

TWARAB YA SHINGAZIDJA: A FIRST APPROACH

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Historically the culture of the Comoro Islands shows a strong relationship to the Swahili culture of the East African coast. Archeology, written and oral history have impressively documented these bonds dating back not less than a thousand years. The appearance of so-called *twarab* in the first decades of the 20th Century once more demonstrated the closeness of this cultural imaginary that links the Comoros to the Swahili world, and beyond to include the predominantly Islamic cultures of the Western Indian Ocean. The paper is a first approach to the history of *twarab* on one island, Ngazidja, until the mid-1960s. It also addresses the question of language use, especially the relationship between East Coast and Comorian varieties of Swahili, and the influence of the Swahili poetic canon on the practice of Ngazidjan poets and singers.

The orthography of names and place names follows Comorian conventions. A distinction is made between 'twarab' and 'taarab', the former is the Comorian rendering and refers to the Comorian style, while the latter designates the East African Coast or Swahili variant.

The Early History of Twarab on Ngazidja

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 Shingazidja [the island's language]. We copied these songs from records that people brought back from their trading visits to Zanzibar.

We did not sing in Shingazidja in the 1950s. All the songs were either in Swahili or Arabic. After I had performed my first Shingazidja 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 language. (Mohamed Hassan, Ntsaoueni, November 1998)

Mohamed Hassan's account of his first contact with "twarab" at the age of 13, and the way it changed his future life as a musician, paints a vivid picture of the 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.

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.

According to most accounts Comorians living in Zanzibar introduced *twarab* to Ngazidja in the first decades of the 20th Century.¹ 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 Shingazidja 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 Ngazidja 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 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

¹ This section is 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; & Cheikh 1988.

Members of the Comorian community in Zanzibar town had founded a musical club by the name of Nadi Shuub in 1908. (For Zanzibar, cf. Graebner 1991; Mgana 1994).

early 1950s.² '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.

Early *twarab* groups featured two melodic instruments only: the violin and the 'ud; plus percussion—what is called *msondo* or *msondo ya mapvadjani* in Shingazidja, a clay *dumbak*, manufactured locally; and *tari* (a small frame drum) or *duf* (tambourine). 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.

Sharif Yahaya is identified as the most celebrated *twarab* instrumentalist of the 1920s and 1930s. 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:

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)

² Mdjiviza is 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).

Fontoynont 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 forms.³

Twarab continued to flourish in Moroni and the towns of Ngazidja. 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 Shingazidja. Al-Jaddid featured Darwesh Kassim, Bwana Bacar, Ali Mohamed Sultan, Ali wa Saidi, and Burhan Saïd Alawy.

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 *firqah*, 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 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.

³ Conversation with Miraj Juma, Mombasa, November 2000; Saïd Nassor, Zanzibar, January 2001.

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. 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 as a singer and composer. In the course of time *twarab* clubs appeared in all the villages on the island.

The history of early *twarab* on Ngazidja shows the closeness in feeling, as well as through regular commercial and cultural contact, between the Comoros and the East Coast. This is especially true for Zanzibar, which has always had a large contingent of residents from Ngazidja, with frequent trade and personal visits.

But what are we to make of the language question? How could it be that for decades Comorian *twarab* songs were sung in Swahili and Arabic, and none in the local languages? This is especially surprising, since in concert anyone could join in as a lead singer and deliver a couplet. For wedding performances special praise songs and eulogies on the participating families are composed, these would hardly be meaningful if composed in languages hardly understood by those present.

Kingazidja or Shingazidja: The question of language use in song

Both Arabic and Swahili (composed 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.⁴ We do not know much, 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, despite never having been on the Comoros, Charles 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 'Kingazidya'—and a popular language widely spoken all over, 'Shingazidya':

⁴ For a discussion of some of the historical sources in Arabic and Swahili cf. Allibert 1984, ch. III; Verin 1994; also the bibliography in Ottenheimer 1994.

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 [*šingazidya*] 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)

Sacleux may have been mistaken in using the designation 'Shingazidya' for the languages of all three islands (Ngazidja, Mwali and Ndzwani), yet he was essentially right in distinguishing these from a Comorian version of Swahili (his 'Kingazidya'): The latter would be the language of choice in urban areas, expressive of a certain "snobbism", and would also be used for literary discourse or poetry, such as *twarab* songs:

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 Saïd 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* was 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.⁵ 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 the songs would have to be well understood by all present.

