Digitization and Commodification of Islamic Knowledge through Chanted Poetry and Dance in the East African Coast

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Abstract
Muslim Ulama (clerics), particularly males, tend to have held the absolute position as custodians of knowledge and religious authority in the community. With the advancement of media technology in the 21st century, nonetheless, this tends be changing as young men and women take to shi'r (religious chanted poetry) to claim a stake in the once reserved space for clerics in knowledge production and transmission dynamics. Using various media including radio, television and YouTube, poems (qasida) and dances (zamuni), young men and women equally relay religious knowledge on diverse issues allowing them to challenge not only the traditional settings on knowledge production and dissemination but also religious authority. Moreover, entry of women in the endeavor further complicates the scenario in relation to traditional beliefs on women's bodies and voices and mixing of genders in public spaces thereby causing a rupture hitherto unexperienced in the Muslim community.

Key words: Chanted poetry, media, women's bodies, proselytization

Introduction

While Islamic *shi'r* (also *qasida*, chanted poetry) and dance (Swahili, *zamuni*) were reserved for special religious occasions like the *mawlid* (commemoration for the birth of Prophet) and Sufi rituals of '*sama* (deep listening) and *dhikr* (remembrance of God), contemporary poetry has become a key segment of the knowledge production, dissemination as well as religious market economy particularly along the East African coast. Ordinarily, knowledge production and dissemination across Muslim communities was a preserve of the *ulama* (clerics) who were, in typical patriarchal communities, male. Females were regarded to be unfit with their bodies and voices perceived as *awra* (nudity) thereby supposedly able "to distract the attention of the males" (Ndzovu 2019:6). Consequently, this not only confined women to private spaces and limited them to basic knowledge sufficient for their core domestic responsibilities but also curtailed their invaluable contribution to knowledge production and dissemination. More importantly, limiting women to private spaces for fear of causing *fitna* (temptation) impeded them from executing the moral duty of exhortation as demanded in the Qur'an - *ta'amuruna bil maaruf watanhauna a'nil munkar* (commanding good and prohibiting evil, Qur'an 3:104, 110) subtly denying them the opportunity to worship freely.

The above scenario was, nonetheless, the norm during times when religious knowledge was considered a rigorous process "attained after a considerable period of training and proven display of acceptable religious behaviour with periodic disputation" (Ndzovu 2019:6). With political democratization and media liberalization across Africa since 1990s, a remarkable change has taken place not only in the perception towards knowledge production but also women's active and public involvement in religious and socio-cultural matters. Media technology has enabled the production and dissemination of religious knowledge through chanted poetry and dance in recorded VCDs, CDs, audio cassettes, television and radio stations as well as social media like YouTube. With this development, youths that were always adept to technology, have progressively taken an active role in religious knowledge dissemination and exhortation thereby fulfilling a core mandate in a way never thought before. This has remarkably demystified acquisition and dissemination of religious knowledge from the traditional rot learning making it fun, enjoyable and

easily accessible enabling one to reform their religious practice and outlook as expected in the commanding good and forbidding evil spectrum. So; (i) What specific gaps does chanted poetry fill in the religious knowledge production and dissemination in the East African Muslim community? (ii) How does appropriation of media by poets helps shape the landscape in relation to knowledge authority and religious market economy in the region? And more significantly (iii) What dynamics does the entry of women in religious chanted poetry create in relation to the view on women's bodies and voices and mixing of genders in the public spaces?

Whereas the study raised pertinent queries that would have appropriately called for an ethnographic investigation, the prevailing challenges posed by the COVID-19 global pandemic made this endeavor purely a desk-top review of Islamic chanted poetry in the social media, particularly YouTube. Without doubt, this posed serious limitations but a clear indication that further studies were required on the subject. Out of the numerous youthful and upcoming male and female poets in the region, the study was also limited to two Zanzibar based poets - Ahmad Shawqy and Arafa Hussein. The choice of the two poets was strategic and purposeful with a view to clearly bring into light the key queries posed by the study. In the chosen poems, Shawqy's was a collaborative performance with one male and another female poet while that by Arafa's was a solo live performance in a social hall. Both poems aptly elicited the moral questions on women's bodies and voices, mixing of genders in public spaces as well as knowledge production, dissemination and religious market economy posed by the study.

Global Debate on the Permissibility of Song-and-Dance in Islam

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that Muslims in the East African region have failed to domesticate the globalized discourse concerning permissibility of music but have, instead, adapted and adopted what is propounded from the predominantly Muslim Middle East and South Asia. The paucity of literature on the subject speaks for itself despite the region, as elsewhere in Africa, being rich with the culture of music and art. It was expected, therefore, that there would be a vibrant discourse that takes cognizance of the cultural sensibilities of African Muslims in the region. This not being the case, local Muslims are split right in the middle between Orthodox and

reformist ideologies on the permissibility of song and dance whose origin is mainly the Middle East and South Asia that renowned scholars have aptly waded into.

