

A Feeling for the Boundaries

Sounding the Indian Ocean on the Swahili Coast

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Indian Ocean Studies coalesced in the 1980s and early 1990s around a conception of the Indian Ocean as the site of an “economic and social world” (McPherson 1993) that emerged sometime in the distant past and dissipated with the rise of a “truly global economy” at the dawn of the nineteenth century (Pearson 2003, 12; Chaudhuri 1985; McPherson 1993). By the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, scholars had begun to ask whether and how the Indian Ocean has remained a “coherently definable interregional arena” even after the emergence of new modes of transportation, communication, and political-economy (Bose 2006, 12; Ewald 2000; Metcalf 2007; Vergès 2003). These questions transformed Indian Ocean Studies into a new kind of “area studies” field, one based not on a colonial or cold-war cartography but on a concern with processes and practices of “world-making” (Samuelson 2017). The purview of this field has expanded in recent years to incorporate multiple forms of world-making, including the cultural and intellectual practices that sustain translocal perspectives, values, and imaginaries (*inter alia* Declich 2018; Prestholdt 2014; Simpson and Kresse 2008; Verne and Verne 2017). This has left a wide opening for ethnomusicological research. But if ethnomusicologists are to contribute meaningfully to conversations on world-making in the Indian Ocean it will be necessary for us to look beyond the themes of cultural transmission and transculturation that are so deeply embedded in the DNA of our field due to the early influence of Melville Herskovits and his students. Recognizing that world-making in the Indian Ocean implies a “struggle with history” (Simpson and Kresse 2008), we must approach music not only as an outcome of historical processes of “culture contact” but also as a vital medium for creative and reflexive engagements with these processes. I model such an approach



MAP 2.1. Port towns and cities of the Swahili Coast and hadhramaut.

in this chapter by exploring the social resonance of musical hybridization on the Swahili coast (the western periphery of the Indian Ocean world) during a period of intensive social change (map 2.1).

SWAHILI TAARAB AND THE DAWN OF PHONOGRAPHY ON THE EAST AFRICAN COAST

A shout of “*Sahani Odeon!*” (Odeon record!) rings out as Mbaruk Talsam strikes the first tones on his ‘ud. A violin and riq (Arabic tambourine) enter a moment later, and a buoyant melody takes shape over a lightly syncopated beat. Seventeen seconds later it reaches an end, leaving only the soft decay of Mbaruk’s final note.

After a moment, Mbaruk gets things started again, this time with his voice as well as his 'ud. Now the tempo is slower, and the rhythmic structure more complex. Time stretches, lopes, as Mbaruk intones Swahili words in his gristled tenor:

U muongo! Basahera, u muongo! (Liar! Basahera, you liar!)

Tena Basahera, u muongo! (Basahera, still a liar!).

The song then moves on to a string of words transported on a winding melody. Unlike the words that came before, these seem to hide their meanings beneath a thicket of metaphor:

Kuna kijiti kimoja kikasitawisha jengo? (Can a single stick hold up a building?)

Huna pau huna nziba huna ng'ongo (You have no pole, filling, or thatching)

Nenda ukakate miti nije nikuonye jengo (Go and cut a tree and I'll show you a building)

Now the "*U muongo*" refrain returns, this time with additional voices, including the unmistakable, soaring voice of the region's first true popular music icon, Siti binti Saad.

Thus proceeds the first minute of Mbaruk Talsam's "Basahera Umuongo," recorded in 1930 in the East African port city of Mombasa (then part of the British Protectorate of Kenya) for the German record label Odeon.¹ This is one of the earliest commercial recordings of Swahili *taarab*, a genre of instrumentally accompanied sung Swahili poetry performed at social gatherings of Swahili-speaking Muslims of the East African coast. *Taarab* took shape in the early 1900s through a creative blending of Swahili poetry traditions with aesthetic approaches and performance practices of Arab music traditions (Graebner 1991; Graebner 2004a; Graebner 2004b; Kiel 2012; Mgana 1991; Topp Fargion 2014, 37–92; Topp 1994). By the early 1930s, it had emerged as one of the most prominent forms of urban popular culture on the Swahili coast, thanks largely to the phenomenal success of recordings by a Zanzibar-based collective of musicians led by singer, poet, and composer Siti binti Saad, a woman affectionately known in East Africa today as the "mother of *taarab*."² Mombasa-born Mbaruk Talsam, a scion of a wealthy Arab family who dedicated his life to writing poetry and performing music after losing his vision to smallpox around age ten, was a key member of this collective, and "Basahera" was among his most popular releases. Siti, the main focus on Odeon's Mombasa sessions, can be heard singing with the chorus; and another key member of the collective, Buda Swedi, supplied the violin part (figure 2.1).