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 subject matter but were multifacetous. *Twarab* songs featuring a singular topic emerged only by the end of the 1950s at the same time as the first lyrics in Shingazidja. 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 Shingazidja in order to reach a

⁵ The *gabusi* takes its name from the featured instrument, a lute in the family of the *qanbus*, spread all around the Indian Ocean from Yemen to Malaysia/Indonesia, East Africa, the Comoros, and Madagascar. The instrument—under the name of *kinanda*, *kibangala*, or *gambusi*—was widely known and in use on the East African Coast until the early decades of the 20th Century, but has since become obsolete. The *gabusi* on Ndzwani is taken to be a very ancient genre—possibly dating back to the 14th Century. It shows close links to musical and poetic traditions in the Lamu archipelago, and features songs in Arabic, Swahili, and Shindzuani.

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 the singers would learn to compose songs in Shingazidja, which were close in form and poeticity to the earlier Swahili ones. Both helped the singers to polish their lyrics in the local language. Kamar Eddine developed a writing system for Shingazidja 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 also notice that Comorian *twarab* of the 1960s closely followed the formal properties of classical Swahili poetry.

Mri riwalao mwema udjisao
Upvashiya ndravu na marunda tamu
Na tamani nkuu pvo riyapvunao

mbesheleo

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

Mngu mwenyi enzi ndjema ndo randzao
Uripve walezi wema walelao
Wake warandazi ena rizandzao

*God Almighty, it is this favor that we ask,
Give us parents, who are good educators,
That they may be our counselors whom we crave for.*

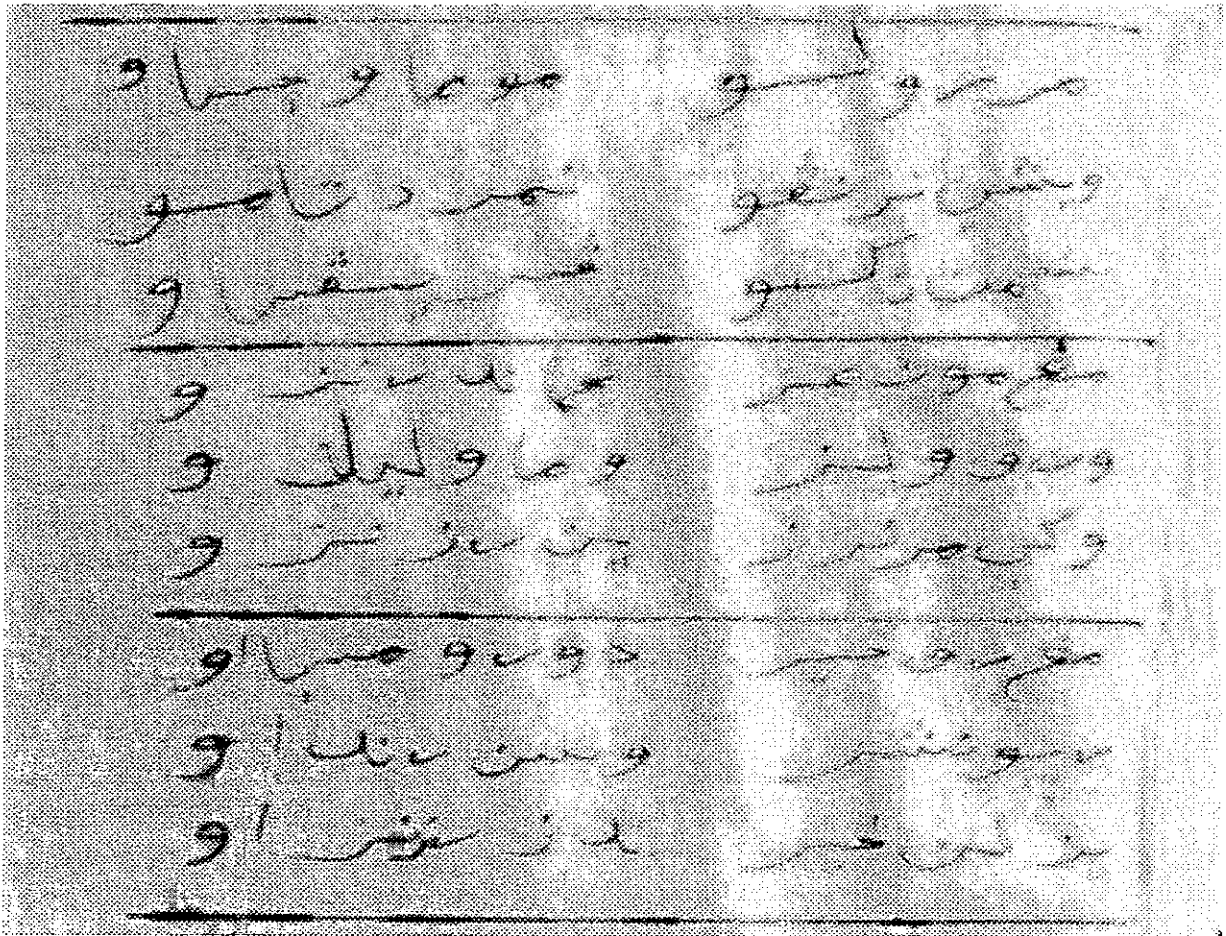
Mngu ripve kheri dua ndo riombao
Ripuwe na shari usoni rendao
Yezilo na kheri ndizo rizandzao