A brief recap on the debate suggests that Orthodox Muslim interpretation holds singing as *sunna* (way of life of the Prophet) if it moves one to a noble state of mind that makes one remember the hereafter. For this purpose, music genres that fall within what Al-Faruqi calls *handas al sawt* (artistic engineering of sound) that tend to encourage good deeds, wisdom, noble qualities, abstinence from worldly engagements, or other pious traits such as urging one to obey Allah, follow the *sunna*, or shun disobedience, are tolerated. This includes family and celebration music such as lullabies, women songs, wedding songs, religious celebration songs; occupational music like caravan chants, shepherds' tunes, work songs; as ell as military band music (Al-Faruqi, 31-33; Harnish and Rasmussen, 2011).[1]

Two historical incidents both recorded in *Sahih Bukhari*, are particularly said to inform the Orthodox Muslim view on the permissibility of music in the faith. In the first incident, 'Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, was approached by Abu Bakr on the days of Mina, (11th, 12th, and 13th of Dhul-Hijjah) while two young girls were beating the tambourine and the Prophet was lying covered. Abu Bakr allegedly scolded the two young girls but the Prophet uncovered his face and told Abu Bakr, "Leave them, for these days are the days of 'Id and the days of Mina." In the second incident, it is reported that 'Aisha said:

> Once the Prophet was screening me and I was watching the display of black slaves in the Mosque and ('Umar) scolded them. The Prophet said, 'Leave them. O Bani Arfida! (carry on), you are safe (protected)'." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2(15):103).

What is manifest in the two incidents is that lady 'Aisha seemed to have enjoyed the display of dancing and sporting the performance of which was apparently approved by the Prophet. This subtly suggests that, after all, music and dancing may not be entirely repudiated in Islam. As a matter of fact, several scholars argued that even the Qur'an contains some aspects of poetry as it could be discerned from the early

[1] See also Shar'ia Law: Music, Song and Dance in Muhammadanism. Available at http://www.muhammadanism.org/Government/Government_Sharia_Music.htm. (Accessed October 2020).

chapters of Meccan origin and its cantillation in strict conformity to the rules governing recitation such as phonetics, phrasing, syllable, length and tempo (Harnish and Rasmussen, 2011:25; Frischkope, undated, p.644). Alongside cantillation and Meccan chapters are religious rituals like the *adhan* (call to prayer) and *talbiyah* (pilgrimage chants). During *mawlid* (commemoration of the birth of the Prophet) praise songs that involve some measure of tolerated poetry are also a core component in the month-long event across the Muslim world.

One group of Orthodox Islam, the Sufi, has especially imbibed poetry in its religious rituals. Poetry constitutes a key element of Sufi rituals of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), which involves chanting the names of God, prayer, singing of unaccompanied hymns (*nasheed*) and ecstatic dance; and '*sama* - spiritual audition or deep listening with the heart that allegedly induces trance to help establish links with divinity (Harris 2017:48; Lisa, 2012: 236; Harnish and Rasmussen, 2011: 17-26; Kapchan, 2009:65-70).

Contributing to the debate on the permissibility of music in Islam, Amnon Shiloah (1997:145) reckons that the Qur'an is ambiguously silent on music. He opines that *lawhi* (pass time, vain talk) in Qur'an 23:3 was used figuratively by contemporary authors to designate what came to be regarded as instruments of diversion in studies of secular music. Ultimately, that line of interpretation included all music and other forms of diversion, misbehavior and forbidden pleasures that are claimed to sway the believer from religious obligations and standard morality (ibid, p.146). The scholar argues that there is nothing inherently wrong with music but rather what accompanies it in form of behavior by individual listeners as well as performers. Citing a 10th century Sufi, Shiloah concludes:

> The [singing] voice is an instrument said to carry and communicate meaningful ideas; when the listener perceives the meaning of the message without being distracted by the melody, his *sama*' is lawful; otherwise and when the content expresses physical love, simple desire and simple futilities, the *sama*' is pure diversion and must be banished (1997:149).

The reformative wing of Islam, however, regards performances that are accompanied with musical instruments as *haram* (prohibited) and condemned for being a source of evil. Such performances are claimed to impede the ideal life of a God-fearing Muslim for their lack of Islamic themes, the inability to enhance sobriety and morality but instead promote immorality or distracts one from basic religious obligations and

practice (Harnish and Rasmussen 2011:12). On the strength of Qur'an 23:3 where *lawhi* is discouraged, performing or listening to song and dance is claimed to be akin to devotion only reserved to God, hence prohibited for it gives the believer no time to perform *dhikr* (Lisa, 2012). Reformist Islam also prohibits song and dance owing to the associated unethical practices like drinking, illicit sex, display of personal wealth, show off (*ria*) and compelling power that are often, and unapologetically attributed to non-Muslim civilizations (Lisa 2012:235; Harnish and Rasmussen 2011).

