



## Soundscapes of Omuhipiti

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### Introduction

Located on the northern coast of the Mozambique, the Island of Mozambique played an important role in establishing economic and cultural relations between Africans, Asians and Europeans. The Indian Ocean has for many years been the Island's main medium of contact with the world, bringing with it countless influences, including sound and music.

The aim of this essay is to explore how the Indian Ocean has shaped the sound signatures of the Island, generated by people and their ideas, through their oceanic mobility, thus providing a sonic environment as the Island's background and sound shaper. The emphasis in the piece is on the performative practice of Maulide Nakira and the sonic environment of the Island.

This study finds relevance in the argument that development has brought new sounds and we have become accustomed to noise pollution, which is now a global problem. One of the challenges of modern society is the fact that the ear has given way to the eye, meaning we have become mostly a visual society, neglecting a sense that was once vital for the human being: hearing! Schafer (1994: 11) asserts that before the days of writing, the sense of hearing was more vital than the sense of sight. All important information about the word of God and the history of the tribe was heard, not seen. Furthermore, he claims that modernity, as result of urbanization, has polluted the sonic environment, which has led humans to listening less, as they became part of the noisy environment.

Very little or no attention, however, has been paid to a study of soundscapes on the Island of Mozambique. Researchers have focused on the dances, neglecting the music and sound that accompanies them. Tamele and Vilanculos (2002) studied Maulide Nakira and Tufo from a historical and descriptive perspective; Arnfred (2004) looked at how Tufo is performed as a dance, linking it with the oral traditions regarding the history of the dance and context of the songs; Macagno (2007) gives a detailed account of how Maulide Nakira is practised and how it arrived on the Island, but with no description of its sonority; and

Bonate (2010) references that all religious rituals are accompanied by collective dancing, feasting and drumming done by dance societies, one of them being the *Rifa'iyya* Sufi Order called Maulide Nakira<sup>1</sup> in Mozambique.

None of these authors make clear reference to the sounds of the performative practices, even though they translate and/or interpret the lyrics. In addition, not much is said about the soundtracks of the dances, except in some cases providing a description of the instruments.

Another worrying fact according to the local leader Mr Hafiz is that, owing to modernization, there has been a decline in the number of Maulide Nakira practitioners and the sonic environment is ceaselessly mutating.

If one compares sound and images historically, sound has been in a disadvantaged position. Before photography there was painting, drawing, sketching and even rock art, which can somehow show us how landscapes have changed over time. Sound recording in audio form has only been possible from around the early twentieth century; consequently, in order to find out about possible changes in soundscapes over the centuries, inferences must be made. Another drawback is that even the most talented chroniclers have somehow neglected sound descriptions. This makes the process studying soundscapes from an historical perspective challenging, as there are not abundant detailed written accounts.

Luckily not all is lost. Based on oral traditions, we can still find soundscapes through the music that accompanies performative practices. It is for this reason that I opted to explore songs, as they convey melodies, rhythms and words from the past, that can lead us to the everlasting element of the soundscape, the soundtrack.

It is in this context that the following questions arise: How has the oceanic mobility shaped the sounds and musical compositions of Maulide Nakira? How has modernity polluted the sonic environment of the Island of Mozambique?

The data collection consisted of bibliographical research, open interviews, soundwalks,<sup>2</sup> field recordings and joining in performances, but only as a spectator. I recorded 10 songs by Mr Nacuti Adamo's group, the only Maulide Nakira ensemble that is still active on the Island, and focused on those for the analysis.

I did eight soundwalks and recorded all of them. Still, I want to go back to record more soundscapes and focus on soundmarks, for example during *Ramadan* when it is quieter. The recordings were done with the intention of allowing further extraction of sonic elements that demonstrate the influence of oceanic mobility on the soundscapes, and to later enable sound installations. Time wise, I concentrated on the period from when the Island was elevated to the status of the capital city of Mozambique, up to the two hundredth year celebration of this event.

## Soundscapes

Soundscape refers to the natural acoustic environment, consisting of natural sounds, including animal vocalizations, the sounds of weather and other natural elements as well as environmental sounds created by humans, through musical composition, sound design, and other ordinary human activities including conversation, work, and sounds of mechanical origin resulting from use of industrial technology (Schafer 1994).

According to Pijanowski et al. (2011), Michael Southworth coined the term ‘soundscape’ in 1969 to refer to the acoustic properties of cities that help people relate to certain spaces. Pijanowski et al. (2011) define soundscapes as the collection of biological, geophysical and anthropogenic sounds that emanate from a landscape and which vary over space and time reflecting important ecosystem processes and human activities, which is the concept that I find most appropriate for this work.

My approach to the soundscapes in this endeavour is antropophonic, as I want to perceive how inspirational the oceanic mobility has been to the creators of music and sounds, and how modernity is altering the sonic environment.