*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.*

ndjema za udjisa wandru wandzanao
hata za udjisa wandru ngwazambao
ze ndjema zehisa zembi ndo zidjao

*There is nothing more ravishing than people loving each other,
it is really good that people talk about it
When the righteous disappear, the evil appears*

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 closely follows the corresponding formal properties of an East African *taarab* song in the Swahili language. Thus



"Mri Uwalao", excerpt from Mohamed Hassan's songbook

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-ngu mwe-nye en- <u>zi</u>	ndje-ma ndo ra-ndza-o
U-ri-pve wa-le- <u>zi</u>	we-ma wa-le-la-o
Wa-ke wa-ra nda- <u>zi</u>	e-na ri-za-ndza-o

Mohamed Saïd Shakir's "Ufitina na Uzidi", one of the big hits in Comorian *twarab* in the 1960s, adapted the theme and story of a well-known Zanzibari song of the time, "Mpenzi wangu hawezi", sung by Mohamed Ahmed in Zanzibar:⁶

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

⁶ Mohamed Ahmed & Ikhwan Safaa Musical Club "Mpenzi wangu hawezi". Recording by Radio Zanzibar, early 1960s.

Mpenzi wangu hawezi naudhika simuoni**kiitikio**

*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.*

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

chorus

Lau kuwa namuona	zingelinishia simanzi
Hebu sogea hasina	nikutume yangu kazi
Nenda kamwambie mwana	nimekonda kama uzi

*If only I saw her, my melancholy would stop at once.
Hasina come close to me, that I may send you on an errand.
Go and tell her, that I have become thin like thread.*

Kama maradhi mzigo	wa mpunga au nazi
Au lingekuwa gogo	ningekuwa mpagazi
Au kanda la muhogo	nampokea azizi

*If this sickness was a load, of say rice or coconuts,
Or if it was a log, I would be its carrier.
Or straps of maniok, I would welcome it like my darling.*

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

*This illness, I want it to disappear, my lover, 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.*

And the Comorian version by Mohamed Saïd Shakir:

Mashaka yanidjiliya	mwandzani hatrilwa ndani
Miwango habaliliwa	hamu ngiyo ho rohoni
Mwandzani hatsatsaziwa	hari ngasi mahabani

Ufitina na uzidi mwambe za tsu mhusuni**mbesheleo**

*I am in trouble, my lover has been locked inside.
The doors are firmly closed, longing is in my soul.
My companion has been caught, because we are in love.*

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

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

*When I think about the plans of my marrying her,,
My soul is in trouble and revolts when I remember,
What has happened to us, my soul is in anguish.*

Barua yiniwaswili
Zontsi tsizikubali
Vaya uketiari

marahaba bo mwandzani
uhudja ho mahalani
nihurenge mihononi

*I have received a letter, thank you very much my love.
I have agreed to all, I will come to the customary meeting place.
Prepare yourself, so that I may take your hands.*

Hari hari rilemewa
Mwe hamba nyi mtsilemewe
Ridungana kavu ndrabo

hunongona shishiyoni
ye zahangu ne mwandzani
namrentsi mtihani

*We are tired hearing you whispering in each others ears.
You, you never tire talking about what concerns only me and my love.
We really love each other, stop creating problems for us.*

