

NYOTA ALFAJIRI - THE ZANZIBARI "CHAKACHA"¹

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Taarab is a style of music performed all along the Swahili coast at weddings and on other celebratory occasions. It is arguably the most important type of entertainment music played in this region, and it is certainly prevalent in Zanzibar, where it has come to be considered part of the very characterisation of the island itself: this is the island of cloves, the island of slaves and "the island of *taarab*" (Seif Salim Saleh, lecture at the African Music Village Holland Park, London, July 18, 1985)

The style was brought to Zanzibar during the 1870s by the leisure-loving third Omani sultan, Sultan Barghash bin Said who imported it from Egypt to be performed in his palaces for the entertainment of his guests (For detailed accounts of the early history and development of the style, see Topp 1992; Saleh 1980 and 1988) By the 1920s *taarab* had begun to move out of these exclusive contexts, becoming extremely popular among less affluent, often African-orientated sectors of the society, and among women. This was largely a result of the impact of the African female *taarab* legend, Siti binti Saad. She inspired the formation of small local, informal groups, which began by playing Siti's songs on makeshift instruments in a form of *taarab* performance called *kidumbak* (named after the two small *dumbak*² drums central to the performance) Women were also influenced by Siti to perform *taarab* and a network of groups emerged from the late 1930s performing *taarab ya wanawake* (women's *taarab*)

Thus, in Zanzibar three types of *taarab* can be identified: a) an 'ideal', modelled on Egyptian forms of urban secular music, serving the more affluent, Arab-orientated sectors of the society³; b) a counter-style, *kidumbak*, that was developed by people of African descent as a result of their exclusion from the 'ideal', by political and economic limitations; c) *taarab ya wanawake* (women's *taarab*) situated significantly in the centre, drawing on both the 'ideal' and on *kidumbak*, while at the same time driving the style forward as a whole with innovations from within its own field (These categories have been described at length in Topp 1992; Topp Fargion 1993).

¹ This paper is based almost entirely on interviews with the leader of *Nyota Alfajiri*, Saleh Mussa Maisara conducted by the authoress in Zanzibar in 1989/90. Thanks to Werner Graebner for his comments, particularly relating to *chakacha* in Mombasa. The paper is a report of research that is still very much 'in progress'.

² Small, y-shaped drums modelled on the *dumbak* of the larger *taarab* orchestras, which are in turn modelled on the Arab *darrabuka*.

³ The epitome of this category is a group called "Akhwani Safaa" which began in 1905, sang in Arabic until the 1950s and is still composed of members with strong Arab links, or at least who are relatively affluent. The group has a large orchestra modelled on Egyptian orchestras such as those that accompany artists like Um Kulthum.

There is another category of music in Zanzibar which should be included in the definition of *taarab*, particularly if one takes the rest of the Swahili coast, and Mombasa specifically, into consideration. This is called *Nyota Alfajiri* (lit., dawn star). Since there is only one group playing this type of music, the name refers to both the group and the style of music itself. An examination of the style once more highlights the significance of women's role in the *taarab* complex as primary consumers having the power to demand certain types of performance. At the same time, *Nyota Alfajiri* is a form of youth expression.

The music played by *Nyota Alfajiri* is in many ways like *kidumbak*, occupying a similar place in relation to the other categories of *taarab*. It is in fact derived from a style from the Kenyan coast called *chakacha*. One source, referring to the style in Lamu, describes it as "the dance given by girls and young women at the *kesha* or wake" (Le Guennec-Coppens 1980, sleeve notes on Selaf Ostrom CETO 791). But possibly a more current and widely accepted description is that given by Campbell and Eastman (1984), who describe it as a dance performed by young women in privacy at weddings. The intention of the dance is to teach the girls proper sexual behaviour. The dance movement is called *kiuno* (lit., hip, groin) and involves the gyration of the hips. As such *chakacha* is linked to the *ngoma* called *msondo* and *unyago*⁴ which traditionally serve this educative purpose. Sheikh Yahya Ali Omar, himself from Mombasa, claims that before *chakacha*, the puberty rites dance in Mombasa was known as *msondo*, having come originally from Pemba island, and that only females participated. According to Sheikh Yayha, the term *chakacha* emerged in Mombasa only as recently as the 1970s, though other consultants generally date the name to the 1950s and early 1960s (Graebner, pers comm, 22/4/95). Sheikh Yayha maintains that its performance is not as secretive as its sexual connotations dictate. He believes that *chakacha* is a product of the changed society in which the sexes are not as strictly segregated as before (pers comm, 6/2/91). Because of this he is disapproving of it.⁵