When studying a soundscape, is it important to unlock significant features, sounds that are important because of their individuality, numerousness or domination. The themes of a soundscape are categorized by keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks. Keynote sounds refer to the note that identifies the key or tonality of a particular composition, in our case of the Island. These sounds are heard and not listened to consciously. The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. Signals are front sounds and are listened to consciously. The word soundmark originates from landmark and it indicates a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it special to the people in a community. Soundmarks are of cultural and historical worth, as they make the acoustic life of the community unique, which is why they must be preserved and protected (Schafer 1994: 9–10).

Traux (1994: 58–61) adds that sound signals convey meaningful information about both regular and unique events to those familiar with the situation, and bring communities together and contribute to their character. Those that are repetitive or occur at regular intervals remain in the background of listeners’ attention, while the non-repetitive may signal unique situations and attract foreground attention, as they might be indelibly lodged in memory in association with particular events in the life of a person or community. They can be associated with long-term memories, meaning that they create an extremely important continuity with the past, which is another reason for preserving them.

## Why Omuhipiti?

The Island of Mozambique is known to the locals as *Omuhipiti*, which derives from *wui-pitha*, which means to hide or to give shelter to someone who is running from danger.

This name comes from the fact that before it was populated, the Island was used as a hiding place for those in danger, according to Mr Andrade one of my interviewees.

This Island is located on the northern coast of Mozambique in the Nampula province. It is around three kilometres long and between 200 and 500 metres wide. It is divided in two: the *macuti* town and the stone and lime town. The stone part is constituted of robust stone and lime buildings where the elites lived, while *macuti* is name of the palm leaves used to thatch the roofs of the houses made of wattle and daub, that make up this town.

Omuhipiti was a major trading post where different nations forged economic and social ties, and an important transit point where navigators and cultures met. As mentioned by Barradas (2018: 18), two hundred years ago, the first impression that immediately struck the eye of a foreigner upon arrival and disembarking on the Island was the ethnic diversity of its few inhabitants, each with their customs and colours: black Africans, Europeans, Indians, Arabs and Mestizos, of all of them with their different oceanic crossings.

The *Naharra* language, which is a variety of *Emakwa* of Swahili origin, spoken by the population of the Island and in other coastal areas, which also integrated some Portuguese words, is one of the results of this melting pot (DNP 2014). Tufo, Nsope and Maulide Nakira are also part of this miscegenation (Tamele and Vilanculos 2002).

One of the most prominent events in the history of the Island was the arrival in 1897 of the Sufi Orders, namely the *Shadhuliyya*<sup>3</sup> *Yashrutiyya*, led by Shaykh Muhammad Ma'arouf bin Shaykh Ahmad ibn Abu Bakr from the Comoro Islands. Another was the arrival of the *Qadiriyya*<sup>4</sup> around 1904/1905 reportedly brought to the Island of Mozambique by Shaykh Issa bin Ahmad, who was residing in Zanzibar at the time but who had also originally come from Ngazidja in the Comoros. Both orders changed the local conceptions and practices of Islam, altering the hereditary power and legitimacy of African chieftainship by making the authority of religious learning paramount and written authorization the main request (Bonate 2010: 582–583).

Navigation in the Indian Ocean, in particular in the Mozambique Channel, at a time when ships used sail, was conditioned by the monsoons: the southwest (SW) monsoon that blows from April to September/November and the northeast (NE) monsoon that blows from then to February/April. Sailing from the Island of Mozambique to India was only possible with the SW monsoon, and the other way round with the NE monsoon. This meant that sailors and travellers would sometimes end trapped on the Island for many months waiting for the winds to change direction (Barradas 2018).

In 1991 the Island was declared on a UNESCO World Heritage Site, owing to its rich history and architecture of Portuguese, Arab, Indian and Swahili influences.

### Maulide Nakira

There is no doubt about the influence of the Indian Ocean on the soundscapes of the Island of Mozambique. In fact, the performative practice chosen arises from

the interaction triggered by oceanic mobility. Therefore, I begin by exploring what I consider to be one of the soundtracks of Omuhipiti, where I look for aesthetic elements that reveal the influences.

Islamic confraternities were introduced to this region at the end of the nineteenth century, as previously noted. One of these confraternities is called *Rifaiyya*. It is established on the Mozambique Island and is popularly known as Maulide. This word derives from the Arabic word *Mawlid*, which means birthday of the Prophet.

There are reports that Maulide Nakira was brought to Mozambique by Sheik Ahmad Arufai, a merchant and religious man from Mecca. It was adopted by the *Emakhua* people, particularly those on the coastal areas, and practised at any period of the year except during Ramadan.

