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In memory of marehemu Mwana Amina Harun, marehemu Ba Athmani, marehemu Ahmadi Shee and marehemu Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar

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 mwichu* 'Chant of seizing the tree' recited by Mohamed Kale, March 2005/Lamu.

1. Bisumila chwambe, mungu chumuombe, mvumba dhivumbe, na iti a nane

In the name of God, let us speak, let us entreat God, Creator of creatures

2. Iti kaveka, mbingu kachandika kwa dhake baraka, mwenyi buruhani

He laid out the earth, and spread out heaven, by His bounty, He who works miracles

3. Buruhani tele, sambe zondoshele, zandidha mukele, mpaka adani

An abundance of miracles, do not think they are over, they start in Mkalla, and continue to Aden

4. Bisumila sama, chwambe mambo mema, dhifungu na kama, mavedha shingoni

In the name of God listen, let us say good things, [like] necklaces and torcs, powerful things around the neck

5. Chwambe bisumila, isimu la mola, usiku kilala. isamu la mola,

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 mema, na midhimu a nyuma, chukiankuwa

Let us mention the chief of ancestors, and the good spirits, also the ancestral spirits, we call

7. Jadi na vakaa iti, na vene dhivanda, kina Baba Shali vakichanguliya

The lineage of the ancestors of the land, and the owners of the plots of land the lineage of Baba Shali preceded us

8. Shela koma ni Adamu,
Muhamadi muungamu,
Chief of all ancestors is Adam,
Mohamed the confessor,

na Musa kalamu,
chumwa kachia auni
and Moses the scribe,
all prophets helped

9. Awali Mungu na chumwa, na majadi a vadhee, kula stadi amali, kula mali bishee

First was God, the prophets, every expert for his work, and the lineages of ancestors, every wealth comes from millet

10.Shela koma na midhimu, veneve vali vakee, honde wakilima Hombe, vakinosa Ivumbee

The chief of ancestors and the ancestral spirits, when they once were

(living),

they were cultivating the fields at Hombe, and irrigating the fields of

Ivumbee

From Sacleux's dictionary entry we learn that *shela koma* is an abridged form of *shee la koma* (Sacleux 1939:432 f.). The contraction of *shee* is a kiBajuni variation of *sheikh* (chief) and *koma* according to Sacleux is 'the spirit of the dead'. Thus *shela koma* means 'the chief of ancestors'.

As you may see in line 8, the farmers prefer to regard Adam, Moses and Mohamed as ancestors rather than as remote prophets. Adam is of special importance, as he is considered to have been the first human being to cultivate, but it is the ancestor Baba Shali and his lineage whose agricultural work is exemplary for the Bajuni farmers today.

The different *Vave* songs, which are recited in a specific order on the eve of burning the thicket, do not only recount the perilous obstacles a farmer is likely to encounter in his task of preparing the land, but recall each particular step in the work routine of this slash and burn cultivation. The steps a farmer must take, roughly begin with the consultation of the future (*Vave a saa kumi* 'Afternoon chant'), determining the right season for cultivation (*Vave a hesabu* 'Calculation chant', *Vave a subhala kheri* 'Good morning chant' or *Vave a saa nne za usiku* '10 p.m. chant'), surveying the forest (*Vave a kushika mwichu* 'Chant of seizing the tree'), preparing the bush for the burning (*Vave a kumaliza mwichu* 'Chant of finishing the tree') and so forth.

The details described in the songs on the one hand assist the farmer to re-enact the work routines that his ancestors want him to remember, but most importantly the recitation of each particular step the ancestor took in his work is a repetition- and consequently a reactualization of *illud tempus* 'those old days' in the time of Creation. For instance, the fire for burning the bush is to the present day made by using fire sticks (*mpeketo*), although modern lighters are available and more practical. By the imitation of archetypal gestures and the recitation of verses that manifest ancient farming procedures, the ancestors and their time is annually regenerated or brought to present by *Vave* performers.

Reactualization of the ancestors is not only achieved by reciting the lyrics, but more interestingly also by the songs' dialogic structure and the call and response component of *Vave*'s performance. The performers group themselves into two parties of three men each. The two parties face each other and become engaged in the verbal exchange of *Vave* verses. Both groups consist of elders of the community and one of them takes up the role of the ancestors.

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 magharibi* 'Sunset chant') recited by Bwana Msuo, March 2005/Lamu.

1. Hamuyambo, waume wa mwambo?

Wake wa urembo, uhali gani?

How are you, men of the forest?

Women of beauty, are you of sound health?

2. Hamuyambo, mwalojenga jengo? Shuwa mbiji limango, shuwara ni nini?

How are you, constructors of the building? Launch the *mbiji limango* (field-boat), what is the intention?

3. Mboni ku matutu? Jumu la vachu, kwa kula muchu ametutumia

Why is there a crowd? A group of people, everyone is gathered

4. Hatuyambo, waume wa mwambo,

wake wa urembo, tusalimini

We are fine, we men of the forest, we women of beauty, we are safe

5. Hatuyambo, waume wa mwambo,

na dhijana dhechu salimini

We are fine, we men of the forest,

and our children are safe

6. Hatuyambo, chwalojenga jingo Shuwa mbiji limango, shuwara ni nini?

We are fine, we constructors of the building

Launch the *mbiji limango*, what is the intention?

7. Kwa matutu tumepanga dhicha, dha kondo kuchecha, na ambao hucha kesho nasende

Communally we arranged for a battle, a war to fight,

and who is afraid, should not go tomorrow

8. Kongo ngeni, uiye iyoni, huna masikani, a nyii wa kukaa

Welcome guest, who arrives in the evening,

you have no dwelling place, no town to stay

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,

Yungwa and Bauri, 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, Good morning friends, waungwana hamuyambo? how are you civilized people?

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

5. *Kambieni cha kibula*, Tell the northern one, cha suheli kimenena nini? what did the southern one say?

6. Kimenena dhicha cha kibula, cha suheli kimenadi amani

War, said the one in the north, the southern one proclaimed peace

7. Kimenena kidha cha kibula, cha suheli kimenadi mianga

Darkness, said the one in the north, the southern one proclaimed brightness

8. 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*, should I fail to take a *nemo*,

the board game, 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 ennumerates

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 occassion. 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 yuu 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.

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