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TWARAB : A COMORIAN MUSIC BETWEEN TWO WORLDS*

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Abstract

This paper explores the different trajectories of Comorian *twarab*, the divergent histories on the four islands, and in different centers, in relation to different modes of cultural exchange and communication (migration, trade, media like phonograph records, radio, satellite communication), and relevant political and economic structures. The focus is on modes of transmission and processes of

cultural syncretization, also on the way that discourses about culture (a style and its history) shape the perception and future trajectories of styles.

Key-words : *twarab*, musical style and instruments, *ud*, *gambus*, *msondro*, *duf*, violin, tambourine, electric guitars, congas. organs... *mgodro*, Swahili culture, Comoros, Zanzibar, Comorian diaspora.

Historically the cultures of the Comoro islands show a close relationship to the Swahili culture of the East African Coast¹. It is the same for music, song, and dance where numerous correspondences can be traced between the two areas. Both, the East African Coast (Swahili culture) and the Comoros possess traditions of poetry accompanied by stringed instruments such as the *gambus*. These are strongest in the town of Domoni on Ndzwani Island and in the Lamu archipelago on the northern Kenya coast, and this heritage linked these areas with the Muslim world as far as Yemen & Hijaz and Malaysia/Indonesia and back in time at least to the 14th Century.

In the early 1900s, however, a new form with strong links to Arabia and the Islamic world saw the light of day with the development of so-called *taarab*

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¹ For background information on history and Swahili-Comoro cultural links see Allibert (1984), Verin (1994). General descriptions of Comorian culture are Fontoynt and Raomandahy (1937) & Chouzour (1994) (Ngazija) ; Ottenheimer (1985) (Ndzwani).

(*twarab/toirab* in Shikomori). A Zanzibar legend has it that the first *taarab* music club was founded in Zanzibar town at the time, being inspired by the Egyptian music emanating from the sultan's palaces. However, the Swahili *taarab* has multiple roots: drawing on local *ngoma* dance traditions, the older *gambus* based genre and the classical traditions of Swahili poetry. To this mix, add the musical currents spreading around the Indian Ocean first through migration and trade, then via the emerging media industries: beginning with 78rpm shellac record in the 1920s and followed by the sound films of Egyptian and Indian provenance from the 1940s onwards (Graebner 1991, 1999).

In 1907 members of the Comorian community in Zanzibar founded their first *taarab* club called Nadi Shuub. *Taarab* was soon to make its way to the Comoro Islands as well.

THE HISTORY OF TWARAB ON NGAZIJA

It was around 1945 when a musical group from a neighboring village came to play in Ntsaoueni. They had one violin player, the others played *ngoma* [local drums]. I was so struck by the sound of the violin that I went to work the following day trying to build a similar instrument from material at hand, strings made from coconut fiber. The following year we started our own little music club, we rehearsed every evening. In 1948 we gave a first public performance. I played on a violin made by a local craftsman. The concert was a big success and we continued playing at weddings but also giving little concerts every Saturday evening to stay rehearsed. The songs we played were Swahili and Arabic songs, Swahili songs by Siti bint Saad's group, later by Bakari Abedi, all from Zanzibar, songs by the grand masters of Arabic music of the time, like Mohamed Abdul Wahhab, Farid [al-Atrache], and Umm Kulthum. At that time we did not sing in Shingazija [the island's language]. We copied these songs from records that people brought back from their trading visits to Zanzibar.

It is true, we did not sing in Shingazija in the 1950s. All the songs were either in Swahili or Arabic. After I had performed my first Shingazija song in 1962, people came from all over the island to see whether it was really true what they had heard about. Such was the surprise at hearing *twarab* sung in our local language².

Illustration 1: Mohamed Hassan

Mohamed Hassan's account of his first contact with “*twarab*”, and the way it changed his future life as a musician, paints a vivid picture of the

² Conversation with Mohamed Hassan in Ntsaoueni, November 1998. Quote translated from Swahili.

attraction that the sound of new instruments and new repertoire had on the local imagination at the time. It encapsulates many traits of early Comorian *twarab* and its historical genesis: He talks about the regular connections that existed with the Swahili world of the East African coast and especially Zanzibar, then the center of power of this culture. Singing exclusively in Swahili and Arabic, songs being copied from a new medium also, the 78rpm shellac discs of the well-known Zanzibari group around Siti bint Saad, or the stars of Egyptian music of the time. Also significant here is that the conversation took place in Swahili: like many older Comorians Mohamed Hassan is well versed in this language, despite never having been on the East African Coast.

What is *twarab* then for the Comorian community? The answers that are usually given to this question vary: “ it is this music that we play ”, “ it is a form of music played at wedding celebrations ”, or “ it is a concert of Arabic music ”. The original root of the lexeme in the Arabic *tariba* and its meaning of 'to be moved, or agitated' by listening to music are rarely known. As with Swahili *taarab*, the Comorian *twarab* has become the designation of the whole genre, this includes a rough delimitation of the musical style, instruments used, the lyrical content and the occasion of performance, and other extraneous features accompanying this performance such as the style of movement or dancing, audience-performer interaction (like the giving of gifts of money to singers at appropriate moments), etc.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF TWARAB (1912-1940)

According to most accounts Comorians living in Zanzibar introduced *twarab* to Ngazija in the first decades of the 20th Century.³ These sources credit Abdallah Cheikh Mohamed, returning to live in Moroni in ca. 1912/13, with the introduction of the violin. As many of the first practitioners of the new style played the violin (and well into the 1920s), the new form of music came first to be known as *fidrilia*, the Shingazija equivalent of Swahili *fidla*, itself derived from English “ fiddle ”.

Abdallah Cheikh was also at the head of the establishment of the first music association in Moroni, called Marin Band, together with Salim Ben Hilal. In 1918-19 another *kilabu* (“ club ”) by the name of Arnuti was created, a third one, founded in 1927, went by the name of Sipori. Shortly afterwards *twarab* associations were also set up in other towns on Ngazija in the late 1920s and the 1930s.

Saïd Seleman “ Mdjiviza ” from Ntsudjini (born in ca. 1915) recalls the return of one Mohamed Ali Mgongo from Zanzibar in 1928. Mgongo was born

³ The historical sections are based on conversations with Maabadi Mzee, Moroni, November 1998, and August 1999; Mohamed Hassan, Ntsaoueni, November 1998; Saïd Seleman Mdjiviza, Ntsudjini, August 1999; Darwesh Kassim, Mzee Abdallah Haj, Moroni, August/September 2001.

in Ntsudjini but had emigrated to Zanzibar. He came back from Zanzibar also with a violin and established Ntsudjini's first *twarab* group. As he was a very good violinist people from Moroni and Ntsaoueni came to learn from him. In 1932 he returned to Zanzibar. Mdjiviza himself was soon to make the move across to the East Coast: He worked in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam until 1955. In the 1940s, he joined the Al-Watan Musical Club in Dar es Salaam as a violin player and also recorded with them for Sauti ya Dar es Salaam (The Voice of Dar es Salaam) in the early 1950s.⁴ "Ropiya Shenda" (Hamada Mgomri) who first began to sing with Sipori frequently traveled to Zanzibar and is remembered as one of the main propagators of Swahili language songs.