As Michael Denning describes in his *Noise Uprising* (2015), early recorded Swahili *taarab* was one among many "vernacular phonograph musics" that arose in colonial port cities in the electrical recording era. All of these musics, according



FIGURE 2.1. Siti Binti Saad and her collective in Bombay, 1929. From left to right: Maalim Shaaban, Subeit bin Ambar, Siti Binti Saad, Buda Swedi.

to Denning, cultivated new social imaginaries that were at once modern and indigenous, thereby presenting an early challenge to the colonial order. *Taarab* was perhaps special (which is not to say unique) among these musics, however, for how it fostered critical reflection on the new social imaginary it was helping to create. Before any of its sounds were ever etched in shellac, it was already a genre that sparked discussions of social norms and values. Audiences derived pleasure from uncovering social commentaries buried in the poetic texts, which employ a mode of allegorical indirection known as *mafumbo* (from the transitive verb *-fumba*, meaning “close” or “wrap up”). The stanza of “Basahera” above exemplifies the *mafumbo* style of poetic composition, though, as I will discuss, it happens to be borrowed from another genre of Swahili poetry.³ In her account of the reception of the binti Saad collective’s music in working-class Zanzibar during the interwar years, Laura Fair (2001, 169–225) describes how conversations about the meanings of *taarab* song texts that began during or directly after performance events would reticulate through the community to “spur public debate of the religious, social, and cultural principles that contributed to the constitution of community” (183–84). While she focuses mostly on song texts whose underlying meanings reside near the surface or circulated along with the songs in the form of rumors, “Basahera” can help us to imagine how this process might have unfolded in relation to songs for which this was not the case. The somewhat ambiguous surface allegory in the first stanza clearly invites interpretations relating to themes of sincerity and responsibility, which would naturally flow into discussions of social roles and expectations.

The transition to a “phonograph music” amplified the public-making potential of *taarab* by enabling listeners to imagine themselves as part of a larger community of addressees without eliminating traditional practices of social

interpretation. “In these early days of Swahili records,” writes one firsthand witness to life in Zanzibar in the 1930s,

the coffee shops and eating houses were flooded with members of the public listening to the songs of Siti binti Saad. Members of the public who played them inside their houses were astonished to hear encores from listeners outside their houses. The people were proud and pleased with this new invention in their national language. (Suleiman 1969, 86–87)

As is clear in this writer’s use of the phrases “members of the public” and “national language,” while listening to recorded *taarab* on the Swahili coast in the 1930s was often akin to attending a live performance, it was also an engagement with a public text, and therefore a way of relating to the multitude of strangers who compose the larger, imagined communities to which every modern urbanite belongs. The addition of this “stranger-relationality” (Warner 2002, 75) necessarily amplified the reflexivity of listeners’ metadiscourses by situating them as “practices of circulation” (Novak 2008) that brought disparate groups of listeners on the Swahili coast into the same broad conversation. In this way, the recorded output of the binti Saad collective constituted what might be called a *medium of social reflexivity*, a form of public culture that encouraged and enabled critical evaluation of aspects of social life.

Siti binti Saad and her collaborators were not the only Swahili *taarab* musicians to get swept up in the global “musical revolution” of the electrical recording era (Denning 2015). But they are the only ones whose recordings from this era are still widely remembered on the Swahili coast today. This holds true even in Mombasa, which was home to all of the other *taarab* musicians who recorded for international companies in this period.⁴ I contend that the binti Saad collective’s special status as virtually the only Swahili *taarab* musicians of note prior to World War II has much to do with the role of their early recorded works in fostering social reflexivity. That is to say, their music was seared into popular memory in the 1930s because it was intimately bound up with coastal residents’ experiences of thinking about, debating, and making sense of the world. To the extent that this is the case, we cannot simply credit the verbal content of this music. The members of the collective were all known for their musical abilities as well as their ways with words. Siti, for her part, was renowned for the “quality of her voice, her range of tones, resonance, nasality, and intonation” (Fair 2001, 181), and her male collaborators were all considered to be among the finest singers and instrumentalists in the region. A close listen to their early recorded output reveals that they were also incomparable *composers* who creatively combined stylistic elements from different music genres of the Swahili coast and beyond to craft the musical settings for their poems. Developing an approach grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin’s “sociological stylistics” (Bakhtin 1981), I argue in this chapter that the sounds of the binti Saad collective’s early recorded works

were meaningful (in multiple senses of the word) for coastal Swahili audiences for how they enabled critical reflection on a matter of increasing importance at the time: ethnicity.

THE HYBRIDIZED SOUNDWORLDS OF THE BINTI SAAD COLLECTIVE

Like most of the early recorded works of the binti Saad collective, “Basahera” combines stylistic elements from different music cultures of the Indian Ocean and broader Arab world. Two key aspects of the performance can be described as generally “Arab”: the orchestration, which is typical of urban ensembles throughout the Arab world in the early twentieth century, and the use of an Arab melodic mode (in this case, *Maqām Bayātī*) as the structural basis of the melodies. Atop this broad “Arab” foundation, Mbaruk and his collaborators construct a more heterogeneous musical edifice.⁵ The instrumental prelude is a *dūlāb*, an Egyptian musical form commonly featured on Arab music recordings produced in Cairo in the early twentieth century.⁶ But the style of the song proper is not Egyptian at all. Its more complex rhythmic foundation—a compound meter involving a 3:2 polyrhythm—is typical of coastal East African music, but also of musics of the Arabian Peninsula, making it one of the elements of the performance that most directly indexes Indian Ocean connections. Meanwhile, Mbaruk’s vocal performance reflects the music culture of the Swahili coast in ways both obvious and subtle. Most obvious, of course, is his use of the Swahili language. But his vocal delivery, which is syllabic and devoid of the ornamentation that one would expect of Egyptian or Gulf Arab song, is also distinctly Swahili. At a deeper level, the peculiar melody of the first stanza is a direct reference to *ngoma* (traditional social dances) of the northern Kenyan coast, which is the original context of the “Basahera” poem. Mbaruk, who had spent years studying with master poet-musicians in the northern coastal port of Lamu, executes this reference with exquisite finesse. His melody’s convoluted motion beautifully mimics how all coastal *ngoma* singing tends to abandon form in favor of delivering an entire stanza in a single breath (Abdalla 1974), while a brief modulation to *Maqām ‘Irāq*—a mode with a distinctive, “half-flat” tonic—elicits a strong flavor of the *ngoma* of the northern coast.⁷

