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Taarab

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Photo
Zanzibari taarab legend
Bi Kidude. She was an avid study
of Siti binti Saad who is widely
credited as having popularized
Swahili taarab in East Africa

Swahili Taarab

Swahili taarab (also tarabu) is a form of secular vocalised poetry that is performed in a variety of musical styles, all of which reveal strong influences from the Indian Ocean island cultures. As a type of music of the 'Swahili coast' that has been recorded commercially for nearly a century and has spread as far as the Arabian Peninsula and all the way inland to Rwanda, Swahili taarab is everything transnational. However, the taarab of the Kenyan coast has taken its own course since independence, allowing for the existence of a distinctive 'Kenyan taarab' that is currently reaching its half-century mark.

Taking its name from the Arabic 'tariba', meaning the ecstatic feelings evoked by true musical artistry, taarab has its origins in court music traditions of the Arab elite in late nineteenth-century Zanzibar and coastal Kenya. A Zanzibari woman who was a descendant of slaves is generally credited with bringing Swahili influences to the genre and popularizing it as a form of entertainment for all strata of coastal Swahili society. Siti binti Saad, as this woman came to be known ('Siti' being Arabic for 'Lady'), was active as a performer and recording artiste from the 1920s until her death in 1950. In 1928, HMV transported her and members of her ensemble, Budda Swedi, Maalim Shaaban and Mombasa-born Mbaruk Talsam, across the Indian Ocean to record in Bombay. These initial recordings by Siti and her group were hugely successful, prompting more taarab recordings by HMV and other multinational record companies. Modern Swahili taarab, as we now know it, was born.

By the 1940s Mombasa, Kenya's coastal town, became known

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across the Swahili-speaking world as a center of taarab innovation. Professional orchestras like Lulu, Jauhara and Morning Star offered poetry that drew on the rich literary traditions of the northern Kenyan coast, set to music that borrowed brilliantly and playfully from Egyptian, Indian, Latin American and Swahili musical traditions. The scene was bolstered by the presence of the radio station Sauti ya Mvita, whose broadcasts reached much of coastal East Africa, including Zanzibar. At around the time of Kenya's independence, a tradition of small-group taarab units came to replace orchestral taarab in Mombasa, fostered by a boom in the market for entertainment at weddings as well as the activities of the local record label Mzuri Records (owned by Assanand & Sons Ltd.).

This small-group tradition came to include three more or less distinct styles, 'Arabic' (taarab ya kiarabu), 'Indian' (taarab ya kihindi) and 'Swahili,' which are identifiable by their musical characteristics (though a closer analysis reveals important differences in the poetic content of the lyrics).

Photo

1. Fort Jesus in Mombasa
2. Maulidi Juma (far right) & Party in Mombasa, 1978

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Arabic taarab consists of Swahili songs composed using the maqam system of Arab melodic modes

Photo
Ustadh Zein L'Abdin
Ahmad Alamoody

Arabic Taarab

Arabic taarab typically features oud (Arabic Lute) as the primary accompanying instrument along with percussion in the form of bongos and/or dumbek (goblet drum) plus rika (tambourine). The main repertoire in Arabic taarab consists of Swahili songs composed using the maqam system of Arab melodic modes. It is also known as 'men's taarab', because its typical live setting during the 1960s and 1970s was the stag party held to celebrate a bridegroom before sending him off to consummate his marriage. It is at such gatherings that Arabic taarab became fashionable among Kenya's coastal Muslims, especially after the wave of Hadrami (Arabs from Hadramawt) immigration in the late-1960s.

The finest Arabic taarab performers in the 1970s typically played before Hadrami as well as Swahili audiences and the fact that the newly arrived Hadrami were marrying Swahili or Kenya-born Hadrami, heightened the demand for songs in Kiswahili performed in ki-Arabu, Arab style, hence the preference for (Swahili) Arabic taarab.

When celebrated singer and oud player Bin Brek returned to his native Hadramawt (southern Yemen) in the early 1980s, oud virtuoso, poet and singer Ustadh Zein l'Abdin Ahmad Alamoody was left as the undisputed king of Arabic taarab in Kenya. Zein, who passed away in June 2016, traced his origins to the Hadramawt, but his roots in Kenya go back many generations. Born in the northern port town of Lamu in 1939, he learned to play the oud from his father and uncle, and acquired exposure to Arab music from sailors visiting from the Gulf.

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Indian taarab came unto its own after World War II, when Hindi films became popular among the coastal Swahili

Photo
Mohamed Juma Bhalo 'Professor Bhalo,' was well known for his mastery of Indian taarab

Indian Taarab

While Kenyan Swahili men were developing a penchant for Arabic taarab in the years following independence, their women were developing a much deeper love for another style, Indian taarab. This latter style which features Swahili poetry set to Hindi film melodies, orchestrated and performed in a manner that captures the spirit of a Hindi film soundtrack, served as the obligatory entertainment during Swahili women's wedding celebrations for much of the second half of the 20th century. It remains popular today, though it has suffered from the rise of 'modern taarab' as well as a campaign against women's taarab celebrations by Salafi Muslims in very strict traditional Swahili neighborhoods.