In Mitsamihouli, on the northern tip of the island, Mradabi Bwana founded an association in 1930. Other important musicians from Mitsamihouli at the time were Mohamed Ahmed and Mzé Mohamed Abdallah. A further musical association was founded in Ikoni, an important town to the south of Moroni.

In the early 1930s Darwesh Kassim (born in 1919) started playing percussion in a group led by his father, a well known *'ud* and violin player in Moroni at the time. Later, Darwesh learned to play violin and *'ud* and, subsequently, the accordion.⁵ Both Mdjiviza and Darwesh describe the early *twarab* groups as featuring two melodic instruments only: the violin and the *'ud*; plus percussion—what is called *msondo* or *msondo ya mapvadjani* in Shingazija, a clay *dumbak*, manufactured locally; and *tari* (a small frame drum) or *duf* (tambourine)⁶.

Darwesh Kassim and Saïd Seleman identify Sharif Yahaya as the most celebrated *twarab* instrumentalist of the time (and earlier, back into the 1920s). Mzaliwa Bwana is the most distinguished singer; he is a part of Sharif's group. However all members of a group take turns in singing, as well as members of the public. This is corroborated by the earliest written description of a *twarab* wedding performance, published in 1937 by Fontoynt and Raomandahy in a small book on the history and customs of Grande Comore. The account gives us a general portrayal of the contexts of a *twarab* concert at the time:

4 Mdjiviza is still remembered to this day by the elders of Al-Watan as one of the "best violin players they ever had". (Conversation with Abdallah Awadh, Dar es Salaam, August 2001).

5 Darwesh Kassim later joined the colonial police force and was transferred to Madagascar. He learned to play a number of brass band instruments and music theory and became a bandmaster. On his retirement and return to Moroni in 1962 he joined Jeunesse de Moroni and later on Asmumo.

6 On the East African coast and the Arabian Peninsula *msondo* refers to long narrow wooden drum. In the Swahili tradition the *msondo* is mainly associated with the female initiation rites called *unyago* (or alternatively *msondo*). The *msondo* drum is also widely used by other ethnic groups along the East African littoral. In Arabia the *msondo* is used in a number of musical forms and dances associated with East Africa, like the *levab* of Oman or Bahrain.

Le moment du mariage, le grand jour tant attendu est arrivé. Le jeune homme se présente chez le cadî avec les parents de la jeune fille pour l'enregistrement du mariage. ... C'est le prélude de fêtes qui dureront trois jours.

La première est le *thouarabou* qui doit avoir lieu en principe le vendredi. Ce *thouarabou* consiste en une réunion d'amis et de parents dans la maison nuptiale ...

Au bout d'une grande salle, devant une table couverte d'une nappe sur laquelle se trouvent deux lampes, le mari en costume de drap, habillé à l'européenne, mais portant sur la tête le fez traditionnel est assis sur une chaise garnie de coussins. Près de lui sont des *androsoma* munies de leur *oupepou* (éventail). C'est pour lui un privilège.

Devant lui s'entassent les invités. Quelques-uns munis de violons et de guitares entraînent les autres à chanter. Tous chantent en balançant la tête à droite et à gauche, successivement, à l'unisson et en cadence.

Les vieux parents sont restés au-dehors de la case à causer sous une tente.

Vers 22 heures, on apporte du café fort et des gâteaux divers avec des cigarettes et du *chileo*.

A minuit, c'est le plat de riz et le cabri. La fête dure toute la nuit; les chants et les repas se succédant alternativement jusqu'à six ou sept heures du matin moment où les invités et le marié prennent une dernière tasse de thé et des gâteaux, avant de s'en aller. (45)

Fontoynt and Raomandahy's description draws a vivid picture of a *twarab* wedding performance and shows how well this relatively new form was already integrated into the festive life of Grande Comore at the time. It also points to the particular character of *twarab* as a music that is performed in a rather formal way with everybody seated and following a certain dress code, there is no dancing, just the synchronous movement of heads. Yet the description also points to the social character of *twarab* song production with wedding guests joining in as lead singers, as well as in the chorus. Such a characteristic is also reported for pre-WWII Swahili *taarab* in Zanzibar and Mombasa where verses were composed on the spot, or excerpts of known songs sung in turn by the participants, thus creating extended medley-like forms⁷.

Unfortunately we do not know more of the musical characteristics of early Comorian *twarab*. In contrast to the East African Coast, where the leading *taarab* artists of the day in the late 1920s recorded hundreds of songs, Comorian musicians made no commercial recordings before the late 1950s or early 1960s. A song recorded by the Mission Clérisse, a French ethnomusicological expedition to Madagascar in 1939, provides a rare example. The recordings made include a small number of tracks by musicians of Comorian origin made in the town of Majunga (Mahajanga) on

⁷ Conversation with Miraj Juma, Mombasa, November 2000; Said Nassor, Zanzibar January 2001.

the northwestern coast of Madagascar. In the references at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris the selection is identified as:

“ I. Madagascar, Majunga. Comoriens Anjouanais ” and described as “ 2. musique rituelle musulmane; solo et chœurs d'hommes, vièle, tambour, cymbale, cliquettes ”.

This and the other tracks are not specifically identified by title or genre, but the identification as 'Islamic ritual music' could well mean that this is a form performed in the course of marriage celebrations. The use of the violin makes it apparent that this not some form of Muslim religious ritual music and marks the track as *twarab*, as do the lyrics, which are in the Swahili language, and take up a love-related topic. In addition to the dominant melodic instrument, the violin, a plucked lute-like instrument is discernible in the background as well. This could be a *gambus*, its Malagasy derivation the *kabosi*, or an *'ud*. The rhythm section with (unidentified) drum, cymbals, and “ cliquettes ” is not standard *twarab* fare. The latter two could be a Malagasy influence, i.e. instruments available at Majunga at the time, rather than the standard *rika* or *duf* (tambourine or small frame drum respectively). Cheikh (1988) mentions the Western drum set (“ janz ”) as a feature of *twarab* in Moroni in the 1930s, though in my conversation with older musicians this could not be verified. However, elements of the drum set as played in brass or marching bands could have been adapted from colonial military bands or could have been taken over from so-called *beni*, a Swahili brass band fashion which spread all over East Africa in the first decades of the 20th Century. The names of some of the early *twarab* groups in Moroni, “ Marin Band ”, “ Arnuti ”, “ Sipori ”, make one think of the East African *beni* brass bands and societies more than of *twarab*; the description of formal offices current in Comorian associations in the years to come also shows a number of correspondences to offices and titles current in *beni*.⁸

Compared to the existing commercial recordings of Swahili *taarab* music of this era, usually recorded in a formal studio environment, the recording under discussion catches the musicians in a rather more lively setting, with percussion dominating over melodic instruments. Contrary to existing recordings of Swahili *taarab* of the time, the track does not feature an instrumental introduction (*taqsim* or *basbraf*) but goes straight into the lead

