



## *Taarab*

*The Voice of Zanzibar*



DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “Taarab: The Voice of Zanzibar” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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## Abstract

Historians of Taarab postulate Sultan Seyid Bargash of Zanzibar to be the progenitor of the music form. Prior to coming into power, Bargash was exiled to India, which fuelled his development of a court culture in Zanzibar, where music would play a central element. Instruments were brought into Zanzibar from Egypt and Malawi, and a small musical group that performed exclusively for the Sultan in his palace was formed. In addition to this, small sailing vessels known as *dhow*s, brought lyrics and tunes that combined with the Sultan's music, slowly amalgamating, amplifying and intensifying the music to form the Taarab that is known today. The *dhow*s brought with them a variety of cultures to meet at the confluence point of Zanzibar. This fusion is also clearly demonstrated through the range of instruments used in the Taarab orchestra: *kidumbak*, *oud*, *qanun*, violin, accordion, tambourine, double bass, to name a few.

The music is no more restricted to the elite class, but has stretched to encompass every aspect of Zanzibari society; it is sung at weddings, *Eid*, festivals, parties and concerts. The lyrics sing of love and passion, and celebrate the small joys in life, hence encompassing audiences that vary across genders, ages, class, race, and nationality, with no exclusion. Furthermore, due to its universal acceptance in Zanzibar, it was also used as a tool of revolt and reform, with lyrics inciting people to take charge of their own fate, incorporating a novel element into the music. Famous performers are invited and travel outside of the country to spread their music and culture, going as far as Norway in Europe. For an art form predominated by males, Taarab is experiencing a more subtle revolution within itself, with the inclusion of more female instrument players. A further development is the emergence of a "modern" Taarab form known as *Rusha Roho*, a more titillating and explicit form propagated by the younger generation of Zanzibar.

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## **1. Introduction**

Boundless energy. Unbridled positivity. Eyes flashing with excitement. Carefree smiles. Women show off their shapely and rhythmic bodies as they dance uninhibitedly to the music, as their voices rise in melodious harmony to permeate the air with Swahili lyrics. Each woman wears a vibrant, colourful piece of traditional clothing, offset by the usual traditional white kaftan worn by the men; together they form an eclectic collection of bright hues, patterns and styles synonymous with the vivacity of their performance.

The music vibrates with zest and vigour, uplifting the spirits of anyone who listens to it. The performers do not stand still for a moment, and those listening find themselves automatically moving their feet to the upbeat rhythm. Supplements to the voices are a variety of instruments, popular amongst them being the keyboard, *qanun*, *oud*, *ney*, accordion, and percussion instruments.

The word “*Taarab*” itself is borrowed from Arabic, meaning joy, bliss, delight associated with music. As a form of music, it is over a century old, pioneered first by Siti binti Saad, a powerful woman who broke out of the stereotypes of her time, being the first woman in East Africa to record her own music. In her legacy followed Fatuma binti Baraka, or commonly known, Bi Kidude, a Zanzibari born *Taarab* singer. Other famous *Taarab* singers hail from Mombasa and Somalia.

*Taarab* has signature characteristics of folk music, which it could be categorised under. The International Folk Music Council in 1954 defined folk music as “the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission” (Mills, Isabelle). It is “music which has originated with an individual composer and subsequently has been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community” (Mills, Isabelle). In concord with the definition, *Taarab* too is transmitted through oral tradition, whether pertaining to new compositions or old ones, and slowly passes into the unwritten legacy of the Zanzibari community. As is common with folk music, *Taarab* is heavily intertwined with the national culture of Zanzibar; its nativity and evolution is linked to the journey and story of the island. Folk music is also strongly associated with the celebration of events, whether private or public. It is seen that *Taarab* is sung mostly at weddings, the perfect setting for their lively



and cheerful performance. However, it is also performed during Eid, parties, and festivals related to the history of Zanzibar, such as Revolution Day. Taarab has no one composer, and neither do the songs have any copyrights; tracks are simply passed down through the generations, and with time, also merge with elements from other cultures such as Indian, Egyptian, Persian etc.

Upcoming modern day Taarab forms are gaining popularity; groups like the Zanzibar Stars have imbibed elements of Taarab into their performances.

### **1.1. Research Question:**

The research question was a venture “**To study the form and context of Zanzibari Taarab in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**”. An operational definition of the terms in the research questions is imperative for a clear understanding of the question.

### **Operational Definitions:**

- **Form:** “Form” refers to an exploration of the various components of a taarab performance such as the lyrics, the rhythmic patterns, the instruments involved, the performers and their role.
- **Context:** “Context” refers to an enquiry into the influencers of taarab music in Zanzibar. Under this, the researchers intend to go into the socio-cultural context in which taarab is embedded. This includes the history and origin of the various aspects of taarab as identified under the “form” of taarab music. Further, the study endeavours to understand the location (i.e. where Taarab is performed) and occasion (i.e. the reason for the performance) that calls for a taarab performance.
- **Zanzibari Taarab:** The research statement identifies Zanzibari Taarab in specific so as to narrow the scope of the study to the strain of taarab music practised in Zanzibar only. This is to eliminate any confusion with other forms of the art form such as, Kenyan, Egyptian or Turkish taarab.

- **21<sup>st</sup> century:** The research hopes to explore the transformation/s in Taarab as a result of the newly emerging forms and hence its struggle to survive in this context in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **1.2. Aims and Objectives:**

The aims and objectives of the research undertaken were as follows:

1. To document the various components of a Zanzibari Taarab performance
2. To understand the reasons behind Taarab's prominence in Zanzibar specifically
3. To explore the role of Taarab in the lives of its performers and locals
4. To uncover the underlying religious connotations within the art form

An elaboration to bring lucidity to the study follows:

### **1. Document the various components of a Zanzibari Taarab performance**

As with every art form, there is a certain structure to Taarab performance, from the choice of its opening song, to the participation of audiences, to the location in which Taarab performances take place. This is what makes up the distinct nature of the art form. The researchers will document any such components that make up a typical Taarab performance in Zanzibar.

### **2. Understand the reasons behind Taarab's prominence in Zanzibar specifically**

*Taarab* has bloomed in the Tanzanian archipelago of Zanzibar particularly, and the aim is to understand the cause of this prominence. Is it the people that made Taarab happen? Do the performers add a special touch to their performance? Is it due to the historical significance of singers such as Siti Binti Saad and Bi Kidude that left a heritage the locals feel they must not let go of?

### **3. Study the role of Taarab in the lives of its performers and locals**

Music stems from great people, ones who understand how to capture the soul through song, and once it is established, it wraps itself around the hearts of people, forming part of their culture, heritage, and daily life. The researchers would like to see if *taarab* has made such an impact, and if it has, on whom? Does everyone in Zanzibar

listen to taarab? Is it simply a way to liven weddings? Is it a tourist attraction? Have locals found a way to earn income from it?

**4. Study any religious connotations or significance within the art form**

Taarab is said to contain mentions of Allah, Ali and other prominent figures of Islam. Its performances are also observed during the times of Eid, and the month of Ramadan. In an island that is 90% Muslim, it's interesting to wonder: does the art form have any religious connotations?

### **1.3. Rationale**

In choosing Taarab as the topic of investigation for this project, the researchers were faced with three main questions to answer: Why choose to research a form of music? Why choose Taarab specifically? Why study this form of music in Zanzibar?

Having previously undertaken research for the Discover India Program on Qawwali music in Delhi, the researchers were keen to extend this interest in music beyond territorial borders. Believing that music is an integral part of any culture, as much as art or dance, and in investigating the formative music forms of Zanzibar, one hoped to acquire a deeper understanding of Tanzanian culture. There was a consensus that, though it varies in different parts of the country, music at its core is a reflection of the societies and communities that shape it.

Then, initial research showed the existence of a form of music called ‘Taarab’ in the African archipelago of Zanzibar. It owes its origins to sailors from Asia and the Middle East, as well as the patronage of Omani Sultan Bargash, but Taarab gained popularity after musician Siti binti Saad recorded in His Master’s Voice and Columbia Records in Bombay, India in the 1930’s. To researchers who come from different cultural backgrounds, it was intriguing to understand the music of the Zanzibaris through this lens.

Although located at the crossroads of trade routes in the Indian Ocean basin, Taarab of Zanzibar has received little serious academic attention, especially in Indian scholarship. Resources on the topic were sparse and many were in African languages that thus remain inaccessible to academics outside the continent. In travelling to Zanzibar, in understanding the modern context and form of Taarab, the researchers endeavored to bridge this gap in whatever little way possible.

#### 1.4. Scope of Research

As outlined in the rationale, the researchers noted that Taarab is one of Zanzibar's best known forms of music but academic insight into this art form is sporadic and often in languages inaccessible to English-speaking academics. This has resulted in a limited number of scholars who have access to secondary information of Taarab. In recent years, academic pursuits such as Hanna Hoyem's *VOICES IN A ZANZIBARI CULTURE: Performing Taarab in the Changing Society of Stone Town* (2009) and Janet Topp-Fargion's *Taarab Music in Zanzibar in the Twentieth Century: A Story of 'Old is Gold' and Flying Spirits* (2014) are informative, updated sources on the art form. In addition, DHOW Countries Music Academy in Stone Town, Zanzibar has encouraged its professors and graduate students to take on the research of Africa's traditional music, Taarab included.

In order to add to the study of Zanzibar's music, the researchers attempted to research the form and context of Zanzibari Taarab, limiting the time period to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (although an overview of its history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been undertaken as well). In documenting the components that make a Taarab performance what it is today, one attempts to highlight the differences between traditional and modern Taarab. In exploring the role of the art form on Zanzibari society, the reasons behind its prevalence in the island of Zanzibar specifically (where it is even more popular than in Egypt, where the form is said to have originated) and whether Taarab contains any religious connotations in a Muslim-majority country, one tries to look at Taarab through a socio-geographical framework.

The research involves a combination of primary data collected over the period of ten days in Zanzibar Island and secondary data collected pre and post-field. The researchers met with scholars, practitioners and used their own observations from performances and travel to collate data and analyse this, keeping in mind the aims and objectives. It is but one of some research done on Zanzibar's music in English, but it remains one of the only projects undertaken by Indian scholarship on the island's art forms.

## **1.5. Research Methodology**

As the review of literature shows, there is some kind of discussion that has been stimulated within Africa about Taarab. However, this is limited to certain pockets of the continent. In Tanzania, Egypt and parts of Kenya, Taarab is an integral part of local life, but in some countries in close proximity such as Mozambique, it's relatively unknown. Thus, it is understandable that there is little knowledge of the art form that exists outside of Africa. Additionally, with the exception of some books in English, language was a barrier in attaining information for other resources are in Swahili and/or other regional African languages. In some cases, resources weren't even available online. Therefore, the on-field study was integral to truly understanding Taarab. In meeting performers, visiting institutes of performing arts and attending Taarab concerts, primary data could be collected and collated. The methodology of research goes as follows:

### **Sources for Data Collection**

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used by the researchers. This is because, outside of the researchers' on-field study, secondary data aided in a more rounded analysis of what has (or has not) been discussed about Taarab till date. Secondary data was acquired through numerous sources such as:

- Journals
- Books
- Audio visual materials (such as videos and recordings)
- Newspaper articles

In addition, the archives and libraries that were accessed for the aforementioned information were:

- The State University of Zanzibar
- DHOW Countries Music Academy

## Qualitative Research

Qualitative research aims at gaining a deep understanding of a certain subject as compared to a surface-level description of a large sample. Here, the qualitative research conducted was:

- a. Descriptive
- b. Exploratory
- c. Explanatory

The research is **descriptive** as it covered a description of the themes of Taarab songs, the possible skills and techniques involved and an overview of various aspects that make Taarab performances. It also included a study of the innovations within the art form and its distinct elements.

It is **exploratory** as it aims to uncover the changes that Taarab has undergone from its original form to its modern adaptations (such as *rusha roho*), look at livelihood of its performers, and its significance within the archipelago of Zanzibar itself.

It is **explanatory** as the researchers attempt to explain the absence of active scholarly documentation of Taarab. The researchers documented their experience, their observations and their understanding of Taarab as an art form through explanation of performances, performers, etc.

## Sampling

Sampling allows for observations and information to be obtained from a large population as a means of statistical analysis. (Investopedia) For the purpose of the qualitative research in this study, the researchers made a conscious decision to employ various types of non-probability sampling as a tool of data collection. This was due to the fact that the total universe was unknown. In using convenience sampling, the sample size could be decided on the basis of situations and availability. In using snowball sampling, the researchers were put in contact with other individuals who could further the scope of this research. The samples included:

- I. **Scholars of Zanzibari Taarab:** Hailing from both Zanzibar and countries outside of Africa, the scholars approached the art form from the lens of their different areas of research, as well as their own cultures, to give a holistic overview of Taarab. Much of their research came from their own primary research in the archipelago.
- II. **Organisation dedicated to the preservation and upholding of African music culture:** In visiting DHOW Countries Music Academy (DCMA) an NGO that is dedicated to preserving African cultural traditions, the researchers were made aware of the decline of traditional Taarab in favor of its modern streams, and the attempts made by organisations such as this to preserve it. Many of the concerts and seminars held in Zanzibar on Taarab in recent times are attributed to DHOW Countries Music Academy.
- III. **Practitioners of Zanzibari Taarab:** Speaking to performers themselves allowed the researchers to see the art form through the eyes of the very people who keep it alive. It also gave an inside perspective into the intricacies that come with performing Taarab, especially for its female artists.
- IV. **Locals of Zanzibar:** As one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Zanzibar, Taarab performances are visited by one and all. Interacting with the locals of the island gave the researchers insight into its role in the lives of the Zanzibari people, especially as they have been listening to the art



form in all its shapes and forms throughout their lives.