Indian taarab came unto its own after World War II, when Hindi films became popular among the coastal Swahili, their romantic themes resonating with the ideas of liberation and self-determination that were in the air at the time. But the style's historical roots extend even further back. Early taarab recording stars, including Siti binti Saad, often borrowed melodic material from Indian qawwali and ghazal records.

Culturally, Indian taarab is also more deeply rooted than might appear at face value. The music is simply not a product of Swahili musicians borrowing from sounds that were in current circulation, but a reflection of a long history of contact and association between the Swahili and Indian communities. Apropos, some of the best-known Indian taarab stars can trace their origins to South Asia. A case in point is a man who might be referred to as the father of Indian taarab, a Swahili of half-Ismaili Asian descent, musician and actor Musa Maaruf ('Famous Musa'). A Zanzibari who frequented

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Photo
Legendary poet
Ustadh Ahmad Nassir Juma
Bhalo (center) penned most
of the songs interpreted by his
cousin 'Professor Bhalo.' He is
seen in this 2015 photo outside
his music store with his son Najib
Ahmad Nassir (left) and Mbarak
Ali Haji of Lelele Africa

Mombasa from the 1940s before finally taking up permanent residence there after the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, Maaruf was an expert harmonium player with a clean, piercing tenor voice capable of performing powerful, qawwali-style melismas. He recorded some of the first locally produced East African recordings with the Nairobi-based Jambo Records label in the late 1940s or early 1950s. His songs set Swahili poems to otherwise authentic Indian songs, sung in a distinctly Asian accent.

While Musa Maaruf and the fabulously talented Yaseen Mohamed were the kings of Indian taarab during the 1950s, for most of the history of independent Kenya that crown has belonged to Juma Bhalo. 'Professor' Bhalo, as he was known, recorded hundreds of

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Indian taarab songs in his pristine, nasal tenor, before retiring from music in 2007 at the age of 65.

He began singing professionally in the late 1950s in Tanga. In those days he accompanied himself on the mandolin, earning the nickname 'Mohamedi Mandolina.' Around 1966, he moved to Mombasa, where he replaced his mandolin with the Indian hand-pumped harmonium and began to establish himself as a renowned recording artiste and performer at weddings. With a 'golden voice' reminiscent of Indian playback singer Mohammed Rafi, Bhalo came to specialize in Hindi film songs relatively early. Most of the poetry put to music throughout his career was the work of his older cousin, legendary poet Ustadh Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo,

Photo
Mbwana in 2015

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who expended great effort and energy in setting Swahili words to songs from popular Hindi films.

In the late-1960s, Bhalo began to release recordings (including live performances) on magnetic reel tapes and, later on compact cassette discs, through Mbwana Radio Services in Mombasa's Old Town.

In the 1980s, following a dispute with Mbwana over royalty payments, he set up his own studio and cassette kiosk across the street. Bhalo Sounds remains the only competitor to Mbwana Radio Services in local taarab recording and distribution in Mombasa.

After Bhalo left Mbwana Radio Services, the company began to promote singer Maulidi Juma Iha as the next 'big thing' in Indian taarab. Maulidi's more easily accessible poetry, and the fact of his Mijikenda background, aided him in building a large, loyal following to rival that of Bhalo. The competition between the two singers led to a duel of words in their songs. These insult songs were broadcast from speakers set up at both Mbwana Radio Services and Bhalo Sounds. When these mud-slinging matches degenerated further into obscenities and slanderous accusations the Chief of Old Town was forced to intervene to silence the open dispute.

Juma Bhalo passed away in April 2014. Despite the impromptu nature of his funeral (following Islamic tradition), hundreds of people turned out and he was eulogized by local Swahili scholars and dignitaries.

Photo
Maulidi Juma in 1998

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The merger of chakacha with taarab was natural from a Swahili perspective, going on to produce a kind of taarab that was much more viable as a national or regional form of popular music

Photo
Malika, the queen of Mombasa taarab. Her song 'Vidonge' remains one of the biggest taarab hits from Mombasa

Mombasa Taarab

The 'Swahili' style of Mombasa taarab is less coherent than the Arabic and Indian styles. The term has been used to describe the Latin- and Arab-tinged music of Matano Juma in the 1960s, and the highly danceable chakacha taarab of female singers Zuhura Swaleh and Asha Abdo Suleiman 'Malika' in subsequent decades. Chakacha, a coastal women's ngoma (style) traditionally associated with Swahili weddings, features an infectious, upbeat cross-rhythm. The merger of chakacha with taarab was natural from a Swahili perspective, going on to produce a kind of taarab that was much more viable as a national or regional form of popular music than the Arabic or Indian styles could ever become.