8 On *beni* cf. Ranger (1975). Fontoynt and Raomandahy's (1937) description of Comorian music and dance entertainments do not mention *beni* but describe its female equation on the Swahili coast *lelemama* as being performed on Grande Comore in the 1930s. Could it be that *twarab* societies took the place of earlier *beni* societies? Or, more probable, were the names and elements of the club structure—as a possible spillover from the *beni* societies of the Swahili Coast—adapted for Comorian *twarab* associations?

singer's first verse. After the verse follows a lengthy chorus section in which everybody joins in, well characterizing the communal character described for early *twarab*. The second verse follows straight after the chorus section without instrumental interlude (as would be common for recorded Swahili *taarab*). Due to the time limit of the 78rpm the selection ends abruptly towards the end of the second chorus section.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF TWARAB (1940S-1960S)

Twarab continued to flourish in Moroni and the towns of Ngazija. The late 1930s saw the formation of two important associations in the old town center of Moroni, one called al-Jaddid, the other Ouladil Watwan. The latter featured the revered Sharif Yahaya, and the important singer Saïd Tourqui. Maabadi Mzee also joined Ouladil Watwan as a young man in 1948. By the 1960s, he had become one of the leading singers and composers of *twarab* sung in the local language Shingazija. Al-Jaddid featured Darwesh Kassim, Bwana Bacar, Ali Mohamed Sultan, Ali wa Saidi, Burhan Saïd Alawy. A third music association existed as well named Ikhwan el-Huda, yet it did not play *twarab* but specialized in *madjlis*⁹. All the associations were located in the Madjeneni quarter just above Mtsangani in the old center of town.

The period between the late 1930s and the early 1950s also saw the expansion of the orchestras to include, in addition to the standard violin *'ud*, *msondo* and *duf*: the *nai* (bamboo-flute), accordion, and cello, plus a violin section of up to three players. The typical *twarab* orchestra of the time featured about 7-8 instruments, played by the association's members in turn. These later instrumental additions were inspired by the growth of *taarab* ensembles on the Swahili Coast, like the Egyptian and Al Watan Musical Clubs in Dar es Salaam, or Ikhwani Safaa in Zanzibar, and the general influence of the Egyptian *firqab*, via recordings and sound films. Most practitioners maintain though, that the Egyptian inspiration was rarely a direct one. The Egyptian films of the likes of Mohamed Abdel Wahhab or Umm Kulthum were not shown in Comorian cinemas; moreover the main musical orientation was pointed towards developments in Zanzibar and the East Coast in general.

In ca. 1950 when some of the older members of Jaddid retired a new association was formed by the name of Jeunesse de Moroni: Athman Ibrahim violin (later accordion), Mzé Abdallah Haj violin, *'ud*, *msondo*; Bwana Bacari violin, Darwesh Kassim *'ud*, Soule Hassan, Burhani, Ali wa Saidi were among the founders. Over time former members of Ouladil Watwan like

⁹ The *madjlis* is a men's gathering, also on the occasion of a wedding. It has generally religious overtones and features the performance of songs in the *qasida* or *mawlid* vein, accompanied by *matari* "frame drums" (cf. also Jaffar 1988).

Maabadi Mzee, and newcomers like the singer Saïd Mohamed Taanshik joined the group. In Irungudjani, another of the older quarters of Moroni two further *twarab* associations existed, called Ntiliba and Magumsese (or Raha Lewo). One of the most famous Comorian singers of the 1950s Moindjie Tabibou, alias Mbarouk, was an early member of Ntiliba.

Like Moroni's quarters, all towns on Ngazidja featured one or two rival *twarab* associations: Ntsudjini's major *twarab* association was called Unzil Mahboub. On his return from East Africa in 1955, Saïd Seleman Mdjiviza joined it. With the knowledge acquired during his residency in Dar es Salaam he trained the club's musicians. At one point the orchestra featured 7 violins, *'ud*, *qanun*, *tashkota*, *nai*, clarinet, and percussion. The group won a national *twarab* contest in 1964, but the association died in the late 1960s when it was banned for political reasons. A second club existed throughout the 1960s called Atome. We have already heard of Mohamed Hassan who started a musical group in Ntsaoueni in the 1940s. Like many others on the island, he called it Ikhwan Safa, after the model of Zanzibar's leading club of the time. Hassan's group was comprised only of violin, *'ud* and percussion and on the whole seemed to depend very much on his expertise and talent. An important singer from Mitsamihouli, the island's second largest town, was Kolé Moindzé; in Mbeni on the east coast Abdou Marchal led a club also called Ikhwan Safa. In the course of time *twarab* clubs appeared in all the villages on the island.

The *kilabu*, the club structure, was a most important element of the world of Comorian *twarab*, and a performance at the *anda* or "grand mariage" not possible without its presence and the gamut of its officers. The social organization of clubs can be distinguished in two models characterized as "modernist" and "traditionalist". The urban clubs, like the ones described for Moroni, are examples of the first, with membership not associated to local social hierarchies or age grades. Traditionalist organization is the system that is usually followed in the villages or smaller towns where the club structure is an expression of the local complex of age grades and linked status groups (cf. Chouzour 1994:155ff).

Illustration 2: Asmumo (Association Musicale de Moroni)

The association's president is called *adisipu* (derived from Fr. "Administrateur Supérieur", abbreviated: "Adsup"). Second in line is the *kumsera* (Fr. "commissaire"), responsible for the smooth operation of a *twarab* concert. The *kumsera* is not necessarily a musician or the bandmaster, the latter function is taken over by the *shefmizisye* (Fr. "chef musicien"). Besides being the leader at rehearsals and on stage, the duties of the *shefmizisye* include the responsibility for the equipment (instruments, amplification, etc.). The club council can total up to 12 members with a

number of additional positions like commissioner, cashier, accountant, etc. (Cheikh 1988: 17ff). A *twarab* concert of the time may be described as follows:

Le soir venu, la place est archicomble. C'est l'enthousiasme et l'impatience qui lisent dans les yeux de tous. Malheureusement, le concert ne peut pas commencer : les membres du comité directeur ne sont pas encore sur place.

Après un long moment d'attente un clairon annonce l'arrivée des membres du comité directeur. Le silence se fait ensuite. Tout le monde se met debout et une haie d'honneur se forme devant l'entrée principale pour l'accueil.

L'Adisipu dans sa tenue blanche aux épaulettes garnies de " galons ", encadré par le kumsera et le shefmizisyé, suivi par une cohorte chantante et colorée des femmes, fait son entrée sur le lieu. Et c'est alors que tous les participants entonnent une " hymne ".

Les honneurs ainsi rendus, l'Adisipu est conduit à sa place d'honneur et le concert peut désormais commencer. [...]

Le Twarab commence par un bashrafi. Après deux ou trois chansons arabes, c'est le anleli¹⁰ qui annonce le repas et durera le temps du service. Après celui-ci, les vieux et les vieilles rentrent dormir : la deuxième partie c'est pour les jeunes et les moins jeunes.

