

ISLAMIC CULTURAL CODES IN SWAHILI DANCES

This paper is about a selection of music and danced events as performed by members of the Swahili populace on the Kenyan coast. The Swahili are a Muslim African people who are characterized by a stratified urban culture of many centuries duration. In this paper I illustrate the integration of Islamic cultural codes into Swahili culture and the synthesis of these two cultural codes into a particular set of performances.

The Kiswahili¹ word, ngoma, means 'a drum,' or 'a dance' (the verb form is 'kutaza ngoma,' literally 'to play a drum' or 'to play a dance') or 'music,' and I will use it throughout this essay instead of the phrase 'music and dance event.' I wish to avoid the word 'dance' because I don't want to limit readers' conceptions of these performances to the notion of movements performed while standing on the feet. Some of the performances I will describe take place while the participants are seated, but they are nonetheless dancing and they fit into the Swahili category ngoma.

The Swahili ngoma I describe are religious in the sense that the music and some of the movements are derived from some pan-Islamic forms.² Music, in this context, is frequently controversial, as it often is in Muslim societies. Some forms are considered halal, that is, legitimate and even beneficial, but there are also forms of music that are haram and these are to be avoided. According to Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, Muslim law, scholarship and popular consensus all agree that different varieties of musical performances can be conceptualized hierarchically. All agree that some musical forms are acceptable without question, but below these come forms which are permitted, but not necessarily beneficial.³ At another level below this type of music is an unnamed category that represents a 'gray area' where individuals are allowed to make their own judgements.

Religious authorities give standards of judgement for the faithful to follow, but there are no 'cut and dried' rules of behavior. Finally come the haram categories of music at the very bottom of the hierarchy, where the bad context(s) and associations at this kind of performance are thought to make the music positively harmful. On the following page I have reproduced al Faruqi's hierarchy of musical forms (1985).

Table: HIERARCHY OF HANDASAH AL SAWT GENRES
from al Faruqi (1985)

	Qur'anic Chant (qira'sh)	
NON-MUSIQA	Religious Chants (adhan, tahlil/talbiyyah, takbirat madih, tasbith, and tahmid)	
	Chanted Poetry with noble themes (shi'r)	
	Family/Celebration Music (lullabies, women's songs, wedding songs, etc.)	LEGITIMATE (HALAL)
	'Occupational' Music (caravan chants, shepherd's tunes, work songs, etc.)	
	Military Music (Tabl Khanah)	
MUSIQA	Vocal/Instrumental Improvisations (i.e. layali, avaz, taqasin, istikhbar, etc.)	
	Serious Metered Songs (dawr, muwashshah, tasnif, etc.) and Instrumental Music (bashraf, da'irah, sama'i, dulab, etc.)	CONTROVERSIAL (HALAL, MUBUH MAKTUH, HARAM)
	Music Related to Pre-Islamic or Non-Islamic Origins	
	Sensuous Music Associated With Unacceptable Contexts	ILLEGITIMATE (HARAM)

Notice that there is no mention of dances or dancing, but that omission constitutes the central issue of this paper. Field experience permits me to say that the dance is a hidden theme extending throughout these categories. Starting at the bottom of this diagram (instead of at the top with halal forms), one can easily imagine that the performance context of the musical form haram (sensuous music), includes female dancers. Taqasim and layali at level 4 (musiqā), together with the other types of music included there, are familiar to dancers.

At a still higher level, within the category of women's songs and wedding songs, we find dances involved with the 'Family Celebration' types of music. Finally, almost at the top of the hierarchy (classified with religious chants) are known to be forms of dancing which are the movements incorporated into Sufi rituals. I didn't see any of these in Kenya; however, that doesn't mean that they don't exist. The more esoteric, the 'inner' or 'mystical' dimensions of a religion, if they are genuine, rarely advertise themselves (cf. Williams, 1976, for discussion in a Christian context).

There are three remarkable points about all of this: (1) No danced forms of expression on any level are mentioned by al Faruqi, which is not a criticism of her exemplary work, because customary forms of speech and writing about her subject usually omit any mention of the dance or the bodies of the agents; (2) dances and dancing comprise a silent, 'hidden dimension' of Islamic musical categories; and (3) the strong emphasis on speech (oral and written) and musical forms of worship, with its habitual neglect of the acts, actions or bodily manifestations of worship are similar to historical Christian treatments of the same subjects -- a topic which will be explored in detail another time. For now, we will concentrate on the Swahili ngoma.

