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DANCE AND SOCIETY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY MOGADISHU

That cultural expression is one of the most revealing phenomena of people's experience has only lately been recognized in historical scholarship on Africa. Contributions by T. O. Ranger (I975) and Margaret Strobel (I979) focus on dance in eastern Africa; the collaborative work of Leroy Vail and Landeg White (I980) draws importantly upon song in central Mozambique; Emmanuel Obiechina I973) explores popular writing in eastern Nigeria; David Coplan (I982) and Tim Couzens (I982) address themselves to the role of music in the emergence of urban culture in South Africa; in a forthcoming article (I983) I incorporate various elements of both popular and elite culture, including art, in discussing Mozambique; while Said Samatar (I982) analyzes oral poetry in his sensitive study of Sayyid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan. All of this work is limited, however, to the colonial period, and extends no further back in time than to about I890. Only John Iliffe (I979), in his magisterial history of Tanganyika, attempts to integrate these cultural phenomena into a coherent historical reconstruction of an earlier century, drawing upon the unique research of the late Gerald Hartwig (I969). In this paper I shall attempt to extend this kind of analysis to a preliminary discussion of dance in I9th century Mogadishu, picking up a thread that I mentioned briefly in my presentation to the First Congress of Somali Studies at Mogadishu in July I980.[I]

During the I9th century the entire Benadir experienced a major socio-economic transformation as a consequence of its integration into the expanding world capitalist system

through the agency of Indian merchant capital and the Omani sultanate of Zanzibar. One of the most important features of this process was the massive importation of slave labour for agricultural commodity production. Mogadishu was at the center of these changes and whatever the composition of its population may have been in earlier periods, there is ample evidence that it sustained a significant slave population during the later decades of the I9th century. Until much more intensive collection of oral data has taken place it will be impossible to assess adequately the experience of these people during this period and to appreciate the process whereby they gradually came to assume Somali identity. At the outset, however, it is important to recognize that enslaved people were not simply passive recipients of dominant cultures and that the entire global history of slavery bears witness to the struggle by suppressed classes to maintain their own, unique historical identity in the face of forcible incorporation into other societies. Frederick Cooper's seminal work (I977) on Zanzibar and the Kenya coast suggests that in a cultural context which was very similar to that of the Benadir, slaves were able to establish their own subculture even as they becoming Swahili. Furthermore, his discussion of the early colonial attack on drinking and dancing as being inimical to regular habits of work should alert us to the possibility that similar slave tactics may have been employed during the I9th century, as well (Cooper I980). Moreover, in a spatially restricted urban society with such a significant proportion of culturally foreign slaves and freed slaves as I9th century Mogadishu,[2] we cannot limit our vision to notions of cultural resistance and survival. To the contrary, we must acknowledge the possibility that "slaveowners absorbed the customs and dances of slaves", as Strobel (I979:8) has demonstrated was the case for Mombasa since I890.

The earliest evidence that we possess for dance at Mogadishu dates only as far back as I882, when Georges Revoil spent several months in residence there. Earlier visitors to Mogadishu apparently had neither the interest, nor the sensitivity to include such observations in their largely economic and political comments on the town, but Revoil provides us with a unique fund of information on various aspects of its material and cultural life. Revoil was particularly taken with "the moonlight dances of the habashi or slaves", the former being defined by him as the liberated great-grandchildren of slaves (Revoil I885:39).