- V. **Government officials:** While conducting primary research in Zanzibar, the researchers had the opportunity to interact with not one but two senior government officials, one from Zanzibar and the other from India. Speaking to them allowed the researchers to gauge the importance of the art form on a larger platform.

Overall, using these sampling methods provided a much better understanding of Zanzibari Taarab by approaching people with differing perspectives, coming from different walks of life. Their individual understandings of the art form gave the researchers varying information to utilize and interpret.

**Figure 1:** *Samples created resultant of the information obtained*

Samples	Interviewee
Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. Mitchel Strumpf</li> <li>• Mr. Mohammed Issa Matona</li> <li>• Ms. Amina Omar</li> <li>• Ms. Mariam Hamdani</li> </ul>
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DHOW Countries Music Academy</li> </ul>
Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. Mohammed Issa Matona</li> <li>• Ms. Amina Omar</li> <li>• Mr. Mohammed Ilyas</li> <li>• Mr. Mohammed Osman</li> </ul>
Government officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. Saidi Mwinyi (Advisor to the Government)</li> <li>• Mr. T.C Barupal (Consul General of India, Zanzibar)</li> </ul>

## **Instruments of Data Collection**

In order to utilize the samples to obtain information methodically, it was important to choose appropriate instruments of data collection. After considering the situations on-field and the type of information required from the previously identified samples, naturalistic observation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were chosen and employed by the researchers.

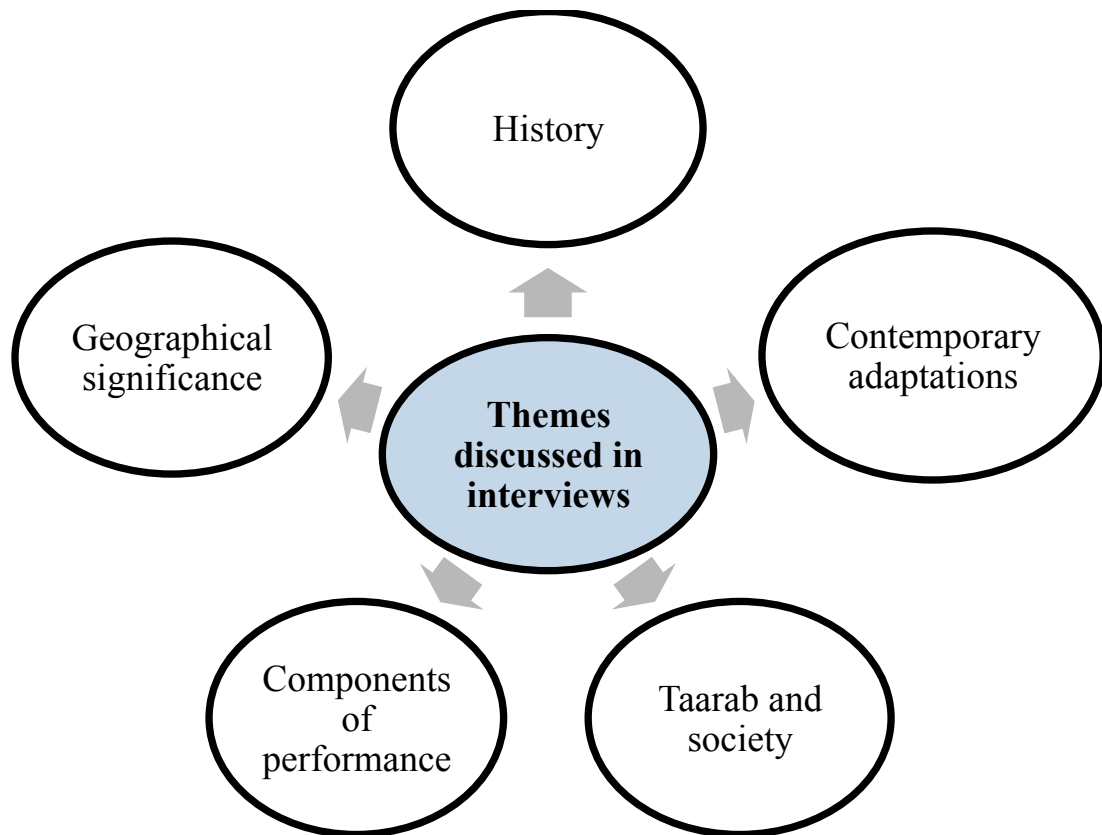
Naturalistic observation is the utilization of the researchers' five senses in situations to create systematic descriptions that can be used for their study. (Kawulich). Observations gave room for details that may have gone unnoticed. This was particularly useful during Taarab performances, to observe not just the performers and their decorum onstage but audience members and their reactions. In studying the performing arts, observations play a crucial role in data collection.

Next, focus group discussions involve a group of individuals with common interests/characteristics who, with the help of a moderator, exchange information about their common interests through discussions. (Sewell & Marczk) The focus group discussions held at DHOW Countries Music Academy gave the researchers an opportunity to moderate discussions between multiple scholars at the same time. This was not only helpful in terms of time management, but also allowed for a unique exchange of scholarly insight.

Finally, semi-structured interviews include a list of pre-decided questions to steer interviews in a certain direction, with enough flexibility to include new questions as and when new information arises. It is useful in cases when there may not be another opportunity for a follow-up interview, as seen in the researchers' interactions with the National Orchestra of Zanzibar.

The interview structure involved six main themes. These themes are:

*Figure 2: Themes obtained from information in interviews*



**Figure 3:** Information (divided based on themes) resultant of the information obtained

Themes	No. of Interviewees
History of Zanzibar and Taarab	3
Geographical significance	3
Components of Taarab performance	4
Taarab and society	2
Contemporary adaptations	2

## **Limitations of Study**

On arriving in Zanzibar, it was found that there were numerous personalities within the identified samples that could be interviewed, but much of the information collected from these personalities was overlapping. This made the data repetitive in nature. As Taarab is such an integral part of local life, many of the interviewees found their insights commonsensical and redundant. Thus, there was some hesitation in sharing information. However, the researchers, as outsiders, found their insights incredibly useful towards data collection.

As with any study, the researchers attempted to reach out to as many interviewees from as many samples as possible, but the question of representativeness must be acknowledged. The data collected here may be vast, but the researchers understand that it is not representative of the entire sample of Zanzibar for the purpose of this study. Much of the primary research took place on the island of Unguja, although attempts to look at Taarab on the island of Pemba (if it is indeed practised there as a traditional form of music) have been made as well.

From an ethical standpoint, the researchers were given oral consent before the beginning of all interviews and permission to use names was given by all. In the case of some locals where random sampling was employed, names could not be used, but their insights have nevertheless been incorporated. In a sense, the researchers' inability to name and identify all their informers may be a limitation.

In addition, the research team was not familiar with the language of Swahili. As a result, the researchers were unable to study the intricacies of the songs that were performed beyond the surface level and could not analyse the lyrics of the songs. Also, lacking a background in ethnomusicology, the researchers were able to respond to the music from an emotional, as compared to scholarly, level. They were reliant on the interviewees from their identified samples to understand the compositions of Taarab songs.

Most importantly, the Zanzibar government's recent decision to limit entertainment during the week in order to improve workforce productivity (as Zanzibar youths were staying out late in the night and returning to work the next morning in a tired state) limited the

researchers' exposures to Taarab performances. Two out of the four scheduled Taarab concerts during the week were cancelled and attempts to hold the concerts in private quarters were discouraged, fearing government intervention.

Adding to this, the researchers were in Zanzibar for a period of 10 days. Many might consider this too short a period of time to wholly study the art form and the researchers wish to acknowledge this. As with any study, more exposure to the art form might have led to greater insights and observations, and this counterfactual could pose as a limitation of this research.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Historical and Geographical Context**

Taarab, according to Laura Fair, is “Swahili music noted for its distinctive sound and poetry”. As of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this poetic musicality found its way to the hearts of enough Tanzanians to be labelled the “most popular form of musical entertainment” in the country (Fair). Taarab is a “highly stylised” performance that is administered at a high scale. Herein perform a solo singer and a chorus in complete harmony with one another, to the melodies and beats of the sounds of the instrumental ensembles. The instrumental company tends to consist of accordions, violins, keyboards, bass, tambourines – all of which are flexible. Taarab has reached a point where it is regarded as the most important artefact of Zanzibari culture. As used among the Swahili, Taarab denotes the performance and singing of *mashairi* (poems) with instrumental accompaniment and also carries the connotations of entertainment and expression of emotions. The Swahili are an African people of mixed descent living along the East African coast. They are mainly Muslim and lead an urban lifestyle characterized by a mercantile economy. With a language that has become world-known, the Swahili have an elaborate cultural practice that draws from Arab, African, Indian, and European cultures. Taarab is indeed a reflection of this complexity with its characteristics reflecting influences from Arabia, Africa, India, Europe, and the Americas. However, when one speaks of Swahili music, there is no doubt that Taarab is a major part of that music (Ntarangwi). Rizk too contends that although *Taarab* songs are written, they bear numerous elements of African orature. He also places emphasis on the dynamic nature of *Taarab*. It has transformed gradually, from exclusive palace entertainment to the popular realm: a progression from music exclusively for listening purposes to music for dancing.

In his book *Jukwaa la Taarab*, Mgana Issa makes an attempt to establish a vague historical frame for the origin of Taarab. He does this by way of relating the lives, careers, and contributions of three Taarab musicians in specific. These explorations are carried out in excruciating detail by the author on the stories of Siti Binti Sadi, Mjuwe Bakari Abeid, and Al-Ustaadh Idi Abdullah Farhan. All of the aforementioned personalities have had a massive influence on the generation and constant regeneration of *Taarab*. What makes Mgana’s



account of Taarab music special is the fact that it includes biographic material on Idi and Bakari, both of whom were heavily involved in the revival of the tradition of *Taarab*. Mgana also opened up the discussion on the “performance” nature of *Taarab*.

### **2.1.1. Omani Empire in Zanzibar**

The University of Arizona’s report titled *Oman, Zanzibar, Their Relationship and Our Trip*, elucidates the period of Omani rule in East Africa – Zanzibar specifically. It is relevant to the study by way of providing the context of Zanzibari history and the influences that gave rise to Taarab music. It especially gave the researchers background and some explanation with regard to the very audible Islamic and West Asian influence on Taarab. It begins by establishing the fact that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zanzibar had become the heart of Islamic scholarship and meeting point for the numerous variants of Islam. In this piece of literature, one is told that the relations achieved their peak when the Omani Empire’s capital was shifted to Stone Town. From this point on, the source discusses the peak and waning of the Omani Empire’s influence on the island, which occurred in 1964

### **2.1.2. Revolution in Zanzibar**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, 1964, the Sultanate of Zanzibar achieved political independence from British colonial rule, which means that it was no longer a protectorate. The Sultanate’s independent rule, however, only lasted two short months until the elected government was overthrown in a violent revolution in an attempt to restore Zanzibar’s political identity to its imagined ‘African’ nature. This kept with the gradually spreading sentiment of African nationalism across the continent – most of which was under primarily foreign rule. The movement tended towards radical socialism in an attempt to break away from the conservative Arab-dominated system of government.

The night of the 11<sup>th</sup> of January was one of festivities in Stone Town, with large numbers of supporters of the Afro-Shirazi Party (Matona). The excitement of the impending revolution was palpable but disguised as apparently neutral social celebrations. They struck the government in power in the wee hours of the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of January led by self-proclaimed Field Marshall John Okello. They quickly gained control of all the government’s defence arsenal, making the Zanzibari revolt perhaps the only one in history to have occurred

and been successful without the government's knowledge of which entity in particular had executed it. The new government was formed under the Revolutionary Council of John Okello with Abeid Karume as president.

The piece of literature discusses the occurrence of a similar episode on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January on the mainland area of Tanganyika (now known as Tanzania).

### **2.1.3. Geographical Relevance**

*Taarab* developed in East Africa out of the local musical styles of people living along the Swahili Coast as well as the musical styles of other people from cultures in Asia, Europe, and America, with whom the Swahili interacted. Even in cases where very little cultural influence was visible between the Swahili and members of these other cultures, their musical styles found their way into *Taarab*. Thus, despite the absence of close cultural contact between Indian populations and the Swahili, for instance, major Indian cultural influences are evident in *Taarab* and in other forms of Swahili popular culture. Indian films, which form a strong basis for the tunes in some *Taarab* songs, are a major attraction in Mombasa. Writing about this phenomenon, Janet Topp rightfully says, "some *taarab* musicians copy the melodies and rhythms of Indian *ghazal*-like film songs. This Indian-style *taarab* is most prevalent in Mombasa, where the two main exponents are Juma Bhalo and Maulidi Juma" (Ntarangwi).