It is normally practised by young men aged between 14 and 20, under the leadership of *raice* (master), normally an old man, who distributes the *tupachi* (spikes). There is a lot of mysticism around this practice, as the practitioners go into a state of trance. To achieve such a state, they need to abstain from sex and from eating crab and octopus for 15 days, and must spend a considerable amount of their time praying. In addition, a day before the performance, they meet to get the *mihompe oude owumba*<sup>5</sup> prepared by the group leader. This ritual protects them from pain and bleeding as the spikes pierce their flesh, according to Nacuti Adamo and Modisco's verbal explanations. The 87-year-old Nacuti Adamo is the only surviving Maulide master from his generation, and 34 years old Mamudi 'Modisco' Ibraimo Saide Ali, is one of the young leaders of the group and assists Nacuti when preparing for the performances. He has also acted as my translator.

The musical instruments used to accompany Maulide are: *opata*, a small metal piece of around 25 cm that keeps the beat; *kubura*, a small hexagonal drum made from goat skin; *tahira*, a round drum; and *tuwaci*, which is smaller than *tahira*, with both made from goat skin.

The songs are normally sung in *Emakhuwa* or Arabic and intoned by a *namwiniha*,<sup>6</sup> addressing different stories, such as the history of the group, the Island, the trip to the Island or about the Prophet.

There is no a consensus amongst the Muslim theologians in Mozambique as to the authenticity of Maulide Nakira, as some do not accept it on the grounds that there are no references to it in the Koran or in the *Hadiths*.

### Listening to Omuhipiti

I have lent my ears to listen to the Island keynote, which I have difficulty describing in words. I am aware that only a sound installation can give an approximation to the listener, or a visit. Still, I will attempt to describe it, hoping that readers who have never been to the Island will build their own sound images based on personal experiences, and that those who have been there, it will sharpen their hearing and awake their sonic memory.





He discloses to me in his faded, coarse voice:

This is an old song, it came with the Arabs, many of our songs are from the time when Maulide came to island. The songs are about the Prophet, the journey to the island and about things from our daily life.

I notice that he is reluctant when asked about the lyrics of the songs, gives an ambiguous answer, saying that he has misplaced the book that has the lyrics and their meaning. But in the intonation of melody I can hear the word Allah and the Arab influence. The E on the second bar and the C on the fourth bar are sung in *glissando*, resembling the way muezzins sing. On the whole, the melody has a vibrato that resembles the Arabic way of singing.

As he chants other melodies, kids who are playing in the surroundings come closer to listen. Modisco, my translator, chases them away. Modisco has been practising Maulide since when he was a little boy, now thirty-four he's one of the leaders of the group.

I enquire about the rhythms that accompany the Maulide, and Nacuti tells me that the secret is the *opata*. He picks it up and plays this pattern:



Modisco joins him on the *tahira*, adding that this drum gives the strong beats to the dancers:



After playing the *tahira*, he does a quick demonstration, showing how the legs move to this sound, as the rest of the body follows the *opata* in a kind of horse galloping movement.

When watching their performance with the rest of the group later on in the day, it all starts to make sense to me. The hands and upper body movements resemble a rowing motion, the body hits the strong beat on one, and the legs are led by the *opata*, especially when the beat starts to accelerate.

The music starts in a *moderato* tempo up to *vivace*, sometimes to *presto* depending on the mood of the dancers. As the performance progresses, one of the songs starts in *vivace* and progresses to *prestissimo*. I find myself thinking that the presence of the audience that cheers up the dancers plays a role in the speed of the songs.

Due old age and illness, Nacuti's voice is fading and his percussive skills are not the same. However, he still likes to perform, and whenever he misses a beat or

sings a wrong note, his disciples jokingly sing more loudly, over his voice, or gently take the *opata* away.

When asked about sounds that annoy him, he is quick in responding that he hates the sound of the *corvo ladrão* (thief crow) and the motorbikes that make a lot of noise and are dangerous.

### *A bedlam of metallic bees and black crows*

Although the listening experience is one of the best at Omuhipiti, when compared to other similar urban spaces in Mozambique, unfortunately it is always interrupted, particularly during the day, by the chaotic sound of modernity: the motorbike!

Based on our conversations, I discovered that until the around 2015 bicycles predominated on the Island. After that, they started being replaced by cheap motorcycles, coming from China via the Port of Nacala. This signal forces itself into our consciousness, no matter how far or close it is.

Another signal that has started dominating the soundscape is the black crow, known to the locals as *corvo da india* (crow of India) or *corvo ladrão*. I was given two versions of how it arrived in this place. Some claim it came from Nacala, like the motorbikes, whereas others affirmed that it was brought by cruise ships. I am unsure how true either statements is, but it is without question that the arrival of this natural signal is very recent. The islanders worry that the black crow is reproducing rapidly and is replacing the traditional black and white crow, that has become scarce.