Malika's 'Vidonge' (Pills), based on a traditional chakacha song, became an enormous hit across Kenya and beyond in the early 1990s. 'Vidonge' spawned other recorded versions of the song by other taarab and non-taarab groups, including Nairobi-based Congolese ensemble Orchestre Virunga. It earned Malika a contract with Mushroom Records, a Kenyan recording company with vast distribution networks.

The success of Malika's 'Vidonge' in Tanzania played a role in the formation of a new style of taarab in that country in the early 1990s. Initially patronized by Tanzania's newly formed political parties, so-called 'modern taarab' features message-laden (mipasho) poetry of the sort exemplified in the refrain of 'Vidonge', set to Latin and ngoma rhythms and melodies influenced by beni (music played by bands).

Tanzanian modern taarab was well received by Kenyan audiences,

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and was therefore quickly adopted by local musicians in Mombasa. While Mombasa's modern taarab groups have appeared largely content to play cover versions of Tanzanian hits, the best of them have also developed their own repertoire. This latter trend has arguably given rise to a particularly Kenyan form of modern taarab which is infused with shades of Indian taarab.

The late Sitara Bute's work with the group Diamond Star (now Lelele Africa) around the turn of the millennium is an example of this. Sitara, who died an untimely death in 2001, sang Hindi film melodies and the Swahili-style melodies composed by band leader Mbaraka Ali Haji in a tone vaguely reminiscent of iconic Indian playback singer Asha Bhosle. The effect set her and Diamond Star apart from Tanzanian groups in a way that found deep appreciation among coastal Kenyan audiences.

Photo

1. Sitara Bute seen here at a performance with Diamond Star. Next to her is Mohamed Adio Shigoo on the keyboard

2. Mwanajuma Mngumi with Diamond Star. On the keyboard is composer Mbarak Ali Haji with fellow singer Mwanate Kibwana next to him



The rise of hip-hop and ragga-based music genres among the youth in Kenya in the late 1990s has provided a new impetus for taarab to change

Photo
Prince Adio

The Youth & Taarab

The various forms of taarab that have emerged on the Kenyan coast over the past half-century still endure, even if most of their practitioners struggle to make a living. The rise of hip-hop and ragga-based music genres among the youth in Kenya in the late 1990s has provided a new impetus for taarab to change. Two coastal musicians who came of age during the boom of music that is distinctly popular with the youth, Prince Adio and Nyota Ndogo, have garnered recognition for combining aspects of modern taarab with 'youth music'.

Prince Adio blazed the trail for taarab-infused music that was popular among the youth. The son of veteran taarab musician Mohamed Shigoo Adio, he already established himself as a modern taarab singer when he began experimenting with the digital production techniques that gave birth to Kenyan youth music, first at Andrew Burchell's Jikoni studio (where Nyota Ndogo also made her beginnings) and then at Tabasam Records. In 2002, Prince Adio achieved a breakthrough with 'Nikiwa Ndani' (When I'm Inside), a track that debuted a novel style of 'hip-hop taarab' that sets taarab-inflected poetry to Kenya's homegrown style of pop music.

'Nikiwa Ndani' is ostensibly a straightforward song about domestic tensions; however, in the typical manner of Swahili taarab poetry, its lyrics invite alternate readings. Young men working on Nairobi's public transport vans, better known as *matatus*, who enjoyed the song's more indelicate double entendre made it part of their daily play list. This stamp of approval by the *matatus* helped to launch the song onto the play lists of some of the major FM radio stations.

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As part of the Spotlight on Kenyan Music project for 2014, Nyota Ndogo pushed the taarab envelope a little further by experimenting on a fusion with jazz and musette from France when she collaborated with the French musette accordionist Vivianne Arnoux and Kenyan jazz guitarist Eddie Grey. One of the songs from that collaboration titled 'Dawa' is featured in the Volume 6 compilation of Spotlight.

In recent years, there have been attempts by some veteran taarab musicians like Mohamed Shigoo and Diamond Star's Mbarak Ali Haji to take Mombasa taarab back to its illustrious past, reviving the sounds of the mid-twentieth century in order to gain access to new patrons and audiences. Working with foreign and local entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), these enterprising artistes are reviving old songs and the instruments used back then, such as the harmonium and the taishogoto, a Japanese toy string instrument originally brought to East Africa by Indian traders. Whatever the case, Swahili taarab will surely be heard and enjoyed in some form as it is so intrinsically linked to the age-old Swahili penchant for poetic expression.

Photo
Nyota Ndogo (right) and
Vivianne Arnoux (left) during a
performance at The GoDown
Arts Centre in 2013