The disadvantage of such a practice, as some Swahili informants explained, is that the popularity of the songs only lasts as long as the movie does. Indeed, Maulidi Juma was quick to tell me that he was working towards reducing the number of Indian tunes he included in his compositions, because he "needed to maintain [his] own style." Another common practice I noted during my field research in Mombasa is that some of the *taarab* musicians in Mombasa have taken to copying musical tunes and styles performed by prominent *taarab* groups in Tanzania. Some of these Mombasa musicians include Sitara Bute and her Diamond Star Group, Rukia Mohammed, and Mohammed Yusuf Tenge. *Taarab* styles associated with Tanzanian groups usually feature guitar rhythms and dance tunes that are common among Tanzanian dance bands (Askew 1997) rather than the usual organ or keyboard tunes associated with *Taarab* in Mombasa and Zanzibar (Ntarangwi).

Many scholars who have written on the history of Taarab have said that Sultan Barghash, who invited a troupe of Egyptian musicians to play at his court, first introduced it to Zanzibar in 1870. At the time, Zanzibar was the center of a significant commercial empire, controlled by Omani Arab Sultans, which linked India, the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and East Africa with European and U.S. traders.

The story states that Barghash was so impressed with the Egyptian musicians that he decided to send Mohammed bin Ibrahim, a musician from Zanzibar, to Cairo to learn to play the *ganuni* (zither), one of the key taarab instruments. After accomplishing his mission, Mohammed returned to Barghash's palace, where he became Barghash's personal poet. Mohammed also taught a few of his friends how to play the *ganuni*, a skill that they later put to work when they teamed up to start the first taarab group, Nadi Ikhwani Safaa, which was formed in 1905 in Zanzibar (Topp 1992). Possibly, some of the members of the group that performed in the Sultan's palace played with Nadi Ikhwani Safaa when performing at friends' and relatives' places (ibid., 72). From Zanzibar, taarab is said to have spread to other parts of the East African coast, including Mombasa and Lamu. Over a long period of time, taarab music was gradually modeled to fit local musical styles and taste, hence explaining the often notable differences in taarab performance and production among various Swahili communities spread along the East African coast and its environs (Ntarangwi).

In Kiswahili-speaking East Africa and the Indian Ocean, *Taarab* is essentially a nonparticipatory entertainment music embracing a diverse spectrum of regional styles, vocal and instrumental combinations, and performance contexts, which in turn reflect, in varying degrees and proportions, "the overall influence of Indian filmtracks, Egyptian and Lebanese music and popular Latin music of various periods." (Mendelson).

## **2.2. Components of a Taarab Performance**

Among the Swahili peoples, the performance of poetry dates back to the sixteenth century when written historical records for Swahili literary practices first appear (Ntarangwi). That poetry is an important component of Swahili cultural identity and practices has been well documented. Indeed, much of Swahili's expressive culture is centered on this poetry. The Swahili divide their poetry into three categories—the *shairi* (a poem that has four lines in

each verse), the *utenzi* (a long poem of three or four lines in each verse and mainly composed as an epic) and the *wimbo* (a three-versed poem composed to be sung).

It is only after we include notions of the content of poems, where they are performed, and their length, that we are able to group them into various categories. Nevertheless, *Taarab* is organised into three lines in each verse and a fourth one that is usually the refrain (locally referred to as *kiitikio*, *kipokeo*, or *kibwagizo*). The composition of *taarab* texts adheres to the tradition of rhyme and meter that is followed in other forms of Swahili poetry. This is example of a *taarab* song that follows rhyme and meter that is present in much of Swahili poetry. The first verse of the song, "Singetema" by Zuhura Swaleh is as follows:

*Takusema takusema tasema sitonyamaza*  
*Na lawama na lawama waja mnganilemeza*  
*Singetema singetema yamenishinda kumiza*  
(Ntarangwi).

### **2.3. Taarab and Society**

Women began engaging with *Taarab* bands and performances over the course of 15 years after the end of the First World War (1945) (Fair). The text entitled *Women In Taarab* holds testament to an intensifying intellectual interest in *Taarab*. Mohamed El- Mohammady Rizk examines the linguistic and stylistic features of music in Zanzibar, and pays close attention to the representation of women in *Taarab* music. He contends that although *Taarab* songs are written, they bear numerous elements of African orature.

Zanzibar town is home to at least 20 neighbourhood *Taarab* bands, who boast, in total, 100 practitioners and members. However, for reasons to do with the Tanzanian government's policy change, women suddenly disappeared from the *Taarab* scene after the Revolution of 1964 which overthrew of the Sultan of Zanzibar and his mainly Arab government by local African revolutionaries. Zanzibar was an ethnically diverse state consisting of a number of islands off the east coast of Tanganyika which had been granted independence by Britain in 1963. At this point, women lost the right to enjoy the practice and were unable to even have a strong influence on the enactment of *Taarab*. Early experiences of *Taarab* included women in a big way because of its mellow, leisurely performance. They preferred to perform in the

*maulid* or *hitma* form of *Taarab* in Islamic lyrical verse. They allowed themselves the freedom to compose and incorporate their own original verses in addition to the classics of *Taarab* performed by Siti Binti Sadi.

At this time, biological and social affinity often determined membership in women's *Taarab* ensembles. Gradually, however, the groups began to include individuals from other class and ethnic backgrounds, making the practice of *Taarab* a culturally inclusive one to a further extent than most cultural artefacts born in regions of cultural confluence. When the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) took over the political administration of Tanzania after the revolution, women's autonomy was snatched away. In 1964, the Culture music Club was funded and assembled by the ASP, making *Taarab* a cultural perpetuation of nationalism by the ASP.

Generally, women's performances were well attended by the masses and provided them with due respite from the domestic work that they were otherwise expected to remain occupied with. The involvement with the practice also afforded women of the East African coast an exposure to the festivities and events happening all over town. The practice also ensured a gendered space for women, simultaneously redefining public spaces that were generally perceived as 'male'. The restriction of performing only with other women changed after the revolution. Revolution in Zanzibar made personal milestones "inconsequential" when viewed against the shifting political and economic landscape (Fair).

The attire and songs of *taraab* groups competed with each other. This involved countless hours intricately designing their uniforms, which they consider an important part of the story. The performances of *Taraab* include pre-determined songs, but some verses are performed and created on the spot and sing of their own stories – their exploits, victories and rivals. However, there occurred a strong censorship of lyrics post the Revolution (Fair).

This stage, however is not where the tradition of *Taarab* stagnated. In a few years the inclusion of women in the practice was revived with the assassination of Karume, thus ending the Tanzanian phase of complete state control. "It was the context and content, which women defined themselves, that made *Taarab* fun" (Fair).

Along with the latter, there are a variety of references to women, with personifications of birds, pearls, flowers, stars, angels and other seemingly "precious" items. However, this not only underscores their femininity and beauty, but is also paralleled with an apparent

dehumanization of women by portraying them as the epitome of male sexual desire. Rizk describes this instance through the example of a song wherein the woman is presented as *nanasi* (pineapple) ready to be devoured for *ladha yake* – how the woman tastes. Its literal translation is a depiction of the sexual pleasure that the woman can provide. Rizk postulates the reasons behind the aforementioned references: there are fewer female composers of *Taarab*. It is of interest to note that even the few female composers of *Taarab* replicate and further the same demeaning images of women, including the stereotypical temptress and submissive housewife (Rizk).

This chapter aimed to establish a clear understanding of the researchers' background knowledge collected preceding the field investigation. The following will outline the researchers' intended methods on field.

## 2.4 Contemporary Taarab

Contemporary *Taarab*, synonymous with *Rusha Roho* in Swahili, is a style that began to gain popularity in the late 1990s. The name was derived from *Kurusha Roho* which when translated to a more familiar dialect means, “to throw away the soul”. The term wholly encapsulates the language and lyrics of contemporary *Taarab*, which are direct and attacking, a complete antithesis to the poetry of traditional *Taarab*. Originally, the syntax of *Rusha Roho* was meant to convey a clear message to another individual. The term *Rusha Roho* appealed to the audience, because of the element of competition – which plays an important role in Zanzibari society – is expressed in it. As the audience was attracted to this term, it persisted. Today, *Rusha Roho* is interchangeable with contemporary *Taarab* and therefore refers to a whole musical style.

To illustrate the direct nature of the lyrics constituting *Rusha Roho* are songs by two different, competing contemporary *Taarab* groups: Zanzibar One and Spice Contemporary *Taarab*, who wrote *Fimbo ya Mungu* and the response, *Dua la Kuku*, respectively.

### ***Fimbo ya Mungu***

*Alhamdulillah zangu ndizo zinazokudhuru*

*Mabaya kifanya kwangu, silipizi nashukuru*

*Iko safi nia yangu, sina rangi ya kunguru*

*Uchawi si sifa yangu, naiepuka kufuru*

*Namuamini Mola wangu, ndie atoninsuru*

### ***Kiitikio***

*Hujarokwa mlimwengu, usitafute sababu*

*Hiyo ni Fimbo ya Mungu, yakushikisha adabu*

*Unalia kwa uchungu, haina wa kukutibu*

### ***Stick of God***

My thanking God affects you

If you do bad things to me, I don't take revenge, I'm thankful for that

My intention is pure, I don't have the color of a crow

Witchcraft is not my nature, I avoid blasphemy

I believe in my God, he is the only who will save me

### ***Chorus***

You have not been bewitched, don't look for a reason

This is the stick of God, it is punishing you

You're crying bitter tears, there is no

Tanihukumia Mungu, jaza yangu ni  
thawabu treatment  
God will judge for me, my reward is  
blessing

### **Dua la Kuku**

*Hilo ni dua la kuku, halinipati asilani mie*

*Na mwenzio kasuku, kaniapiza zamani mie*

*Yailahi niepushie, hasama na faataani*

*Alitakalo lisiwe, katu abadani*

*Wala asifanikiwe, kwa uwezo wake manani*

### **Kiitikio**

*Kama kusema ni mauti, nishasomewa  
hitima mie*

*Sizijali tashiti, viumbe wanazosema*

*Nishayazoea, wanoizulia*

*Nishayazoea, yote ya dunia*

*Yangu hayaenda shoti, na wala  
hayajakwama*

*Dua zajo hazipati, kazi bure zako njama*

### **Prayer of the Chicken**

This is the prayer of the chicken, it will  
never get to me

And your fellow parrot, has cursed me  
long ago

God protect me, from conflict and trouble

What she wants should not be, never ever

Neither should she succeed, with God's  
power

### **Chorus**

If being talked about is death, the service  
has been held for me

I don't care about the critiques, preachers  
are saying

I'm used to it, what they say about me

I'm used to it, all things of this world

My things don't go wrong, neither do they  
get stuck

Your prayers are useless, your conspiracy  
is worthless work

It is clear from the aforementioned example, the language of Rusha Roho is oftentimes aimed at attacking a rival by outperforming them in comeback. Such competition is a great source of entertainment to the audience. It must be noted that competition and rivalry is not backbone theme of every contemporary Taarab song. In fact, Rusha Roho conveys messages about health, how a woman can be a good wife as well as how people should live together. Whatever the theme may be, the language is entirely unambiguous.



A distinguishing element of contemporary Taarab, apart from the progression in lyrics from traditional Taarab poetry, is the music itself. An intermingling of various music styles, such as *soukous* and *dansi* characterizes the music. The music of *soukous* encompasses melody and virtuosity in their bass lines as opposed to the chords played by traditional Taarab musicians. Contemporary Taarab is set apart a fast and loud beat, generated by the beat machine – an electronic musical instrument which imitates the sounds of drums. *Rusha Roho* is an orchestra of electric and bass guitars, keyboards, beat machines and several singers. Typically, in a performance, there are four singers, usually women, who take place on one side of the stage. At least one song is sung by each singer, for which she takes central position on stage. Meanwhile, the rest of the singers form the background chorus. In order to garner a larger audience, a contemporary Taarab group can invite a famous singer to accompany their performance.

For the most part, contemporary Taarab uses Arabic *maqams*, also known as Western scales, which do not use quartertones. This is consequent of the main melody instrument being the keyboard, which cannot product quartertones. In practice, the maqams of *Ajam* and *Nahuant* are used the most. Very rarely, a *maqam* is used that does contain quarter-notes. When this is the case, the half flat is changed into a normal flat. This changes the very nature of the music.

*Kutunza*, in other words, to reward, is an important characteristic of *Rusha Roho*. In common with traditional Taarab, *kuntunza* refers to the practice of tipping. During a performance, in the event that an audience member hears a song that he considers appropriate for oneself or another person in the audience, they can move forward toward the stage. Upon doing so, the audience member waves a banknote around, and eventually delivers it to the singer. This can be accompanied by eccentric gesticulations, coupled with giving the person for whom the song is meant for, a meaningful look.

### **3. Taarab Explained**

#### **3.1. Historical and Geographical Context**

In this chapter, by way of establishing historical and geopolitical context, the researchers intend to lay the foundations of the origins and cultural bases in connection with which Taarab came to be.



*Map 1: Depicting proximity of Zanzibar islands to Tanzanian mainland*

One cannot say for sure when the first migrants came to the islands of Zanzibar, but from multiple primary and secondary sources, the researchers understood that the Negroids<sup>1</sup> have lived on the island since prehistoric times. They lived in separate, stratified societies, resulting in the existence of multiple independent tribes on the landmass. It was later that these smaller units came together to form one large collective political entity. It is thus established that the original habitants of the islands were assuredly Negroids<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> A Negroid is the word used to designate, or is characteristic of one of the traditional racial divisions of humankind, generally marked by brown to black skin, dark eyes and woolly or crisp hair and including the indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa and their descendants

Zanzibar's relationship with Asian communities began as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD when traders from the Arab Peninsula, Persia, and India. These influxes of foreign populations rose gradually until the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. While these migrants arrived all over East Africa, it is believed that most found themselves settling on the Zanzibar islands. However, the West Asian and African communities did not remain culturally or racially distinct for very long. It was confirmed for the researchers on field that over time, an assimilation of cultures and intermarriage between the two communities took place.