Several traditions (*ahadith*, sing. *hadith*) are equally cited to give eminence to the reformists' stance on song and dance, one of which allegedly promises severe punishment in the form of molten lead poured into the ears of such believers in the hereafter. It is such *ahadith* that form the basis of detailed *fatawa* (sing. fatwa, religious legal opinion) prohibiting listening to music and dance in reformist Islam.

There, however, seem to be no monothematic stance within the Islamic reformist wing with regard to song and dance. While the largest segment of reformist Islam condemns all forms of music, a small section accepts *nasheed* (vocalized performances) accompanied only by percussion instruments like the *daf* (tambourine) or sung a cappella song style for the purpose of praising God. *Nasheed* has a long history in Islam with predominant Muslim societies of the Middle East and South East Asia having their own recording industries (Harris 2017:45). Even as the tolerated song and dance genre in reformist Islam eschews musical instruments, however, they are thoughtfully constructed as musical works in terms of production quality and style and draw directly on the technologies and the values developed within the music industry (Harris 2017:46).

In summary, the global debate on the permissibility and moral effects of music and dance in Islam is not a new phenomenon and dissenting views have uneasily coexisted since immemorial times among various ideologies in the faith. More significantly, the debate tends to oscillate between what Harnish and Rasmussen (2011) describe as the 'whole performance medium' - message, behavior, venue and context - in determining permissibililty or otherwise. To use the words of a Central Asian Sufi master;

> Human beings are composed of spirituality and sensuality. If spirituality is predominant in people, then listening to beautiful voices will bring

> them closer to God, but if sensuality is dominant, then listening to fine voices will incline them towards fornication and obscenity (Ahmad Kasani Dahbidi in Harris 2017:48).[2]

In other words, the practice of producing and listening to music is in itself indifferent with the problem laying squarely with the people themselves. This takes us to the perception of performers and listeners of song and dance in Islam in relation to women's bodies and voices in public space as elaborated in the subsequent section.

Controversies on Women's Bodies and Voices in Muslim Chanted Poetry

Another element on the global debate on the permissibility of music and dance, concerns women's bodies and voices. Conservative interpretation of Islamic moral and legal corpus hold that women mixing with men and projecting their voices in public is '*awra* and *fitna*. This particularly demonstrates the misogynist face of a section of Islam where men tend to place eminence on the bodies and voices of the messengers rather than the messages contained in the religious discourses by women. Indeed, misanthrope perceptions across Muslim societies are not limited to female poets but also women religious authorities.

In his study on *Broadcasting Female Muslim Preaching in Kenya*, Hassan Ndzovu noted that female religious practitioners - Qur'an reciters, preachers and *madrassa* teachers (*ustadha*) "are confronted with the prevailing belief that classifies their voices as nakedness" (2019:31). In Muslim communities where even Qur'an cantillation and teaching by women is demonized, therefore, song and dance by female bodies and voices would outright be condemned as un-Islamic. Recordings of female recitation of the Qur'an were, for instance, discouraged in the late 19th century Indonesia for fear of arousing erotic feelings (van Zanten 2011:246).

Sexualization of women's bodies and voices as well as lethargy towards their inclusion and involvement in public affairs for fear of temptation has, nonetheless, more to do with cultural perceptions rather than religious (Islam) connotation. Describing her ethnographic experience about male-female involvement in public spaces in contemporary Indonesia, for example, Rasmussen (2011:121-125) notes that:

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[2] See also Shiloah, 1997.

> The women and men I worked with taught me that as Qur'anic scholars, particularly those who serve as reciters, women are neither shameful nor defective, and their voices and public bodies, as they work to broadcast and strengthen the faith, represent neither temptation nor danger. For most Indonesian Muslims, it seems, the woman's voice and the woman's body is not "'*awra*" (shameful, from the Arabic), but rather "*biasa saja*" (just regular, usual, from the Indonesian)… the sound of a woman's voice or her physical presence was not problematic in the Muslim Indonesian context. (Rasmussen 2011:121-125).

The observation by Rasmussen clearly illustrates that not all cultures of predominantly Muslim communities are hostile to women involvement in religious and social spaces. The author further noted that recordings of women singing Islamic music were a common feature as early as 1920s in Indonesia, and so were music schools where all genders learn to perform and take active part alongside each other (Ibid, pp. 246-247).