La deuxième partie débute par le traditionnel bashrafi suivi d'une chanson arabe. Le reste du programme est rempli par des chansons swahilies. Le rideau tombe avec l'appel du muezzin. Après la prière, les moins jeunes rentrent dormir : la troisième et dernière partie est l'affaire des jeunes.

Après le bashrafi d'ouverture, les chansons se suivent pêle-mêle, question de veiller...

(Cheikh 1988:26-28)

Cheikh links the appearance in the performance of the *bashrafi* — meaning either " an instrumental piece played as introduction to the performance ", or " an instrumental introduction to a song " — to the general pattern of the wedding performance in which all participants can ask for permission to sing a verse as solo singers.

Le Twarab était l'affaire de Monsieur tout le monde. Pour intervenir dans une chanson en cours, il vous suffit de lever la main pour que le kumsera vous autorise à chanter un couplet. (Cheikh 1988:32)

The instrumental introduction to songs and the instrumental interludes gave the singers the possibilities to get in tune with the proceedings and also allowed enough time for the segue from one vocalist to the other. But what about the contents of the songs in this sort of setting? And how would we have to imagine the use of " foreign " languages like Swahili and Arabic under such circumstances?

10 From Ar. *ya leil* ('the night') a frequent allusion and at the same time emotional interjection in song poetry. Here it means a vocal improvisation with instrumental accompaniment. (cf. Mohamed Hassan " Ya leil ", track 9 on *Duniya*, Dizim 4507).

Both Arabic and Swahili (written in an adapted Arabic script) were the dominant languages of written discourse until the mid-20th century. Archives hold manuscripts of town and family chronicles both in Swahili and Arabic, treaties, commercial accounts and correspondence in these languages; Arabic of course was and is also the language of religion and legal discourse.¹¹ We do not know, however, about the actual use of these languages in everyday discourse, nor for instance about the “Swahili” used in song. Moreover, confusion characterizes many linguistic observations on the Comorian languages, which have been variously classified as Swahili dialects, or as independent languages. Yet the Swahili specialist Sacleux had already recognized the dual character of language use on the Comoros at the beginning of the 20th Century. He distinguished between a Swahili dialect spoken on the Islands — what he named *Kingazidja* — and a popular language widely spoken all over, *Shingazija*:

Le *kingazidya*, un dialecte swahili assez peu différent du *kiungudya*, le dialecte de Zanzibar, est la langue officielle des trois Îles les plus au nord de l'archipel ... Mais la langue populaire [ingazidya] de ces mêmes Îles se présente avec une allure très particulière, qui en fait un idiome distinct, quoique appartenant, comme le swahili, à la grande famille bantoue. (Sacleux 1979:23)

Thus a Comorian version of Swahili (=Kingazidja) would be the language of choice in urban areas, expressive of a certain “snobbism”, this would also be used for literary discourse or poetry.

Chanter en Swahili était un idéal pour les chanteurs comoriens de l'époque. Ainsi, hormis les régions rurales qui étaient demeuré à l'écart de cette civilisation côtière, la prédominance du Swahili dans les relations sociales et dans la vie quotidienne avaient été un phénomène quasi général. (Moussa Said 1986:6)

Thus the use of Swahili in *twarab* would not be a simple borrowing of some imported song lyrics, hardly understood by the public, but be expressive of and reinforcing ideal and urbane language use. In this *twarab* is not without predecessors on the Comoros, as other genres, historical and contemporary ones, have made and make use Swahili lyrics, like *lelemama*, or the *gabusi* still found in Ndzwani (cf. below). Swahili understood not as a foreign language, but as a local variant in use, would also clear some doubt as to the possibility of everybody joining in as a lead singer. *Twarab* is known to feature specially prepared or improvised praise songs on the families to be wedded. This could also be achieved in a distinguished language, but to make sense it would have to be well understood by all present.

¹¹ A number of historical manuscripts from the Comoros and their sources are discussed in Allibert (1984).

The feature of having a string of singers on different verses of a tune lead to multiple themes and topics in delivery. Songs did therefore not have a single topic but were multifacetous. The *twarab* songs featuring a singular topic emerged only by the end of the 1950s at the same time as the first lyrics in Shingazija. Champions of this development were singers like Maabadi Mzee, Mbarouk, Taanshik, or Mohamed Hassan.

All the elder musicians I spoke to attributed the impulse to compose songs in the local language to the initiative of Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, then the leading figure in Comorian politics. Cheikh, a member of a local elite family from Mitsamihouli, was an ardent fighter for more political independence from France, yet also a traditionalist. He urged the *twarab* singers not to sing in “foreign” languages but to use the local language Shingazija in order to reach a wider public. Possibly this move was also to give more strength to his political arguments for more independence and a political culture based on local norms.

According to Maabadi Mzee, then Jeunesse de Moroni's leading singer and composer, Cheikh even enlisted the help to the poets and literary specialists Kamar Eddine and Saïd Tohir, so that they would learn to compose songs in Shingazija, which were close in form and poeticity to the earlier Swahili ones. Both helped the singers to polish their lyrics in the local language and Kamar Eddine even developed a writing system for Shingazija based on the Arabic alphabet, similar to the one used for Swahili at the time.

Older singers like Mohamed Hassan still use this system of writing. From the transcript of “Mri Uwalao” (“The flowering tree”) we can also notice that Comorian *twarab* of the 1960s closely followed the formal properties of classical Swahili poetry.

Illustration 3 [Song text in Shingazija Arabic Script]

Caption: “Mri Uwalao”, excerpt from the songbook of Mohamed Hassan

Mri riwalao mwema udjisao	Chorus
Upashiye ndavu na marunda tamu	
Na tamani mkuu pvo riyapvunao	

*The tree that we have planted is beautiful and flowering
Full of branches and savory fruits
Of great value when we harvest from it.*

Mngu mwenye enzi	ndjema ndo randzao
Uripve walezi	wema walelao
Wake wara ndazi	ena rizandzao

*God Almighty, it is this favor that we ask
Let us have good parents, good educators
That they may be our counselors for all that we crave for.*

Mngu ripve heri	dua ndo riombao
Ripuwe na shari	usoni rendao
Yezilo na kheri	ndizo rizandzao

*God Almighty, give us luck, we beg you in this prayer
Save us from misfortune now and in the future
All that is good, this is what we ask for.*

Excepting the chorus, which does not necessarily have to correspond to the same formal properties as the verses, we find that Mohamed Hassan's song follows the same formal properties as an East African *taarab* song in the Swahili language. Thus we find regular verses of three lines, and a line structure with a fixed number of syllables (here it's 6 by 6) and with internal and final rhyme:

M-n <u>g</u> u mwe-nye en- <u>z</u> i	ndje-ma ndo ra-ndza- <u>o</u>
U-ri-pve wa-le- <u>z</u> i	we-ma wa-le-la- <u>o</u>
Wa-ke wa-ra nda- <u>z</u> i	e-na ri-za-ndza- <u>o</u> .