Simultaneously, the major, contemporarily relevant tribes of Zanzibar began to form, namely the Hadimu and the Tumbatu and Pemba. The Hadimu occupied the East, West and South of the main Zanzibar island whereas the Tumbatu settled on the North of the main island, the Southeast region of the Pemba island and the small island of Tumbatu. The third tribe – Pemba – occupied the rest of the island of Pemba.

Around the same time, the Arabs arrived in East Africa too, explained Professor Mitchel Strumpf. They settled largely on the mainland in Mombassa, Tanzania and limited their interaction with Zanzibar to trade activities. Their established sphere of influence, however, was soon taken over by the Portuguese colonisers, who remained on the island for two centuries. The Portuguese interest in Zanzibar, and East Africa as a whole was limited to economic exploitation of the resources and profit. In 1699, however, their reign ended when the Arabs re-established themselves on the seaport of Mombasa. The researchers collected this information from Professor Strumpf and his associates at the Dhow Countries Music Academy in Stone Town, Zanzibar for the most part. Professor Strumpf elaborated on this in saying that the resident Arabs' loyalty lay with the Omani empire that had taken political control over Zanzibar, thus exalting Zanzibar to a point of cultural and trade convergence. He echoed the University of Arizona's paper in saying that in addition to this, the island had become a point of confluence for the variants of Islamic belief and practice.

This raised the question, before going on field, as to whether Taarab held any religious significance to the largely Muslim population of Zanzibar. On field, each interviewee in their separate and collective capacity confirmed that religion holds

little or no place in the understanding or delivery of Taarab. The form of music has evolved on a purely human, soulful level, which connects all the people that compose of the Zanzibari society, regardless of their religious practices and preferences.

In the 1830s Zanzibar became an imperial, independent Arab state, ruled by the Sultan of Zanzibar, This independent rule lasted for sixty years, when Great Britain, extending her own empire in East Africa, made Zanzibar her Protectorate. Yet, as with most protectorates of the colonial era, the Sultan remained the nominal ruler and the Arabs remained the major political force of the British,

The introduction and creation of a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democratic institutions were the ultimate objective of British policy in Zanzibar, Britain's view that Zanzibar was an Arab state is visible in her implementation of this constitutional goal. From 1914, when the first council (the Protectorate Council) was created to reflect local opinion, until 1957 when the first popular election was held to choose members of the legislative council, only some Africans ever served in these appointive positions. The first African appointment was in 1946, With the July, 1957 election, the Africans held more legislative seats than the Arabs, However, the Arabs managed to unite with a number of Arab-oriented Africans and gained an independent government from Great Britain on December 10, 1963.

### **3.1.1. The Revolution of 1964 and its Aftermath**

Details of the violent upheaval that was the revolution were found in the literature that was reviewed by the researchers. However, it is through primary interactions that the implications of the revolution on the conception of Taarab came through.

Matona and Strumpf explained that when Persian and African groups merged into one group, the resulting group absorbed many of the cultural and social characteristics of the Persians. Many of these characteristics were common among the Arab groups in the Middle East. Hence, when the Omani Arabs gained political dominance in East Africa, and eventually settled in Zanzibar, they shared many common cultural and social characteristics with the islands' indigenous groups. For example, Islam is the dominant religion of the Middle East, When the Persians migrated to Zanzibar and

merged with the local Africans, Islam became the prevailing religion. Therefore, when the Arabs finally arrived on the islands, this common religion, which they shared with the Shirazi, offered an important bond of acceptance. Similarities, such as Islamic beliefs, acted as a bonding agent between the migrant and indigenous groups. Thus, Islam catalysed the convergence of these racially and culturally distinct groups and combined them into a society with a common identity and altruism. Taarab thus became an element for the society to bond over – regardless of their religious beliefs. Taarab was extra-religious in Zanzibar in that sense.

The revolution overthrew the foreign Arabic oligarchy from its place of power over the Zanzibari community. Thus, what used to be a form of court entertainment for the masses slowly began to transition into entertainment and expression of the masses. From love songs to lyrics about societal and political reform and change, Taarab, at this point, started to become a true expression of the Zanzibari people.

However, the Taarab movement had to be pushed underground under the regime of Abeid Amani Karume for the practice of Taarab music was seen as ‘un-African’ and therefore temporarily banned. Karume was on a rampage to Africanise Zanzibari culture by way of implementing strict, draconian rules on the people of the island. His rule resulted in a lot of instability in Zanzibar. After the revolution, which had been supported by the masses, one would have assumed that peace would have befallen Zanzibar. This, unfortunately, was not the case.

First off, his presidency was not wholly accepted because his legitimacy was under question. Between 1964 and 1972, Zanzibar was still uncertain as to who should rule the island nation. The implementation of the land redistribution programme, wherein land was snatched from the Arab inhabitants in an attempt to ‘return’ the land of Zanzibar to the Africans was the first of many underhanded attempts to rid Zanzibar of all but the African people. Furthermore, he brought about a nationalisation of all Zanzibari industries so as to drive out the Indian and other Asian businesspeople from Zanzibar. Placements in educational institutions were also ethnically discriminating and gave preference to those of African origin, thus curbing education prospects for a large section of the Zanzibari population. The atmosphere in Zanzibar became repressive and stifling to the point where people began to flee the island to live

elsewhere because the prospect for normal life was lost on the island unless one was of African descent. Swahili replaced English (which had become the official language since British rule).

It is likely that this change too made the environment more exclusive of those who were not of African descent, thus turning Zanzibar into an unwelcoming, uncomfortable place for groups who happened not to be of African descent ethnically. These laws created a rift between the once largely harmonious and heterogeneous space that Zanzibar had been. The preferences based on ethnicity and race naturally led to certain resentment towards the preferred in the hearts of the Arabs and Asians. Several human rights violations occurred during this period too at the hands of Karume, including forcing Asian and Arab women into marriage with African men and almost complete repression of free speech in Zanzibar. Cinemas, certain types of dresses etc. were all banned under Karume's sceptre. This abuse of power and visible attempt at an ethnic cleanse of Zanzibar resulted in the existence of a deeply wounded society that required something to bind them together again. In 1972, Abeid Amani Karume was assassinated.

### **3.1.2. History of Taarab in Zanzibar**

As discussed in the review of literature, the island of Zanzibar, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had become the centre of economic and cultural exchange. The individual forms of music that came together to result in Taarab all arrived with the travellers and the traditional musicians that they brought along with them for entertainment during their long, trying nautical travels from parts of West Asia to the island. This information was accumulated in detail whilst perusing secondary sources and confirmed on field.

As understood from Hildegard Kiel's work, and reinforced during the researchers' interactions with Mitchel Strumpf, it was established for the researchers that Zanzibari Taarab is especially connected with the Egyptian tradition of 'tarab'. During the 1800's, Egypt went through an economic surge (Strumpf). This meant that people had the time and money to spend on entertaining themselves in cafes during the evening hours. At this time, Egypt was a vassal of the Ottoman Turkish Empire

and Muhammed Ali Pasha was the Khedive, or the viceroy or governor of Egypt and Sudan. The economic boom brought Egypt in direct contact with Zanzibar and the Khedive hosted the Zanzibari Sultan Barghash bin Said at his court for two weeks in 1875 (Matona). Though no records remain of how this contact influenced the development of cultural life in Zanzibar, it demonstrates the political significance of the territorial claims and the ensuing encounters (Strumpf).

However, an interaction with one of the most active proponents and practitioners of Taarab, Meriam Hamdani, the researchers were allowed a little more insight into the rise of Taarab to the most popular form of entertainment in Zanzibar. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music had been popular amongst the older generation of the island. The youth, apparently, had been more interested in music from the West. They didn't find the local music popular enough. This coincides with the West's expanding sphere of influence at the time in terms of cultural artefacts and ideology. Youngsters were excited about imitating the style and manner of the likes of Elvis Presley. However, around the 1950's, a change of heart seemed to have taken place. Younger people began to embrace the local music and started enjoying it.

Around the same time, the Zaini Social Club was formed for youngsters to play, enjoy and learn Taarab. The songs composed by musicians in this club tended to be shorter. This strayed away from the lengthy nature of a single Taarab performance, taking the structure of the music closer to the composition style of Western popular music. The Taarab composed by these musicians resembled elements of the *chachacha* music in terms of time signatures and scale. It was at the same time that female singers and performers began to join the ensemble as well. Audiences were interested in witnessing the women of the society being involved with the performances. From here on, mixed gender music groups began to take root, thus making a small change in the way in which Zanzibari society functions.

Interest in reviving Taarab peaked enough for musicians to travel all the way to Egypt to learn the Arabic scales and Egyptian instruments. They brought this back to the island and completely changed the sound of Taarab again for the islanders, who were reintroduced to the Arabic music scales and the distinctive sound that employment of the scales lends to the music.

In 1905, the first group of Taarab players was formed. It was a group that only comprised of male performers. Women were not even granted the rights to observe a performance by the group. During this period in Zanzibar, society had a tight grip on women's morality and behaviour. They were expected to cover their heads and could not be seen unless accompanied by a man to whom she was married or related.

Siti Binti Saad, however, became the catalyst for change in this situation. According to Meriam Hamdani, "that was Taarab!". Taarab was largely only performed in the Stone Town area for the rich of the community who could afford to pay for the musicians' instruments and educational travels to North African and West Asian countries.

### **3.1.3. Personalities instrumental to the revival of the Taarab tradition**



*Image 1: Taarab legend Siti Binti Saad*

Siti Binti Saad is the woman who changed the way Taarab was looked at in Zanzibari society. This is to say that she was instrumental in its revival and popularisation throughout Zanzibar. Born in 1880, in a small place called Fumba, Siti Binti Saad led a simple life growing up. She was born to a local, poor family who sent her to study in the local *madrassa*, thus giving establishing her background in religious knowledge (Omar).



In Stone Town, street vendors were abundant. Siti Binti Saad was one of them. She sold cooking pots on the side of the street and had to come up with a manner in which to attract buyers, like her competitors. It is at this point that Siti began to channel her singing voice. She had a beautiful voice and she used it to attract buyers to her cooking pot stall. It is then that she was recognised by a local Taarab musician who happened to come by the street upon which she sold. He was inspired enough by her voice to take her under his wing in secret and train her. This had to occur in secret due to the stigma against performing women and women in training for any sort of entertainment (Matona).

Therefore, in a desperate attempt to train Siti to sing, the musician conducted her training sessions in the silence of a playground at midnight everyday. Siti Binti Saad went on to become one of the most popular and respected Taarab musicians of her time. She sang of the political strife, of love metaphors and lullabies as well. In total, through her career, Siti wrote and performed 1000 songs (Omar).

Not only was she talented, but she was also pioneering. She was the first East African musician to have recorded her music in a studio. For this purpose, she travelled all the way to Bombay, India, at the time (pre 1950) to record with Columbia Records. It is here that she wrote, performed and recorded an ode to Bombay and India at large. In this, one can hear elements of Hindi in the lyrics (Omar).

Due to these activities and efforts, Siti Binti Saad came to be known as the Mother of Taarab. During her time was the peak of traditional Taarab (Matona). She became a recognised personality in the music fraternity almost globally and was visited by foreign musicians to witness music that was reminiscent of the Egyptian music style (Omar).

#### **3.1.4. Contribution of Dhow Countries Music Academy towards the Taarab tradition**

Mitchel Strumpf founded the Dhow Countries Music Academy in 2002 with the objective to preserve the traditional music of Zanzibar and the *dhow* countries at

large. The academy teaches popular instruments such as the bob, drums, bongos and even lesser known ones such as the *qora* (a big string instruments).

They put special emphasis on ethnomusicology and studying the confluence of “music cultures of the world” (Strumpf). The school receives financial support from the Swiss Embassy in Zanzibar which commits itself to cultural restoration and revival. It is interesting to see, however, that the Zanzibari government is barely involved in the continued and waning efforts to sustain the sound of traditional Taarab.



**Map 2:** *Depicting the location of Stone Town in Zanzibar where the Dhow Countries Music Academy is located*

### **3.1.5. History of Dhows**

The Dhow Countries Music Academy is named after the sailing vessels that were used in the early 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries for trade purposes and to transport slaves. They were present even at the time of writing of the Greek and Roman sailors’ accounts mentioned in East African and Portuguese literature. This was established in Saumya Sampath’s group in their research on the Mandvi boats of Kutch. Dhow is a Swahili word, but it could also have derived from the Arabic word “dawa” or the Marathi word “daw” from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, explains Strumpf. From around the world, different dhows have different identifiers. Pakistani dhows are more colourful and

have rounded hulls whereas Indian dhows are plain with white exteriors. Yemeni and Gulf dhows are significantly smaller than their South East Asian counterparts.

Omani traders carried out trade with East African entities on dhows that had typically been built in India and then bought by the traders for use. The West Asian dhows, which brought with them traders and their musical entertainers would arrive on Zanzibar between November and February. The same traders tended to visit India on dhows between December and March. The Dhows would typically visit Tanzania, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Somalia, Iran, Dubai and Iraq.