It is safe to note, therefore, that women's voices, like any other voice, are inherently indifferent and get meaning depending on the listener. The argument that women's bodies and voices are *fitna* is, unfortunate and raises two considerations: First, that women are expected to be live passive actors even in sexual intimacy. Why would one, for instance, assume that it is only men that could be aroused by female voices but not the reverse? Women also attend religious *darsas* conducted by men but do not regard men's voices, at least publicly, as *fitna.* So, other than misogyny, what makes men think that women cannot be attracted by a male voice? The textual basis of the argument on limiting women's active participation in public spaces explicitly mentions dress and as such cannot be extended to include the voice (Qur'an 33:59). Doing so would amount to confining women to private spaces hence missing their invaluable contributions as is presently the case across most patriarchal Muslim communities.

Significantly, Islamic history is replete with parallels of mothers of believers (Prophet's wives) preaching to larger and mixed congregations and even offered consultation to men but their voices never arose any sentiments of being *fitna*. As a matter of fact, even in Islam's holiest place, Mecca, where believers perform haj, the annual gathering is not gender segregated. Men and women rub shoulders on equal footing reciting the *talbiya* as they perform religious rituals and meditate to God, each

deeply immersed in his own spiritual concerns. By extension, it goes to say that watching and listening to live performances or recorded chanted poetry by a female artists could as well fall within the parameters of religious exhortation as exemplified by the mothers of believers and forms no basis for sexual arousal.

This could not be further from the truth as elaborated in the poem by Arafa Hussein in this paper. Arafa's poetry is among those that tend to "impart verses of the Qur'an and *hadith*" (Harnish, 2011:26), thereby situating them within the realm of tolerated genre in Islam. More importantly, the message contained in the poem would pass for an ordinary preaching and exhortation session by a traditional *ulama* in a religious space. This underscores the view that the main task of a practicing Muslim is to decipher and make sense of the message rather than painstakingly attach significance to the medium used in delivering it.

The second consideration that the misogynist argument raises is that all men are wired the same in as far as sexual arousal and intimacy is concerned. This is without doubt not true since what interests one person does not necessarily interest the other. The argument, is thus without merit and merely a ploy to perpetuate patriarchy and misogyny with a view to silencing women in the socio-cultural set up way into the 21st century. This perception, nonetheless, seem to be progressively paving way for gender inclusion in the society as is presently the norm in the predominantly Muslim communities of Indonesia and Zanzibar. Women's participation in social and religious publics in the East African Island and Indonesia is a common feature with several of them in key government ministries and departments, Qur'an teaching and preaching. In both countries, the field of chanted poetry is well established with state of the art recording studios and promoters open to both male and female performers. For this reason, the two communities have at least sufficiently demonstrated that women's bodies and voices are "neither shameful nor defective" (Rasmussen 2011:121). This gives room for women to join their male counterparts in broadcasting and strengthening Islam as aptly demonstrated in the chanted poetry analyzed in the following section.

The Place of Chanted Poetry in Knowledge Production, Dissemination and Religious Market Economy in the East African Coast

In this section, we explore specific gaps that chanted poetry fill in the religious knowledge production and dissemination; and how appropriation of media helps shape the landscape in relation to knowledge authority and religious market economy in the East African Muslim community.

Hassan Ndzovu (2019) observed that the *ulama* class is traditionally a rigorous process associated with a scholarly religious authority "attained after a considerable period of training and proven display of acceptable religious behaviour with periodic disputation before other scholars" (Ndzovu, 2019:19). While this remains the norm for the purpose of establishing a strong religious authority, the dissemination of knowledge in a society where religion drives every aspect of life need not be limited to a social class of people. Islam is basically not a missionary oriented religion according every believer the moral obligation to enjoin what is right and forbidding what is wrong - *da'wa* (Qur'an 3:110). In another tradition attributed to the Prophet, he also encouraged Muslims to "convey from me [him] even if it is one verse" (*Sahih Bukhari,* 3461). These textual edifices suggest that one does not necessarily need to be an established *ulama* to command good and discourage vices in the community. They further leave it wide open to the *dai'ya* (person undertaking *da'wa*) to decide on the most appropriate context and method including but not limited to chanted poetry.

It is, therefore, argued in this article that, chanted poetry helps demystify religious knowledge and concepts in Islam. In the traditional setup where knowledge generation and transmission is perceived to be the exclusive realm of mostly male *ulama* in the community, young men and women have demonstrated that after all, religious knowledge is meant to be simple and consumable to help shape everyday life rather than being restricted to complexities in conventional religious spaces. This simplification could be readily achieved through chanted poetry as established by this study and elsewhere where the power of music was proven to be viable and effective means for communicating religious messages. As established by Harnish (2011) and Rasmussen (2011), certain forms of music, dance, and theater were historically and effectively used as medium either for *da'wa* and exhortation in Islam, or presented narratives with Islamic content, or even to "add meaning and inspiration to the spiritual value of Islam" (Rasmussen 2011:253; Harnish 2011:87).