Of those which I will describe here, the majority are concerned with the topmost categories of the hierarchy of music, i.e. "Non-Musiga." Koranic chanting and other types of religious chants, worship, praise and invocation are well-known to Swahili people because they are part of their general received Islamic traditions. These forms are imported from outside and they are faithful copies of their Arabic originals -- insofar as these can be maintained. The third category, "Chanted poetry with noble themes" is an area where Swahili innovation has produced a genre that synthesizes Islamic cultural codes for music with Swahili cultural codes of social status and it is to this code that we shall now turn.

Swahili towns are best characterized as a few big plums in a lot of surrounding pudding. Their history is not unlike the Italian city-states of the European Renaissance. These were major ports for the exchange of exotic, costly imports and exports, supported by a broad base of agriculture in the surrounding hinterlands and by fishing and coastal trading on the fringes of the sea. Agriculture, fishing and the manual labor required for coastal trading were largely run by slave labor in the Italian context, and the major towns had populations of slaves as household servants, skilled craftsmen and laborers. Swahili society, too, was highly stratified and class conscious, with the extremes of class distinctions -- wealthy merchant and humble slave -- all living cheek by jowl in the towns.

The highest class called themselves waungwana. Their status was based on the following attributes: (1) a prestigious pedigree, including some non-African ancestors, usually Persians or Gulf Arabs; (2) long-standing family residence in the town, preferably in the stone-built areas rather than in the mud and thatch house areas; (3) wealth and the proper material display of wealth, including a two to three storey stone house with imported furniture, dishes, fabrics and such; (4) a purer form of Islam with scrupulous observations and devotion to its precepts; and finally, (5) aristocratic pursuits such as the study of religion and poetry composition. Last, but never least, comes patronage of ngoma events and associations.

Swahili ngoma range across a wide spectrum, as do most sophisticated ranges of danced idioms belonging to a particular ethnicity. The Swahili are described by early explorers, British officials and ethnographers (see Bakari, 1981, and Allen, 1974) as being obsessed by dance competitions. In fact, they seem to be obsessed by class distinctions, and they continuously jockey for rank and prestige within their class system. Ngoma were (and are) a principal means of gaining prestige and demonstrating waungwana (i.e., elite or highest) status. Swahili ngoma are certainly entertaining, but they are also serious business from a standpoint of social relations and political influence: reputations, alliances, political factions and fortunes could all be confirmed (or possibly lost) by the relative success or failure of a huge public ngoma.

These ngoma have at least four principal characteristics which are part of the Swahili cultural code of dances. First, they are extremely competitive; individuals, teams, moieties within towns, and whole towns compete with each other. Second, performances are preferably as big and as public as possible, often taking the form of processions through the town. Third, ngoma are accompanied by witty songs which ridicule the competition. Fourth, ngoma are evaluated according to the expenses incurred for costumes, staging and feasting which is held afterward.

Leaving aside the great variety of ngoma, I will focus on the religious category, shown in the following table. The reader may visualize this table juxtaposed with the "Legitimate" (Halal), the upper section of the previous table:

	Name of Dance	
<u>Pan- Islamic</u>	Dhikri (zikr)	
	Samai	
	Zefe (zefa) ⁴	
<u>Area of Synthesis</u>	Maulidi	
	1) ya Barzanji	Pepo (zar) Cults
	2) ya mrama	Spirit Possession
	3) ya utaya	
	Zamuni	
<u>Pure Swahili</u>	Tware la ndia	

The first group above is basically similar to al Faruqi's category #2, which is the received part of Islam that the Swahili steadfastly follow. In this category are the familiar pan-Islamic forms of dhikakri or zikr, the rituals of Sufi tarīqas.⁵ Swahili do participate in tarīqas and perform Dhikri ngoma; but there is an interesting contrast which will not be pursued in this paper, between the Northern Kenyan Swahili and the southern Tanzanian Swahili, where Sufi brotherhoods are much more common, following a typical Swahili pattern of class participation (Nimitz, 1981).

Given that ngoma sponsorship will enhance waungwana status, and that devotion to Islam is a waungwana attribute, it is difficult to imagine a more fortuitous combination than a Swahili ngoma form that is simultaneously large, public, competitive -- and religious. In fact, such an ngoma was invented by the Swahili and, as we shall see from the following description, it is a synthesis of Islamic and Swahili cultural codes.

The first of these I will examine is called maulidi. The name derives from an Arabic term, mawlid or mulid, meaning a poetic recitation of the events surrounding the birthday of the Prophet. Maulidis can be recited on any important occasion, but are more frequently performed on the anniversary of his birthdate. This recitation form is pan-Islamic, but the Swahili have added their own variations and adaptations.

