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Beyond the *leiwah* of Eastern Arabia Structure of a possession rite in the *longue durée*

Maho Sebiane

Abstract:

Along the shores of the Persian Gulf and especially in Eastern Arabia, the *leiwah* is a possession rite involving music and dance. It is practiced by descendants of East African slaves named the *Zunûj*. They consider it as native from the Swahili coast (*Bilâd as-sawâhil*). Indeed, their presence in this region dates from the late nineteenth century as a result of the Indian Ocean Slave trade.

However, the *leiwah* is known best as an entertaining dance and perceived by the young Arab urbanized generation as a secular and local tradition of Arabic inspiration. This situation is partly due to the fact that the presentation of this practice by the Gulf States cultural institutions minimize all its links to Africa and do not mention the history of the *Zunûj* slavery. What, then, does *leiwah* mean for those who practice it? What are the *cultural influences* on which it was established, as well as the specificities of this practice in Eastern Arabia, given that the old generation of the *Zunûj* considers the *leiwah* as an East African cultural expression and it is basically a rite of possession?

This article focuses on the study of the *leiwah* in a diachronic perspective. The purpose being, on one hand, to replace in a historical perspective some anthropological and musicological elements observed in synchrony, and on the other, to clarify its *cultural influences* that would contribute to a better understanding of how and from what this practice was elaborated in Eastern Arabia.

Key words:

Eastern Arabia - East Africa- Anthropology of Music - History- Slavery- Spirit possession - Ritualization - Dance - Comparative organology - Symbolic values - Cultural transfers.

The first academic publication about the *leiwah* in Eastern Arabia dates from 1967¹. The author, Poul Roving-Olsen, describes this music and dance practice in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain as an African dance performed by the local black slave descent population - named the *Zunûj*- in connection with the spirit possession belief². According to his observations, the *leiwah* is apparently an entertainment dance, but sometimes it becomes a possession rite (Roving-Olsen 1967, 31; 2002, 129). The various works about this practice from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf subsequently published between the mid-seventies and nineties, have tried to determine its provenance. Largely, they all agree that this dance has foreign "origins" from the Arabian Peninsula. The "*leiwah* dance" was qualified as an African "immigrant" practice (*wâfida* in Arabic). This dance is presented as festive without links to possession and it was disseminated in the Persian Gulf through the Omani merchants after their return from East Africa. But from these various works, it is difficult to determine if this dance has African or Omani provenance as the information presented about this practice do

¹ Eastern Arabia is the most easterly zone of the Arabian Peninsula and in the South of the Persian Gulf region. It includes United Arab Emirates and Sultanate of Oman nation-states. The entertainment practice of *leiwah* named "*leiwah* dance" (*raqsat-al-leiwah*) is known on the whole coast of the Persian Gulf from southern Iraq to Baluchistan including Hadramut in Yemen.

² See also Hassan (1980) for the area of Basra in Iraq. The term *Zunûj* is a denomination in classical Arabic since the Middle Ages to designate the entire black population native from East Africa. See for references: Southagte (1984). In the Persian Gulf, the *Zunûj* is an African slave descent group, Sebiane (2011; 2015a; 2015b).

not overlap, as we can see from Qayed (nd), Duwîb (1982), Stone (1985), Al-Khan (1989, 1996), Shawqi & Christensen (1994) and Handal (1995) for example³.

Today, following the patrimonial process in the Arab Gulf nation-states, this dance seems dissociated from all that relates it to Africa and their national cultural institutions came to consider it as "national" (Sebiane 2011; 2015b). In fact, the actual citizens of African descent in the Gulf States –including the *Zunûj* – are mostly the descendants of enslaved Africans brought from East Africa between the 17th and 19th century. The slave status of their ancestors is not represented in the local nations' historiography, and references to their African ancestry and slavery are absent from the cultural and social space. This situation participated to make invisible this population and the singularity of their culture. Nevertheless, their music and dances are exhibited in festivals and national commemorations, completely decontextualized from their initial signification (ibid.). In the United Arab Emirates for example, it is perceived by the young urbanized generation as a secular tradition and even as an Arabic cultural expression⁴. The situation is even more unclear than the *Zunûj* musicians are exceptionally cautious and discreet to describe, outside their cultural group, if the *leiwah* is an entertainment dance or a possession rite or both⁵. What, then, does *leiwah* mean for those who practice it? What are the *cultural influences* on which it was established, as well as the specificities of this practice in Eastern Arabia, given that the old generation of the *Zunûj* of the rural areas in the Sultanate of Oman considers the *leiwah* as an East African cultural expression and it is basically a rite of possession? This questioning arising from my previous research work in the Persian Gulf to understand the issues of this practice both in its ethnomusicological, anthropological and historical perspective. For this last point, it follows the work of Edward A. Alpers (2000), a historian of slavery in East Africa, who considered the music, songs, dances, medicine healers, language and folklore of the Black African slave descendants that spread over the shores of the Indian Ocean are "traces" which constitute a kind of proof recalling Africa. According to him