> "At nightfall, men and women join together and begin by arranging themselves face to face in two semi-circles. Two men then beat on differently toned large drums which they hold between their legs, in such a way as to indicate a cadence that all the dancers follow. In the middle of the circle are positioned a group of children wearing chelèou-chelèou, which are bracelets of small dried calabashes filled with gravel and which serve the function of rattles, on their ankles.
> Sometimes these are simply the dried fruits of the Datura stramonium (a medicinal plant containing an alkaloid which is used to relieve bronchial spasm), which are very abundant at Muqdisho.
> At a signal given by a horn, the children begin to turn themselves according to the cadence indicated, during which the women sing in a sad and monotonous voice.
> Then, little by little, the pace of the dancers accelerates: the circle is broken, and, facing the women who are standing up, the children present themselves for their meeting, holding their futas or loin-cloths, kinds of aprons which serve as their clothing, in front of them in both their hands. This movement resembles the two-step of a quadrille.
> They then execute the most bizarre contortions, and the dance ceases immediately, at the sound of the same horn which gave the opening signal.
>
> The slow rhythm which accompanies the beginning of this dance, called the chelèou-chelèou, is marked by a melancholy which at

> first saddens the spectators; but little by little laughter seizes you, without your being able to hold it in, at the sight of the negresses executing their prancing steps with all the grace of which these ladies are capable." (Revoil I885:40)

It would be foolhardy to attempt to read too much into this slender evidence with respect to the function and significance of this dance. Nor would it be wise to attempt to identify too specifically the origin of this dance. I have not been able to find any modern references to its existence in Somalia, but there are certain close parallels in the literature on Swahili dances. Among the many dances which he observed as being either practiced or known at Malindi, on the Kenya coast, in the second decade of the 20th century, Skene described the kinyasa, "a dance practised only by slaves and people of humble origin", which was evidently brought to the coast by slaves from the Lake Nyasa region. According to Skene (I9I7:4I8),

> "It is danced in the open either by day or by night. Men and women, arranged in no special order as to sex, form a circle standing one behind the other and go round in a direction opposite to the hands of a clock, moving in quick time but taking very short steps and bending the knee considerably at each stop. The arms are held in the position of a person running, that is to say with the elbow bent and the forearm at right angles to the body, which is bent slightly forward. Some of the dancers jerk their shoulders up and down occasionally. The leader of the dance sings a solo and the others take up the chorus. The men wear a string of small iron bells known as njuga strung around their knees, and stamp their foot at each step so as to make them jingle.
> One large drum is used, called a msondo, and fashioned somewhat after the drum of the Washambala (who inhabit the Usambara Mountains of northeastern Tanzania). It is rather a high-toned drum in spite of its size, which is about six feet in length and twelve to

> fifteen inches in diameter. One end only is covered with goat-skin, struck with the player's hands. The open end rests on the ground while the drummer stands astride the other end which is supported by a cloth round his waist, and he plays it in that position."

Certainly, what we have here is not exactly what Revoil described four decades earlier at Mogadishu. Indeed, even if what he witnessed had been a Nyasa-derived dance, it would be most surprising to find an exact replication. As James de Vere Allen remarks after surveying the great number of Swahili dances that have been recorded during the past century "these figures suggest that Swahili dances changed at a fairly fast rate and also varied, in many cases, from region to region, and this is pretty much what we should expect in an urban-oriented society in which considerable value was always attached to "the latest", whether in dances, clothes, or any other area in which fashions reigned." Allen (I98I:243) also comments that "the instruments selected to accompany each type of dance were simply the most appropriate available, and the fact that one or more such instruments might be nonindigenous tells us nothing about the origins of the dance itself except in a very few cases where the newly arrived instrument gave to the dance its special flavor or novelty." Indeed, something of this nature seems certainly to have been the case with the chelèou-chelèou dance, which very probably derived its name from the Swahili word chelewa, which is defined as "a kind of rattle used in dances, made by putting either stones or seeds into a tin", though the pre-20th century prototype may have been the dried fruit of the Oncoba spinosa (see Johnson I939:53; Allen I98I:236; Sacleux I939/I94I:I38). In any event, the two dances we have been examining are similar enough in their general configuaration and instrumentation to suggest that the chelèou-chelèou

and the kinyasa were very possibly different facets of the same general experience in which Central African peoples were enslaved and then incorporated into Muslim coastal East African society during the I9th century.

