Vave is generally defined as a corpus of agricultural songs as they are sung and performed by Bajuni farmers - an ethnic subgroup of the Swahili - on the eve of burning the bush, a stage of slash and burn cultivation. Although the song’s main theme is agriculture and each cultivation step in particular is given attention, an analysis of the aesthetics of Vave from the viewpoint of oral literature unearths the secret and sacred dimension of Vave performance. Death, bereavement, resurrection, and spirituality are, besides agricultural cultivation, the basic aspects of the Vave. Indeed the Vave performance may be more correctly recognised as an ancient religious rite which has ancestral worship as a central issue. Although the worship of ancestors is irreconcilable with the Islamic belief system, Vave is still performed by the Muslim Bajuni farmers today. This essay attempts to outline in which way the ancestors are annually remembered, revived or actualised in the present by Bajuni farmers through the performance of an oral tradition.

As an agricultural people the Bajuni believe in the cyclical structure of time. According to slash and burn cultivation, dried and chopped-off bush is burned down to ashes in March, which results in a cleared field of fertile soil for new cultivation in April, before the rainy season begins in May. The belief that death is inevitably followed by resurrection or that something isn’t truly dead, but continues to exist in a new form derives from an observation of nature, in the same way that reproduction or the sexual act is symbolically similar to agricultural work. In the Vave songs the Bajuni refer to the dry bush as a virgin girl who longs for a husband. Furthermore when the bush is burned, the spectators cheer on the burning by shouting Subo! Subo!, which is a Somali expression for ‘married man’ (Lamberti 1986). Thus the fire extinguishes everything and at the same time turns the thicket to fertile land out of which new and nourishing plants may grow.

This symbolic regeneration which is applied to agriculture is also applied to human life. The human being does not completely vanish with his death, but continues to exist in the form of an ancestral spirit. On the eve of burning the bush the farmers call upon their ancestors to intercede in agricultural matters. Invocational verses are recited not only to petition God for help, but also the prophets and most importantly the ancestors, who as the proprietors for burn and slash cultivation, know their job best.
The following is an excerpt of the prologue to *Vave a kushika mwичu* ‘Chant of seizing the tree’ recited by Mohamed Kale, March 2005/Lamu.

1. *Bisumila chwambe,*  
   *mvumba dhivumbe,*  
   In the name of God,  
   let us speak,  
   Creator of creatures

2. *Iti kaveka,*  
   *kwa dhake baraka,*  
   He laid out the earth,  
   by His bounty,  
   He who works miracles

3. *Buruhani tele,*  
   *zandidha mukele,*  
   An abundance of miracles,  
   they start in Mkalla,  
   do not think they are over,  
   and continue to Aden

4. *Bisumila sama,*  
   *dhifungu na kama,*  
   In the name of God listen,  
   [like] necklaces and torcs,  
   let us say good things,  
   powerful things around the neck

5. *Chwambe bisumila,*  
   *usiku kilala,*  
   Let us say in the name of God,  
   when I sleep at night  
   in the name of the Lord,  
   and the Merciful

6. *Chwambe shela koma,*  
   *na midhimu a nyuma,*  
   Let us mention the chief of ancestors,  
   also the ancestral spirits,  
   we call

7. *Jadi na vakaa iti,*  
   *kina Baba Shali*  
   The lineage of the ancestors of the land,  
   the lineage of Baba Shali  
   preceded us

8. *Shela koma ni Adamu,*  
   *Muhamadi muungamu,*  
   Chief of all ancestors is Adam,  
   Mohamed the confessor,  
   and Moses the scribe,  
   all prophets helped
First was God, the prophets, and the lineages of ancestors, every expert for his work, every wealth comes from millet.
The representation of ancestral spirits by one party is not explicitly announced, but emerges through the *Vave* verses this group has to recite. This respective group is considered as the ‘visitors’ - according to Eliade a kinship term borrowed to describe ancestral spirits who come to visit the present (Eliade 1965).