### 3.1.6. Geographical Context

According to Professor Strumpf, with whom the researchers had the pleasure of two extensive interactions, understanding the geography, trade and exchange patterns in and around Zanzibar is important as a means to understanding the origins and influences on the conception of Taarab.



*Image 2: Tracing the origins of the instruments of Taarab with Professor Mitchel Strumpf at the Dhow Countries Music Academy*

He began with the relevance of Central Africa in terms of its resources. Since this region of the continent has a tropical climate, trees were in abundance. This resulted in the making of several wooden instruments such as the drums and the xylophone. Deserts on the other hand, due to their lack of wooden resources made instruments from strings and percussion instruments from clay.

He adds that the black diaspora too, had a large part to play in the development of African music. Since they travelled around the world as a part of the European and Sultanate slave trade, they carried with them their musical traditions and cultures wherever they went. Thus, the music of Africa has always found itself melding and merging with another society's practices and styles. The East African slave trade extended to Zambia and Malawi through Tanzania and Zanzibar. Therefore, the central African slaves stopped in Zanzibar and introduced to the island the music of their land. This meant that the traditions of wooden instruments were introduced to the Zanzibaris in this fashion, thus implying that Taarab also borrows, to an extent, from Central African cultures (Strumpf). It is only the West Asian influence that becomes more overtly highlighted due to the prevalence of the Omani Sultanate in Zanzibar for a long period (as discussed previously). The slaves travelled through Tanzania to Bagamoyo, which literally translates to "we are crying tears of blood" and finally to Zanzibar. Bagamoyo has thus always been identified as a slave port.

With the arrival of Islam in East Africa and Zanzibar in specific, there arrived the Islamic/Arabic *maqams* which are now used in Taarab. The faith came to Africa from Western Asia through Europe with the Muslims and Jews who were removed from Spain and ended up in Northern Africa. Cairo became their main center of settlement. Of course, in their displacement, they brought with them certain artefacts of the European culture, such as the violin – to name but one. It is in this manner that the violin found its way into Zanzibari Taarab (through its relations with the Omani Sultanate and Northern Africa).

A result of the slave trade came to be known as the black diaspora. They returned to Africa by the shiploads and brought with them pieces of the traditions that they had picked up, for example, to South Africa this influx of returnees brought and spread guitars and their use.

Professor Strumpf considers Zanzibar special to Taarab in the sense that it has been historically welcoming of other traditions, people and cultures. Ever since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the indigenous Zanzibaris have learnt to accept and embrace the entry of any new cultural artifact. As a community, Zanzibaris are emotional about what they take in and what they don't. If something appeals to them on any level, it is incorporated and infused with their culture. This is clear with the assimilation of musical instruments such as the flute and clarinet into the Taarab ensemble. Generally, Zanzibari people are flexible, eclectic and open to new things, therefore making Zanzibar the perfect melting pot for the conception of a sound as diverse and intriguing as that of Taarab.

## 3.2. Components of a Taarab Performance

Taarab is wondrously dynamic and fluid; it is adapted to every occasion, by every singer, and with each audience. The beauty of it resides in its ability to customise its music to audiences, while maintaining an astonishingly close link to its essence. It consists of a variety of components, not just lyrics and instruments, but also audience, occasion and outfits. The performers themselves will be analysed more closely in the next section.

### 3.2.1. Instruments

As does any orchestra, a traditional setting of Taarab contains an enormous amount of instruments. On observation of a three hour long practice session of the National Orchestra of Taarab, the researchers were able to carefully record the range of instruments used during a fully-fledged Taarab performance. A list of the instruments used at the National Orchestra is as follows:

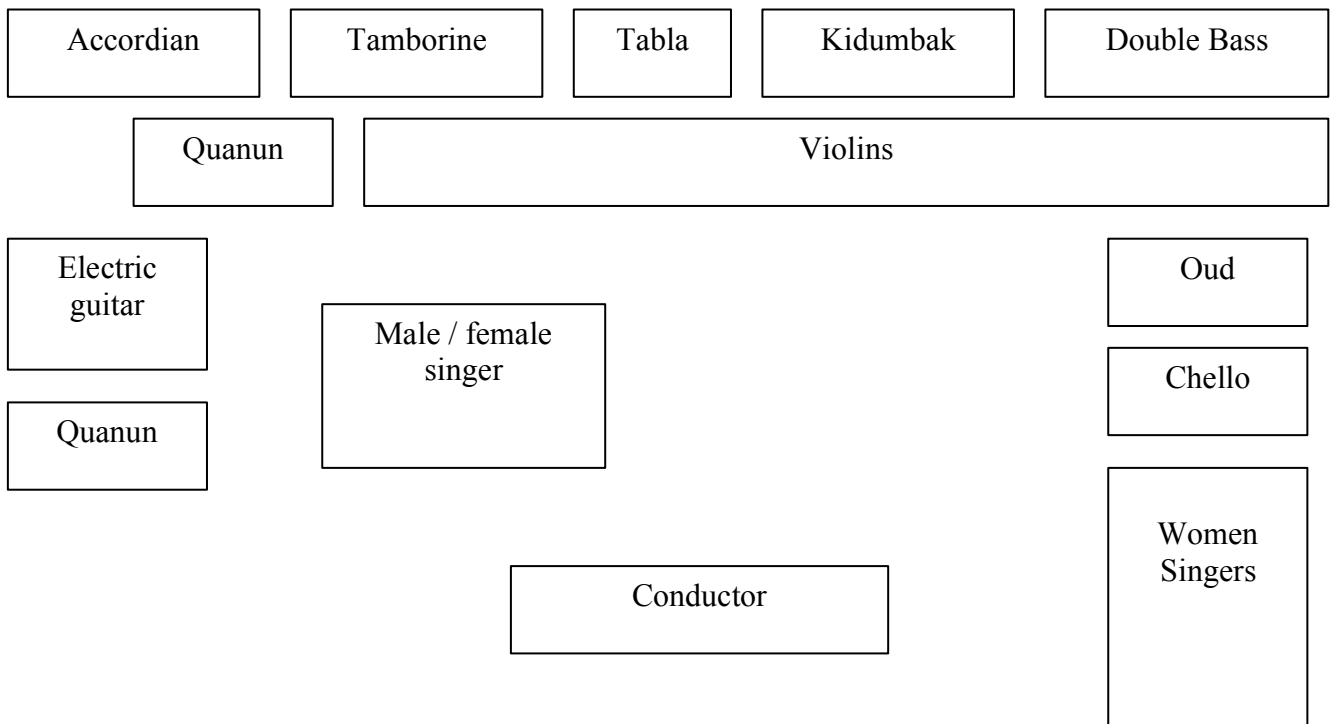
- 6 violins
- 2 *qanuns*
- 2 accordians
- 1 keyboard
- 1 electric guitar
- 1 cello
- 1 *oud*
- 1 tamborine
- 1 double bass
- 1 *kidumbak*
- 1 *tabla*



**Image 3:** *Accordion player in the National Orchestra*

The performers sat in a specific formation, giving optimum importance to each instrument used. The more prominent instruments such as the violin, *quanun*, *oud*, were in the front, while the percussion and bass instruments were together at the back.

The arrangement of the National Orchestra is displayed below:



**Figure 4:** *Depicting the arrangement of a traditional Taarab orchestra*

In smaller Taarab performances, all of these instruments are not utilised. Selection of instruments is based on the different groups of Taarab, on the strengths of their members, as well as the occasion. Given below is a list of instruments used at a Taarab performance given at a tourist restaurant in Zanzibar:

- *Kidumbak*
- Violin
- *Qanun*

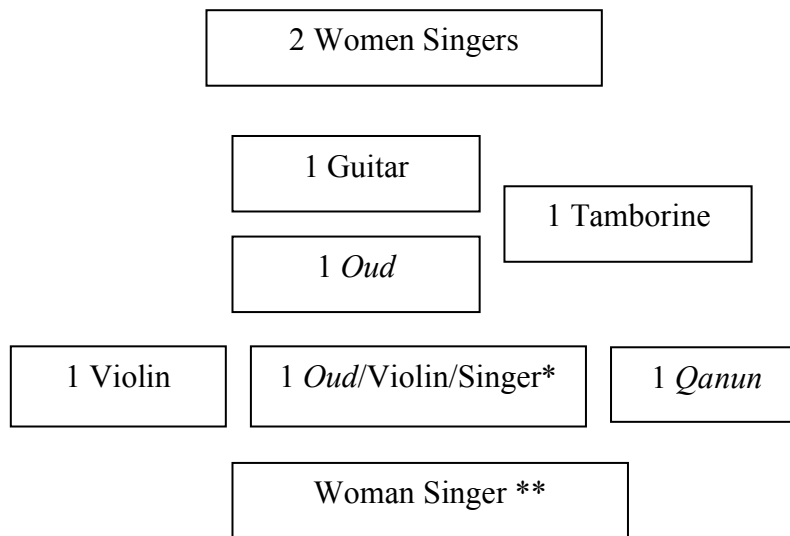
As is evident, the list of instruments is dramatically reduced due to obvious elements such as lack of space as well as the context of the performance.



*Image 4: Violin players in the National Orchestra*

The third Taarab performance that the researchers were exposed to was in another different context, and hence the number of performers and instruments changed. The concert was conducted at the DHOW Countries Music Academy, where the performers had the comfort of space. The seating of the performers was as follows:





**Figure 5:** Arrangement of a smaller Taarab assembly

\* This musician was the leader of the group, and alternated between the *oud*, violin and singing during the concert

\*\* The two women alternated between coming to the front, and for some songs, stayed behind the male performers completely.

As can be seen, the arrangement of performers in this setting is completely different to the previous two concerts witnessed by the researchers. A similarity that may be observed, though, is that the participation of women is mostly limited to simply singing. As was observed and understood through research, women do not usually indulge in instrument playing with the large amount of men, and restrict themselves to singing. However, exceptions were witnessed in the form of Amina Omar, an accomplished *oud* player plus a singer, as well as another Zanzibari lady part of the National Orchestra, who played the violin. She was the sole female instrument player in the National Orchestra group.

While watching the concerts and the practice session, an interesting phenomenon cropped up: the flexibility of the usage of instruments. Performers did not necessarily play or excel at just one instrument. Instead, they changed their instrument depending on the song and on their talents: a seemingly accomplished *oud* player might just amaze the audience by his dexterity with the violin in the very next song.

Tambourine, *tabla*, and accordion players exchanged their instruments periodically too depending on the song being performed.

In the National Orchestra, the performance usually began with the *tabla* and tambourine, followed by the violin and *qanun*, and then all the instruments a few moments later. In all the settings that the researchers experienced Taarab, it was seen that the violinists all followed a main violinist, who was easy to recognise. He began first, set cues for other musicians, and played solo or extra-complicated pieces for the audience. This was seen in the concert at DHOW Countries Music Academy, where the lead violinist set the cues for the second violinist, and as leader of the group, set the pace and time for all songs.

The dedication of Taarab performers is laid bare for everyone to see; they are accomplished at an assortment of instruments, sometimes also at singing, and perfect their art with years and years of practice. The electric guitarist at the National Orchestra was an extremely elderly man, but had honed his skills impeccably, beautifully complementing the rest of the orchestra.

### **3.2.2. Lyrics**

Taarab songs are very poetic in nature, and mostly sing of love and lust. However, during the revolution of 1964, Taarab was used as a tool of rebellion and reform. Lyrics sung of the struggles of the time, advising and inciting people to protest and take charge of their own fate. In the mid 80's, after scandals over lyrics, the Government forced women's Taarab clubs to register and a Censorship Board controlled their lyrics (Ilyaz).

A characteristic excerpt of a Taarab song is:

*Aashiqui Baya,*

*Ubaya*

*Ubaya Sana*

It means:

*You gave me the sweetness of sugar until I was addicted to you*

*It's bad*

*Very bad*

Most songs are playful and joyous, cleverly composed with influences from India and Egypt. The word “*Aashiqui*” means “love/lovers” in Hindi, and it is used in a similar context in this song (Omar).

The songs have a very specific structure and rhyme scheme. Taarab lyrics are composed of four stanzas rhyming in regularly patterns, and a brief recurring refrain. The music uses Arabic *maqams*, or scales, as a form of structure. Each performance consisted of 8 songs that were sung for 20-23 minutes each. This meant that each performance was more than three hours long. Notwithstanding, efforts are being made to reduce the time taken for contemporary performances. Lyrics are repeated fewer times to limit the duration of each song, and more songs are added to the performance while maintaining its brevity (Hamdani).

Adding further to the elements in the more modern strains of Taarab, there are excessive sexual allusions, as well as more explicit lyrics, dance, glances and gestures. Traditional Taarab performers, and most of the older generation in the Zanzibari society, view this development as vulgar and distasteful, believing that it destroys the essence of the Taarab they know (Hamdani).

### **3.2.3. Audience**

Taarab is not limited to a specific audience. It is welcoming and including, inviting the audience to participate in its melodies. Collective enjoyment is key; there is no religious motivation or component to this music. Taarab does not exclude its audience on the basis of gender, class, authority, religion or nationality. *Everyone* is wanted, the more the merrier. That is what Taarab is meant to be about: uplifting of the spirits of anyone who listens to it. It denies no one the pleasure of delighting in its beats (Omar).