As Fair suggests, any Swahili *taarab* performance in the interwar years would have, to some degree, “reflected the cosmopolitan mix of Indian Oceana that came together” in Swahili port cities like Zanzibar and Mombasa (Fair 2001, 171). But not everyone would have done so to the extent that we hear in “Basahera.” It seems likely that most performances by the elite men’s orchestras that dominated the world of *taarab* on Zanzibar until the ascent of the binti Saad collective in the 1920s would have been less adventurous in combining different stylistic elements, as these groups generally remained faithful to the Egyptian style first adopted by the Sultan of Zanzibar’s court orchestra in the late nineteenth century. The binti

Saad collective's special penchant for combining a wide array of styles is partly explained by the diversity of its membership and primary audience. Members hailed from various class backgrounds and regions of the Swahili coast, and during the 1920s they composed and performed in the heterogeneous, working-class neighborhood of Ng'ambo, outside of Zanzibar's Stone Town (Fair 2001, 182–85; Mgana 1991, 40–41). But as is evident in Mbaruk's playful reference to the *ngoma* of the northern Kenyan coast in "Basahera," the stylistic approach that the collective developed in Ng'ambo during the 1920s and subsequently brought to their first recordings was not simply an organic consequence of the diverse origins and life experiences of the members and their interlocutors. It was an intentional and reflexive aesthetic project.

I use the phrase *stylistic approach* rather than *style* when discussing the music of the binti Saad collective from East Africa's early commercial recording era because their recorded works from this period don't exhibit a single style or even array of styles. To be sure, some stylistic threads weave through most of the works including an Arab-style heterophonic texture, in which all instruments and voices perform the same melody in unison but with distinct variations and ornamentations; the use of melodic modes (frequently, but not always, Arab *maqāms*); an Egyptian-style introductory prelude (*dūlāb*) as an introductory gesture; and, most importantly, Siti binti Saad's reedy yet powerful voice, which "is said to have moved her listeners to another plane of existence" (Fair 2001, 181; see also Jahadhmy, in Matola et al. 1966, 97). Beyond these threads, however, what characterizes the style of the binti Saad collective's early recorded works is the absence of a characteristic style. The stylistic approach of the binti Saad collective effectively established the musical setting of each song as its own *hybridized soundworld*, a unique "musogenic scene" (Tagg 2013, 417–85) incorporating some combination of elements drawn from *ngoma* traditions, Egyptian Arab music, Arab musics from the Arabian Peninsula, or Indian musics.

Garnering insights into the early works of the binti Saad collective might seem like a rather straightforward task, given that some of their repertoire is still performed today on the Swahili coast. But in truth, the musical sensibilities of the early commercial recording era are mostly alien to contemporary *taarab* musicians and audiences. Even the contemporary Swahili musicians who still perform works by Siti binti Saad and her collaborators are often puzzled by what they hear in the collective's earliest recordings.⁸ This may seem especially remarkable in light of the fact that there now exists a music school on Zanzibar oriented toward teaching the *taarab* as it was established by the binti Saad collective. The Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA), founded in 2001, offers formal instruction in Swahili *taarab* performance.⁹ Students there are taught to perform songs by the binti Saad collective, and a photo of Siti hangs in a place of honor in the main performance space. But while these students and their instructors are rightly

seen as heirs to the tradition of Siti binti Saad, they received this tradition from later generations who transformed it in significant ways. Notably, the late singer and drummer Bi Kidude, who was largely responsible for reviving interest in the repertoire of the binti Saad collective in the late twentieth century, brought her own aesthetic sensibility to the music, “modernizing” it and infusing it with a dose of *unyago*, a rural women’s *ngoma* danced for weddings and initiation rites (Graebner 2005; Saleh et al. 2008).

One musician from whom I was able to garner valuable information and perspectives for this chapter was Kenyan *taarab* musician Zein l’Abdin, who passed away in 2016. Zein was born in 1939 but had spent years pursuing knowledge of Swahili music of earlier generations. I had many conversations with him about the music of the binti Saad collective while conducting my dissertation research in Mombasa between 2004 and 2005. The key point that I took away from these conversations was that the songs of the collective were always, in Zein’s words, “original,” with the exception of a few that borrowed famous Egyptian melodies. While the musicians obviously engaged in a great deal of mimetic appropriation, what they appropriated were not musical utterances, but rather musical *styles*, which they plucked from music genres of the Swahili coast and wider Indian Ocean world. This is important because it raises questions of *meaning* by implying that the hybridized sounds that the binti Saad collective launched into public circulation in the interwar years did not simply “reflect” the Indian-Ocean cosmopolitanism of the Swahili coast, but also to some extent reflected *on* it.