Mohamed Saïd Shakir's "Ufitina na Uzidi", one of the big hits in Comorian *twarab* in the 1960s, adapted the theme and story of well-known Zanzibari song of the time, "Mpenzi wangu hawezi", sung by Mohamed Ahmed in Zanzibar:

Mwenzenu nauguliwa	siupati usingizi
Ijapo kula haluwa	wali kwa nyama ya mbuzi
Nikumbuka nauguwa	tumbo langu la pumzi

Kama maradhi iyapowe kipenzi changu hirizi
Duwa yangu naipae isifike hata mwezi
Na awachwe na mumewe likome jambo la mwizi

Mpenzi wangu hawezi naudhika simuoni¹²

*My friends, I am sick, I cannot sleep
Even though I have eaten sweets, rice and goat's meat
When I think about it I turn sick, there is nothing but air in my stomach*

*This illness, I want it to disappear, my lover, and my charm
I pray that it may not last more than a month
That her husband may leave her, so that these games will come to an end.*

My beloved cannot come, I am ill, I cannot see her.

And the Comorian version by Mohamed Saïd Shakir:

Mashaka yanidjiliya, mwanzani hatrilwa ndani
Miwango habaliliwa hamu ngiyo ho rohani
Mwanzani hatsatsaziwa hari ngasi mahabani

Tsibaki na uloleya ye zahangu ne mwanzani
Henisa na yesheleya roho ngeko taabani
Tsi leo zinidjiriya ngizo djamna shabani.

Ufitina na uzidi mwambe za tsu mhusuni

*I've got problems, my lover has been locked inside the house
The doors are firmly closed, I am much worried
My companion has been caught, because we love one another.*

*When I think about the plans I had with my companion
And every time I think about
What has happened to us, my soul is in anguish.*

Just continue your babble and talking about things that do not concern you.

As we can see the Comorian version of the song is not just a translation of the Zanzibari song, but also a creative adaptation of the general topic of the song. In fact, it is much more to the point in linking its story to the chorus line of the Zanzibari song. Again the structure is regular and follows the Swahili conventions for poetry:

¹² Mohamed Ahmed & Ikhwani Safaa Musical Club "Mpenzi wangu hawezi". Recorded by Radio Zanzibar, early 1960s.

Ma-sha-ka ya-ni-dji-li-ya	mwa-ndza-ni ha-tril-wa nda-ni
Mi-wa-ngo ha-ba-li-li-wa	ha-mu ngi-yo ho ro-ho-ni
Mwa-ndza-ni ha-tsa-tsa-zi-wa	ha-ri nga-si ma-ha-ba-ni

The song by Mohamed Saïd Shakir not only dwelt on the theme of the Swahili song, but used the melody as well. Actually the melody dates back even further. The first known recording of it is by Mbaruk Effendi from Mombasa who recorded the song “Tausi kwa heri sana” in the late 1920s.¹³ The melody is said to originate from Lamu, where Mbaruk Effendi picked it up in the early 1900s. It was very popular in Zanzibar in the late 1920s and 30s and features on a number of other recordings, with different lyrics.¹⁴ It is most probable that these songs and the melody were also taken over on Ngazija at the time and that “Ufitina” constituted a revival of an earlier version of the music, probably sung from the 1930s onwards.

The recording of “Ufitina” in the archives of Radio Comores, is also a good example of small group *twarab* as practiced at the time in the 1960s. The foregrounded melodic instrument is the accordion, covered most of the time by a violin. The rhythmic momentum is generated by the *'ud*, accompanied by the *msondo*. The song's form is quite regular: Short *basbrafi* introduction, 1st verse, chorus, instrumental interlude, 2nd verse, chorus, etc. In the absence of recordings prior to 1960, and with the few remaining samples at hand, this piece and a number of songs that Mohamed Hassan recorded during a visit to Majunga (Madagascar) in 1969 must suffice to characterize the early Comorian style. The recordings by Mohamed Hassan feature violin, *'ud*, and *msondo*. The songs start with either a *taqsim* by Mohamed Hassan's *'ud*, or a short instrumental intro carried by *'ud* and percussion, and then segue into the first verse. The chorus or refrain follows, next a short instrumental interlude, later verse two, and so forth. A recording made by Hassan for the radio in Moroni, probably in the early 1970s, features accordion and congas in addition to the instruments just described.

The only extant recordings of larger scale orchestral *twarab*, representative of the sound of associations like Jeunesse de Moroni, already marked the end of an era. In 1969 an itinerant French team recorded and released four songs by Asmumo, a successor organization to Jeunesse.¹⁵ According to participants in the session, the group had got a new drum set just days before the recording session. In order to show that one was *à la mode* it was decided to include the new sound despite a lack of rehearsal.¹⁶ The recording thus shows the old instrumentarium juxtaposed against the new drum set. Thus we have long introductory *basbrafi* to the songs, violins in

13 Mbaruku. *Tausi kwa heri sana*. One 78rpm shellac disc. London: Columbia, n.d. WE 19.

14 Maalim Shaaban. *Udasbi*. One 78rpm shellac disc. Calcutta: HMV, n.d. P 13326.

15 The recording in question is *Chants des Comores*, Le Kiosque d'Orphée, KO/IIS.

16 Conversation with Mzé Abdallah Haj and Abdallah Chihabi, Moroni, September 2001.

unison, the accordion usually playing in unison with the violins, the *'ud* rhythmically foregrounded. Percussion is left solely to the drum set, sometimes augmented by maracas. The structure is the same as in small group *twarab*, i.e. instrumental introductions, 1st verse, chorus, instrumental interlude, 2nd verse and chorus, etc. It is interesting to note that the disc classifies the recordings as “Swahili songs”, despite their being sung in Shingazija. Featured singers are Maabadi Mzee and Yusuf Abdulhalik.

If we take the original designation of the *twarab* genre, *fidrilia*, as a measure, it was the sound of this bowed string instrument that very much caught the local imagination and it stood in for the whole genre. The recording by Asmumo, with the uneasy juxtaposition of the force of the drum set against the vulnerable strings, vigorously announces a new paradigm, and points towards the future directions in Comorian music.

1968-1975: MSHAGO AND MABOTO

Change was in the air in the late 1960s, not just for *twarab*. A student strike took place in the early months of 1968; the first and second generation of political leaders came under increased pressure from a younger and more educated class that pressed for complete independence.¹⁷ A rift occurred within Jeunesse de Moroni, with one faction registering itself as As.Mu.Mo (Association Musicale de Moroni), the other slightly later as Ouladil Comores. Here too, divergent political affiliation may have been the reason behind the division, but within both groupings younger members pushed for a general change of style.