Revoil did not limit his interest in dance to the slaves of Mogadishu, and also provides a fairly detailed description of "a sort of chant, called the aiat, which is completely devoid of gaiety", that was performed by the Somali of the town.

> "It is generally executed by some artists of which our landlord was the chief of the orchestra.
> Grouped in a circle around him, these singers hold in their hands two pieces of hollow wood, looking pretty much like large weaver's shuttles without their bobbins, and, in beating them one against the other, they produce a more or less great sound, according to the part of the instrument which is struck.
> With a regularity which recalls the movements of a metronome, the men beat their pieces of wood while each time carrying their bodies forward, while the women, placed outside the circle, accompany this music with a plaintive voice, always on a drawling and languishing rhythm.
> The leader carries on like a devil to obtain modulations of forte and piano, and conducts his orchestra, from door to door, to serenade the influental people of the locality.
> The aiat is performed indistinctively at betrothals and funerals." (Revoil I885:4I-42)

Here we are on much firmer ground. There can be no doubting that what Revoil witnessed was a performance of the important Somali ritual dance known as Hayat, which is also called Bordheere and Lugey in other parts of Somalia.[3] Furthermore, the fact that this dance was specifically an upper class dance, or at least considered to be a true Somali dance at this time, is revealed not so much by the fact that it was performed for local notables, but that

the leader of the orchestra - Revoil's landlord in Xamarweyn - was himself a propertied Xamari.[4] Oral data from contemporary Mogadishu confirm that Xayaad, as it is known locally, was danced there in the I9th century, as well as adding some suggestive detail about it. According to one informant, all dances were performed by slaves, including Xayaad.[5] This notion would seem to be in direct conflict with Revoil's eye-witness account from I882, but it is possible either that some of the supporting musicians at that time may have been slaves (possibly belonging to the leader of the troup) or that by the very end of the pre-colonial era (i.e. the usual limit of an informant's memory of cultural events in 'the past'), even dances such as Xayaad were being danced by slaves. Only further research in the field can clarify questions such as these.

Another intriguing reference to Xayaad in Mogadishu is embedded in oral traditions about Sheikh Uways Haji Muumin, a saintly scion of the important Reer Sheikh Muumin of Xamarweyn.

> "Sheikh Muumin was on of the most respected saints of the I8th and I9th centuries. He displayed certain mystical powers. He could fly to far places. He used to feed people with food which he claimed to have brought from Zanzibar by using such of his mysterious powers. He performed a religious show called Xayaad. While dancing, when he was under intense divine inspiration, he often disappeared. At that time only his turban was visible in a dancing posture. It was his normal habit to distribute the food after the show."[6]

The point here is not to argue for the historicity of this example of communal religious ecstasy, but to point out that the performance of Xayaad in this important cultural context establishes the centrality of dance to Somali cultural identity in pre-colonial Mogadishu.

In addition to the slave dance that Revoil witnessed, there

is evidence that a number of other such dances were performed at Mogadishu in the I9th century. According to one informant, these included Beebo, Luumbi, Aw Daare or Aw Deere, Barkhadle, and Mateeko, and all were performed by slaves. "The one I recall vividly is Aw Deere because when Aw Deere was performed for me and I took part in that spiritual ritual dance, I got well."[7] Both Aw Deere and Barkhadle are clearly indigenous Somali dances, if names are any indication, the latter being identified with the legendary Yuusuf al-Quneen, who preached against pre-Islamic practices in northern Somalia.[8] But the other three dances are just as clearly not Somali, on linguistic grounds.[9] The first of these, Beebo, undoubtedly takes its name from the type of Swahili spirit possession dance known as pepo, a word which more generally signifies the entire generic category of spirits. Among the Swahili speaking peoples of the East African coast, each of these ngoma ya pepo has its individual name, but it should not surprise us that in its passage to an entirely different cultural context the generic name for this kind of spirit possession dance should have been adopted instead (Skene I9I7:420-434). In the I930s, Beebo or Pepa, as it was recorded by Viola, was recognized as