There are few firsthand accounts available today that reveal anything of how listeners on the Swahili coast engaged with the sounds of the binti Saad collective’s early recordings at the time they first entered into circulation. While musicians and commentators handed down stories about intended and received meanings of some poems from the binti Saad collective, they did not do the same for any of the musical settings through which these poems were conveyed.¹⁰ This surely has much to do with the fact that Swahili poetry has always been viewed on the Swahili coast as a vessel of cultural knowledge worthy of preservation. But it is also possible that listeners did not talk about the sounds of the music using the sort of (meta)language that would lend itself to transmission through formal writing, as speech about music is often highly associational and metaphorical (Feld 1994, 92–93). In any event, we must look—or listen—elsewhere to approach questions of meaning in relation to the sounds of the early recordings of the binti Saad collective. That elsewhere is, of course, the works themselves, which I approach here through a sociological stylistics that attends at once to their sociohistorical context and their “internal social dialogism,” their ways of representing different musics and fostering relations between them (Bakhtin 1981, 300).

A FEELING FOR THE BOUNDARIES

To begin to understand the resonance of the binti Saad collective's hybridized soundworlds on the Swahili coast in the interwar period, it is necessary to situate them in the context of the controversies and disputes over ethnicity wrought by colonial governance and colonial capitalism. As a zone of trade and migration, the Swahili coast has always been a place where individuals and communities transition from newcomer to native. This has lent a special temporal character to identity in the region, which makes ethnic boundaries more like horizons than gateways or barriers. Since at least the nineteenth century, however, this paradigm of ethnicity has existed in tension with a competing, "racialist" paradigm that posits the existence of "mutually exclusive ethnicities or ethnic groupings" (Glassman 2000, 397). In the wake of the first world war, the British colonial administration in East Africa, seeking to assert greater control over the population and economy, instituted new laws and policies that amplified the impact of this racist paradigm for the colonized peoples of the Swahili coast. The result was a range of new controversies and disputes over ethnic categories and boundaries among colonized subjects. In Mombasa, for example, the administration's efforts to clarify the distinction between "natives" and "nonnatives" sparked discord and even incidents of violence between two long-allied segments of the city's Swahili-speaking Muslim elite, the Coast Arabs and the Twelve Tribes. Both communities actively lobbied for "nonnative" status to escape new taxes on "natives" as well as the indignity (from their perspective) of being lumped in with "native" Africans. The administration's decision to grant this coveted status only to the Coast Arabs, albeit only for the purposes of taxation, created an ethnic cleavage in the heart of Kenyan Swahili society (Kindy 1972, 27–45; Salim 1976). Meanwhile, in the Zanzibar archipelago, the racist paradigm of ethnic belonging conspired with the demographic changes wrought by new labor policies to foster new understandings of "Swahili" identity that served to unite some and divide others. As laborers who settled on the islands from the mainland increasingly sought to identify as ethnically "Swahili" in order to escape the social stigma and other deficits of their "tribal" origins, the islands' indigenous communities began to reject this label in favor of "ethnic categories associated specifically with the isles" (Fair 2001, 36).

Writing about the context of Zanzibar, Fair argues that the collective's hybridized soundworlds provided a bulwark against the ascendancy of the racist paradigm of identity by providing "a musical space that widened the boundaries of belonging" (Fair 2001, 174).¹¹ There is certainly a large grain of truth in this. However, it fails to fully account for an essential aspect of the binti Saad collective's approach to sonic hybridization: its *dialogism*. When we explore *how* the binti Saad collective brought together sounds of different social groups, it becomes clear that their hybridized soundworlds do more than simply reflect the diversity of the Swahili coast. They also explore the dynamics of social difference in the region, including the tensions and contradictions inherent in any and every social identity that is tied

to it. With this in mind, I argue that for coastal Swahili audiences in the interwar period, these soundworlds ultimately did more to *objectify the boundaries of culture* than widen the boundaries of belonging. By *objectify* here I mean, specifically, *to make available for scrutiny by granting sensuous form and presence*. To borrow a turn of phrase from Bakhtin, what the binti Saad collective's hybridized soundworlds offered listeners was *a feeling for the boundaries of culture*, a kind of tactile awareness of them that enabled and encouraged reflection (Bakhtin 1981, 364).

STYLIZING THE SOCIAL

I take the phrase “a feeling for the boundaries” from Bakhtin's discussion of “stylization” in his “Discourse in the Novel” (Bakhtin 1981, 364), the essay in which he lays out most clearly the elements of his sociological stylistics. Bakhtin defines stylization in this work as a mimetic appropriation of stylistic elements oriented toward creating “an artistic representation of another's linguistic style, an artistic image of another's language” (Bakhtin 1981, 362).¹² By *language* here, as elsewhere in his writings, Bakhtin means a system of communication that is “stratified not only into dialects in the strict sense of the word . . . [but also] into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc.” (Bakhtin 1981, 271–72). An “image of another's language,” then, is an image of another's situation in, and situated perspective on, the social world. Stylization achieves this image by setting up a productive tension, a “dialogic contrast” (364), between “two individualized linguistic consciousnesses” (362). As such, it “delineates the boundaries of languages, creates a feeling for these boundaries, compels one to sense physically the plastic forms of different languages” (364).

I argue that the mimetic appropriations that constitute the hybridized soundworlds of the binti Saad collective represent a mode of musical stylization that enabled listeners on the Swahili coast in the interwar years to feel the boundaries of and between different music cultures of the Swahili coast, and thereby to consider questions of cultural identity. “Basahera,” for example, would have offered listeners of the time a feeling for the boundaries of Swahili music culture within the broader context of commercially recorded musics in global circulation, and of coastal Kenyan music culture within the broader context of Swahili music culture. In other words, notions of Swahili cultural identity and coastal Kenyan cultural identity would have emerged for listeners in (or *as*) sensations of, feelings for, their boundaries.