The islanders nostalgically describe the disappearing sound of dusk, as the black and white crows coming back from mainland, after feeding on the leftovers from a cashew nuts processing factory nearby. This bird is also famous for fleeing the war from the mainland during the Mozambican Civil War, as explosions from heavy weapons could be heard from a distance.

Depending on the tide or location, waves can be heard and strongly felt, especially on the side facing the ocean. This sound can be intimidating, at least for those who are not used to it. Its sonic strength is reinforced by water jumping over the barriers on the waterfront, sometimes wetting the passers-by.

I went in pursuit of the sounds from the times of travel. As noted earlier, these sounds were somehow neglected by the chroniclers. I do not mean that there are no written records about them. During this research, I found a sound description by Henry Salt, an English artist, traveller, diplomat and Egyptologist, who passed by the Island on his way to Abyssinia:

As we passed the fort we hailed, as is customary, from the ramparts with a capacious trumpet about three feet in circumference, which appeared as if it had answered the same purpose ever since the establishment of the colony. (Salt 1816: 27)

Further he mentions that, he saw several dances of the same kind in the slave yards on the Island. The slaves were allowed to dance in the evenings, when



men began to move to the sounds of tom-toms, beaten by women with sticks, while others clapped their hands and sang inharmonious tones. He goes on to say that the *Makooa* (*Emakhua*) people are fond of music and dancing, and are easily made happy by the sound of the tom-tom, like all savages. He describes their favourite musical instrument, the *ambira*, as harmonious with very simple notes, and compared its sound to bells. He added that it was made of thin bars of highly tempered iron of different lengths, set in a row on a hollow case of wood, about five inches square, and generally played with a piece of quill.

The Portuguese and Dominican missionary in Africa and India. Fr. João dos Santos, on his visits to eastern Ethiopia during the sixteenth century, refers to the *ambira* as the best and most musical of the instruments that looks like the organ, composed of long gourds with a small opening at the side near the end, with placed wooden keys played by sticks (Blades 2005: 71–72). Clearly his *ambira* is different from the one Salt talks about.

I tried to find an account of the *ambira* or players of the instrument and I questioned people on the Island to find out whether anyone knows about it, but with no success. Further research using the description and name is needed, but I tend to think that Salt's narrative resembles the *mbira*.

Despite all the changes, the muezzin calling from the *Mesquita Grande*<sup>8</sup> has stood the test of time. The only difference, like in other parts of the world, is that the call to prayer is not sung out loud from the minaret into the environment, but into a microphone and speakers (megaphone) that help to send the call far and wide.

The effects of modernity cannot be reversed, evidently, and the Omuhipiti soundscapes have changed and continue to change fast. It is thus urgent to preserve the soundmarks, and the extinct or endangered practices and musical instruments. This essay has unveiled only a small part of an interesting place to which one can listen.

## Conclusion

This study explored how the Indian Ocean has shaped the sound signatures of the Island of Mozambique, generated by humans and their ideas through oceanic mobility, resulting in having a sonic environment as its background and sound shaper. The emphasis of the study was on the melodies and rhythms of Maulide Nakira and some of the most obvious sound signals on the Island: motorbikes, black crows and muezzin callings. I also sought the sounds from the past: the trumpet that welcomed the boats or alerted the islanders in the case of an evasion, and the *ambira*.

Through oral and written narratives, it was possible to find extinct sounds and musical instruments, and track how modernity has changed and is changing the Island's sonic environment. Of one thing we can be sure: oceanic mobility has shaped the soundscapes, by conveying sounds and ideas from other parts of

the world to the Omuhipiti. Maulide Nakira musical compositions and words are a clear example of this phenomenon

It is crucial to highlight that most researchers have focused on the meaning of dance, history and lyrics, overlooking sound and its ambiances. For this reason, we need to safeguard the sonority of the Island and conduct further in-depth research into this subject matter, as a way to protect the soundmarks that make the acoustic life of this community unique.

## Notes

1. Boante (2010) mentions different spellings of Maulide Nakira, such as *Molidi*, *Mawlid*, or *Mawlid Naquira*.
2. The soundwalk is an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score as a guide. The score consists of a map, drawing the listener's attention to unusual sounds and ambiances to be heard along the way (Schafer 1994: 213).
3. Also spelled *Chadulia* or *Xadulia*.
4. Also spelled *Cadria*.
5. The medicine prepared by the leader of the group. It is made out of incense, little stones, water and a piece of paper with the following written on it: 'In the name of Allah, the benevolent benefactor'.
6. A singer responsible for intonation of the songs.
7. The leader.
8. The main mosque that was built in the eighteenth century.

## Notes on the Contributor

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