As demonstrated in the present study, chanted religious poems and dance further help simplify the otherwise complex and abstract religious concepts through dramatization of real life situations, thereby making it easy for such doctrinal issues and concepts to sink into the minds of the believers. This is particularly invaluable to "people lacking strong literacy and religious training", hence making chanted poetry among "the most attractive religious commodity to consume" (Nzovu 2019:18). This observation could not be further from the truth as elaborated in the chanted poetry by Ahmad Shawqy.

In his poem, *Kulla Jema* (every good deed), Ahmad Shawqy demystified the concept of s*adaqa* (charity) in Islam. Regarded as one of the main pillars of religion next to *salat* (prayers), every Muslim is expected to give charity. However, preponderant interpretations often emphasize the material aspect where believers pay up to two and a half percent of their annual wealth to the poor and the needy (LeBlanc Marie 2020). This partly explains the obsession of material charity with aid and development in Western scholarship (See Holger Wiess 2020). Contrary to the emphasis on material charity, nonetheless, several traditions of the Prophet place equal eminence to the non-material aspect that:

> Charity is due upon every joint of the people for every day upon which the sun rises. Being just between two people is charity. Helping a man with his animal and lifting his luggage upon it is charity. A kind word is charity. Every step that you take towards the mosque is charity, and removing harmful things from the road is charity (Bukhari, 2827).

Shawqy's poem, therefore, helps bring into light the often forgotten non-material forms of charity as an inclusive way of life not limited to material wealth but also time and gratitude for the service of God.[3] In fact, the title of the poem as suggested is a *hadith* attributed to the Prophet reminding believers that "every good deed done to another person constitutes charity" (*Sahih Muslim,* 10005) as elaborated below.

Kulla jema kulla jema swadaka, yakimbilie yakimbilie haraka x 2
every good deed, every good is charity, make haste, make haste (in performing good)
Hakuna dogo mbele ya Mola hakika, kuna malipo wala usitie shaka
certainly nothing is too minute before Almighty, without doubt there is reward
Likulli maa'un x 4 in all that you do

[3] *Kulla jema* (Every Good Deed), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flhjMopjmT8 (Accessed October 2020).

Kimbilia kheri upate thawabu, epuka kiburi utapata tabu x 2

hasten in doing good to gain divine grace, avoid arrogance/pride least you get into difficulties

Wema ni wema, usirudi nyuma, mja fanya hima thawabu kuchuma

goodness is undefined [not limited to material sense] don't shy away, hasten in reaping divine grace

Wema ni wema, usirudi nyuma, mja fanya hima thawabu kuchuma (chorus)

goodness is undefined don't shy away, hasten in reaping divine grace

Wabebe yatima, fukara vilema, zidisha hekima upate salama,

Carry [help] the orphans, needy, disabled, be wise to gain peace

Na sura kunjufu, mbele ya wenzako,thawabu 'adhwimu zitakuja kwako x 2

and joyous face before peers, rare divine grace shall come unto you

Kulla jema kulla jema swadaka, yakimbilie yakimbilie haraka x 2

every good deed every good is sadaqa, make haste, make haste (in performing good)

Hakuna dogo mbele ya Mola hakika, kuna malipo wala usitie shaka (Q 99:7)

certainly nothing is too minute before Almighty, without doubt there is reward

Likulli maa'un x 4 (chorus) in all that you do

Kauli njema na kwako idumu, wakubwa wadogo uwaheshimu,

let good speech be your tradition, respect the young and elderly

Umpe mwenza kilicho 'adhwimu, aliyekuudhi umkirimu x 2

to colleagues give them the rarest do good to those annoying you

Wema ni wema, usirudi nyuma, mja fanya hima, dhawabu kuchuma

goodness is undefined don't shy away, hasten in reaping divine grace

Wema ni wema, usirudi nyuma, mja fanya hima, dhawabu kuchuma (Chorus)

goodness is undefined don't shy away, hasten in reaping divine grace

Aaa Mtume kasema, halina mashaka, kila jambo jema hilo ni swadaka

has without doubt confirmed the Prophet,every good deed is charity

Upendo moyoni, mpende jirani, na ndugu nyumbani ungie peponi x 2

love in the heart, love your neighbor and relatives to enter paradise

Ya jamaa ya jamaa, tufanye wingi wa swadaka

oh people, oh people, lets give lots of charity

Ya jamaaa, ya jamaa, Mtume wetu katamka

oh people, oh people, has said our Prophet

Ya jamaa ya jamaa, "Qullu ma'rufi swadaka"
oh people oh people, every good deed is charity
Ya jamaa ya jamaa, tufanye wingi wa swadaka
oh people, oh people, lets give lots of charity
Ya jamaaa, ya jamaa, Mtume wetu katamka
oh people, oh people, has said our Prophet
Ya jamaa ya jamaa, "Qullu ma'rufi swadaka" x 2 (Chorus)
oh people oh people, every good deed is charity