*The African presence in the Indian Ocean world represents one of the most neglected aspects of the global diaspora of African peoples. Yet very significant numbers of people of African descent today inhabit virtually all the countries of the western Indian Ocean littoral. It is evident, however, that African voices have been actively silenced in this diaspora both by the cultural contexts of their host societies and by the way in which the scholarly production of knowledge has reflected such cultural domination*⁶ (Alpers 2000, 83).

In this perspective, the approach developed during my research in Eastern Arabia allowed to me determine the various levels of signification of the *leiwah* object as both entertainment dance and possession rite through the slave trade history in the Indian Ocean (Sebiane 2015a). I conducted my study in the Sultanate of Oman and in the United Arab

³ I focus in this introduction to consider these works in their historical and cultural context of production. Their respective scientific contributions allow us today to query the object of study in a different perspective.

⁴ According to Godelier (2010, 106), the word "culture" means "all representations and principles which consciously organize the various areas of social life, and the values attached to these ways of acting and thinking". This concept falls within "the ideational only truly exists when the ideational elements - principles, representations, which are values- up the associated specifically with social practices and material to which they give meaning" (ibid.). For an overview of notions of "culture" and "cultural identity" that flow from it, but also the theoretical aspects since Tylor (1871), see Galaty and Leavitt (1991, 190-196).

⁵ In fact, when *Zunûj* (ritual adepts and musicians) define differential relations of their *leiwah* practice, they are also engaged in the definition of a differential relation at the articulation between what is realized inside and outside their cultural group. See Sebiane (2015a).

⁶ See Bilkhair (2006) about the cultural assimilation of African slaves in the host society of Dubai (UAE).

Emirates (UAE) among the *Zunûj* from 2006 to 2011. The data were collected through participant observation during different types of events, as well as formal and informal interviews with musicians and people at large in the survey areas (Barth 1969; Stokes 1994). This discourse approached from an ethnolinguistic angle, has been viewed as a production which expressing a personal representations in relation to *Zunûj* group, their beliefs and their perception of their history (Bornand and Leguy 2013). My approach was then based on the categories of thought of my interlocutors, both in conducting my interviews and formulating a hypothesis that allows me to identify the “symbolic values” of the *leiwah* components in the eyes of the *Zunûj*⁷. The analytical work was carried out from the classificatory criteria provided by my interlocutors. The classificatory relevance was established on the basis of a cross-examination of the used semantic field on a historical point of view (Braudel 1958; 1969), on linguistic and anthropological studies of the concerned geographical areas.

Therefore, this article focuses on the study of the *leiwah* in a diachronic perspective. The purpose being, on one hand, to replace in a historical perspective some anthropological and musicological elements observed in synchrony, and on the other, to clarify, through this historical perspective, its *cultural influences* by proposing a hypothesis which allows a better understanding of how and from what this practice was elaborated in Eastern Arabia⁸. Thus, I will first introduce how the *leiwah* entertainment dance is ultimately a festive expression of a possession rite for the *Zunûj*. Then, from the cross-checking between the characteristics of some of its components as musical stages, spirits names, musical instruments names and morphology, I will propose how it is possible to envisage the underlying history of this African possession rite in Arabia.