Each group has a spokesman who usually stands between his two companions. The speakers then respond to each other in alternative sets of verses like these of *Vave a kupandisha ngeni* ‘Chant of welcoming the visitors’ (or *Vave a habari* ‘Chant of news’, *Vave a maghari* ‘Sunset chant’) recited by Bwana Msuo, March 2005/Lamu.

1. *Hamuyambo*,
   *Wake wa urembo,*
   How are you,
   Women of beauty,
   waume wa mwambo?
   uhali gani?
   men of the forest?
   are you of sound health?

2. *Hamuyambo*,
   *Shuwa mbi ji limango,*
   How are you,
   Launch the *mbiji limango* (field-boat),
   mwalojenga jengo?
   shuwar a ni nini?
   constructors of the building?
   what is the intention?

3. *Mboni ku matutu?*
   *kwa kula muchu*
   Why is there a crowd?
   everyone
   Jumu la vachu,
   ametutumia
   A group of people,
   is gathered

4. *Hatuyambo,*
   *wake wa urembo,*
   We are fine,
   we women of beauty,
   waume wa mwambo,
   tusalimini
   we men of the forest,
   we are safe

5. *Hatuyambo,*
   *na dhijana dhechu*
   We are fine,
   and our children
   waume wa mwambo,
   salimini
   we men of the forest,
   are safe

6. *Hatuyambo,*
   *Shuwa mbi ji limango,*
   We are fine,
   Launch the *mbiji limango*,
   chwal ojenga jingo
   shuwar a ni nini?
   we constructors of the building
   what is the intention?

7. *Kwa matutu tumepanga dhicha,*
   *na ambao hucha*
   Communally we arranged for a battle, a war to fight,
   and who is afraid,
   dha kondo kuchech a,
   kesho nasende
   should not go tomorrow

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8. *Kongo ngeni,*
   *huna masikani,*
Welcome guest,
you have no dwelling place,

*uiye iyoni,*
a *nyii wa kukaa*
who arrives in the evening,

Through this challenge-response component of *Vave’s* enactment, in which the two groups are engaged in a verbal exchange and one group takes the role of the ancestral spirits, the ancestors are revived or regenerated to the point that one can interact orally and face-to-face with them in dialogue. This verbal interaction includes several poetic devices which are typical in the day-to-day speech of the Bajuni and which emphasizes the dialogic form of oral interaction between two or more parties. One such poetic device is the regular feature of truncation. Truncation is characterised by the saying of a word only halfway, while the listener is expected to complete the word. This device in oral interaction is used to ensure and test the attention of the listener.

We find an example of this device later in the *Vave* song above:

*Takupa haba* ni ile habari iliyo na kheri,
*Yungwa na Bauri* tutaipambua
I give you ne[ws] that is the news of good fortune,
shall we extinguish

Another example is taken from *Vave* verses recorded by Marehemu Sheikh Yahya and which are published in Farmer and Forest: Bajuni Agricultural Songs (Omar and Donnelly 1987).

*Nimbwene mambo a dali…* I have seen propi(tious) things
*Nimbwene mambo yaliyo dalili* I have seen things which are propitious
*Nimbwene mambo a tama…* I have seen hope(ful) things
*Nimbwene mambo yaliyo tamaa* I have seen things which are hopeful

The truncation of a word, which requires the knowledge of the complete word, can be recognized as a kind of riddle. Indeed the riddle is another popular device in Bajuni speech, and one which is essentially dialogic, as a main characteristic of riddles is the prerequisite of two opposing parties - the challenger and the respondent. The following *Vave* excerpt from *Vave a hesabu* ‘Chant of calculations’ shows how the challenging group sets its riddle verses and how the responding group has to answer (*Vave a hesabu*, recited by Bwana Msuo, March 2005/Lamu).

3. *Subhala heri wayoli,*
   *waungwana hamuyambo?*  
Good morning friends,
how are you civilized people?