As we can see the Comorian version of the song is not just a translation of the Zanzibari song, but a creative adaptation of the general topic of the song. In fact, it is much more to the point in linking its narrative to the chorus line of the Zanzibari song. Again the structure is quite close to Swahili poetical conventions:

Ma-sha-ka ya-ni-dji-li-ya
Mi-wa-ngo ha-ba-li-li-wa
Mwa-ndza-ni ha-tsa-tsa-zi-wa

mwa-ndza-ni ha-tril-wa nda-ni
ha-mu ngi-yo ho ro-ho-ni
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. 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.⁷

However, Comorian composers of the 1960s were soon to go their own way in adapting their songs to pressing local concerns. Saïd Mohamed Taanshik composed a number of topical songs on local incidents from a cholera epidemic, to the eruption of the Karthala volcano, or the sinking of a passenger boat.⁸ Yet it was politics, the fight for independence, which really caught the imagination of Comorian *twarab* singers and their public at this time. One example from the mid-1960s is Mbarouk's (Moindjie Twabibu) "Ungwana Udja" ('Freedom has come'). The song is a subtle critique of the political establishment and its leader Saïd Mohamed Cheikh. It criticizes dictatorial tendencies as well as peace made with France in stopping short of real independence and settling for internal autonomy.⁹ At first taken to be a

⁷ Mbaruku. *Tausi kwa heri sana*. One 78rpm shellac disc. London: Columbia, n.d. WE 19. & Maalim Shaaban. *Udashi*. One 78rpm shellac disc. Calcutta: HMV, n.d. P 13326.

⁸ Cf. Taanshik "Antri", track 8 on *Sambe-Comores* (Dizim 4508).

⁹ For the political background cf. Ibrahim 2000; Chouzour (1994, ch. 2) provides a good account of the cultural contestation of the time.

celebration of the political process (internal autonomy) the song was widely played on the still French controlled national radio, until the personnel and politicians alike recognized the singer's critique, well hidden in poetical language:¹⁰

Ndjajohura yaeni ho ndani hangu
Ndjaj'ora ulala ho nyumbani
Ehika ngwendo zaho na dhari zaho
Sabu Mngu nanipve mmiliza waheri nami

**Ungwana udja ungwana udja
Uridjilia pvanu Ngazidja**

mbesheleo

*I will not be afraid, inside my own house.
I will not be afraid to sleep in my own house,
If you decide to leave on your own will.
May God present someone to watch over my fortune.*

***Freedom has com! Freedom has come!
It has come to us on Ngazidja!***

chorus

Amina leza yaeni bedja wapeu
Sabu Bedja tsirenge uwade wahangu nae
Ngapvo wambao wanane hau washenda
Sabu owakume mwana kadja kalaia ndze
Nganyinya mfure wa madhambi, oha Rwabana

*I have got a lover, Bedja is cruel.
Bedja, he has made me pregnant.
There are some who say it is the eighth or ninth month,
Now into the tenth and the child does not appear
You have committed an enormous mistake, oh God.*

Bedja dja tshai yaeni Bedja dja tshai
Mwinyi mali dja sukari pvo nimwandzao
Ehika tsimono ndzaa kandja
Sabu mahaba leza ukinaza hana halua

*Bedja is like tea, Bedja is like tea,
Rich in sugar, because I love him.
When see him, I am not hungry,
Because love is more satisfying than haluwa sweetmeat.*

Masikini nge yaeni Mandza na pare
Sabu duniani banda kuu kalina mdri
Itso nde par'ampira na tomobili
Sabu ndjadjohura yaeni hwenda djioni

*If only the road had reached Mandza,
If the world was a plain without trees,
If there was nothing but a good road for cars and playing football.*

¹⁰ The song transcription follows Said 1984:123, 125.

I would not be afraid to go there in the evening.