That said, if the audience wishes to communicate their pleasure at listening to Taarab, they might do so in the form of tips, a practice alternately known as *ku tunza*. This is done by approaching the singer and offering the monetary benefaction, which the

performer then tucks into his pocket. Tipping might be perceived as a controversial gesture, because it is important to understand the lyrics being sung at the moment of tipping, lest the action be misinterpreted. For example, if a performer is singing of adultery and lust, and a viewer gives a tip at that exact moment, the audience, if composed of locals (who understand the music), might perceive that person as supporting or advocating infidelity. It is suggested that tourists take care to avoid potentially offending locals this way; if they cannot understand the lyrics, they could opt to give tips at the end of the performance. Due to the possibility of insult, tipping is not very common nowadays (Omar).

Famous Taarab singers such as Mohammed Ilyaz suit each performance to the audience assembled. He gets invited to functions conducted by ministries in the Tanzanian government, who host people from a variety of countries. He takes requests from the audience and alters his performance to incorporate alternate languages to connect with them further. Songs are taken from the UK, China, India, and sung in Taarab style. The nature of the art form itself harmonises the audience with the performers, fuelling shared contentment and merriment. Famous Taarab performers travel all over the world to spread their art, encapsulating everyone in its magic (Ilyaz). Hence the researchers learned that Taarab does not restrict itself to its own country, or even continent, for the Zanzibari people are a generous one, and yearn to share their remarkable culture with all.

#### **3.2.4. Occasion**

Contemporary Taarab is sung at every happy occasion in Zanzibar. It is sung at weddings, during *Eid*, at hotels, restaurants and festivals. The contexts of each performance vary hugely. Fortunately, the researchers witnessed three *Taarab* performances, each being in a completely unique setting. It is to be noted, however, that although Taarab is sung during *Eid*, it is devoid of any religious connotations, and the relation is simply that both are forms of celebration in the Zanzibari context.

To prepare for any concert or public appearance, it is integral that Taarab groups practice as a “club”, and not just as solo artists. Rehearsals could take place up to three or four times a week, depending on the popularity and dedication of the group.

At the Culture Music Club for example, where the National Orchestra group rehearses, practice occurs five nights a week, and the rehearsals are open to the public (Ilyaz).

The first performance observed in Zanzibar was at a tourist restaurant. There were three performers, playing while diners ate and enjoyed food and drinks, hence defining a new setting and purpose to Taarab. Restaurants and tourist destinations, such as hotels, use Taarab as a means to attract and invite tourists, and hence improve their popularity and profits. Hence here a new dimension of Taarab is introduced, and an alternate form of its use is found.



*Image 5: Taarab performance at Monsoon Restaurant*

Second, when observed, the National Orchestra group was practicing for Revolution Day, on 12<sup>th</sup> January, which is a government recognised festival. Most of the Taarab songs sung on this day praise the revolution, while few sing of love and passion. When performed in large areas, the whole group attends the performance, i.e. 15-20 people perform. In such a situation, as singing for a festival for the population of Zanzibar, the entire National Orchestra group will be present and perform. The group is hand picked by Mohammed Ilyaz, Zanzibar singing sensation, and represent the very best at their instruments. Mohammed Ilyaz represents the desires of the government, and speaks for them. The oldest member of the National Orchestra, as well as one of its founders, is Saidi Mwinyi, a Taarab performer for over 50 years of his life (Ilyaz).



*Image 6: Posters for an African Music festival- Sauti Za Busara*

The National Orchestra group has been formed very recently, and they intend on permanently remaining a group, one that composes and plays their very own music. Here, the context and purpose of Taarab is very different. It is performed on a national festival, as a tribute to the bloody history of Zanzibar, and its songs commemorate the day. Moreover, the group represents the very best of Taarab performers in the society, and embodies the government's stance on this art form (Ilyaz).

Since Taarab is a huge tourist attraction as well, being so distinct in Zanzibar, Taarab groups may even schedule their own performances in different locations in the city. Word is sent through the locals or other performers to tourists, and flyers or banners are placed around the location. This is the kind of context that the researchers witnessed for the third time. The DHOW Countries Music Academy advocates and supports Taarab, and hence the performance at the academy was simply a way of spreading the essence of Taarab to both tourists and locals, and raising awareness of the art form.

### **3.2.5. Outfits**

Traditional African garments are worn to Taarab performances; men wear white *kanzu*, which are long white kaftans. Women wear elegant, colourful traditional clothing, and more often than not, cover their head with scarves. In earlier days, women would attend Taarab concerts in a veil that is a *buibui* headscarf with an additional cloth leaving only the eyes exposed. Women performers are known to say

that this blocks their expressions from the audience, and the emotions to be conveyed through Taarab are then lost. Men do not cover their face or head, only sometimes wearing a cylindrical hat called *kofia*. It is important for the performers to make themselves look attractive and presentable in order to be taken seriously. Taarab is important to the Zanzibari people, and attire should be of no lesser significance (Omar).



*Image 7: Female performer's outfit for Taarab performance*



*Image 8: Male performer's outfit for Taarab performance*



*Image 9: Male and female Taarab performers*



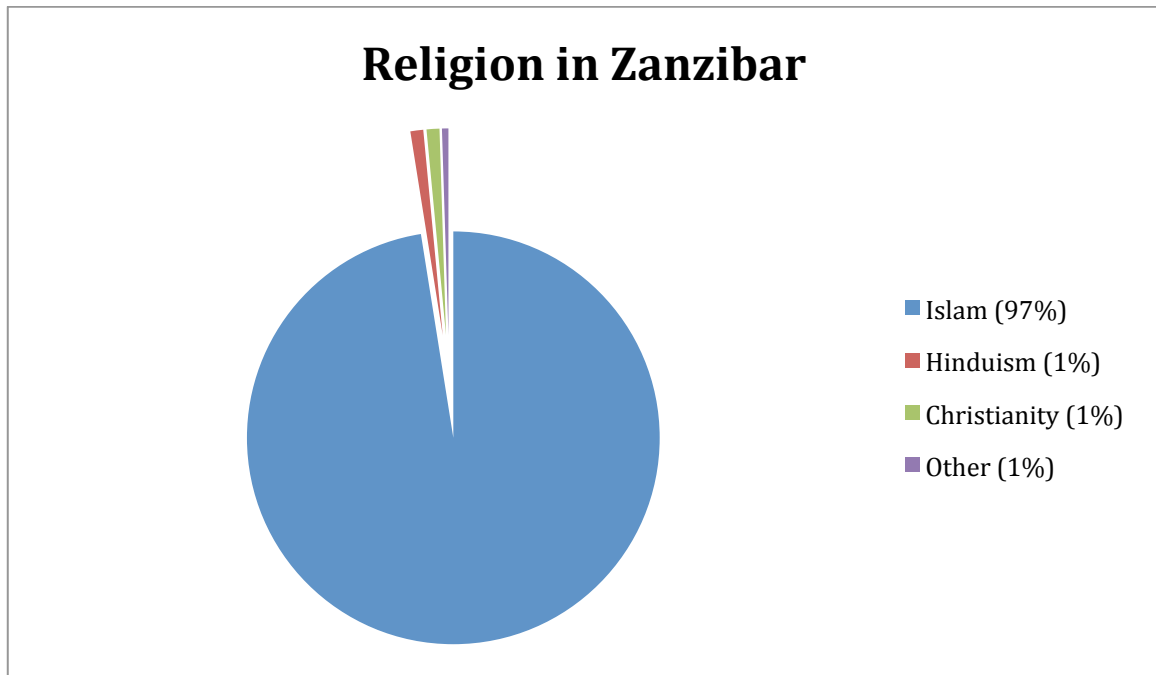
### **3.3. Taarab and Society**

Because an art form thrives from the people that partake in its continuation and survival, an understanding of Zanzibar's society forms the base of researching Zanzibari Taarab. Aside from looking at Taarab in itself, looking at its practitioners, audiences and social context adds a layer of understanding of the art form. Who performs Taarab? Who listens to Taarab? The researchers hoped to answer these questions by looking outward at the Zanzibari people.

#### **3.3.1. Impact of Religion**

With trade between Asia and Africa booming in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Zanzibar's convenient location made it a popular trade port. It was the centre of trade travel and all were welcome to the island. Before long, Zanzibari society included Persians, Iranians and other cultures that came with the *dhow*s. It also included 'mainlanders' who came to the island from Tanzania. It wasn't long before Zanzibar became a confluence of cultures, a society made of "cultural agreements". (Strumpf)

Despite the assortment of cultures that merged on the island, Zanzibar is almost entirely Muslim. All towns in Zanzibar's two islands –Unguja and Pemba- have at least one mosque. As the sun sets, it isn't uncommon to hear the familiar call to prayer that echoes from these mosques. During Ramadan, the pace of life on this Muslim-majority island visibly reduces. It is generally during this time that a large chunk of Taarab music is composed, as the artists who are fasting use music to occupy their days. (Matona) The music composed, though, is not religious in its connotation. While Taarab music is a crucial aspect of Zanzibar's society, it is not religious in any way. The majority of Muslims on the island are Sunni but there are a few churches spread across the island as well as two temples (one being an Arya Samaj Temple) present in Stone Town. (Barupal)



*Figure 6: A visual representation of religions practised in Zanzibar.*

The influence of Islam on this society is undeniable, especially in its impact on the performance of Taarab. Men are encouraged to perform while the women are not, comparing them to prostitutes for ‘displaying’ themselves onstage. Public performance of female Taarab singers remains a huge problem in Zanzibari society. Even Siti binti Saad, one of the pioneers of Taarab and a legend today, faced much difficulty. It was only after achieving reasonable success that she earned the respect of her peers and her participation was socially accepted. (Omar A. )

Husbands dissuade their wives from Taarab performances and do not give them the freedom to sing in public. As Amina Omar points out, “you have to love music enough to fight for it”. Her cousin is a talented violinist, currently performing for the National Taarab Orchestra, but her induction into Taarab was a difficult journey. (Omar A. ) It is intriguing that, although Taarab is such an intrinsic part of Zanzibar’s culture, listeners do not encourage the women of their own households to take part. Female voices are deeply appreciated and these performers receive generous tips, but few families want to send their own women to learn Taarab.

This is especially seen in the lyrics of Taarab songs, which are romantic in nature. While Muslim men can have multiple wives and enjoy singing Taarab music

dedicated to their families, society suppresses female performers. The thought of a self-respecting Muslim woman standing in front of an audience full of strangers is looked down upon. DHOW Academy directors revealed that a majority of their enrolment comes from men, not women. (Strumpf) Additionally, the 'womanisers' in mixed Taarab groups worry Zanzibari men, who do not want their wives to be swayed by these men when they join mixed groups. Some female performers admitted to misbehaviour by these 'womanisers'.

When women do perform, it is expected that they cover their heads in a show of modesty. When the researchers inquired about this, most female performers stated that they follow this practice as a general rule of thumb to not offend. Established performer Mariam Hamdani exclaimed that she isn't particular about uncovered heads during her Tausi Taarab Group practice sessions, but covers her head outside to not be seen as a bad influence on younger performers. (Hamdani) They match these headdresses with formal wear called kanzus, long tops that are also worn to mosques. The researchers observed that all the female Taarab singers in attended performances were dressed well, with matching earrings and make-up. Meanwhile, the men do not face such restrictions. They are simply expected to dress elegantly.

Men in Islam are allowed to have multiple wives, and this often caused a peculiar issue during Taarab performances. As these songs are predominantly, although not exclusively, about love, Taarab performances by men would often lead audiences to wonder which wife he is singing the love song for. Unintentionally, it would cause some friction within the family. The wives would wonder which one of them is the chosen lady, unless explicitly indicated by the man pointing and smiling directly at the woman of his affection. When women sing Taarab love songs, such an issue was not typically observed.

Additionally, practising Taarab is easier for the Zanzibari men as they have the flexibility to travel with their groups, while the women are required to stay at home and maintain the household. Female musicians who perform at hotels and restaurant nowadays are typically unmarried, for the married musicians would be unable to perform in the night-time unless they have the support of their husbands in their musical endeavours. There are societal expectations of gender roles in Zanzibar and

the researchers noted that a woman who neglects her family in favour of music is not viewed kindly.

Men are seen as the primary composers of Taarab music, although musicians such as Mariam Hamdani prove otherwise. She has had to defend herself on many occasions against claims that she may not have actually written her compositions. There is a clear gender bias that exists within the art form. While Hamdani has earned respect due to her experience as a musician, as well as her eventual association with Mohammed Ilyas, other female musicians face much difficulty with recognition.

When the groups go on tour, it is not unheard of that some female members are left behind. Historically, women have been vocalists in Taarab groups instead of instrumentalists. They are hesitant to learn instruments such as the cello because they are uncomfortable with spreading their legs wide enough for the instrument to fit between their legs and would not play the accordion as it is played against their breasts. This lack of knowledge of instruments has made them more replaceable within the group and they have to fight hard for their place in groups., although organisations such as DHOW Academy are attempting to change this.

The first Taarab group of Zanzibar was formed in 1905. However, it was a men's group only. Women were not even allowed to observe their performances. Over time, they were allowed to join the audience, but only after covering themselves and with the company of a male family member. It took many years before women's Taarab could leave a domestic environment, though this required their husbands' permission beforehand. As Hamdani exclaimed, "This is not Europe, you know". (Hamdani) Female performers insist that the men are jealous of their capacities as they are able to inherently channel more emotions in their songs. Despite progress in many areas, low participation of women in Taarab reflects Zanzibar's rigid society.