> "a Swahili dance sung in the Swahili language and danced by the freed slaves, men and women simultaneously. It conveys carnal passions and delight and the dancers seem invaded by the 'jini' or demons, so that the excitement provokes lively movements. A principal male and female dancer lead the entire dance which simulates violence and lust and customarily the spectators are not admitted to it with their heads uncovered." (Viola I937:337-338)

Four decades later, however, an official Somali Government booklet includes Beebe in a listing of "ritualistic Somali dance", without any apparent recognition of its

foreign, slave-introduced origin.[10]

The derivation of the other two slave dances, Luumbi and Mateeko, is less clear. The latter may possibly take its name from the Swahili mateka, indicating a captive in war or a slave. In the late I9th century it was also a pejorative name given to children who had been freed from slavery and confined to the Christian missions at Zanzibar (see Sacleux I939/I94I:5I4). This identification seems close enough to the social condition of the people who were dancing Mateeko in Mogadishu that I feel reasonably confident in suggesting it. Luumbi presents more of a problem. In Swahili there are two possibilities which might conceivably provided inspiration for the name of this dance. One is the word for chameleon, lumbwi, which according to Krapf (I882:I89) (most of whose lexicographical knowledge pertains to Mombasa) was called sultani ya nyama yote,"the king of all animals", because of its slow pace. Both this characteristics and the adaptability of the chameleon to its immediate environment by changing its coloration make it a tempting focal point for a spirit possession dance. The other possibility is rumbi, a northern Swahili dialect name for a large Indian jar which was sometimes placed in front of a mosque on a well frequented passageway to serve as a water reservoir (Sacleux I939/I94I:782). Such an object could also have stimulated people's imagination as a symbol of the dominant culture into which they had been forcibly thrust.[11] Only further careful research can hope to clarify this issue, including a survey of other Bantu languages, as well as Swahili.

We do possess, however, independent confirmation of the non-Somali, slave-introduced origin of two of the dances that I have been discussing. Oral traditions associated with the famous I9th century mystic and holy man, Sheikh Suufi, who is remembered as the 'Guardian of Mogadishu', extoll

his ceaseless campaign against all evils.

> "He discouraged bad sorts of dances like Maduundi, Beeba and Luunbi, which had its origin in Kenya. These dances were to propitiate devils. Hence the Sheikh very rightly perceived that these dances were not in the true spirit of Islamic religion and culture. So Sheikh Suufi spared no efforts to guard the town against everything he thought was harmful."[12]

Here we have another convincing demonstration of the impact which slave dances introduced from Bantu speaking, non-Islamic East Africa were having on Muslim Somali society in late I9th century Mogadishu. Moreover, we now have yet another spirit possession dance, Maduundi, to add to our list. It seems very likely that the name of this dance derives from the Swahili verb, kudunda, which has several meanings directly related to dancing.[13]

All of this evidence suggests strongly what one could in any case imagine must have been taking place in a society like urban Mogadishu one hundred years ago. That is, the massive infusion of a servile class of people whose culture and religion were foreign to that of the Somali, and who were being forced by their bondage into adopting Somali culture and Islam, was producing severe strains on the cultural cohesion of the dominant culture itself. Indeed, exactly the same sort of strains were appearing in Swahili society at the same time for exactly the same reasons.[14]

A particularly vivid illustration of the tensions that this produced within society and within individuals is provided by Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, the author of the monumental Desturi za Waswahili who grew up in Bagamoyo in the late I9th century and came to teach Swahili in Berlin in the early decades of this century.

> "I once had an illness of the back and limbs, and a doctor was called in to treat me. He brought me Dungomaro steam for seven days.