Not every mimetic appropriation of an alien style constitutes *stylization*. One can simply *imitate* a style or, at another extreme, *caricature* it in a fashion that fails to “give it its due . . . as possessing its own internal logic” (Bakhtin 1981, 364).¹³ Though they sit at opposite ends of a spectrum, imitation and caricature are similar in how they assume full control over the appropriated style. This is precisely

what stylization does not do. Instead, stylization allows the appropriated style to “[reveal] its own world” (Bakhtin 1981, 364), thereby maintaining an “internal dialogism.” In general, the binti Saad collective’s mimetic appropriations of other styles are too faithful to their sources to have been heard as rhetorical parodies. Most would not have been heard as simple imitations, either, for two reasons. First, they are almost always *intergeneric* and therefore invite semiotic readings. In Philip Tagg’s terms, they are “genre synecdoches,” mimetic appropriations that “connote paramusical semantic fields—another place, another time in history, another culture, other sorts of people” (Tagg 2013, 525). Mbaruk’s appropriation of northern-coastal *ngoma* style in “Basahera” is a good example. For the most part, it would not have sounded like a simple imitation to listeners on the Swahili coast in 1930, because these listeners would have heard it as a *reference* to a place and people. (On the other hand, the Egyptian *dūlāb* almost certainly *would have* sounded like simple imitation, because of the normative status of Egyptian style in Zanzibari *taarab*.)

The second reason why most of the binti Saad collective’s mimetic appropriations of other styles would not have been heard as simple imitations by listeners on the Swahili coast at the time is that they almost always maintain an *element of parody*, despite their fidelity to their sources, by virtue of being placed within a comedic frame. The live and recorded performances of the collective almost always involved some comedic acting.¹⁴ Despite being compelled by the media technologies of the era to limit each recorded performance to three minutes (or six, with a break in the middle), the collective almost always included a brief comedic skit that illustrated or commented on the theme of the song, either at the start or in the middle of the performance. In “Basahera,” the skit comes mid-performance, at the beginning of the second side of the record. Two male characters, one of them played by Mbaruk, engage in a brief argument that would seem almost Dadaist if it didn’t relate directly to the *fumbo* (enigmatic metaphor) in the first line of the first stanza. One character, played by Mbaruk, begins by calling the second a liar and demanding to know, “When have you ever seen me trying to use a single stick to build a house?” (*Umepataje kuniona mimi nimechukua jiti moja kuja kujengea nyumba?*). The second character responds, “You always do it!” (*Daima unafanya hayo!*). The argument gets more heated from there, until it begins to get lost beneath the sounds of Mbaruk plucking his ‘ud strings, and eventually ends with the two characters gruffly parting ways as the musical performance starts up again.

The collective’s predilection for infusing their performances with comedy may have been influenced by earlier forms of musical entertainment in the working-class contexts of the Swahili coast. But it surely also had to do with the particular personalities and experiences of Siti and Mbaruk. Siti developed considerable theatrical skills while hawking pottery on the streets of Zanzibar before taking up a career as a musician (Fair 2001, 179; Robert 1967, 5). Mbaruk,

meanwhile, was by all accounts a born comedian (Jahadhmy, in Matola et al. 1966, 62; Suleiman 1969, 88). At the time that he was welcomed into the collective he was nearly as renowned for his comedy as for his musicianship. His lively performances for British and African troops in Mombasa during the latter half of World War I famously included humorous parodies of European folk songs and military marches (Jahadhmy, in Matola et al. 1966, 67; Ward 2011, 78). For this he earned the affectionate nickname “Meja Mbaruk,” which he kept for the rest of his career.

It is self-evident that the binti Saad collective intended their comedic skits to create a lively and fun atmosphere that would set their musical performances off from the mundanities of everyday life. But the skits also frame the musical performances in another, very important way: they infuse them with the “modal trope” of pervasive irony (Friedrich 1991, 30). Irony comes in many forms, but its essence is always *a hint of an ulterior meaning*. Adding irony to musical expression provokes a particular mode of reception—an “interpretive move” (Feld 1994)—oriented around the search for an underlying meaning. In other words, it inaugurates a way of approaching musical sound that is akin to how *taarab* listeners in the early twentieth century approached the poetic texts of *taarab* songs. The *mafumbo* style of early twentieth-century *taarab* compelled listeners to search for meanings deep “inside” (*ndani*) the words. While *mafumbo* is most often understood as a way of using language, one can think of it more broadly as a culturally specific way of exploiting the “power of ambiguity” to invite active interpretation (Vierke 2012). This expanded sense of the term suggests the possibility of a musical form of *mafumbo* that leverages the inherent ambiguity in any ironized musical gesture to provoke a critical engagement.

“YA DANA DANA”

I want to bring this discussion back to the ground now by considering another recorded performance by Mbaruk from the same Odeon sessions in Mombasa. This one, titled “Ya Dana Dana,” offers one of the most remarkable examples of musical stylization in the binti Saad oeuvre because the performance is explicitly framed as a critical exploration of cultural boundaries.

Like “Basahera,” “Ya Dana Dana” extends over two sides of a 78-speed record; however, I have only been able to locate a copy of the first side. The performance opens with Mbaruk and Siti speaking over each other to announce the name of the record label. Siti seems to be having fun with the task. The mellifluous “*Sahani Odeoni*,” Swahili for “Odeon record,” rolls quickly off her tongue in a playful flutter. Next, we hear Mbaruk and another man engaged in a brief conversation. Speaking in fast, slightly garbled Arabic, one of them calls to the other and coaxes him to “come see the *dāna dāna*!” All of this—the announcement of the record label and the introductory skit—lasts just eleven seconds.