*Image 10: Woman performer of Taarab in Zanzibar- Amina Omar*

### **3.3.2. Government Intervention**

The power of music in swaying public opinion is widely recognized, especially by the government. During turbulent times in Zanzibar, musician Mohammed Ilyas composed “Amani” as a song against bloodshed and violence. It was targeted at the island’s problematic elections. The song was played 10-12 times a day on radio and television channels. While listeners enjoyed the melody, the underlying social message succeeded in influencing the public. (Hamdani) Due to this, compositions are scrutinized and public performances sometimes require government permission. In 1992, Mohammed Issa Matona, a prolific Taarab singer, faced issues with authorities for the problematic content of his compositions.

When the researchers visited Zanzibar, they were unable to attend certain Taarab concerts due to a new law that had been passed banning Taarab performances between the days of Thursday to Sunday. It was explained that it is an attempt to encourage the Zanzibar youth to work more, for they stay out late in the night and are unable to work efficiently the next morning. This is a reflection of the government’s recent attempts to improve Zanzibar’s economy.

To aid preservation of cultural heritage, they fund and support the National Taarab Orchestra. This is a 36-member Taarab group created by recruiting the best musicians

from various local Taarab clubs around Zanzibar. The 'stars' of Taarab collect here to perform on a national platform. Members are of various ages, ranging from 20 years old to 50 years old, and it is a mixed group. The researchers were able to attend a rehearsal by the National Taarab Orchestra for their upcoming January concert commemorating the 1964 Revolution.

The researchers observed that the women members tended to be singers, while there was only one women violinist. There was little interaction between the sexes. All the women were dressed in burqas and mostly spoke amongst themselves. The men only spoke to them to give cues and instructions. Taarab singers choose songs that they enjoy performing and as a result, the lead singer rotates amongst the group. In the orchestra, both men and women were allowed the chance to lead.

The lyrics and compositions of the National Taarab Orchestra are monitored due to its patronage by the government. This is especially intriguing, as the researchers noticed the presence of many government officials at the rehearsal. According to its founder, Saidi Mwinyi, they hope that they can become self-sufficient in the future. The group travels to Dar-es-Salaam (the capital of Tanzania, located on the mainland) every three-four months to perform and members often take turns performing based on the occasion. They limit their song selections to praise of the government, the revolution and love songs.

Aside from the National Taarab Orchestra, the government supports Taarab not through money, but opportunities. Amina Omar cited an example wherein she performed at a European music festival accompanied by the Tanzanian president. On many international platforms, the government includes Taarab in cultural showcases. Consulate General of India T. C Barupal added that, when other countries visit the Zanzibar embassies, Taarab groups are often hired as performers for the evening.

However, the directors of DHOW Music Academy stated, while providing opportunities to Taarab musicians is a big step in preserving the art form, finance is still required to run the institution. On numerous occasions, it has nearly shut down due to its inability to cover expenses. They maintain minimal charges for their music lessons and in many cases when the students are homeless, professors from the

academy provide shelter for the duration of the course. They currently receive financial aid from the Swiss Embassy, although the future of this aid is uncertain. DHOW Academy hopes that the Tanzanian government will take notice of their condition and intervene. (Strumpf, 2016)

Type of Taarab Performance	In Tanzanian Shillings	In US Dollars	In Indian Rupees
<b>International</b>	10,000-15,000	5-7	300-500
<b>Domestic</b>	6,70,000-11,20,000	300-500	20,000-33,000

*Figure 7: The disparity between fees paid for international and domestic Taarab performances*

Independent Taarab musicians, too, find it difficult to survive without financial aid. They are paid very little on the island, anywhere between 10,000-15,000 shillings in hotels. In smaller performances, their fee is even lower. This is worsened by the fact that there is a preference for senior, experienced musicians as compared to Taarab newcomers, and so making a start in this field is difficult. The musicians tend to fare better internationally where they typically receive 6, 70,000-11, 20,000 shillings per performance. This is why they look forward to international opportunities provided by organisations and the Tanzanian government.

### **3.3.3. Other Performance Avenues**

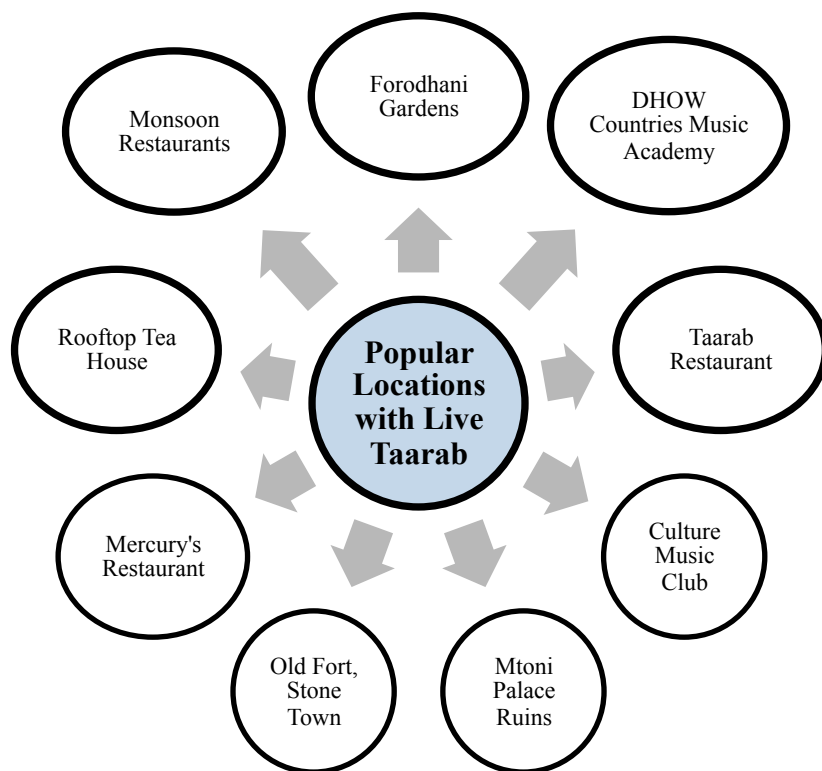
For those musicians uninterested in government performances, the next best opportunity to perform Taarab internationally comes with Sauti za Busara (meaning “sounds of wisdom”), a music festival typically held in the month of February every year. It is considered one of Africa’s best music festivals and is organised by Busara Promotions, a non-profit NGO. The festival focuses on promoting “music with cultural identity” by showcasing 40+ artists of different genres of music, of which nearly 20 musicians tend to hail from Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania. Other countries that are represented at Sauti za Busara include: Mali, South Africa, Ghana,

Senegal and Egypt. It partners with other international music festivals from countries like Denmark and Norway as well. Sauti za Busara works in partnership with DHOW Academy during the year to decide the line-up of artists for that year. The festival is held in the Old Fort in Stone Town, Zanzibar and performances go on from 4:00 pm till the early hours of the morning. Taarab music is a regular feature at Sauti za Busara, having been performed by Nadi Ikhwan Safaa and Kidumbak Group, amongst other artists, since the festival's inception in 2006. The Taarab song selections at Sauti za Busara tend to be of love, celebration and community, keeping in mind the occasion. (Hamdani, 2016)

Other paying avenues for Taarab musicians are hotels and restaurants across the island. Monsoon Restaurant is an upscale restaurant in Stone Town which offers Taarab performances every Wednesday and Friday evening. Just a five minute walk from DHOW Academy's office, Monsoon Restaurant hires artists from the academy to perform. In the past, this DHOW Academy ensemble would perform at the Forodhani Gardens in Stone Town which is popular for its night market.

While the researchers comprised half the audience during their visit to Monsoon Restaurant, other members of the audience were tourists who came to experience Taarab music and locals who attended to catch their "weekly dose of Taarab". Due to the small setting, this Taarab group consisted of only three musicians: a violinist, a *qanun* player and a *dumbak* player. There was some discussion of a monthly contract between the ensemble and the restaurant. This indicates some steady business for the ensemble, unlike some who are unable to find performances regularly. The sample of Taarab musicians is diverse, for some are full-time musicians while others own businesses and perform Taarab on the side. Additionally, the smaller space for these Taarab performances has led to changes from the typical orchestral structure of the art form.





*Figure 8: A collation of popular locations in Zanzibar where live Taarab is performed*

Some other restaurants in Stone Town that employ these musicians are Taarab Restaurant in Double Tree by Hilton, Rooftop Tea House in Emerson on Hurumzi Hotel and Mercury's Restaurant. All three are well-established, casual dining restaurants that cater to a primarily tourist audience. This shows how most performances of Taarab today are forms of entertainment for visitors of Zanzibar, more than the locals themselves. Amidst seafood dishes, endless wine menus and beautiful island views, Taarab has become a valuable part of the dining experience.

However, this is not to say that Taarab has lost its value to the local people. As with any folk music, there has been no 'formal' training, at least until DHOW Academy was established. It is performed by one and all, although only taken professionally by some. For most Taarab musicians, it has been a part of their lives ever since they were children. Whether it was from the radio or family members, the music was inescapable. They would learn through mimicry and imitation and thus, the form would be passed down through generations.

Performing Taarab is a social activity in Zanzibar due to its orchestral nature and the number of people required. It remains a crucial aspect of their important festivities such as weddings or birthday celebrations or even as a leisure activity. It also adds to a person's identity in the sense that, because of Taarab's social nature, a musician's identity as a Taarab performer is not private but a public identity. The music keeps the Zanzibaris young at heart and no occasion would be considered complete without a Taarab performance. (Matona, 2016)

Taarab has a tangible link to the society in which it is practised. As an art form, it can be practised by one and all and access to Taarab is not difficult. It is performed by men and women of all ages throughout the island. While some sing Taarab out of enjoyment and tradition, others sing it alongside their business careers and there are some who take up Taarab professionally. The impact of Islam on this music is clear, especially with respect to Zanzibari women's participation. There are certain norms that the women must follow regarding outfits, lyrics and decorum. Their voices are desired, but few families are willing to let their women partake in Taarab. In a sense, there is a 'free rider' concept that takes place here. The government focuses more on the island's economic growth than on cultural preservation but its efforts to protect its traditions has led to some opportunities for Taarab performers. This is crucial considering the art form does not provide much income for the Taarab performers in itself. Despite the rise of modern Taarab that has plenty of critics in fans of traditional Taarab, the art form has an important role in social gatherings and occasions. Because of these strong social ties, the researchers do believe that Taarab is the voice of Zanzibar.

### 3.4. Contemporary Taarab

Zanzibar began liberalization in the year 1985 (over twenty years after their historical revolution) and with this liberalization came the inevitable influence of global music in the country. From Elvis Presley of the United States of America and The Beatles of England to Bollywood music from the Indian subcontinent, new genres of music entered the island. Understandably, it caught the fancy of the locals. Slowly but surely, Zanzibari Taarab, too, saw a change. Also known as '*rusha roho*', contemporary Taarab began to emerge.

While traditional Taarab uses instruments such as the double bass, flute, bongos, *qanun* and the accordion, contemporary Taarab began to include new instruments of Western origin such as the electric guitar, drums and keyboards that were previously unheard of. Musicians gained interest in learning these. As with the traditional instruments, they learnt through observation and practice. Omar comments that in traditional Taarab, it was typical for the women to only play the drums and simple instruments; however, in recent years there is a scope for the women learning new instruments and becoming increasingly irreplaceable in the orchestra, akin to Omar mastering the *oud*.

Earlier, performances would involve mild dancing from the singer while the audience was seated, although they were free to sway along if the music moved them. The songs were primarily romantic in nature. Contemporary Taarab became more influenced by the 'entertainment factor' and aimed to please audiences. It uses beats and rhythms that allow audiences to vigorously dance along, like modern concerts. Some songs remain romantic in nature but others saw an overt inclusion of sexuality and lust that was previously unheard of in such a direct manner. Nowadays, Zanzibar elders feel uncomfortable listening to these lyrics. (Omar)

In fact, musicians who are loyal to traditional Taarab believe that their lyrics speak of love, peace and praise for humanity which is tarnished by today's lyrics. In using swear words and insulting one another, the good name of Taarab music is ruined. The true meaning of Taarab and all that it stands for is lost to contemporary Taarab practitioners. Their audiences drink during performances and cause fights, instead of

enjoying the music and internalizing the rhythms and melodies. (Ilyas) In fact, these fights are actually detrimental for the Taarab songs that speak of peace and brotherhood. Rhyming stanzas in regular patterns and a brief recurring refrain composes the lyrics of Zanzibari Taarab. The introduction and refrain of contemporary Taarab, on the other hand, is in free verse. If lyrics were the most important quality of traditional Taarab, infectious rhythms and melodies have taken over Taarab today.

A distinguishing element of contemporary Taarab, apart from the progression in lyric, is the music itself. An intermingling of various music styles, such as *soukous* and *dansi* characterizes the music (Hulshof). The music of soukous encompasses melody and virtuosity in their bass lines as opposed to the chords played by traditional Taarab musicians.

It is because of this that traditional Taarab musicians are in favour of government censorship. It impacts their creative liberty, but it also ensures that the lyrics of contemporary Taarab musicians can be monitored closely. As an important music form of Zanzibar, they worry that contemporary Taarab will impact the good name of Zanzibar music on an international platform. (Mwinyi) The researchers noted that these musicians see contemporary Taarab as a passing phase, more than a modern stream of their music.