> Then he said to my parents, "Mtoro has the Dungomaro; do not let him eat mutton or anything fried with onions." My parents believed him. One day he said, "He is all right now; but let us reduce him so that the spirit lets him rest." My parents agreed, but when my teacher heard that I was to be reduced, he forbade me, saying, "Are you not ashamed to dance in the yard in the sight of everybody?" I was ashamed, and I told my parents that I would not be reduced. My mother was much frightened by my refusal, and when the doctor heard it, he said that I must not eat mutton and that if I did so I should die.
> One day my teacher was asked to a party and I with him. The Arab host had killed a sheep, and my teacher said to me, "This is mutton; are you going to eat it?" I said I did not know, and he said, "Put your trust in God; there is no spirit; it is nonsense." I ate the mutton, and when I went home I told my mother that I had done so. She was horrified and said, "Why did you do that? Do you not value your life?" I waited for five or six days and had no pain form head to foot, and now I am here in Berlin."[15]

Both Strobel and Allen have pointed out the dialectic process involved in the cultural exchange between the free, once slave-owning dominant class and slaves and their descendants in Swahili society. Allen (I98I:244-245), in particular, comments on this contradiction in these terms:

> "The elite, the old, established families, were constantly seeking to entrench themselves, to make themselves almost a caste apart, distinguished from other groups by any number of cultural and sociocultural indications; and almost as invariably they failed, because of insufficient economic differentiation, perhaps, or simply because they were too few in number or the resources on which their wealth depended were too vulnerable to ecological and other forces. At the other end of the social spectrum, new groups were constantly being absorbed, sometimes almost wholesale, who brought with them certain cultural traits and values that

> they did not discard (though they often modified them to make them more acceptable to an urban and Islamic society), and these frequently became so important in the cultural scheme of things that the elite had to accept them along with everything else."

Surely, this analysis pertains equally to late I9th century Mogadishu, as the oral data testify, while the ultimate acceptance of Beebo bears witness to the integration of at least one element of slave subculture by the dominant Somali culture.[I6]

Finally, let me return to the communal, integrative rites which were celebrated at Mogadishu in the I9th century that I mentioned at the end of my forthcoming article in the Journal of African History. The annual arrival of the north-east trade winds combined with the lack of an enclosed harbor at Mogadishu to necessitate the beaching of local boats until it was safe to ply the seas again. Revoil describes this festival, which he calls Lab, but which other sources identify as Istaagfurow, Dabshiid, Neyruus, or Ciid fircoon.[I7] In this context it is less important to establish the specific identity of this celebration, which continued to be celebrated on a grand scale into the I970s, than to note that all social groups within Mogadishu participated, including the reer of both Xamarweyn and Shingaani, masters and servants, freeborn and slave. Revoil also noted a similar communal celebration at the annual commemoration in honor of Sheikh Aways al-Qarni which took place at the mosque which bears his name on the coral reef just outside Xamarweyn. Reer from both quarters again participated in this colorful and religiously significant occasion, which was presided over by Sheikh Suufi, although Revoil makes no specific mention of slaves in his description (see Revoil I885:202,204).

At the very end of the century, in I897 and I898, the

Italian Royal Commissioner presided over two similar communal festivities which included groups of slaves performing two dances that we have already noted previously. The first, Mudundu, is certainly the same dance against which Sheikh Suufi exhorted the faithful. According to Sorrentino, in the best tradition of Swahili dancing, it was a competition between different groups of slaves composed principally of brightly attired young women in their early adolescence which was accompanied by tambourines and fifes, while the two groups circled around a barrel. The second he does not name, but those who danced it wore ankle bells and mimicked the movements of birds (see Sorrentino I9I2:I04-I05). What is of greatest significance to note here is that these dances were part of the communal celebration of Ciid al-fitr at the end of the month of Ramadhan, as the dating of Sorrentino's account makes clear.