1. From an entertainment dance to the *leiwah* possession ritual complex

The *leiwah* practiced by the descendants of East African slaves is best known in the Persian Gulf region to be an entertainment dance performed in a circle, in a festive occasion as weddings, festivals and official celebrations. This dance is performed by a group of dancers-singers comprising only men in UAE, and men and women in the Sultanate of Oman. These dancers-singers surround five musicians: four percussionists who play drums as *msondo* –in Oman- or *mshindo* – in the UAE - , *kasir* and *rahmani*⁹, an idiophone named *tanak*, and finally an oboist playing *zamr*. The dancers move around the musicians in an anticlockwise direction. The realization of this dance requires the participation of a significant number of dancers. All the dancers also sing responses to the melodies played by the *zammâr*, the oboist. The lyrics are sung in vernacular Arabic mingled with some terms of address and phrases in Swahili language.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the *Zunûj* consider the *leiwah* practice as native from the Swahili coast. According to them, it has been brought from East Africa by their ancestors who were slaves of the Arabs. In effect, their presence in Eastern Arabia dates from the late nineteenth century as a result of the Indian Ocean Slave trade practised by the Omani merchants (See map.1).

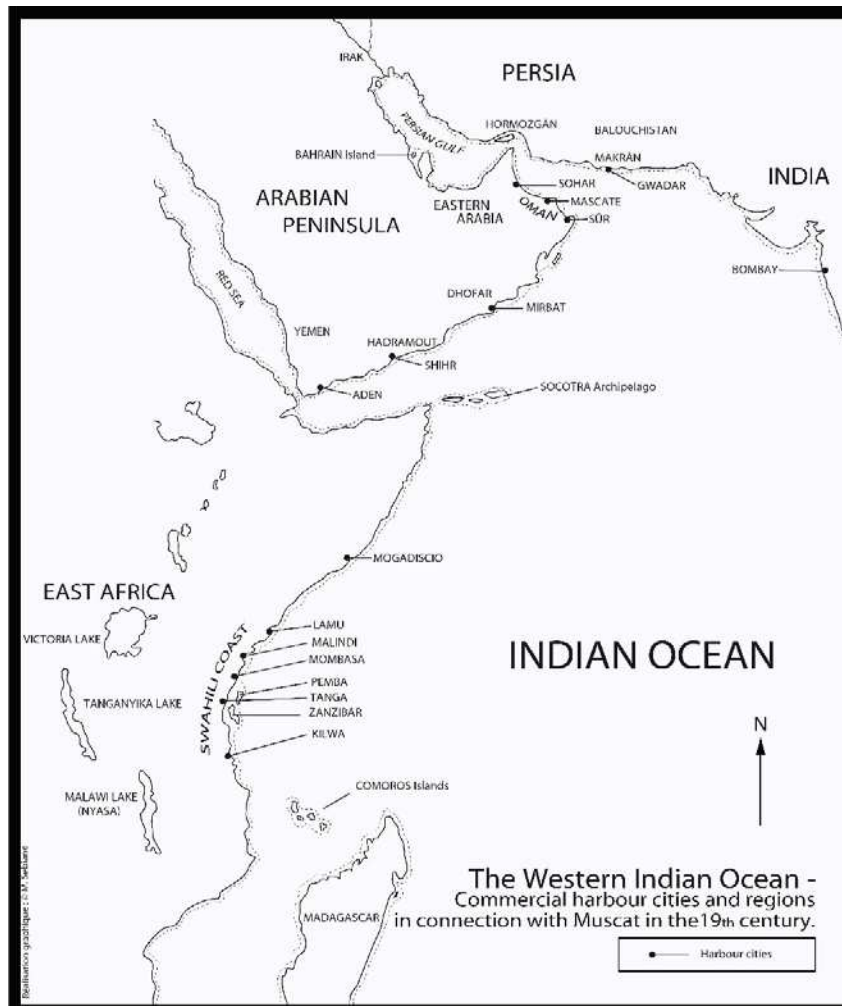
This Eastern Slave Trade expands in parallel to the Omanis maritime and commercial expansion in the Western Indian Ocean after the expulsion of the Portuguese from Mombasa

⁷ It is understood here that the term "symbolic values" refers to the culturally meaningful meanings of the gestures and words of the concerned people. See also Rouget (1980, 56).

⁸ I mean by "influences" all progressive actions of any nature (ideational and material) which act on the expression modes being understood here in an ethnomusicological perspective. See *infra*: Godelier (2010).

⁹ The *rahmani* and *kasir* denominations are commonly used to designate a type of cylindrical membranophones with two skins. Their names differentiate them in relation to their size and their musical function. The *kasir* is the smaller of the two.