In traditional groups, there would be one or two composers of songs that would later be discussed with the rest of the group but contemporary Taarab gives chances to other members to be involved in the creation of their group's music. Of course, this is not always the case. The researchers were informed that a lot of contemporary Taarab songs are remixes of already existing songs. They are revamped to grab the public's attention and entertain. It is what predominantly plays on the radios of Zanzibar, where it is heard by one and all. The researchers themselves were able to catch contemporary Taarab on the radio of their bus as they travelled around the island. Their bus driver did not seem to mind the music, but his accompanying friend commented that music "wasn't like it used to be". To elders of the island, contemporary Taarab evokes a sense of nostalgia for the music that they grew up with. The two forms fight for business –in concert halls, on the radio, in live

performances- and it is difficult to answer which one succeeds. Both remain easily available to one and all. On an international scale, it is contemporary Taarab that continues to gain popularity.

Some, such as Mariam Hamdani, understand that the younger generation has a right to enjoy themselves with the music that they deem fit, although she hopes that this can be done without harming the survival of traditional Taarab. “We can’t just ban everything that they enjoy” she says with a smile. Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to allow this leeway. Many find the hordes of audiences dancing in front of the stage along with the contemporary Taarab musician a disgrace to the art form. They see it as a lack of discipline and order.

The researchers were intrigued by the overwhelming influence of India on Zanzibar society, and this was made clear by another form of contemporary Taarab that was revealed: Indian Taarab (*Taarab y kihindi*). As the name suggests, it gains its influence from India and the Bollywood film industry. Tausi Women’s Taarab Group, for example, has added “*Haste Hue Nikle Hum*” (which means “Laughing, we leave”) to their inventory of songs.

Indian Taarab combines Swahili poetry with Bollywood melodies. It is believed to have begun in the late 1950’s and reached its peak in the 1980’s following liberalization. The form was most popular in Kenya, but Zanzibaris too were fascinated with India’s music. They looked up to the works of Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle. The quality of some female voices inspired many female Taarab musicians. It was the rise of Indian Taarab that brought the harmonium and *tabla* to the foray of contemporary Taarab instruments. A unique feature of this genre is the predominant use of male singers. (Eisenberg)

As the researchers came to learn, Zanzibar society today is mixed on contemporary Taarab. Some see it as a harmless trend that will inevitably fade away unlike traditional Taarab that will live on; some see it as the future of Zanzibar’s music; others believe that traditional and contemporary Taarab can coexist. One is inclined to agree with the latter. Most of the interviewees spoke disdainfully of contemporary Taarab although record sales and radio coverage of those speak for themselves.

Clearly, there remains a niche of musicians who will continue to preserve traditional Taarab in the face of global music.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the narrative that had been constructed by secondary sources before the researchers visited Zanzibar in December of 2016, Taarab was an art form that emerged by the confluence of Arab and African cultures on the island. It could trace some of its influences to Egyptians, Indians and other countries by virtue of its lyrics, instruments and delivery of performances. To define Zanzibari Taarab would be a difficult task, and any attempts to do so would be insufficient. On arriving in Zanzibar, the researchers came to learn that Taarab is more than just music. Deeply embedded within Zanzibar's society, it represents the voice of the island.

Historically, Zanzibar's diversity has led to much conflict between the communities of the island. From the arrival of Portuguese to the Omani Sultanate to British rule, the island's many communities struggled to find a meeting point where peace and multi-culturalism could be achieved. It was in 1964 that tensions within the island caused a revolution, and while the years thereafter would be difficult, Zanzibar had, for the first time, established itself. With this independence came a wounded society, but as the islanders would learn, music would play an integral role in weaving the island back together.

From the inclusion of Arabic *maqams* to the use of the Indian *tabla* to the addition of the European violin, there is a multiplicity in Taarab in which all influences are accepted. This is perhaps one of its most endearing features: when one listens to Taarab, one is bound to find at least some familiar influences from their own culture. In determining the research question, the researchers aimed to document this fluid nature of the art form by studying the form and context of Zanzibari Taarab as it exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Research first began by employing appropriate methods of collecting data that would answer the aims and objectives that the researchers identified. Then, samples were created and personalities were determined within these samples. The data collected on-field through observations, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews was analysed and divided into certain 'themes'. It is these themes that the researchers

analysed over the course of this report: history and geographical context, components of a performance, societal influences and finally, contemporary streams.

Traditional Taarab comprises an orchestral nature in which groups of musicians would come together to perform as a club, adding to the social nature of the art form. Instrumentalists and vocalists would join forces, including composing some of their own music, for the purpose of entertaining fellow members of the island. There was no formal training for Taarab and people would learn through observation and imitation. Even as young children, they would pick up instruments and play until eventually, through trial and error, they mastered the instrument. This is how the tradition gained popularity. Taarab is open to one and all as a form of expression.

It exists in all aspects of social interactions. A wedding in Zanzibar ends with the community performing Taarab to show their happiness for the newlyweds; a birthday is celebrated with the family singing Taarab for the birthday boy or girl; sunsets during the month of Ramadan bring about the performance of Taarab songs that were composed the previous day. When a family goes out to eat, they enjoy the sounds of live Taarab with their delicious meal. When tourists visit, they are entertained by the enthralling nature of this music.

The art form is not limited to pleasant occasions, though. During turbulent times, the Zanzibaris employ this music to convey their displeasure with political events. They rally public support by singing of peace and reform. The singers are both musicians and rebels when they criticize their governments (especially with Zanzibar's history of political upheaval) but Taarab is the island's voice through all events, good or bad. In a predominantly Muslim country, religion plays an important role in shaping the island's society. Social interactions are considerably different there due to the impact of Islam. For example, the inclusion of women in Taarab was eventually allowed, but even this comes with the stigma of a woman 'portraying' herself onstage. This is especially made tricky when she performs for money. What does this make her? Zanzibar's society loves the female voice, but they are hesitant to see women onstage. She must cover her head, sing sweetly and dress elegantly to earn the respect of her audience, and even this come with years of experience. There are many factors that cause differences in men and women's adoption of the art form.



Despite the impact of Islam on Zanzibari society, it does not find itself in the island's music. While this music has deep social roots, it stays clear of religious connotations. To say that Taarab is religious would be incorrect, because it may be performed during Eid, but it is not sung to invoke the divine. It is not a form of prayer. Taarab is performed on a Muslim-majority island, but that is the extent of the religious influence on this form of music.

With the passage of time and eventual influence of global factors, traditional Taarab has expanded to include contemporary Taarab. There are many overlaps between the two, except that contemporary Taarab includes new instruments like keyboards and electric guitar. Lyrics-wise, it is much more direct than the subtle traditional Taarab that delivers messages through metaphors. Contemporary Taarab is more pointed with its allusions to sex and relationships that the elders of Zanzibar interpret as crass and vulgar. The researchers did not find many fans of contemporary Taarab amongst their interviewees who see it as an unfortunate adaptation of a once-beautiful art form to subscribe to popular culture. The length of songs is significantly shorter, the melodies are repetitive and remixes of old songs are employed.

Slowly, Taarab has evolved into smaller groups performing shorter songs and the birth of contemporary Taarab has created a change in its form. The government makes attempts to preserve the musical tradition through opportunities and endeavours such as the National Taarab Orchestra, but the structure of the political system in Zanzibar since the 1964 Revolution has resulted in suppression of public discontent in all forms. For art, dance and music, this translates to censorship in different levels. Now, the government focuses on boosting the island's economy through domestic reform and tourism which impacts Taarab both positively and negatively. The ban on performances during the week to improve productivity reduces music on the island during the week. The researchers themselves faced difficulty in attending Taarab concerts during their 10-day trip due to this ban. However, the rise of tourism on the island, which increased sevenfold in the last decade, has given musicians more avenues than ever to showcase their talents and earn a living.

What does this mean for the survival of the art form? How does Zanzibar preserve its musical tradition? There is no doubt of the importance of Taarab within the island, but in recent years, it is contemporary Taarab that, despite its critics, prevails on the radio and public platforms. Hotels employ musicians not to further music traditions but entertain their tourist visitors and if contemporary Taarab is the best way to keep their visitors content, then that will do. Perhaps contemporary Taarab does not need to be viewed negatively, because even traditional Taarab was contemporary at some point of time. Contemporary Taarab has its origins in the traditional music form, but as many interviewees pointed out, the differences between the two can lead to a different categorisation altogether. It may be wise to view the two art forms as separate entities. Because of its integral role in society, the researchers believe that Taarab will continue to flourish on the island. Just as contemporary Taarab emerged, as will many other new streams of music. With efforts made by the DHOW Countries Music Academy and some reform by the government, it is not difficult to see that Zanzibar's music tradition can survive modern times. After all, it is irreplaceable to the local people. To hear Taarab is to hear Zanzibar speak.

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## **Appendix**

### Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Research statement: **“To study the form and context of Zanzibari Taarab in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”**

1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Can you tell us a little bit about what you do?
2. What sparked your interest in this art form? How long have you been interested in it for?

#### **Form of Taarab**

3. Would you say that Taarab is “Swahili poetry put to music” or is that a limiting definition?
4. In your observations, what are the overarching themes, symbols and motifs seen in Taarab songs?
5. What is the general structure of a Taarab performance?
6. What is the form of Swahili poetry? What is the rhyme scheme and general syntax language used?
7. What is the general economic background of Taarab performers? Is this their primary occupation?
8. Who is the audience of a Taarab performance? What is their role? What is the take-away from the experience?
9. Siti binti Saad and Bi Kidude stand out as prominent female musicians of the art form. In your opinion, what is the role of the female voice in Taarab?
10. What is the general opinion amongst Taarab performers of its modern adaptations?
11. How does Taarab stand out from other African music?

#### **Context of Taarab**

12. How far does listening to Taarab give the listener an insight into African culture?

13. Would you agree that the beauty of Taarab music can be lost on non-Swahili speaking audiences? Or do you believe that its beauty can still be appreciated despite linguistic barriers?
14. Where does one learn Taarab? How is one inducted into the art form? Is it only taught in music academies, or is it taught within performing families as well?
15. Once one learns Taarab, what distinguishes mere practitioners from legitimate performers of the art form? How would one primarily gain exposure as a Taarab artist?
16. What according to you counts as African popular culture, with regard to music? Where would you place Taarab within this spectrum?
17. What are your views on Taarab in the world today? Would you say it is gaining importance?
18. How does Zanzibari Taarab differ from, say, Kenyan or Egyptian Taarab?
19. Why has Taarab been so popular in Zanzibar specifically?
20. To what extent does its performance in hotels, music festivals and other commercial arenas affect its survival?

## Glossary of Terms

1. *Amani*: Swahili word for “peace”.
2. *Bongos*: An Afro-Cuban percussion instrument of different sized drums.
3. *Buibui*: An Islamic headdress for women that covers the face except for the eyes, similar to *kiZorro*.
4. *Chachacha*: A form of dance and dance of Cuban origin that is popularly performed in the United States and parts of North America.
5. *Dansi*: A genre of dance music from Tanzania, also known as muziki wa dansi.
6. *Dhow*: A traditional sailing vessel with one or more masts used primarily in the Arabic and East African region.
7. *Dumbak*: A hollow drum traditionally made of wood that finds its origins in the Central African region.
8. *Ganuni*: A trapezoid-shaped string instrument with a soundboard interface, also known as *qanun*.
9. *Ghazal*: A lyric poem that is normally set to music typically associated with the theme of love.
10. *Hitma*: A form of music that finds its origins in Islamic lyrical verse, similar to *maulid*.
11. *Kanzu*: An ankle to floor length garment or tunic worn by men in the African region.

12. *Kidumbak*: A smaller form of the dumbak, a wooden, hollow drum.
13. *Kiitikio*: Swahili word for “chorus”.
14. *kiZorro*: An Islamic headdress for women that covers the face except for the eyes, similar to buibui.
15. *Kofia*: A brimless cylindrical hat worn by men in the East African region.
16. *Kutunza*: Swahili word for the practice of “tipping” at the end of a performance.
17. *Madrasa*: Education institutions (usually located in or around mosques) that impart religious knowledge.
18. *Maqaam*: A system of arranging musical scales used in Arabic music.
19. *Mashairi*: Swahili word for “poems”.
20. *Maulid*: A form of music that finds its origins in Islamic lyrical verse similar to hitma.
21. *Nanasi*: Swahili word for “pineapple”.
22. *Ney*: A wind instrument (like a flute) that features prominently in Middle Eastern music.
23. *Oud*: A short-necked string instrument in the shape of a pear.
24. *Qanun*: A trapezoid-shaped string instrument with a soundboard interface, also known as ganuni.



25. *Qora*: A large-sized string-lute-harp instrument from the West African region also known as kora.
26. *Rusha roho*: Swahili word for “to throw away the soul”, another word for Modern Taarab.
27. *Sauti za Busara*: Swahili for “sounds of wisdom”.
28. *Shairi*: A form of Urdu poetry.
29. *Soukous*: A popular genre of dance music from Central Africa.
30. *Taarab y kihindi*: Swahili word for “Indian Taarab”.
31. *Tabla*: A percussion instrument consisting of two-three small drums.
32. *Utenzi*: A long-form poem of two-three line verses.
33. *Wimbo*: A three-versed poem composed to music