Dodo tsi zio yaeni dodo tsi zio
 Sabu isho shahula sha ndema ne magawa
 Isho kashende fahari ho marengweni
 Sabu dodo tsi zio yaeni nyi Wangazidja

*The dodo mango is not proper food, dodo is not proper food!
 Because it is the food for bats and crows.
 It does not create splendor if served to the assembly.
 The dodo mango is not a proper food for us people of Ngazidja!*

Si ritsinyese yaeni si ritsinyese
 Siri riirende djunia ngio tchiranka
 Hunu laki tsishuhuli kariwaza
 Sabu kambisi ngio hami ngarivayao
 Ungwana udja uridjilia si Wangazija

*Do not humiliate us, do not humiliate us!
 The trouser has been turned into a trunk, to create enough space.
 Big money is not important, we do not take the trouble of counting it.
 And the kambisi cloth, it is the linen we prefer to wear.
 Freedom has come, it has come to us people of Ngazidja.*

Karadhwa mwindji yaeni be karadhwa mwindji
 Sabu na ndapvo ndjoukiri karadhwa leo
 Tsikana nkabwa Washili zizubu binda
 Isandza mdru yanimee ndjamhundra
 Isilapva djadi na naswaba nakiri tsende

*To serve counts much here, to serve counts much.
 I will accept again to do a favor again today.
 I had sandals in Washili, but missed the latch.
 I searched for someone to shave my head, but I did not find him.
 I swore on my ancestors and the paternal nisba, I do not accept to go away!*

At first sight "Ungwana Udja" seems to be well grounded in the eulogies and praise songs that, according to most accounts, were the special preserve of *twarab*, and of *twarab*'s inclusion into the inherited structure of Ngazidjan wedding celebrations. The song's title, the chorus and verse endings seem to celebrate the internal autonomy achieved in 1961. Yet, the song does not speak of *uhuru*, the dominant term in independence rhetoric in the wider Swahili region, but of *ungwana*, 'civility', just a possible regain of some respect in the face of the often brute French colonial policy. Originally *bedja* was the honorific of petty rulers on Ngazidja at the time of the coming of Islam, today it however it refers to an uncivilized or unruly person. Thus Saïd Mohamed Cheikh, president of the Conseil National and member of one of Ngazidja's noble families, just a petty village chief? Or internal autonomy just 'peanuts', or *embe dodo* (a minor quality mangos) in Mbarouk's parlance?

On the formal level the song still follows the strophic structure of earlier *twarab*. The number of lines is not even, but still quite regular.¹¹ Gone is the adherence to a fixed number of syllables per line, and the system of internal and final rhymes, a general feature of Swahili *taarab*, and also followed earlier in Comorian *twarab*. According to Damir Ben Ali (personal communication, November 1998), *twarab* on Ngazidja took up the social-critical function of *sambe* songs, a prominent feature of Ngazidja's most famous *ngoma*¹²; or of the *debe*, a female song form very popular with the women and the youth, but much criticized by the local notability and colonial administration alike (cf. Damir 2001, Said 2000:243f).

Change was in the air in the late 1960s, and *twarab* took a different trajectory as well. Musically speaking the introduction of the drum set was 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 (cf. Said 1990). *Twarab* then came under severe pressure under the revolutionary government of Ali Soilih. Because of its supposed association with the urban upper-class *twarab* was not popular with the Soilih administration, and indeed many of the older musicians stopped performing. A revival of the old traditions of *anda* and *twarab* took 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. *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. The instrumentation has shifted completely to electric instruments, with current music production dominated by synthesizers and drum machines. But even the young somehow acknowledge the acoustic years, the years between the 1930s and 1960s, as the golden age of Comorian *twarab*.

Conclusion

Despite their differential integration under conflicting colonial powers, French and English respectively, the example of the adoption and adaptation of *twarab* into Comorian cultural practice in the first decades of the 20th Century reveals how long-term cultural relationships and orientations may shape perception and everyday practice. It shows well how such cultural syntheses may have worked in past centuries—i.e. the movement of cultural artifacts, customs, ideas via trade and migration—but also how local concerns may lead to divergent developments over time.

¹¹ I have not had access to a recording of this song and do therefore not know how the different length of verses is realized in relation to the musical structure.

¹² On the *sambe* cf. Said 2000:225-227; a modern adaptation of the *sambe* song given by Said is to be found on *Sambe-Comores* (Dizim 4508, track 1).

It is interesting to witness how the prestige Swahili (or better, of a Comorian version of Swahili) persisted well into colonial times, and well past the mid-20th Century. The example of *twarab* has enabled us to gain some insights into the use of Swahili in praxis, as an idiom of urban and upper-class discourse, as well as of literary and poetic use, along with Arabic (which remains an important language of religion and law).

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