(Adapted from Kulla Jema by Ahmad Shawqy)

Since conservative interpretation places emphasis on the material charity, the poet invokes the Qur'an as first basis of authority to bring into light the non-material forms right from line 2 and 3 of stanza 1. Qur'an 99:7-8 is explicit that everything shall be accounted for before God during judgement - "whosoever does an atom's weight of good will see it; and whosoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it". Shawqy goes on to give examples of the non-material forms starting with the warning against pride as drawn from various verses of the Qur'an (see Qur'an 17:37; 31:17-18; 28:76) as well as *hadith* where arrogance and vanity are discouraged.[4] Other non-material forms of charity as explained in the poem include being kind to the poor, needy, and elderly, helping the physically challenged, meeting people with respect and smiling face, using good language in speech as well as not taking revenge.

In summary, Shawqy dramatically presents what Islam expects of a believer in his everyday life experiences in the spiritual, social and cultural realms as best captured in Qur'an 4:36;

> Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allah does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful.

In a sense, therefore, as elaborated in the poem, the religious space is being demystified and taken out of the mosque pulpits to social halls, homes and other places of entertainment. Consequently, this development radically shakes the balance of religious authority from traditional *ulama* to young men and women in chanted poetry and through social media. Significantly, it changes the pattern of religious economy from traditional tokenism where Qur'an teachers traditionally relied on the

[4]Abdullah ibn Mas'ud reported that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "No one who has an atom's weight of pride in his heart will enter the Garden." (Muslim)

goodwill of parents and guardians to production of VCDs, CDs and cassettes for sale or even paid up performances for entertainment in social and cultural events as argued in the next section.

Moreover, to show that chanted poetry and dance constitute a significant part of the religious economy, *Kulla Jema* was viewed 9,678 times and received 73 likes with the artist commanding 132,000 subscribers in YouTube by October 2018. This suggests a remarkable interest in religious poems in the community not only for entertainment but also learning and information sharing (infotainment). Assuming that recorded CDs and VCDs sold at $1.00 per piece with the artists receiving royalties from television and radio stations, one could only imagine how much religious knowledge production and dissemination generates in a modest economy like the East African coast where the recordings are a common household gadgets. In fact, YouTube comments by fans indicated that the recordings were still on high demand but out of circulation.

Other aspects of religious economy generated through chanted poetry included huge investments in recording studios in terms of personnel and equipment, advertising of venues where the videos were shot like hotels, restaurants, estates and residential areas, as well as designer gowns and dress (custom). Significant to note is that *Kulla Jema* was a collaborative performed with Masoud Ferouz and Rahma Kigola. The inclusion of Rahma Kigola as an active participant in singing and playing the tambourine, as well as other female members in the troupe demonstrates a break from conservative religious norms on the mixing of gender in the Muslim public space. This clearly shows that, at least in the context of Zanzibar Muslim public space, women bodies and voices are neither *awra* nor a problem as further argued in the next performance by Arafa Hussein.

Female Bodies and Voices as Contested Religious Space in the Muslim East African Coast

The third question that this paper endeavored to investigate was the dynamics of women involvement in religious chanted poetry in relation to the conservative

perception on women's bodies and voices in public space as *awra.* As it is the case with Indonesian Islam (see Rasmussen 2011), it has progressively become common practice in Zanzibar to actively involve women in the public space as was established in this study. Women in the predominantly Muslim Island take full occupations as teachers in formal and Qur'an schools, media personalities, taarab singers, as well as state employees. *Qasida*, for this reason, serves as among the various vehicles through which women participate in the public space alongside men as shareholders in the production and dissemination of religious knowledge through composition, singing, and the whole performance spectrum of chanted poetry. For all purposes, this endeavor has also become a commercial enterprise from which women make a career and a living, in the form of recording studio operators or owners, costumeer, and dance troupe members.

Unlike Shawqy, Arafa's poem is a solo live performance in a social hall. In her performances dubbed '*qasida* flavor', she sings mainly in Swahili but intermittently code switches to Arabic phrases as well. Patrons are usually drawn from across the genders and have to book tickets in the *Bait ul Halal* (permitted house, social hall) ranging from TSh. 100,000 ($43.32 VIP), Red Carpet TSh. 50,000 ($21.65) to Ordinary at TSh. 15,000 ($6.5). The naming of the show house could be metaphorically strategic to suggest a departure from other cultural and social shows commonly associated with unethical practices condemned in Islam like alcoholism, lust, adultery and drug abuse. This is not, however, to deny that at times, believers even turn religious vigils to avenues for un-Islamic behaviour. It is clear that, as is the case with explicit textual evidences, only associated behavior stand condemned rather than chanted poetry in itself.