Inclusion of slaves in these celebrations by no means implies social equality - after all, these were still slaves - but it does signal the acceptance of these groups and their cultural expressions into the orbit of Somali culture and society. I should also point out that this custom was not unique to Mogadishu. An American traveller at Muscat in I852 witnessed exactly the same kind of hierarchical integration of African slaves and their cultures at the celebrations marking the end of Ramadhan. Following about two hours of displays of horsemanship and military skills by Seyyid Thuwain ibn Said and his retinue, that is, by the official contingent of the ruling Bu Sa'idi dynasty,

> "the slaves clustered together for a dance, called by them "Gooma" (Sw. ngoma, E. A.). When they were arranged I counted ten different groups, each consisting of between twelve and fifty men and from two to thirty women. There was so much sameness of dress and movement connected with the different circles that it would not

be worth the while to particularize regarding more than three or four of them."

While I do not intend to detail each one of these dances, Osgood (I854:I06-I07) mentions a wide variety of dance styles and instruments, including many different kinds of drums, pipes, ankle rattles consisting of "wooden globes filled with pebbles", sticks to beat together, and others. It would be no less interesting and rewarding to investigate the history of these dances and the social groups that they represented in Muscat than it is in Mogadishu.

To conclude, I think that I have only scratched the surface of an extremely important historical index of social change and cultural synthesis in I9th century Mogadishu. Furthermore, as Strobel elucidates, the process of integrating former slaves and former masters into a more egalitarian social order continued to be played out with only partial success during the 20th century, at least in Mombasa. What I hope to have achieved in this paper is recognition that the historical study of cultural phenomena may yield equally rich rewards for our knowledge of Somali culture and society.

FOOTNOTES

I For a revised and extended version of that paper, see Alpers (forthcoming).

2 Details are provided in Alpers (forthcoming).

3 Ministry of Information and National Guidance (I974:I3). I hope to pursue all of these questions about dance in Mogadishu with colleagues at the Somali Academy of Arts and Science and to seek their assistance in discussing them with members of the dance team of the National Theatre.

4 Revoil (I885:3Ø), for the circumstances of his obtaining lodging in Xamarweyn.

5 Interview with Islao Mahadala, Shingaani, I5 November I980. These interviews were carried out in collaboration with Maxamed Cabdi Allamagan, Axmed Yuusuf Paarax, and Cusmaan Yuusuf Maxamed (Jirfe), without whose dedication and perseverance they would have been impossible. They were seconded to this project by the Somali Academy, to which I also wish to express my gratitude.

6 Interview with Iikar Bana Xadad and Imaan Osman, Xamarweyn, I7 June I980.

7 Interview with Islao Mahadala.

8 Personal communication from Amina Haji Adan, Los Angeles, II May I983, who adds that the dance associated with him used to be performed annually on a specific date on the Islamic calendar at Aw Barkhadle, near Hargeysa. See also I. M. Lewis (I969).

9 My thanks to Christopher Ehret for clarifying certain linguistic points for me.

IO Ministry of Culture and Higher Education (I974:I3).

II cf. Alpers: Female Subculture in I9th century Zanzibar: the kitimiri spirit possession cult, paper presented to the conference on African Women in History, University of Santa Clara, I5 - I6 May I98I.

I2 Interview with Iikar Bana Xadad and Imaan Osman.

I3 Sacleux (I939/I94I:I75), who gives these definitions: "to beat the ground in time (dancer); -d. ngoma, to beat the drum several times, to announce the dance and to invite the dancers to come. Ngoma ya kudunda, drum which is only beaten on one side."

I4 See Alpers: Female Subculture ..., and sources cited therein.

I5 Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari (I98I:I00). Dungomaro was a particular type of possessing spirit which required its own special form of exorcism.

I6 Of note here is the official attack on excessive expenditure on spirit possession dances in Mogadishu before October I969 in: Ministry of Information and National Guidance (I974:27-28); cf. Strobel (I979: I63-I73).

I7 Revoil (I885:55); interview with Islao Mahadala; Ministry of Information and National Guidance (I974:I4).

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