(Kenya) in 1698. Thus, during the nineteenth century the demand for East African slaves on the coast of Oman was stronger than anywhere else in Eastern Arabia (Wellsted 1838; Palgrave 1865; Lorimer 1915; Miles 1919; Thomas 1931, 1932; Sheriff 1987; Nicolini 2006; Hopper 2006; Vernet 2009). This was mainly due to the development of the dates palm grove agriculture as in the Batinah region of the current Sultanate of Oman¹⁰. The dates were exported to the Persian Gulf, but also to the rest of the world especially in Europe and North America (Hopper 2006).



Map.1: General view of the Western Indian Ocean.

This slave transoceanic commercial monopoly continued officially until the ratification of a treaty of total abolition of the maritime trafficking, signed by the Sultan of Zanzibar in 1873, and the institution of the British protectorate on the island in 1890. However, that did not stop this trade from continuing, firstly fraudulently between the east coast of Africa and Arabia, and on the other hand, at the regional level in the Persian Gulf until the end of World War II (Thomas 1931 ; Al-Fares 2001; Hopper 2006). The abolition of slavery in the Persian Gulf began in 1950 and ended in 1970 with the emergence of the current Nation-states. At that time, the East African ex-slaves no longer had contact with their native region for almost two generations (Sebiane 2015a).

¹⁰ The Batinah it is a northern region of the Sultanate of Oman of which the capital is Sohar. It is delimited in the north by the international border with the United Arabs Emirates and in the south by Muscat agglomeration: the capital of the Sultanate of Oman.

However, the study reveals that the *leiwah* dance, regarding the festive expression that we have known for more than forty years, is ultimately an offshoot of a possession rite named *ramsat -al-leiwah* [what is hidden from the leiwah] by the *Zunûj* (Sebiane 2015a). It is an element that is part of a wider structure including two other ritual achievements: the *tanzilah* [the descent / the revelation] and the *fatha* [the opening]. These three rites constitute the overall architecture of a therapeutic ritual complex named *leiwah* by the *Zunûj*. Moreover, in the Batinah region, there is no doubt for the *Zunûj* that the *ramsat-al-leiwah* possession rite or simply *ramsa*, comes from the current Swahili coast, as they call *bilâd as-sawâhili* [Country of the coastal people] despite the fact that they had no more links with Africa for more than a century. The spirit possession of this ritual complex are qualified as *Habayeb*, which means "Winds" and named *as-sawâhili* by them accordingly to their geographic and cultural provenance¹¹ (ibid.). It should be added that if the *ramsat-al-leiwah* is fundamentally considered by the actual *Zunûj* as a therapeutic rite, the main purpose of this practice is ambivalent based on the facts we have observed. Indeed, the entertainment dimension of the *ramsat-al-leiwah* dance cannot be ignored as we can see in the notorious festive *leiwah* practice in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, this ritual practice is closely subordinated to the dates palm grove agricultural calendar. Most of the *ramsa* rites are performed during the harvest season between May and October, while today this period is not exclusive. This indetermination suggests to us that the *leiwah* ritual complex, especially the *ramsat-al-leiwah*, was or is at the crossroads of three symbolic dimensions: (1) ritual therapy (2) agricultural celebration (3) entertainment dance, among the *Zunûj* society. This is the main hypothesis that we will go into more details from now¹².

1.1 *The musical stages of the ramsat-al-leiwah*

The various *ramsat al-leiwah* realizations among the *Zunûj* of the Batinah were mostly held in the open air, in the village and in the neighbourhood where the patient family lives. These rites involve the active participation of all close relatives of the patient. In practice, these *ramsa*, taking place over two days. It involves the preparation of ritual dishes and the consumption of an alcoholic ritual beverage. This latter is prepared from fermented dates coming from the annual local harvest. This rite must be open to all and it is not necessary to be believe in the spirits to take part. According to all my *Zunûj* interlocutors, the presence of many participants and spectators is essential to achieve a successful *ramsa*. These guests: families, close friends, neighbours and spectators are encouraged to participate in the dancing and singing. The dance takes the form of a round and incorporates male and female participants as we can observe it in the entertainment dance expression of this rite in Oman.