Chakacha employs the same triplet rhythm as *msondo* and *unyago*. It is performed using one *msondo* (large drum), two or three *kundu* (small, stool drums), *tarumbeta* (trumpet) or *nzumari* (oboe) and various idiophones such as metal shakers and a clapperless bell, all performed by men. Further research would reveal a more exact musical relationship between *chakacha*, *msondo* and *unyago*. Musicians in Zanzibar do not appear to differentiate between *chakacha* and *unyago* rhythms, though in Mombasa, musicians do speak of differences between *chakacha* and *msondo* rhythms (Graebner, pers comm, 22/4/95).

While the word *chakacha* denotes an independent *ngoma*, Zanzibaris also use it to describe a type of *taarab* in Mombasa that is a mixture of the two styles. Ensembles comprising an accordion and/or an electronic keyboard, bongos and other percussion instruments accompany *taarab* poetry using rhythms from *chakacha* that entice the audience to dance. Given the sexual and secret nature of the dance associated with the *chakacha ngoma*, it is perhaps not surprising that this music is not highly thought of among stricter Muslims. In Zanzibar the term *chakacha* can thus be somewhat derogatory, used particularly by certain participants of 'ideal'

⁴ *Msondo* and *unyago* are the same, the former being the name used in Mombasa and Pemba, the latter being used in Unguja.

⁵ This disapproval is also felt by many people in Zanzibar where there have been restrictions in the past on the use of the word *chakacha*.

taarab who believe that when *taarab* is played with ensembles using none of the 'ideal' (Arab) instruments (that is *qamun*, zither; *'ud*, plucked lute; *nai*, flute; *riqq*, tambourine and violin) and when it is danced to, it becomes *chakacha*. Much of the *taarab* of the Tanzanian mainland and Mombasa, as well as the music played by groups from Burundi and Uganda is thus frequently described as *chakacha*.

Saleh Mussa Maisara is the leader of the Zanzibari *chakacha* group, *Nyota Alfajiri*. He was born in Zanzibar town in 1963, and became involved in music informally at the age of about fourteen, playing small flutes and the harmonica, while also participating in women's *taarab* groups - significant in that women represent the main market for entertainment music. Gradually, from among his childhood friends he recruited a group of musicians to play Mombasa-style *chakacha* (Some of them were also involved with *taarab ya wanawake*). *Chakacha*-style *taarab* from Mombasa is very popular in Zanzibar, mainly among women. Recordings of the famous female artists, Zuhura Swaleh and Malika, are widely available in 'recording centres' in Zanzibar town, and it is most likely from this source that Saleh Mussa and his friends adapted the music. His intention was to earn a living by performing at weddings. The adoption of *chakacha* in Zanzibar is an example of how women make demands on male musicians who are forced to be innovative.

Thus, with accordion, bongos and rika (*riqq*), they performed for a fee at wedding celebrations both in town and in rural areas. This situation was destined to change, however Saleh Mussa explained:

Mwanzo hichi kikundi kilikuwa kinaitwa chakacha lakini kwa vile kuonekana jina la chakacha kwa hapa petu halifai kutumika . . . Ukitumia lile lina maana kuwa unafanya makosa hapa . kwa sababu lile linatisha - chakacha inatisha. [At first this group was called *chakacha*, but it seemed that the name *chakacha* was not suitable here . . . If you use that name here, it means that you are doing wrong because the name scares (*linatisha*, lit , frightens, overawes, menaces, strikes with terror; Johnson 1939:468) - *chakacha* scares] (pers comm , 18/5/90)

That the word *chakacha* is unacceptable in Zanzibar is what they were told by the authorities in the Culture Department, who try to encourage all performing groups to register formally with them. In obtaining their registration certificate in 1989, Saleh Mussa and his group were therefore forced to choose a name other than *chakacha*. They decided on *Nyota Alfajiri*. Saleh Mussa feels that it was important to conform by registering:

Ukishapata ile 'certificate' ile 'of registration', basi Unaweza kwenda po pote, kupiga po pote. Sema una mambo, inakuwa hayatakiwi [once you have the so-called certificate of registration, that's it You can go anywhere, play anywhere [Without it,] say you have a problem, they [the authorities] are not interested] (ibid).