Le *msbago*, concert musical, avait lieu le samedi soir dans l'ensemble des villages de la Grande Comore. Il entrait dans le cadre des festivités villageoises liées au *ndola nkuvu* ou grand mariage. Là aussi les jeunes occupaient une place de choix. Ils assuraient l'ensemble de l'animation et en profitaient pour se faire entendre. Le *msbago* était une innovation de leur part et exprimait bien leurs soucis de vouloir se distinguer des traditionalistes et créer un nouvel art. (Said 1990:66)

Musically speaking the introduction of the drum set may have been the paradigmatic case. Other instruments (like organ and electric guitar) and fashions were to follow. The outward sign of the “nouvelle vague” was the so-called *boto* craze, introduced by students coming back from Madagascar:

Boto (pluriel *maboto*) était le terme utilisé à l'époque par la plupart des Comoriens pour désigner le jeune homme “qui suit son temps”. Il serait dérivé du malgache *butu* qui signifiait à Madagascar jeune homme élégant épris de mode et de fantaisie. Le jeune *boto* était d'une part reconnu par son comportement vestimentaire et par sa contestation

¹⁷ This is not the place to discuss the political developments of the time in detail. For a succinct summary cf. Ibrahim 2000.

quasi-permanente de l'autorité parentale et à travers elle, l'ordre social traditionnel, d'autre part. (Said 1990:67)

The new fashion came under immediate critique from the *twarab* establishment. Saïd Mohamed Taanshik, one of the most cherished composers of *twarab* songs since the late 1950s, in “ Matso ” (“ Eyes ”) saw the new fashion behavior of the youth as leading towards a complete moral disintegration of the society of believers:

Levons-nous pour donner des solutions
Pour que Dieu nous rende la paix
Ne négligeons pas ce qui se passe dans nos maisons
Des jeunes filles nues se promènent dans la rue¹⁸
Que Dieu réserve à ses fidèles une belle fin en ce monde
Les jeunes gens transgresseurs, avec leurs colliers autour du cou
Privent les jeunes filles du charme de la poitrine ... (Said 1990:68)

“ Trama ” (“ Maize ”), a recording by a village association from Uhozi best characterizes the new-style *twarab* and the new direction generated by the drum set: Endless drum rolls punctuate the introduction played by two violins (possibly electrically amplified) and a barely audible accordion. The drummer then pushes the vocals and chorus into a delivery that owes more to *ngoma* than to the typical laid-back style of Comorian *twarab*. The same goes for the development of new dance styles, which partly of foreign inspiration rapidly turn into expressions of local bodily sensibility and an orchestration of space akin to *ngoma* like the *sambe*:

[...] au début des années 70, on adopte le jerk. Tout en dansant le jerk (double pas à droite puis à gauche), les danseurs et danseuses forment un cercle, tournoient autour du *bangwe* à l'instar du *sambe*. Cette danse ainsi inventée devient le *mbili-mbili* (lit. deux-deux). ... Et le fameux *trende ba ridungwa* (avance car on nous poursuit) n'est autre que le jerk à un pas de droite et un pas à gauche mais d'une façon saccadée. (Cheikh 1988:28-29)

Hassan Bounou and Asmumo offer a fine example of the schizophrenic situation *twarab* found itself at the time. For the song “ Poleti ” (rec. in 1968 for Radio Comores) Asmumo dispensed with its arsenal of string instruments, *'ud* and the general *twarab* character and delivered a Latinate pop song based on electric guitar, conga and percussion. The lyrics oscillate between harsh critique and a kind of admiration for the new times and fashion, the latter interpretation not least accentuated by the new type of musical accompaniment:

Elle se pavane et marche en se dandinant
Dans la rue elle avance remplie d'elle-même

18 The allusion here is to girls who do not cover their head with a shawl when in public.

Elle croit que la vie n'a pas de fin
Prends garde à toi, Poleti.

Elle est passée à toute vitesse en camionnette
Elle se rengorge, elle a mis un short
Vraiment elle se pavane, elle porte aussi une chemise
On dit qu'elle s'appelle Poleti.

O ma belle ne suis pas la mode
Et n'imites pas la démarche de Poleti
Ne va pas à la guinguette ... (Said 1984:177)

1975-1978: THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE MUSIC SCENE

Twarab came under severe pressure under the revolutionary government of Ali Soilih. Because of its supposed association with the old elites and the old bureaucracy *twarab* was not popular with the Soilih administration. The possibilities of association were severely inhibited, many of the older musicians stopped performing, numerous *twarab* recordings disappeared from the archives of Radio Comores at the time and were destroyed.¹⁹ Only two orchestras were allowed to continue operating under the designation “orchestre” and were subsequently elevated to the rank of national orchestras. Maybe it was symptomatic that Orchestra Joujou from Wani/Ndzwani Island, which had not played *twarab*, previously, was elevated to the rank of a national *twarab* orchestra, while Ouladil Comores was to play as national dance orchestra. All other groups were of lesser status and only allowed the label “groupe musicale”. Most village *twarab* clubs continued to operate on this basis.

Nevertheless, the second half of the 1970s was the time of *twarab* lyrics for a national cause. Hiyari Nour from Ndrouani village south of Moroni became one of the leading groups with popular nationalist songs like “Rwahamane” or “Mahore Karijala”, and also with their integration of acoustic instruments like *'ud* and violin in an otherwise quite modern electric set-up.²⁰

19 Conversation with Mohamed Hassan, Ntsaoueni November 1998 and personal experience at Radio Comores, Moroni.

20 Hiyari Nour's “Rwahamane” was re-recorded for international release in 1999 (track 5 on *Sambe-Comores*; Dizim 4508); “Mahore Karijala” was also recorded at the same session but remains unreleased as of this date. The lyrics for “Mahore Karijala” can be found in Moussa Said 1984:128.

TWARAB ON NDZWANI

In the big towns of Ndzwani (Anjouan) early *twarab* took a trajectory similar to developments on Ngazija. Small groups, composed of violin, *'ud*, *msondro* and *duf* are remembered to have existed in Domoni, Mutsamudu and Wani since the early decades of the 20th Century.²¹

In Mutsamudu, Ndzwani's largest city, the first orchestra/association to be formed was Saïf el-Watwane, founded in 1955. Original club members were Saïd Mohamed Nadhir, Saïd Mohamed Johar, Maulid Ben Ali, and Salim Abdallah. Instruments played included violins, *'ud*, mandolin, and percussion. In 1960s the club's second president Saïd Mohamed Johar bought an accordion. Saïd Omar Saïd Ali Foidjou joined the orchestra in the late 1950s. Throughout the 1960s he became the group's second bandmaster and the main singer/composer. His songs like "Djamila", "Sikitriko", "Mola" are remembered with affection and are still in the orchestra's book until today.²² A second club existed in Mutsamudu in the 1960s, by the name of Nour al-Zaman.

In both Mutsamudu and Wani there was a tradition of all female *twarab* clubs with the women accompanying themselves on small percussion instruments. Initially they sang Swahili *taarab* songs originating from the East Coast and Zanzibar, songs transmitted orally by travelers or copied from 78rpm records. These clubs date back at least to the 1950s.