Attendants to Arafa's shows also tend to abide by a silently agreed dress code that conforms to Islamic ideals with men adorning *kanzus* (flowing robes), *kofia* (prayer caps) and *kashidas* (men's head covers). Some also adorn decorative knives akin to the official dress of the former Mazrui Arab *liwalis* (regional governors) in the region. Women would, as expected, be clad in *buibuis*. Like in the dress code, sitting arrangement also follows a strict religious separation of the genders, though not separated by curtains or walls, making it possible for attendants to see each other or

even communicate. Once in a while during the performance, patrons move to the front to give special tokens to Arafa that are collected in a basket under her feet.

In her famous poem, *Nafsi* (carnal soul/self)[5] Arafa employs pitched sound rendition akin to the Qur'an cantillation (Swahili *kughani, qira'ah*) that often moves her audience to yearn in encouragement - '*Yallah Yallah*' or '*hivyo hivyo*' (that way); or '*ongeza*' (once more!); *Twayib! Twayib! Twende* (well done, well done, go on); *bado bado* (not yet, not yet). Other than fully attended shows, Arafa also commands a large following in the social media with 10,172 views and 79 likes as at March 2019 in the YouTube alone.[6] It is amazing to see that the congregation tends to be moved by religious exaltation in chanted poetry than it could possibly be the case in ordinary sermons in the mosques. This clearly demonstrates the power of music in the exhortation and proselytization process as earlier elaborated in the first poem.

Ewe nafusi tulia, tulia, tulia, kwa Mola wako rejea	O ye soul calm down, calm down, to your Lord return
Ewe nafusi tulia, tulia, tulia, Kwa Mola wako rejea	O ye soul calm down, calm down, to you your Lord return
Ukiitwi'i dunia, akhera utajutia x 2	If you obey the world, you will regret in the afterlife
Ukiitwi'i dunia x 2	If you obey the world
Akhera utajutia x 2	you will regret in the afterlife
Ukiitwi'i dunia x 2	If you obey the world
Akhera utajutia x 2	you will regret in the afterlife
Usinifanye dhalili, Mbele ya Mola karima	Make me not so weak before Almighty,
Nikakikosa kivuli, adhabu kuniandama	Least I be denied the shade and fall into torment
Usinifanye dhalili, Mbele ya Mola karima	Make me not so weak before Almighty
Nikakiso kivuli, adhabu kuniandama	Least I be denied the shade and fall into torment
Jua qiyama ni kweli, na sote tutasimama x 2	Indeed judgment is certain and we shall be accounted
Tafuta njema a'amali x 2	Seek the good deeds
Ili nipate salama	So that I find peace
Tafuta njema amali x 2	Seek the good deeds
Ili nipate salama x 2	So that I inherit peace

[5] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBSXJKptgck&list=RDtBSXJKptgck&start_radio=1&t=1). (Accessed December 2020).
[6] The audio version of *Nafsi* had 13, 266 views, 12600 subscriptions and 96 likes as at April 2020.

Dunia ni mtihani, uishi kwa tahadhari x 2	This world is a trial, live carefully
Mabaya ya Shaitwani x 4	the evils of Satan
Yamepambwa (kwa hariri) x 3	Are clad in silk [conspicuously appealing]
Yamepambwa (kwa hariri) x 3	Are clad in silk
Zidisha yako imani x 4	Fortify your faith
Kazania kwenye kheri x 2	Be steady in good deeds
Hawaingii peponi, watendao yenye shari x 2	They never enter paradise those committing evil deeds
Dunia ni mtihani,uishi kwa tahadhari	This world is a trial, live carefully
Mabaya ya Shaitwani,yamepambwa kwa hariri	The evils of Satan are clad in silk
Dunia ni mtihani,uishi kwa tahadhari	This world is a trial, live carefully
Mabaya ya Shaitwani,yamepambwa kwa hariri	The evils of Satan are clad in silk
Zidisha yako imani, kazania kwenye kheri x 2	Fortify your faith, be steady in good deeds
Hawaingii peponi, watendao (yenye shari) x 3	They never enter paradise those committing evils
Hawaingii peponi, watendao (yenye shari) x 4	They never enter paradise those committing evils
Nafusi jihurumie, kumbuka kuna hesabu x 2	Have pity ye soul, remember accounting in the hereafter
Kiburi usijitie, fanya haraka kutubu x 2	Don't be arrogant, hasten to repentance
Mema yakimbilie akubariki Wahabu x 2	Hasten towards good deeds for the Almighty to bless you
Eee Mola turidhie kwa baraka za Habibu x 3 (chorus)	We seek your grace oh Lord through your beloved (Prophet)
Nafusi jihurumie, kumbuka kuna hesabu x 2	Have pity ye soul, remember accounting in the hereafter
Kiburi usijitie, fanya haraka kutubu	Don't be arrogant, hasten to repentance
Mema yakimbilie, akubariki Wahabu	hasten towards good deeds for the Almighty to bless you
Eee Mola turidhie kwa baraka za Habibu x 2	We seek your grace oh Lord through your beloved (Prophet)
Nafusi jihurumie,kumbuka kuna hesabu	Have pity ye soul, remember accounting in the hereafter
Kiburi usijitie, fanya haraka kutubu	Don't be arrogant, hasten in repentance
Nafusi jihurumie, kumbuka kuna hesabu	Have pity ye soul, remember accounting in the hereafter