These negative attitudes regarding *chakacha* performances in Zanzibar were possibly not without foundation. One consultant told me that they always took place inside an enclosure to prevent young children from seeing men and unmarried girls dancing in a sexual manner together (Suleiman Kimea, pers. comm., 22/3/90). Indeed, when I first saw *Nyota Alfajiri* perform in July 1989 at the Mwaka (New Year) celebrations in Makunduchi in the south of Unguja, I was astonished to see one of the male members dancing the *kiuno* dressed in a sparkling white *kanzu* (Islamic robe) with a *kanga* around his hips.

The group currently consists of about twelve people, of whom six or seven play instruments; the remainder dance and sing (as soloists and as a chorus). All but one are male. The instrumentation has now become standardised. Apart from the instruments associated with the *chakacha/taarab* of Mombasa, including an electronic keyboard, one pair of bongos, *rika* and a variety of improvised idiophones (such as tin maracas and sticks), the ensemble includes a collection of other membranophones. The musicians are not very precise with regard to the names of these. A small manufactured drum like a single bongo is referred to as 'kibongos' (small bongos); it is played in the same way as a pair of bongos, held between the knees and beaten with both hands. Finally, there is a set of three, or sometimes four, drums which are played by a single drummer. The set comprises a *msondo* (a slightly tapered, open-ended drum approximately three feet tall), one or two stool-shaped drums (one smaller than the other) for which no names were given⁶, and another large, tapered drum which Saleh Mussa called a *vumi* but which resembled a slightly smaller and somewhat more tapered *msondo*.⁷ Saleh Mussa referred to this set of drums collectively as *ngoma za miguu* (lit., feet drums). This is descriptive of the way in which they are played. The *msondo* and *vumi* drums are placed horizontally on the ground and at right angles to one another, with the head of the former resting on the body of the *vumi*. The player stands astride this latter drum and stoops over the drums. The stool-shaped drums are placed on the floor in front of the drummer.

This set of *ngoma za miguu* performs much the same function of providing excitement (*msisimko*) as the *sanduku* (tea-chest bass) in *kidumbak*. It becomes a focus for dancers and it is not uncommon to see women dancing the *kiuno* very close to the drummer. The organisation of the dancing is more like that in other local *ngoma* however, where the women form a circle around the musicians and move around in short steps.⁸

Ideally, Saleh Mussa claims, his band would also like to use an accordion, but these days they do not have access to one as they did before 1989. They already have to hire the keyboard, and it would apparently not be viable to hire an accordion as well: their fee must pay for the hiring of speakers, microphones, keyboards and other equipment before the balance is divided between the members. The preference for the keyboard over the accordion in this limited situation is based on its adaptability.

Keybodi ina tuni nyingi sana - 'buttons' - kuchenji. Ndio zile ni muhimu sana. Lakini accordion unapata sauti moja tu, ndio ile keybodi inapoteza. [The keyboard has many tunes [settings] - buttons - to change. These are very important. But on the accordion you only get one sound, the accordion sound. [while the sound of the] keyboard gets lost.] (ibid.)

Since the keyboard, like the violin in *kidumbak*, leads the ensemble, it is understandable that this should be an important consideration.

⁶ Carol Campbell (1983: 29) mentions a stool-shaped drum called *kunda*, and Ingrams (1931:399) includes a description of such a drum which he refers to as a *mshindo*. None of the musicians in *Nyota Alfajiri* used either names in reference to the drums of their own ensembles.

⁷ A *vumi* is otherwise usually a laced, double-headed cylindrical drum.

⁸ Dancing at other *ngoma* such as *beni*, *mdundiko* and *sindimba* (mainland forms which have become very popular in Zanzibar) and at *unyago* is also arranged in this way.

As in *kidumbak*, the music of *Nyota Alfajiri* draws heavily on the repertoire of 'ideal' *taarab* for its material. The songs are played unaltered during the first part of a performance; the second part of the event consists of original songs, mainly composed by Saleh Mussa. He gave the reason for organising performances in this way