The particular maulidi poem that is almost always used for performances is by Barzanji, a Hadrami⁶ born in the seventeenth century. It is recited by a soloist who pauses between verses of the story for refrains or choruses sung by the audience and the

musicians. At the climactic verse, everyone stands and sings with special fervor. Rose water and incense are distributed through the audience. A brief sermon may follow, then some refreshments -- a drink and a sweet -- are distributed. Maulidi can be sung for small family occasions as in devotional exercises or they can be included in large public events, for example, as part of weddings. They are most frequently performed during the month of the Prophet's birthday, which moves forward each year of the lunar calendar, as Ramadan, Id al Fitr, and other Islamic holy days do. The biggest public gatherings are seen at that time.

The largest Maulidi performance in Kenya today is to be found in Lamu town, one of the oldest traditional Swahili locations which is distinguished for its religious learning and famous poets. Maulidi week on the coast of Kenya is somewhat reminiscent of Christmas week in the United States: there are lots of parties, family feasts, traveling, visiting, and fun, combined with serious religious activities. The focal point of the week is the Maulidi recitation given in the biggest mosque in Lamu on Thursday night. Hundreds of people attend, travelling from all over East Africa, because it is a major religious event. However, the form of Maulidi now to be seen in Lamu is a fairly recent form. Fifty years ago, maulidi ngoma were quite different. They did not consist of a single major event for all coastal Muslims, but were composed of intra-town moiety competitions in the purest Swahili tradition. These earlier maulidi had special names, i.e., maulidi ya mrama and maulidi ya utaya (see previous chart). These have nearly disappeared by now, but they provide instructive examples of how Swahili synthesize form and function.

Maulidi ya mrama, has two names. Mrama means 'shaking,' and refers to an ecstatic trembling movement that the participants were sometimes observed doing. The alternate name, maulidi ya Kiswahili refers to the language used in the performance. That is, after the formulaic Arabic segments of the recitation, the soloist could continue the theme in verses composed in the Swahili language. The seated participants then move in a characteristic pattern. They bow from the waist, first over the right knee, then over the left. One hand is outstretched over the knee; the other held over the heart. As the participants' bodies swing from right and left, they alter the outstretched hands to correspond with the body's direction. The swinging, rhythmic, repetitive motion of the torso, accompanied by a 'dipping' motion of the head, is a movement typical of trance states, which is familiar to those who are familiar with zar spirit possession dances and some forms of the dhirki Sufi rituals. The third maulidi listed on the chart (utaya) has not been performed, I was told, for more than twenty years. I therefore have only scant information on this form, and am not sure how significantly it differs from maulidi ya mrama. The

name utaya refers to the cheek or jaw, and participants are said to have clasped alternate cheeks with one hand while bowing over alternate knees, as described above. Poetry composition was part of this maulidi as well.

These two forms of maulidi were both in vogue during the 1920s and 1930s, when their popularity was apparently at its height. Most of this information was taken from The Sacred Meadows by El Zain, an anthropologist who worked on the coast circa 1972. His information about this period of the 1920s and 1930s comes from historical anecdotes and other oral data which provided few precise dates and details of performance. The fact that does seem to emerge clearly is that these maulidi performances were marked as specifically Swahili types of competitive ngoma, because they incorporated elements of Islamic tradition into a uniquely Swahili cultural code.

From the best evidence we have for this period, we know that the waungwana of Lamu sponsored two major maulidi leaders who staged alternate performances in two town moities. Their sponsorship included payments for poetry compositions which the leaders recited. They also gave money to spend on street lighting and other decorations, besides providing the resources for rose water, incense and other paraphernalia. At its fiercest, the competition went on to include feasting on a scale comparable to that of a potlatch on the North-west coast of America; one side killed two cows this week, the other side killed four cows the next, and so on. One maulidi was reported to have continued each night for nine successive nights until the British commissioner finally put a stop to such 'wasteful' behavior.

It seems that after this period, Maulidi performances and other sorts of competitive ngoma of this form gradually declined. The reasons for the decline are complex, but they were primarily economic, in the form of pressures created by events which impinged on Swahili culture from the outside. World War II further disrupted these traditions through the dislocation of Kenya's economy, for at this time, independence movements in Kenya were gathering force.

Africans began to look to each other for support in independence activities, but the Swahili were suspect among them. They could not seem to shake the image of themselves as slave-raiders and non-African opportunists. Because of this and for the first time, a kind of overall ethnic identity of these people resulted: that is, the notion took hold that the Swahili were one ethnic unit, instead of several similar competing town-identified groups. This, I think, is what explains the survival of the later maulidi as a unifying coastal religious observance and holiday. It is now an event which is by and for the coastal people who comprise the Muslim part of Kenya, and it is

controlled and sponsored by the Swahili elite in the heart of traditional Swahili culture, the town of Lamu.