The image of these women's clubs may have been influential in the formation of Ndzwani's and the Comoros' first all-female *twarab* band, Mahabouba el-Watwan. As Aziza Ahmed one of the club's founder members and current president explains, the group was first founded as a women's mutual aid society. In the 1960s they used to play *tari* at weddings in order to raise money for some of their objectives. However, earlier on, when she was about 16 or 17 she had already picked up her grandfather's violin and learned to play it. She encouraged her fellow club members also to learn to play musical instruments. They started to play *twarab* in private, and then formed an official group in 1978, the aforementioned Mahabouba el-Watwan, with much success. Original instruments were violin, accordion, organ, etc. In the 1980s the group picked up the guitar and bass guitar, drum set and conga. A new generation has taken over recently and a performance I witnessed in 1999 featured three Casio keyboards, bass guitar, drum set and congas.

21 This section is based on conversations with Nunu Afane, Domoni August 2001; Ibrahim Hamza, Wani July 1999 and August 2001; Jaffar Salim Mvoura, Mutsamudu, August 2001, Aziza Ahmed Mutsamudu August 2001. Because of the pertaining political situation visits to Ndzwani had to be limited to two short intervals in 1999 and 2001.

22 Saïf el-Watwane recently re-recorded some of these songs for release on CD (cf. Discography). S.O. Foidjou moved to Moroni in the 1970s where he formed the group Nour el-Jazaïr. Songs by Foidjou with both groups are featured on a recent commemorative release edited by his children.

Likewise, a second all-women *twarab* group was formed in Mutsamudu, by the name of Twama.

In Domoni, the second largest town on the island, in 1960 ADP (Association de Domoni pour le Progrès) was formed with a music and arts section called “Domoni S Bande”. The first instruments were the accustomed *'ud*, violin, and *msondo*, the French administrator of the region offered an accordion. In 1967 the name was changed to Asmine Bande, the band played *twarab* exclusively. A number of instruments were added over the next few years, saxophone, organ, bass guitar. In 1969 some members left Asmine to form a rival group called Mahabou. Both continued to play *twarab* exclusively until the second half of the 1970s.

A radical shift in musical perspective occurred in the second half of the 1970s. With the ban on the exaggerated expenses of the traditional *grand mariage* celebrations by the Ali Soilih regime the musicians had lost their major source of income. The resettlement in Domoni of a large contingent of the so-called “Sabenas” — Comorians fleeing the ethnic massacres in Majunga in Northwestern Madagascar — changed the outlook of the local population. The Sabenas re-popularized the *wadaba* a traditional female dance well described in the following way:

To the accompaniment of singing and the rhythmic banging of a half of a coconut shell on a grinding stone, twelve women circle one large, wooden mortar using three large, wooden pestles to pound aromatic flowers. Three of the women begin by each taking a pestle in hand. One after the other, the women pound the flowers in the mortar with a single hard thrust down with the pestle, then throw the pestle into the air, and step aside. Three other women step in from the previous women's left, catch the pestles, and repeat the pounding, throwing, and stepping aside. Throughout the dance, the group of twelve women circles the mortar in a counterclockwise direction thus returning the original three women to the place where they can again catch, pound, and throw the pestles in rhythm with the percussive and vocal accompaniment. Women along the sidelines sing, dance with each other, observe, and can, with a slight tap on the shoulder, replace one of the women pounding the flowers. (Ottenheimer 1985:65)

However the accompaniment was now changed from the spare percussion to include a full-fledged band, featuring 2-3 electric guitars, keyboard, bass guitar, drum set, congas, and percussion. Asmine and Mahabou both specialized in this new sound, playing the slower *wadaba* for women's wedding celebrations, and the faster *mgodro*—also a traditional form known before, but probably of Malagasy origin. The latter is played for the *rumbu* spirit possession dance as well as for the *mrengué*, a boxing match. In the last mentioned case the rhythm becomes even faster and more inciting.

The fast *mgodro* style may offer some clues as to the inspiration for these guitar bands and their playing style. This dance/rhythm is also largely popular

in Mahore (Mayotte); there the featured melody instruments are usually the *gabusi* (5-stringed lute) or the *ndz̄endz̄e* (a box-zither derived from the Malagasy *marovany*). A number of the Mahore groups show name references to East Africa, one calls itself Chirati Djazz, a direct reference to a well-known Western-Kenyan *benga* band. The Domoni *mgodro* and Kenyan *benga* are roughly compatible in terms of instrumentation and style. *Benga* was largely popular in East, Central and Southern Africa in the 1970s, played by all the continental radio stations, and widely distributed on 45rpm singles. Ian Anderson reports a similar fast guitar style from Northern Madagascar, and Julien Mallet, speaks of the influences that radio broadcasts from South Africa and Mozambique (probably also featuring *benga* at the time) had on the development of *tsapik* music played in the south west of Madagascar.²³

Domoni—with the bands Asmine, Mahabou and Ulanga—continues to be the major center of the electric versions of both *mgodro* and *wadaba*. Their style has become the major popular music form of the island. These three bands play functions all over the isle and make frequent visits to Mahore as well. More than with *twarab*, Ndzwani's is now identified as the island of *wadaba* and *mgodro* in the Comorian musical imaginary.

One reason possibly, that—with the exception of Mutsamudu— *twarab* was never seen as essential on Ndzwani, is the existence of a very ancient form, which in its character is not unlike *twarab*, and after its major instrument is called *gabusi*. On the Comoros the *gabusi* is a five-stringed lute (two double courses and one single course). This family of lutes, with supposed origins in the Hijaz or in Yemen, spread all around the Indian Ocean from Yemen, the East African coast, to Malaysia and Indonesia. In Domoni and Sima two small double-headed drums called *dori* and *mshindrio* accompany the *gabusi*. The *gabusi* is a very ancient form, its introduction probably dating back to the 14th Century.²⁴ Songs are in Shindzwani, Arabic and in Swahili. With few exceptions the songs are thought to be very old. The form shows strong resemblance to one existing on the northern Kenya coast until the beginning of the 20th century, likewise accompanying classical poetry. The Ndzwani type of *gabusi* is sometimes called *twarab ya gabusi* to distinguish it from another genre of *gabusi* playing and song, which possibly shows more Malagasy or mainland African characteristics. In the latter case the *gabusi* is accompanied by the *kayamba* (a square-raft idiophone). This style is associated with Mwali, and more specifically also with Mahore; the *gabusi* is not played on Ngazija.²⁵

23 Ian Anderson, personal communication, October 1999; Julien Mallet, personal communication, and infra "Liens sociaux et rapports ville/campagne. Analyse d'une pratique musicale du Sud de Madagascar."

24 Conversation with Inzouddine Ben Said Massondji, Domoni August 1999.

25 In important representative of the latter form of *gabusi* is Boina Riziki from Mwali/Moheli.

THE NEW TWARAB-VARIETE (1980-2000)

Today the only music that works over here is the *twarab*, because the people can play for those *anda* weddings, which are the most important part of the Comorians live ... at that time there is so much money, and the groups of *twarab* can have money from those things, otherwise there is no way to get money from making music...