Ile kuigiza inakuja kitu kama kupamba. Unajua hapa petu wana maradhi [ya taarab] sasa [wanamuziki] wanajua, wanatafuta 'population' ya watu - wapi wanapenda. Inategemea na ile 'country' yenyewe. Unatazama mpeni wao. Sisi tunazo nyimbo zetu lakini kutafuta ile 'market' yenyewe, inakuwa kwa pale mwanzo hatuwezi tukazitia tu zile isipokuwa kutazama ile mfumo mwenyewe. Sasa tunazitia zile. Sasa watu wanakuja pale, wanakuja, na sisi tunaendelea ile ile. Wanakuja, wanakuja, wakeshafika kati kati, tunageuza, tunaweka zetu. Yaani kama kuweka kila kitu kiwe kizuri tu. [Copying [taarab songs] is something like embellishment. You know here in Zanzibar they have a disease [of taarab] so [musicians] know, they look for what is popular among the people - where their likes are focussed. It depends on the particular country. You look for the style popular with the audience. We have our own songs, but in order to follow the market, at the beginning [of Nyota Alfajiri performances] we can't only use those without considering the style [of Nyota Alfajiri] itself. For that reason we use them [popular taarab songs]. So people come there, they come and we continue in that way (that is, in playing taarab songs). They come and come, when half of them have arrived, we change, we play ours. In other words [we copy taarab songs] only to make everything good.] (ibid.)

It is not only *taarab* that is used to draw the crowds, however. *Njenje* is the name of a cassette (in circulation on Zanzibar and the mainland in 1990) played by a group of musicians in Dar es Salaam, called the 'Revolution Band'. For the most part they play modernised versions of traditional *ngoma* songs. *Njenje* is an expression used by *chakacha* musicians and audiences to spur solo dancers on (Graebner, pers comm, 22/4/95). At performances of *Nyota Alfajiri*, a cassette recording of this '*njenje* music' is played to entice people (that is, women) to attend and to entertain them while the musicians have a break from time to time during the long evening. According to Graebner, *njenje* actually refers to money and may be used in *chakacha* performances to encourage people to give money (*tuzo*) to the artists.

According to Saleh Mussa, his music is not like any other type of music but incorporates elements of many styles. We have already noted that a) the use of the *ngoma za miguu* is reminiscent of the *sanduku* in *kidumbak*; b) that *Nyota Alfajiri* perform popular 'ideal' *taarab* songs; and c) that the form of dance - in which the dancers move in a circle around the musicians - is like other *ngoma*. In addition, the influence of Mombasan *chakacha* is still present: in many songs, the basic *chakacha* pattern of twelve pulses (x x x x x x x) is played on the tin rattles.⁹ *Unyago* triplet drum rhythms are also frequently used. In a typical extract the tin rattle plays the *chakacha* pattern; the bongos keep the triplets of the *unyago* rhythm, thus providing a steady beat; and the *ngoma za miguu* player acts as the master drummer, free to improvise around this. Thus, to accommodate the *taarab* market, which is dominated by women, male musicians have drawn on music styles particularly associated with women.

⁹ A variation of this pattern is: x . x . x . . . x . . . x . . . (Campbell and Eastman 1984: 475-477) though the other appears to be more frequently used in *Nyota Alfajiri*.

Saleh Mussa also composes his own lyrics which, he says, are not very different from those used in *taarab* and often adhere to the rules about rhyme governing *taarab* poetry. Those that do not use these rules are still acceptable however. He claims that this is because they are instructive and beneficial to society. He explained:

Unafundisha jamii. Kama "Mola tujialie dawa, Ukimwi tuondoe": utakuta -wa, -e Lakini inafunza jamii sasa. Sasa hii, inakuwa 'alive' siku zote, shairi hili. Kila tukienda, lazima tukiimba kwa sababu inafahamisha jamii [You teach the public. Like "Mola tujialie dawa, Ukimwi tuondoe" (God, we must have medicine, so that we can abolish AIDS): you find -wa, -e [at the end of each line] But it teaches the public now. So this is alive all the time, this poem. Whenever we go [to play] we must sing it, because it makes people understand.] (ibid)¹⁰

Taarab has been used in the past to educate and instruct people, particularly in political matters. For example, a competition was recently organised on a national level to choose the best *taarab* song on the subject of AIDS. Topical *taarab* poetry has perhaps helped to keep the style alive in the face of the social changes of the past thirty years.

These sorts of 'eye-opening' lyrics, accompanied by high energy music, are perhaps what has led to the linking of the word [*ku*]changamka with the music of *Nyota Alfajiri*. Literally, the word means "become cheerful, look bright and happy, be in good spirits, be in a buoyant mood" (Johnson 1939:50), but when Saleh Mussa explained its usage, he suggested other connotations. He said:

"Ni kitu ambacho unaambiwa na jamaa wakati unakwenda kwa uregevu. ni kama kitu "Get Up, stand Up". Maana yake kama mtu anakushtuka: "Changamka, bwana!" Ni kama "Wake up, man!" ["It is something which you are told when you are being slack (*uregevu*, lit., slackness, limpness, carelessness) it is like "Get up, stand up". Its meaning is as if a person shocks you: "Wake up, man!"] (ibid.)