4. *Nchi dhivuli dhivili,*
   *kimoya kibula, kimoya suheli*  
A tree with two shadows,
one north, one south

5. *Kambieni cha kibula,*
   *cha suheli kimenena nini?*  
Tell the northern one,
what did the southern one say?
5. Kimenena dhicha cha kibula, cha suheli kimenadi amani
   War, said the one in the north, the southern one proclaimed peace

6. Kimenena kidha cha kibula, cha suheli kimenadi mianga
   Darkness, said the one in the north, the southern one proclaimed brightness

7. Kimenena dhishindo cha kibula, cha suheli kimenadi matwari
   Peal of thunder, said the northern one, the southern one proclaimed rain fall

The puzzle to be solved here is the picture of a tree with two shadows, one shadow pointing north and the other south. The solution is the Swahili/Bajuni year, which is characterized by two contrasting monsoon winds *kusi* and *kaskazi*, each one blowing for exactly six months in the year. The northern shadow proclaiming war, darkness and peals of thunder is the fierce southeast monsoon *kusi*, while the southern shadow is the symbol for the mild northwest monsoon *kaskazi* bringing peace, brightness and the blessed rain.

The vital feature of a riddle is its ‘hidden meaning’ which the responding counterpart must uncover. The intellectual essence of riddles is thus underlined by the metaphorical and the ambiguous. Metaphorical analogy is the most fundamental aspect of a riddle. As we can see from the above excerpt the solution or profound meaning, lying below the surface is not presented in literal terms, but in the same metaphorical manner. The questions set by the challenger concern the Bajuni’s agricultural methods and practices and are embodied in the images of the everyday aspects of life and environment. Consider another excerpt from *Vave a hesabu*.

> Chutatedha kwa nemo,
> kikosa nemo,
> bao la dhishimo,
> vucha nchaji

> We will play with nemo, the board game,
> should I fail to take a nemo, I will use my reserve

*Nemo* or *kete* is a seed and a preferred game piece for the board game *bao la kete*, widely played all over Africa, and usually referred to in English as ‘awari’ or ‘mancala’. The game is characterized by the placement of these pieces into the hollows on the board, taking pieces from the opponent and putting them into one’s own hollows, and if that is not possible, taking pieces from one’s reserve and distributing them to all one’s other hollows. The movement of taking the pieces out of the hollows is reminiscent of the movement of the hands when scooping the earth to form a hollow to plant seeds. On the other hand, the filling of the hollows with the game pieces serves as a metaphor for the agricultural activity of seed planting in particular. If the respondent succeeds in appropriately answering the riddles, his challenger will recognize him as an initiate to the *Vave* tradition and worthy enough to represent the spirits of the ancestors.

To summarise, I venture to say that poetic devices such as truncation, riddles and metaphors help to create a vivid scene in which elders of the present can verbally interact with ancestral spirits in dialogue form.

Several aspects of the *Vave* performance are in accordance with what Eliade enumerates...
as characteristics of periodic New Year’s festivities (Eliade 1965:51f.). Such according characteristics are among others the ‘presence of the dead’, the ‘repetition of archetypal gestures’ and the ‘ritual/ceremonial combat’ between two groups of actors. In a broad sense one could recognize the call-and-response component of Vave’s enactment by two groups as a kind of verbal combat between two parties in accordance with Eliade’s ‘ritual combat’ (Eliade 1965:53f.).

The ‘presence of the dead’ at a Vave occasion is acknowledged by the people involved and is confirmed by the strewing of corn as an offering to the ancestors who inhabit the land which is to be burned. (Corn was also strewn in the rooms of a house at a child’s naming ceremony). That the annually performed Vave festivity might once have been a New Year’s ceremony is also confirmed by a special meal, the kijojo (a kind of sweet rice-bread), which is only cooked on the eve of burning the bush, and by Shela people on Nairuzi - the Persian New Year’s day which is celebrated by some Swahili.

As Eliade states “a dance always imitates an archetypal gesture or commemorates a mythical moment. ... It is a repetition, and consequently a reactualization of illud tempus, ‘those days’.” Further on he says that “at the end of the year in the expectation of the New Year there is a repetition of the mythical moment of the passage from chaos to cosmos” (Eliade 1965:54).