The musical performance begins with a simple melody played on ‘ud, violin (or possibly *kamanja*, a traditional Arab fiddle), and *nai* (end-blown flute), backed by a steady pulse played on the jingles of a *riq*. The melodic instruments all play the same line together in a heterophonic texture, each presenting the melody in its own idiomatic fashion. But Mbaruk’s ‘ud is audibly in the lead role, supplying a quick upbeat before the other instruments join in and pushing the pulse forward with forceful articulations. The melody employs only a few pitches, rhythmically patterned in a danceable triple meter. It is set in *Maqām ‘Irāq* and emphasizes the mode’s distinctive “half-flat” tonic.

After the initial instrumental exposition, the melody repeats, this time with voices taking the lead and the instruments lightly doubling the melody while interjecting short connecting phrases. The melody is now revealed in full, with the addition of a slightly varied consequent phrase. The first vocalist we hear is Mbaruk, who performs the antecedent phrase alone. Two or three vocalists then follow with the consequent phrase. They sound distant, but Siti’s clarion voice is clearly audible among them. The words they sing are not words at all, but various combinations of three vocables: “yā” “dān” and “dāna.”

The meaning of “come see the *dāna dāna*” now becomes clear with the introduction of the vocables. This “dān” singing, which is found in genres of music and sung poetry throughout the Arabian Peninsula, is perhaps most strongly associated with the music culture of Hadhrami Arabs, an ethnic community from the Hadhramaut region of southern Yemen that has spread throughout the Gulf and western Indian Ocean regions, including the Swahili coast (Urkevich 2014, 270–71; Hassan 1998).¹⁵ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Swahili coast has been home to a thriving Hadhrami diasporic community, established and sustained by immigrant men (and some women) who traveled to East Africa in search of economic opportunities (see map 2.1).

The *dān* vocables in “Ya Dana Dana” are not an isolated reference to Hadhrami culture. Rather, the performance as a whole is generically Hadhrami. In form and execution, it fits the mold of *dān tarab*, a Hadhrami genre of accompanied popular song. Unlike other forms of Hadhrami sung poetry that incorporate *dān* singing, *dān tarab* is entertainment music “sung for the pure enjoyment of poetry and song” (Hassan 1998, 4). Toward the end of the performance, Siti adds jubilant shouts to give a sense of the festive atmosphere of an authentic *dān tarab* event.

Around forty seconds into the performance, Mbaruk introduces the song’s refrain—two lines of Swahili poetry, set in a typical *taarab* meter, with the first repeated to fit the form of the melody:

Kanga mbili za mkasi, zimenikata maini (Those scissors *kangas* have cut me deeply)

Mwambie bwana afunge mlango, leo asitokaini (Tell him to close the door, he should not go out today)

As with many *taarab* refrains, this one includes esoteric references and possibly borrowed material. I am not fully confident in my translation of the first line. A *kanga* is a colorful printed cloth that typically includes a short poetic saying or message on it. Since the early twentieth century, women on the Swahili coast have commonly used *kangas* to send veiled insults and challenges to rivals. The line “*kanga mbili za mkasi*,” which literally translates as “the two *kangas* of scissors,” is ambiguous. For this translation, I have taken my cue from Abdilatif Abdalla, who believes the scissors may refer to a specific, notoriously insulting line of *kangas* that bore the image of scissors (personal communication, September 7, 2019).¹⁶

The introduction of Swahili *taarab* poetry, redolent with *mafumbo*, transforms the performance into a cultural hybrid, a combination of Hadhrami *dān tarab* and Swahili *taarab* (a kind of *dān taarab*). This hybrid is fleshed out even further as the performance continues. After the Swahili refrain there is another *dān* refrain, and then an instrumental refrain punctuated by Siti’s exhortations (in Swahili). The Swahili refrain then returns again, followed again by another *dān* refrain. After a minute and a half of this vacillation, Mbaruk sings the only full stanza of Swahili poetry in the three-minute side. As he does, Siti and a male backing musician echo key phrases in heightened speaking voices, mimicking the sort of “ecstatic feedback” that one finds in traditional settings of Arab music performance (Racy 1991; Shannon 2003, 75). The lines he sings are as follows:

Pesa zangu mbili, hanunue kibiriti (Two months’ salary doesn’t even buy matchsticks)

Ni vinani tu makanda, tenda chukua kaniki (It’s just empty grain sacks, go grab a laborer’s shirt)

Usiku kucha silali asili, kwa kuhesabu boriti (I don’t sleep at night, for I count the ceiling beams)

Unlike the refrain, the stanza connects thematically to the style of the performance, albeit obliquely, by expressing the point of view of a manual laborer, a common profession for Hadhrami men in East Africa during the interwar years.¹⁷ While grounded in reality, the conceptual linkage that is achieved at this point in the performance between the (musical) image of Hadhrami culture and the (poetic) image of struggling laborer was to some extent politically charged. The fact that most Hadhramis who arrived in East Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were peasants who had come to escape abject poverty back home positioned them as a kind of untouchable class in the highly stratified coastal Swahili society. Tellingly, Hadhramis on the Swahili coast have never been referred to as “Arabs,” a distinction traditionally reserved for communities of higher social status. During the interwar years, they were typically referred to as *Shihiri*, a reference to Shihr, the Arabian port from which the new arrivals among them had started their journey to East Africa (Le Guennec-Coppens 1989, 186; Salim 1976, 78). While this label has fallen out of use today, it remains uncommon to hear a

Hadhrami described as “Arab” on the Swahili coast, even as many of them have achieved success as entrepreneurs and business owners.