La musique traditionnelle comme la musique *twarab* était complètement dévisagée par rapport à quand on l'a senti avant. [Le *twarab*] c'est une musique bien populaire, je ne dis pas le contraire, mais je sens qu'il faudrait qu'elle évolue dans toutes ses sens, il ne faut pas qu'il y a un arbre qui donne une branche, il faut qu'il y a assez de branches ... il faut d'un sacrifice artistique, rentrer dedans, se donner tout dedans de pouvoir voir les différents angles de la chose.²⁶

A revival of the old traditions of *anda* and *twarab* had taken place after the fall of the Ali Soilih regime. However, the ostentatious spending had come under severe critique and, by the mid-1980s in Moroni, *twarab* as a wedding entertainment had disappeared completely. People were less willing, or simply no longer able to sustain the ever-increasing sums of money they had to spend so as to not lose face. Thus in the capital, *twarab* has been replaced by the *madjlis*, a more restrained and religiously oriented ceremony. However, *twarab* continues to play an important role in the rural areas. Almost every village still hosts one or two *twarab* associations, which perform solely during the wedding season in July and August.

These circumstances constitute both the strength and the major weakness of *twarab* as a style, a problem well characterized by Maalesh in the introductory citation to this chapter. Strength, because there are chances for performance (if limited in extent) and money to be made for the musicians. Weakness, because throughout the year there are no possibilities for performance. And because the link of the association to the age grade system does not allow for older musicians to continue in music once they have attained a certain age and status. The reservoir of talent is therefore limited to a certain age set and to members of the local community, restraining creativity and musical improvement.

Almost all the village clubs record and release their songs on self-produced and self-marketed cassettes or CDs. The limits on funds and creativity, combined with the available local technology make the output barely attractive outside the home village.²⁷ However, *twarab* has become

Cf. Boina Riziki & Soubi *Chamsi na Mwezji* (Dizim 4503).

²⁶ Conversation with Othman Elyas "Maalesh", Moroni, November 1998. Both quotes in their original language. Maalesh is one among the few international stars of Comorian music.

²⁷ Local studios are usually limited to computerized track- & midi-based recording of electronic

part of the national cultural heritage and as that it has become a Comorian tradition like others: Contemporary musicians draw on *twarab* just like on diverse *ngoma* rhythms or melodies, as a model for their creations.

Thus the current members of Sambeco, third generation in relation to the founders of an association established as Fédération in Mitsamihouli in the 1960s, have created a stir in the 1990s with their unorthodox adaptations of various *ngoma* dances and religious music genres. Their adaptation of the *sambe* Ngazija's best known *ngoma* dance has become so popular, that cassette versions of their recording have largely replaced the actual live performance with drums, when the dance is arranged for wedding celebrations.²⁸ On the other hand religiously minded people have severely criticized Sambeco for their use of rhythms and musical elements that evoke religious ceremonies, like the *zifafa*, or Sufi inspired trance seances.

Illustration 4: Cassette cover Belle Lumière " Umma "

Visiting a local cassette shop during my first passage in Moroni in 1998 the cassette cover depicted in Illustration 4 attracted my attention: So there still are young musicians playing the old-time instruments, I thought, under the impression of a contemporary music scene dominated by synthesizers and drum machines. Yet, like all other contemporary *twarab* recordings Belle Lumière's cassette only featured the usual keyboards, drum machines and electric guitars, *'ud* and violin were nowhere to be heard. The band had the following explanation:

Le groupe Belle Lumière se consacre sur la musique *twarab*, donc c'est une musique arabo-swahili, un peu orientale et swahili, qui se joue lors des manifestations de grands mariages surtout. Donc cette musique que nous consacrons à travailler et d'ailleurs notre première réalisation, se base sur le *twarab*. Avec l'amélioration de l'électronique, donc au lieu d'utiliser l'oud proprement dite, on trouve le son oud sur le synthé. On a voulu montrer, que c'est le son principal qu'on utilise, le violon et le oud, malgré qu'on utilise le synthé, mais on utilise le son de l'oud qui se trouve dans le synthé. On suit le temps ... ces instruments ne sont plus utilisés actuellement, c'est presque rare. On n'a pas voulu perdre cette tradition, c'est pourquoi d'ailleurs qu'on a commandé un synthé purement arabe, c'est justement pour préserver cette tradition qui vient de disparaître peu à peu.²⁹

In Batsa village I was shown a video of a wedding performance by the local *twarab* association. On a longer shot I spotted an *'ud* player front stage

instruments like synth and drum machines and do not have the facilities to directly record larger or acoustic ensembles.

28 " Sambe " on *Sambe-Comores* (Dizim 4508).

29 Conversation with Moussa Ahmed, Mapvinguni, August 1999.

to the left. But the *'ud* was nowhere to be heard, surely drowned out by the otherwise all-electric band, or so I thought. Later on the video showed player and instrument in close-up: The performer was a 10-12 year old boy, hardly to be seen behind the *'ud*. He was fully dressed up in dark suit and red fez. He mimed playing the instrument, the *'ud* had no strings, however!

CONCLUSION

L'impact des partages coloniaux qui se perpétue par des divisions politiques et économiques sur la base des États modernes contraste dans notre sous région avec une unité culturelle partout manifeste. Cette culture, élaborée par une société maritime unique constituée sur la côte est africaine et les îles voisines... a déterminé une aire géographique spécifique rattachant les rives de l'Océan Indien à celles des Grands Lacs. (Damir Ben Ali, 1984)

The 20th Century adoption and adaptation of *twarab* into Comorian cultural practice is a positive example of the cultural unity between the Swahili Coast and the Comorian archipelago evoked by Damir. It shows well how such syntheses may have worked in past centuries—i.e. the movement of cultural artifacts, customs, ideas via trade and migration—and it reveals how long-term cultural relationships and orientations shape perception and everyday practice.

Despite the different colonial legacies in the area and the increasing might of global media we witness the continuation or emergence of intermediary regional subsets. The musical cultures of *taarab/twarab* are such a set, but there are also new genres in the making, as we have seen in the examples from Ndzwani, which show divergent trends and reorientations. For the Comorians in the diaspora of Majunga, the *wadaba* had taken on another, stronger significance than back on the Islands. Thus they were instrumental in its revival on their return, albeit in much changed and modernized context. The development and popularity of electric *wadaba* and *mgodro* also points towards a more general trend in the area, an increased esthetic orientation towards the African Continent, towards new places of work, emigration, and trade. These developments, which are the result of enlarged mobility within the area and are also an outcome of the extended “media-ization” of musical genres and their spread via radio, discs or cassettes. They work out, however, on a bed of music/cultural exchange that has tied together the region over centuries.

The violin—the instrument and its sound—had caught the Comorian imagination in the early decades of the 20th century and had at first given the name of *fidrilia* to the whole genre. In a similar way the examples of Belle Lumière and the Batsa video — via the sound and image of the violin and *'ud*, as icons in the very sense of the word — show the *twarab* heritage as a valid

expression, at the beginning of the 21st Century, of the cultural history that has linked the Islands to the coastal areas of East Africa, Arabia, and South Asia.

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