju is a coastal ethnic group located mostly on the Tanzanian side of the Kenya-Tanzania border.

96. Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.

w is pronounced in true Indian style as a labiodental approximant [ʋ]—that is, somewhere between a *w* and a *v*. I considered representing these sounds with the letter *v* instead of *w* in my transcription but quickly realized that this would be misleading. It would imply that Bonzo performs a vulgar parody of this phoneme. In fact, Bonzo performs the labiodental approximant perfectly, because it also exists in northern Swahili dialects. He doesn't need to *imitate* this sound, just *accentuate* it, something that even Indian *taarab* professors do. A Swahili listener is forced to wonder whether those sounds are truly parodic. Are they “Banyani” or just Swahili?

Bonzo Banyani is certainly an unflattering caricature.⁹⁷ But “*Sisi Isilamu*” is not only—or even primarily—about East African Indians; the joke, really, is on Indian *taarab* and the (Swahili) people who perform and enjoy it. By masterfully layering parody on top of parody (on top of parody on top of parody . . .), Mohammed Hassan upends the genre of Indian *taarab*, compelling listeners to consider the nature and role of parody in this iconically Swahili art of sounding Indian.

Conclusion: The Intimacy of Indian *Taarab*

I have suggested that we may hear the playful performances of Indian *taarab* clowns as reflexive explorations of Swahili ethnicity. By placing an Indian voice at the center of Swahili-space, where Indianness already resonates, Indian *taarab* clowns enable and entice Swahili audiences to reflect upon their shared sociality as subjects situated in closer cultural, historical, and geographical proximity to India than other non-Indian citizens of the Kenyan nation-state. As such, their performances may be described as articulations of “cultural intimacy,” in Michael Herzfeld's sense of the “rueful self-recognition” that often lies at the heart of group identity formation in the modern world.⁹⁸

In line with Herzfeld's model of cultural intimacy, Indian *taarab* clowns foster a sense of shared sociality by trafficking in notions of cultural identity that “are considered a source of external em-

barrassment.”⁹⁹ Being Indian in Kenya, as in other parts of East Africa, means being quintessentially non-African. Stereotypes of the Indian as insular, a carpetbagger, and an exploiter have been part and parcel of the discourses of nation building in Kenya since independence. A decade after independence, one sociologist reported, “anti-Asian ideology is the bread and butter of many a local politician,” and “the implementation of the Ugandan option [Idi Amin's expulsion of Indians] is a political possibility at any time in Kenya.”¹⁰⁰

But Indian *taarab* does not only produce a sense of Swahili community by revealing the Indianness of Swahili ethnicity; it also does so by revealing the deep *familiarity*—a different sort of intimacy—between Swahili and Indians. The importance of this familiarity for a Swahili sense of shared sociality was driven home for me as I listened to Omari Swaleh al-Abdi, son of the late Indian *taarab* singer Swaleh al-Abdi, telephone an Indian musician with whom his father used to perform. Omari was hoping to borrow a harmonium for a recording session. To break the ice, he playfully introduced himself as the “*chokra*” of Swaleh al-Abdi. *Chokra*, a Gujarati word for *boy* and Hindi word for a *servant boy*, entered the Swahili lexicon at least as early as the late nineteenth century, presumably as a result of Indians employing African boys as servants and employees.¹⁰¹ More recently, it has entered into upcountry Kenyan slang as a term for a homeless child who roams the city streets committing petty crimes.¹⁰² No self-respecting upcountry Kenyan would ever refer to himself as a *chokra*. But from the mouth of a Swahili man in Mombasa (not to mention the son of an Indian *taarab* singer) the word finds a different resonance. Like the musical performances of his father and other Indian *taarab* singers, Omari's telephone performance revealed an intimate relationship with Indians and Indianness, recalling a shared Indian-Swahili experience on the periphery of the Kenyan nation. ■■■■

97. Without denying its unsavory aspects, it is possible to argue that the sense of intimacy between Swahili and Indians conveyed by any Indian *taarab* performance (a theme I will return to in the conclusion) mitigates the callousness of “*Sisi Isilamu*,” bringing it into the realm

of *utani* (a traditional relationship of joking or teasing that exists between people of neighboring ethnic groups in East Africa).

98. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*, 6.

99. *Ibid.*, 3.

100. Ferudi, “The Development of Anti-Asian Opinion,” 358.

101. Sacleux, *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français*, 146.

102. Mbaabu and Nzuga, *Sheng-English Dictionary*, 4.

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