While we cannot know exactly how audiences on the Swahili coast in 1930s received Mbaruk’s Hadhrami-Swahili musical hybrid, it seems clear that it would *not* have been heard as a simple mockery (or *rhetorical parody*, in Bakhtin’s terms). The Hadhrami style is performed too beautifully for that. Upon hearing the recording for the first time, Yemeni musician and music researcher Nizar Ghanem opined that the performance bears a distinct “Hadhrami taste” (personal communication, July 8, 2019). It did not sound to him like an inauthentic imitation, much less a “gross and superficial destruction” (Bakhtin 1981, 364); it simply sounded “Hadhrami.” Nevertheless, the performance would certainly have been heard as *parodic*. The introductory skit establishes a playfulness and general sense of irony, which is then amplified by the introduction of Swahili poetry. Given that Hadhramis on the Swahili coast, as elsewhere in the Indian Ocean world, have historically “dropped their own language for the local one” within a generation (Le Guennec-Coppens 1989, 190), the idea of Hadhrami music sung in Swahili is not all that strange. But Mbaruk’s highly sophisticated Swahili poetry, with its complex *mafumbo*, is a strange fit with a performance that so vividly reflects the culture of recent Hadhrami immigrants.

The ironized hybridization of Hadhraminess and Swahiliness in “Ya Dana Dana” does not offer a direct statement or commentary. What Hadhraminess and Swahiliness offer, rather, is *a feeling for the boundaries* of Hadhrami culture in coastal Swahili society. This would have been compelling for audiences of the time on the Swahili coast, I suggest, because it would have enabled them to reflect on one of the more paradoxical facets of social belonging in this society: the status of Hadhramis as both insiders and outsiders. While Hadhramis spoke Swahili and participated in the same religious and cultural practices as most other Swahili-speaking Muslims, their subaltern status kept them apart from other Swahili-speaking Muslims, encouraging a degree of insularity. Their residence patterns reflected this situation quite vividly: in Mbaruk’s home town of Mombasa, for example, Hadhramis who were fortunate enough to live outside of the migrant laborer housing settled in Bondeni, right on the edge of Old Town, the traditional neighborhood of elite Arabs and the *waungwana* (Swahili patricians) (Le Guennec-Coppens 1997, 168, n. 41).

Another paradoxical aspect of the Hadhrami position in Swahili society is that there often is no boundary between Swahili and Hadhrami *cultures*, since many “Swahili” religious and cultural practices actually have Hadhrami origins (Pouwels 1987, 32–54). Intentionally or not, Mbaruk subtly references this situation in the structure of his melody, which is built on the same relatively rare melodic mode (*Maqām ‘Irāq*) that he also uses in “Basahera” to capture the sound of the northern Kenyan coast. This is a rather subtle reference, to be sure, but it seems likely that Mbaruk and his listeners would have sensed it at some level, if only as an added bit of tension in the “dialogic contrast” of the Hadhrami-Swahili soundworld.

CONCLUSION

I have offered an account of how musicians and audiences on the Swahili coast during the early commercial recording era engaged with musical sounds as a way of reflecting on complex issues of ethnic categorization. My aim has not been to demonstrate any specific historical outcomes. Rather, in the spirit of Johannes Fabian's classic statement on African popular culture studies, I have sought to offer a view into "how perceptions, experiences and problems, are being 'worked out' in an open, never-ending process" at a particular moment in history (Fabian 1978, 329). One element that is conspicuously missing from my analysis, as I have already noted, is a discussion of how denizens of the Swahili coast may have talked about the hybridized soundworlds of the binti Saad collective when they first entered into public circulation. But as I hope I have shown, a lack of access to verbal (meta) discourses in music research does not mean a lack of access to practices of critical reflection. Musical sound can also be a medium of this reflection—and one that deserves special attention. The exploration of ethnic boundaries that took place in and through the hybridized soundworlds of the binti Saad collective can never be fully translated into words. While musical communication necessarily takes place mostly "below normal levels of ratiocination" (Christgau 2005, 415), it is not merely subordinate or supplementary to verbal communication. Verbal discourse, including scholarly writing, can only ever *mediate* musical communication. "Language," after all, as C. S. Peirce and Lady Welby averred, "is only the extreme form of expression" (Hardwick 1977, 112). Human beings also share ideas through non-verbal modes of expression, including music, and "meaning," as linguistic anthropologist and ethnomusicologist David Samuels puts it, "is richer and more complex than what can be contained in a lexical gloss of a sign" (Samuels 2004, 194).

I bring this chapter to a close by insisting on the significance (and significance) of musical communication, because I believe it to be an essential basis for an ethno/musicology of the Indian Ocean world. Ultimately, my work here demonstrates that research on musical form can serve a purpose beyond that of "imagining the Indian Ocean world" (Alpers 2002) as a "cultural milieu" (Bose 2006) (as important as this may be). It can also enable us to explore how individuals and communities of this milieu imagine the Indian Ocean world for themselves.

NOTES

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1. Digital copies of the recordings discussed in the chapter are stored in the Andrew Eisenberg Collection of East African Commercial Sound Recordings, at http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyuad/ad_mc_035/.