We may well ask, "Has the culture changed?" "Is the code for Swahili status different?" "Has maulidi changed because competition, conspicuous displays of wealth, and the consciousness of social position are no longer important to Swahili people?" The answer is "No, indeed it hasn't." The rivalries have not gone underground, but they have become underage, so to speak. The contestants are now little boys from about six to twelve years of age. The ngoma is called Zamuni (see the previous chart), which is a new ngoma which I was told appeared in the last ten years, more or less. Zamuni retains many of the elements of the old maulidi competitions: it is first a religious ngoma and it has patrons among the wealthy elite; it features a conspicuous display of costumes and it is produced in the form of competitions within towns, and between towns, as we shall see.

First, an open area between houses is cleared. If sufficient funding is made available, a fancy awning is erected, microphones and speakers are set up, and mats are arranged over the dirt section for spectators. The musicians, mainly older boys who are sometimes assisted by adult singers, take their place in one corner of the performance space. The musical instruments are the acknowledged 'religious' ones which are permitted in other pan-Islamic genres of music, including flutes, bell-less tambourines (tware or def), and small drums (kigoma).

The leading singer begins a standard religious chant, and the dancers file in. Usually a double line enters, then winds around the dance area, splitting into two lines which travel around the space separately, rejoining each other for a promenade down the center of the space. This part of the performance ends when the boys have taken positions in a rank and file order with a drill leader at the front. To the uninitiated observer, they might look like a physical education class about to start exercises. One of my informants made this comparison directly, saying that even the movements performed were imitations of calisthenics.

However, the boys are not dressed in school uniforms, but in white konzu prayer dress which is the same as that worn by adult Swahili men. It is unusual for boys to have this clothing because they are rather expensive. With the konzu, they wear kofia (elaborately embroidered prayer caps) which come in several named varieties and can cost up to fifty or sixty dollars. So far, these clothes are simply standard male dress clothing. Over the konzu, the boys wear vests, a uniform item for all of them which is black or a bright color such as orange or green, trimmed with gold braid and linen in flashy-colored satin. Adult men do not wear these vests. From the best information I possess, I

believe that they are imitations of what Gulf Arabs are thought to have worn in the past.

The movements of this ngoma are adaptations of some maulidi movements, and are not unlike dhikri movements, as far as I can tell. They are performed standing and also while sitting. The boys step forward diagonally onto the right foot, raise their right hands above their heads and over the extended foot, alternating the combined gesture/step to the other side. The opposite hand is held over the heart. They rotate the torso, and sometimes the whole body, in order to repeat the movement phrase facing 180 degrees from the starting position. If there is a sitting portion included in the performance, they will bow at the waist with the same arm extending over the knee towards which the torso bows. Sometimes one may see a segment which includes a mock sword fight between two opponents, who use silver painted, wooden swords. After all the variations are complete, the dancers file out the same side as they entered, and the music diminishes to a close. The spectators cheer the performers and are very supportive and generally uncritical of the ngoma.

It should be obvious that the little boys who participate in this new ngoma do not organize the performance themselves. The parents must have as much interest, if not more interest, than the boys themselves. The organizational unit for these ngoma is the Koran school, which are themselves sponsored and supported in many cases by wealthy leaders of the community. A man's son attends the Koran school that is affiliated with the mosque the father uses regularly. Adult men choose a mosque not by proximity to their homes, but by social class, wealth, and family pedigree. The patronage of Koran school teams is a highly valued and prestigious activity for the parents.

Significant here is how closely zamuni performances are tied to maulidi performances, in that both are performed most frequently during the month of the Prophet's birthday. South of Lamu, in Mombasa, where there is a much larger Swahili community, I observed one or two zamuni performances per week during that period and there were two maulidis at night during the same time period. The biggest coastal event of maulidi season is the performance in Lamu in front of the main mosque as described previously. This coincides with the most intense zamuni competition as well, also in Lamu on the same night, following the communal event. After the communal event with hundreds of people singing together in front of the largest mosque in Lamu the Swahili break up into smaller groups which compete in various ngoma on through the night. The zamuni teams meet and perform consecutively in some of the less central mosques. I was told that one team came from as far away as Tanzania to compete. At the same time as the zamuni competitions, older men, known as the 'sheikhs of poetry' were meeting for a maulidi ya mrama. So the two kinds of performances took place on the same night, in the

same town; that is in the religious center of the coast.