The Vave ceremony incorporates two modes of performances; the above-mentioned recitation of Vave verses by two groups in the call-and-response manner, and a vigorous ritual dance called Randa, in which the two parties of elders reciting Vave join with the remaining male audience to form a circle. While they move around the circle a skilful wordsmith improvises verses, which relate to the current situation and are repeated by the whole group a number of times before the wordsmith casts another verse into the group, which has to be repeated for a while.

The improvised verses may, among other things, mention the names and deeds of the recently deceased. This makes some participants start weeping and enter what might be called a state of mourning, which is regarded as a part of the Vave rite. While the men join in the vigorous dance, the women tap with mangrove bars in a steady rhythm on a mangrove trunk.

The Vave recitations, lasting from dusk till dawn, are interrupted by several of these Randa dance sessions. One could associate these recurring passages from Randa to Vave and Vave to Randa with the repetition of the mythical moment of the passage from chaos to cosmos. The Randa circle in which the ‘living’ dance together with those representing the ‘ancestral spirits’ symbolises chaos, while the recitation of Vave verses in two aligned groups which separate the ‘living’ from the ‘dead’ creates cosmos.

Not only does mentioning the recently deceased lend the Vave and Randa ceremony a solemn touch, but also the style of vocalising the Vave verses. Vave recitations are characterized by a very low (stressed voice) tone and a relatively high pitch. The speed of delivery of a line
or verse starts out slow and accelerates over the course of the recitation. This is accompanied by a fall in pitch in each verse, in which the voice becomes a mumble and tails off at the end of each verse, so that it becomes inaudible, except to a few. As Okpewho explains, when oral literature is delivered at a high speed the emphasis is on “the continual flow of utterances, which need not be linked by any apparent intellectual thread, but which are united by their cumulative emotional effect” (Okpewho 1992: 131). Vave’s melody, which is characterized by wailing and lamentation, recalls elegiac poetry such as dirges.

What I cannot fully describe (nor can it be recreated even with audio-visual recordings) is the powerful sacred, spiritual and transcendent atmosphere, which is particularly created by this style of vocalisation, the mourning participants and the intoxicating scent of incense which is burned on that occasion. The solemn atmosphere one experiences at a Vave performance makes the Bajuni consider Vave to be a dirge. Vave ni kiliyo cha wakulima (‘Vave is the cry of the farmers’) is how my key interviewees Bwana Msuo and Madi Kale defined it.

This essay closes with the tradition of how the Vave originated, as told by marehemu Maalim Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar six years ago:

Very long ago, a man Juta wa Kisimbe Kondo and his son Pandeye went into the forest to cut trees. One day the father told Pandeye to climb on top of the ndachidachi. The ndachidachi was a very big tree and had a lot of bushes, vines and branches surrounding it.

So the boy realised he couldn’t climb that tree and asked his father: “Nipandeye imi hapa la ndachidachi? Maana tini kuna nachi, kachi kuna noka, yiuu kuna noki hunduma vachu. Pandeye imi?” (“How shall I climb the ndachidachi? For at the bottom of the tree there is a Water Buffalo, in the middle there is a snake and at the top there are bees that sting people. How shall I climb it?”)

Thereupon the father answered: “Katunde bunduki umvue nachi, utunde simbo umvue noka, utunde na ntungo umvue noki. Panda kwa mimba ushukile kwa machumbo.” (“Get a gun and shoot the buffalo, get a stick and kill the snake and get a torch and chase the bees. Climb up ‘in pregnancy’ (i.e.; to climb up by using the chest and come down with your belly).”) The water buffalo, the snake and the bees were merely metaphors, for the bush at the bottom of the tree, the vines in the middle and the branches at the treetop.

The boy, however, couldn’t climb the ndachidachi, but his father could. That is why the father climbed the tree. He took a gun and shot the buffalo, then he took a stick and killed the snake and he climbed on the very top, to chase the bees with fire and smoke. Then he lost his footing and fell down into the sharp edge of a cut branch. The father died.

Pandeye wailed about his father’s misfortune and cried out for him in pain: “Yoo vave!” instead of “Yoo babe!”’. This was the occasion when Vave -‘the dirge’, which annually revives our ancestors, was born.
References