2. Siti binti Saad and other members of the collective—including Mbaruk Talsam as well as the equally renowned Maalim Shaaban—recorded their first titles in 1928 and 1929 in Bombay, under the aegis of HMV (see Graebner 2004b). By 1930, they had become the region's first bona fide media celebrities.

3. A version of the original poem is included in Abdalla (1974).

4. A couple of years after the binti Saad collective recorded their first songs for HMV in Bombay, groups from Mombasa also recorded with HMV as well as other international record companies. Initiatives by Odeon and the French record company Pathé to record Mombasan musicians in 1930 are described in official EMI documents (Graebner 2004b, 3). HMV's role in recording Mombasans seems to be less well documented, but Laura Fair was able to retrieve information from an HMV catalog from 1930–31 pertaining to a couple dozen releases under the names of four different Mombasan singers. I am grateful to her for providing me with this information.

5. The terms and concepts I use in discussing aspects of the *Maqām* system are those of contemporary Arab music theory. While this theory is taught and studied on Zanzibar today, it would not have been familiar to the binti Saad collective—especially not during the interwar years, when it was still being standardized in Cairo (Marcus 1989, 12–41). It may be impossible at this point to reconstruct how the members of the binti Saad collective conceptualized and talked about *Maqām*. The smattering of notes on the matter in Matola et al. (1966) are suggestive but raise more questions than answers.

6. A *dūlāb* is often used in Arab music to quickly and efficiently establish the feeling of a melodic mode (*maqām*) (Farraj and Shumays 2019, 145–46; Touma 1996, 106). For this reason, it was often used on recordings of Arab music during the shellac era (roughly from the first decade of the twentieth century until the end of World War II), when recorded performances were limited to three-minute increments.

7. A “half-flat” pitch in *maqām*-based music is a diatonic pitch lowered by (approximately) one quarter-tone. Modes with a “half-flat” tonic generally resolve down to the tonic by a 3/4-step interval, producing “an unusual feeling of tonicization and resolution” (Farraj and Shumays 2019, 388). In most cases, including the one under discussion here, a *maqām* with a half-flat tonic is built on the *Sikāh* trichord, classically spelled E half-flat, F, G. These include *Maqām Sikāh*, *Maqām 'Irāq*, and *Maqām Huzām*, all of which fall in the *Sikāh* “family.” The modulation in this part of “Basahera” moves from *Maqām Bayātī* on G (the song's primary mode) to *Maqām 'Irāq* on A half-flat, by tonicizing the second scale-degree of *Maqām Bayātī* on G. Even today, the sound of a half-flat tonic is common in *ngoma* traditions of the coastal islands of northern Kenya and southern Somalia. One can hear it, for example, in this recent performance of *vugo* (a women's *ngoma*) from Chundwa Island: Anonymous, “VUGO LA TCHUNDWA2 LAMU,” Salim Ahmed, November 29, 2018, video, 14:13, <https://youtu.be/UWYz7op6584>.

8. Werner Graebner (2004a, 173–75), Hildegard Kiel (2012), and I have each held focus group interviews with accomplished Zanzibari musicians (different musicians in each case) aimed at gathering reactions to some of the earliest *taarab* recordings. (My interview was carried out with members of the Dhow Countries Music Academy *taarab* orchestra during their visit to NYU Abu Dhabi on September 26, 2019.) Graebner reports that his interviewees were “[astonished] that the music was so kaleidoscopic and that it featured quite a number of elements from local *ngoma*-dances” (174). Both Kiel and I found our interviewees puzzled by certain aspects of the recorded performances, including the melodic modes that were used, which they could not always identify.

9. For a brief history of DCMA, see Topp Fargion 2014, 184–89.

10. The only published compilation of poems by members of the binti Saad collective, *Waimbaji Wa Juzi* (Matola et al. 1966), contains a number of commentaries on the meanings of the poems from the last surviving member at the time, Maalim Shaaban, but almost no information about the musical settings of any of the poems.

11. Fair builds on Janet Topp Fargion's (Topp 1994) work on the history of Zanzibari *taarab* in developing this theoretical perspective and credits her with the idea that the music was in some sense about "belonging."
12. Bakhtin adopted *stylization* from the Russian formalists, who used it to mean an overt appropriation of a foreign style that was too playful to be considered simple imitation but not playful enough to be considered parody (Ogden 2005, 528). Bakhtin added a sociological dimension to the concept by conceptualizing it as a mode of "double-voicing."
13. The former extreme in music is sometimes referred to as *pastiche* (though this term is rarely used beyond Western contexts). The latter is often referred to as parody, though Bakhtin's phrase "rhetorical parody" is probably more appropriate.
14. On comedic performance in the live performances of the collective, see Fair (2001, 224).
15. Hassan (1998, 4) explains, "The word *dān* is derived from *dandana* which translates literally as 'humming' or 'singing to oneself', meaning a melody without words. By extension, it also refers to any song using phonetic derivations from the word *dān* such as *dāna*, *dānī* etc."
16. It is also possible to understand the line as referencing the fact that *kangas* are normally sold as a single piece of cloth containing a matching pair that must be separated by the consumer with scissors. In either case, Mbaruk seems to be playing with the vivid imagery in the common Swahili idiom "*kukata maini*," which is a way of saying "to hurt (someone's) feelings" but literally means "to cut the liver."
17. The reference to *boriti*, which I have translated as "ceiling beams" but specifically refers to mangrove poles, might also be heard as a reference to dockwork, which many hadhrami men undertook in that period.

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