This philosophy is possibly what caused Saleh Mussa to call his music *Nyota Alfajiri*. "Get up, stand up" is Saleh Mussa's own reference to the Bob Marley song which continues: "Stand up for your rights. Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight." "Wake up, Man!" in Saleh Mussa's explanation above, was said in a West Indian accent. Reggae is very popular among Zanzibar's youth.

A comparison with *kwela* music suggests itself (Kwela is a style of music originating in South African townships in the 1950s). Although no stylistic similarities exist, ideologically there are possible parallels not only linking the music of *Nyota Alfajiri* with *kwela*, but also placing it in the wider context of contemporary Africa. Firstly, both musics are performed by youngsters: Saleh Mussa was twenty-seven in 1990, but all the other musicians were under twenty years of age. Secondly, there is a striking similarity in the respective usages of the words [*ku*]changamka and *kwela*: "*kwela* means "to get up" in colloquial usage. "You must get up on top of everybody!" ... "It is a strong word" (Kubik 1974:13, quoting from an interview with Daniel Mabutho). Finally, Kubik continues:

¹⁰ He recited more of this poem:

Mola tujialie dawa
Ukimwi tuondoa
Maradhi alosakili

God, we must have medicine
so that we can abolish AIDS
It is a disease which has great effect

Mola tujialie dawa
Maradhi haya mabaya
Mola tujialie dawa

God, we must have medicine
This disease is bad
God, we must have medicine

Similar to the word Highlife for one kind of neo-traditional music in West Africa, which is associated with 'high living' in a Western sense, *Kwela* also belongs to a conceptual framework associated with social emancipation and increased intensity of life. We encounter here a phenomenon also widespread in other African and Afro-American cultures: the names for various 'acculturated' forms of music are often associated with the ideas of rising, increased power and social status, increased life intensity. (1974:13)

Although [*ku*]changamka is not the actual name of the music played by *Nyota Alfajiri*, it is used widely to describe it. Whether the use of the word in this context has any political overtones such as those suggested by Kubik is difficult to say. The reference to Bob Marley suggests that it might.

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KOFIA IN ZANZIBAR

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There are many different traditional costumes in the world. In Zanzibar, a Swahili man is said to be fully attired when he puts on an embroidered cap, locally known as *kofia ya viua* or just *kofia*, robe (*kanzu*) with a coat, and sandals taking a Swahili name of *makubadhi*

The *Kofia* is round-shaped with a flat top, adorned with embroidered designs all over. For convenience of simplicity in classification *kofia* are divided into two main groups, simple-designed and complex-designed caps

Traditionally *kofia* are given names according to what the design types appearing on them look like. However it should be noted that the design types are not carbon copies of objects an artist has represented. A *fundi* (a craftsman who specializes in drawing of *kofia* designs) normally takes a small part of that object or thing and then changes it in conformity with cap-designing art, which, to a great extent, puts much emphasis on producing criss-cross patterns. Worth pointing out is that this art is not done for the sake of art as many people think. Almost all designs are drawn from the environment in which the *fundi* live, making the art itself a true representation of the life of the people

The common names of Zanzibar caps are *kikuti*, *kidema*, *lozi*, and *besela*. There are so many names as more new designs of caps are coming up daily

To begin with, the *kofia* called *kikuti* (palm leaf), for example, represents availability of countless coconut trees in the isles. Life without coconut trees in Zanzibar is nearly impossible to imagine. Fishing, a bread earning activity to many Islanders, is represented by a design of *kidema*, a locally made fishing trap. Fishing by using *dema* is one of the traditional fishing methods practiced in many parts in the Isles

Besela is the name of the Zanzibar wooden bedstead, which is a treasured household item. Made from expensive timber, *besela's* peculiar designs may please many. The cap artists have come out to preserve the name as the possibility is high for this type of bedstead to disappear in future.

Unlike other *kofia*, *lozi* designs do not have any representation from the environment. *Lozi* is a corruption of the English word 'rose', a flower loved by many for its pleasant smell. Because the rose is regarded as the best flower so *lozi* is taken to be the king of all *kofia*