The dance is one of the central achievement of the *ramsa* possession rite. It is performed three times in the final phase of the rite. Each one has a duration that varies between 20 and 40 minutes. They comprise three musical stages that mark the progression towards the collective possession which takes place at the end. These three stages, as identified by the *Zunûj*, are: the *leiwah* dance (the same name as the generic denomination of the *ramsat-al-leiwah* dance for its entertainment performance), the *sabata* dance and the *mendondo* dance. The passage from one musical stage to another follows a gradual acceleration of the tempo, from slowest to fastest (*accelerando*). The *Zunûj* identify each

¹¹ It is an Arabic term whose root [SHL] designates the seashore, the coast (*sâhil*), *sawahili* being an adjective qualifying the persons, meaning "those of the coast". In the case that concerns us, *sâhil* refers to the East African coasts and everything that comes from this region. Its vernacular use in Eastern Arabia, by extension, refers to an African origin, the black color, different mores, uncivilized and paganism.

¹² It is understood here that the "symbolic dimension" designates all the elements that have value only by what they express or what they evoke within a given society.

musical stage according to the tempo and the type of dance steps executed: **1.** The first musical stage of the rite is the *leiwah* dance, where the dancers are side by side in a circle (a dance round). They perform slow large-body movements. These simple and slow movements are made in the axis of rotation of the dance round and in an anticlockwise direction. At this stage, the round dance (the circle) is wide. **2.** The second musical stage, the *sabata* dance, the tempo has accelerated. The round dance tightens. The singers-dancers modify their dance steps. Always side by side, they progress in the round dance by making lateral steps while stomping the ground with their feet. **3.** In the final musical stage, the *mendondo* dance, the tempo has accelerated again. The round dance tightens even more. The dancers progressively change their dance movement by putting themselves one behind the other while stomping the ground with their feet. The dance round becomes a formless group with a collective possession of the rite participants (See figure.1.1.). It should be emphasized that these musical stages are musically similar to those performed in the entertainment dance expression of this rite with one exception; the *mendondo* dance/ stage is rarely performed in a festive context as family celebrations, wedding, and never during official commemorations, national day or festivals. It is executed only during the ritual context to proceed to the possession. On a formal level, it is this last musical stage that clearly differentiates the entertainment dance from the possession rite.

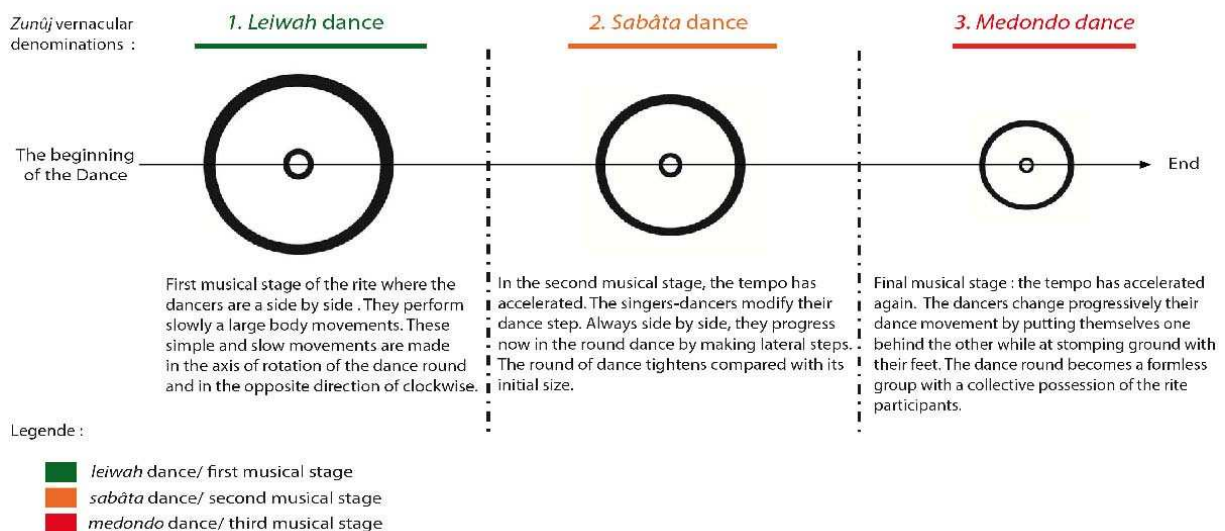


Figure.1.1: The formal progression of one *ramsat-al-leiwah* dance with its musical stages-dances (Eastern Arabia)