The concatenation of performances and religious ngoma are, I think, directed at two different audiences. The Riyadah maulidi -- the very large communal event -- has only appeared after its expanded audience from all areas of Kenya came on the scene. This maulidi is a communal rite of re-affirmation of Muslim identity and a kind of 'ethnic separateness' from common Kenyan national identity. It is the ngoma ya pwani, 'dance of the coast', the Coast's own unique festival.

But the dialogue among Swahili groups is still an ongoing concern. The norm of competition to establish and enhance social rank is still part of the standards for exemplary Swahili behavior; thus, without detracting from the main performance and message, zamuni competitions serve the purpose of after-hours expression of traditional Swahili ngoma ideals.

Conclusion

This paper provides a concrete example of an interesting form of cultural syncretism consisting of orthodox Islamic structures and indigenous traditional embellishments and survivals. Specifically, maulidi and zumani combine orthodox forms of dress, music and ritual, including specific movements ('dance steps') found in Islamic rituals everywhere, with Swahili ideas of competition, piety, displays of wealth and consciousness of social rank. It has been said many times that the Swahili are masters of adoption, adaptation and assimilation. The maulidi and zamuni allow a 'piece by piece' breakdown, as it were, of elements which have been adopted or adapted from Islam, plus the easily discernible indigenous Swahili attributes which are considered essential for local cultural meaning and expressions of identity. It is in these ways that I believe the examples given are instructive both for comparative work and their possible theoretical implications.

Finally, I would want to say something about choosing aspects of the dance as an ethnographic focal point. I have attempted to analyze the Swahili dance forms as elements of a specific, Islamic cultural code. I think dances are particularly appropriate for such treatments because dances are themselves 'codes.' A danced event is a flesh and blood event with concrete attributes such as costumes, music, movement, staging, participants selected, and observers reacting. It is a confirmation of patterns seen elsewhere in the same cultural complex. In fact, I would argue that this confirmatory (or affirmatory) feature of danced events is the main reason behind why people perform dances. They offer concrete examples and the possibility of formal, constituent analyses of what may be only vaguely perceived observations made with regard to other types of social activity.

If more anthropologists could drop their cultural stereotypes of what dancing consists, which is often little more than the idea that it is some personal, individual expression of affective emotions -- as depicted in J. Pfeiffer's cartoons -- they might find that a very rich source of data is waiting for them, which has been largely unexploited and ignored.

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NOTES

1. The Swahili language (KiSwahili) and people have been much confused in Western thought and perception. The large number of Arabic loan words put the African nature of the language into question. Several scholars, especially Nurse and Spear (1985) have thoroughly documented the Bantu origins, sound system, and grammar of KiSwahili. Today it is spoken from the Somali border in the north to the southern Tanzanian border and as far inland as Zaire. It is the official language of Tanzania, but in Kenya faces stiff competition from English. The Standard Swahili of textbooks is based on KiNguja, the dialect of Zanzibar, so-called 'Ki-Missionary'. KiSwahili was in the past dismissed as a 'pidgin' of Arabic and Bantu; this is now disproved (ibid.) but in fact a true pidgin of Swahili and English is said to be developing west of the coastal region of native speakers (Hein:1979).

The confusion over the origin and ethnicity of the Swahili people (WaSwahili) also centers around that troublesome word 'Arabic'. The confusion was perpetuated by early colonialist beliefs about the urban coastal culture. It was assumed that sophisticated aspects of urban life, especially the architecture, must have been imported, just as the religion of Islam had been. This mistake has been put to rest by historians (Allen:1974; 1981) and archaeologists (Connah:1987) who now regard Swahili culture as an indigenous development with significant cultural borrowings from around the Indian Ocean region. The Swahili people themselves use the label 'Arab' or 'WaArabu' in an unexpected manner to designate people who constitute an elite in urban culture and who trace their ancestors to Oman, Yemen, and the neighboring Arabic-speaking areas. The WaArabu, however, were born in Africa, do not speak Arabic, have more ancestors of African than extra-African origin, and are the product of thoroughly assimilated immigrants of the past. Modern Arabic-speaking immigrants or visitors are called WaShihiri (Leinhardt: 159:232).

2. As, for example, Dhikri (zikr), Samai, and Zefe (zefa). See table on page 150.
3. See al Faruqi (1985).
4. Zefe is the Swahili form of the Arabic Zeffa. Zefe are religious processions only, whereas the Arabic term Zeffa includes a wider variety of public processions.
5. Tarigas; literally "orders" or "associations," similar to the notion of religious "orders," such as the Franciscan Order, Dominican Order, etc.
6. A "Hadrami" is a person from the Hadramaut coast, between Yemen and Oman.
7. Just as in the U.S., the 'Little Leagues' of baseball, soccer, etc., do not organize themselves.

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