Kiburi usijitie, fanya haraka, fanya haraka kutubu	Don't be arrogant, hasten to repentance
Usinifanye dhalili, mbele ya Mola karima	make me not so weak before Almighty
Nikakosa kivuli, adhabu kuniandama	least I be denied the shade and fall into torment
Jua qiyama ni kweli na sote tutasimama	Indeed judgment is certain and we shall be accounted
Tafuta njema amali x 2	Seek the good deeds
Ili nipate salama	So that I inherit peace
Tafuta njema amali x 2	Seek the good deeds
Ili nipate salama x 2	So that I inherit peace

(Adapted from Nafsi by Arafa Hussein)

Nafsi draws mainly from Qur'an 7:205 on the carnal soul or self as the driver of the individual destiny. Islamic traditions identify three types or levels of soul - *nafs ul ammara* (Qur'an 12:53), *nafsi ul-lawwama* (Qur'an 75:2) and *nafsi ul-mut'mainna* (Qur'an 89:27-28). At level one, the soul is regarded as being dominating and inclined towards evil desires and appetite. Many people are claimed to fall prey to the evil machinations of the soul at this level doing what pleases and makes them happy rather than seeking the grace of God. People that fail to overcome personal inclinations are believed to inherit hell fire upon death. At *lawwama* level, the soul becomes incriminating and constantly reproaching towards guilt after committing a sin. People that have attained this level of self are said to be remorseful or shameful of their own wrong deeds thereby swift in seeking forgiveness from God, or embarrassed for human errors. At the final level of *mut'mainna*, the soul is seen to have attained serenity both with itself and its creator and no longer entertains evil desires or sins. It only performs what pleases God and shun from what could cause disharmony with the divine world. These are the souls that are promised paradise upon death.

In the poem, therefore, Arafa appeals to the third and highest level of the soul, which is also the dream of every Muslim so as to gain greater rewards in the afterlife. To graduate to the highest level, one is expected to overcome Satanic practices that are perceived to be conspicuous and mostly unethical and follow the ideals of Islam. The poem further remind believers that entry to paradise is contingent to overcoming the Satan and dwell in good deeds. More significantly, as it was the case in the preceding

poem by Shawy, Arafa also reminds the community of the evils of pride that is believed to be among the serious sins in Islam.

From the two poems discussed above, it is evident that chanted poetry contributes to the important religious duty of commanding good and prohibiting evil. This noble obligation is the moral obligation of every believer regardless of gender making women bodies and voices merely vehicles through which the this duty could be executed. When a woman performs chanted poetry and dance hence exhorting as expected of every Muslim, listeners only need to "pay attention to the affective power of the voice and the particularities of the mediated voice" (Harris 2017:44).

Conclusion:

Varied perceptions in relation to the permissibility of music and moral standing on women's bodies and voices in public spaces uneasily co-exist in Islam. Debates on the two issues are ancient but have not impeded the involvement of women in religious and cultural matters across Muslim societies. As it was demonstrated in this study, there is instead more to gain in the form of invaluable contributions to the society by women engagement as equal partners both in spiritual and social concerns. The perception of women's bodies and voices as medium rather than distractors in the predominantly Muslim Island of Zanzibar and their subsequent involvement in the realm of religious chanted poetry has, for instance, adequately demonstrated that poetry could accord women space to accomplish the moral obligation of commanding good and forbidding evil. Involving of women in the public concerns through poetry has equally proved significant as a source of income and economic sustainability as audio and video recordings have found their way to social media and social halls from which women earn royalties.

More significantly, the study has confirmed that chanted poetry could be an effective vehicle for exhortation and proselytization. Recorded cassettes and videos of chanted poetry not only offer suitable alternatives but also complement contact knowledge transmission, particularly to believers not adequately grounded on the textual rigors of the faith. This viewpoint could alley the conservative and patriarchal fear on women bodies and voices as a threat and recognize them as invaluable contributors to the socio-cultural well being of the Muslim society as a whole.

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