2. The East African Kinship of the *ramsat-al-leiwah*

2.1. The cultural links between East African and Eastern Arabian spirits possession

The understanding of the *leiwah* practice in Eastern Arabia gets complicated when we consider the question of spirit possession. In fact, in the state of our knowledge there are two categories of spirit possession in this region of the Arab-Islamic World: first, we have the *Junun* (Jinns) whose existence is recognized by the Islamic religion. It is the only category of immaterial entity that has the power to possess the human bodies. Then, we have the *Habayeb*, the winds (another category of immaterial entity) of which only the *Zunûj* proclaim the existence within the framework of their possession rite. But for the Muslim exegetes the winds are considered as false gods and those who believe in them are perceived as

polytheist¹³. In consequence, the *Zunûj* never mention their existence outside their ritual practice, more so as the *Habayeb* spirits of the *leiwah* are named *as-sawâhili* according to their cultural and geographical provenance. Finally, the semantic analysis of the notion of wind for the *Zunûj* indicates that their concept is based on an African cultural conception of spirits possession and apart from all monotheist consideration as we can found it in Islam especially in Eastern Arabia. The *Habayeb*, wind spirit, for the *Zunûj* are similar by nature to those found in East Africa for defining the notion of spirit possession named *Pepo*. This analysis corroborates the African denomination that we can note among the *sawâhili* spirits of the *leiwah* ritual complex as *mshenzi* and *wanyasa* which we can found in both some East African possession rites and *leiwah* rites (Sebiane 2015a, 2015b). It must be stressed that their behavior during these rites and the *Zunûj* discourse about them are very close to what has been noticed by Giles (1987, 240; 1995, 90; 1999, 148) and Bacuez (2007, 3; 2008, 6) on the Swahili Coast.

Furthermore, we note that some of the names of these *leiwah sawâhili* spirits correspond to East-African ethnonyms and, for others to East- African toponyms. This phenomenon was also reported by Alpers about the slaves' names and possession spirits that can be found among the African diaspora of the Indian Ocean (2000, 91-93). This situation suggests that *Zunûj* of Eastern Arabia is a heterogeneous group of people originally native to East Africa (See tab.2.1). This possibility is corroborated notably by the testimonies of Burton (1860) and Livingstone (1866) about African regions where blacks were captured, but also by the recent work of historians on slavery as for example Sheriff (1987), Alpers (2000), Deutsch (2006), Hopper (2006), Lovejoy (2012), Vernet (2013) and Médard (2013). This diversity of slaves descendants among the black population of the Batinah may suggest the particular structure of the Swahili society described by Ingrams (1931), Prins (1967), Eastman (1971), Giles (1987), Le Guennec-Coppens (2002), and especially with Linda Giles (1987, 145; 1999, 156), which defines the Swahili society by its "special syncretic character" given that this society brings together numerous different groups of people with their specific ritual practices, but united in a "syncretic and particular Muslim culture of this region (the Swahili coast) ".

<i>sawahili</i> spirits	Population Group Name	Geographic Location Group
<i>Wanyasa / Mnyasa</i> (Ki-nyasa)	Nyasa	Mozambique - Malawi - Tanzania
<i>Wagindo</i> (Wa-gindo)	Gindo	Rufiji - Mafia- Tanzania
<i>Wadigo</i> , (Wa-digo)	Digo	Mijikenda and Mrima
<i>Mshenzi</i> (Ma-shenzi)	Wa-shenzi	Hinterland Swahili coast
<i>Warima</i> (Wa-rima)	Rima	Mrima- Kenya / Tanzania
<i>Makwani</i> , (Makuani)	Makwani	Makua- Mozambique
<i>Myao</i> (M-yao)	Yao	Mozambique-Malawi-Tanzania
...etc.	...etc.	

Tab. 2.1: The *sawâhili* spirits names and their referral to identified populations and places in Eastern Africa

The contribution of Giles to the study of spirit possession in East Africa seems as decisive for our exploration of the *leiwah* historical and symbolic background understanding in Eastern Arabia. It allows us to corroborate the shared traits between the Eastern Arabian *leiwah* and the East African ritual and musical practices especially from the Mrima Swahili coastal region. The general aim of Giles's work is to show "[...] how the history and identity

¹³ The existence of the *jinn* is recognized in the *Quran* (Surah 55 verse 15). However, calling out to these spirits is interpreted by the Muslim exegetes as an association (shirk) to another god than Allah (Surah 4 verse 4 and 116) and in opposition to the idea of God's uniqueness (tawhid). The association to another god is considered as a sin by the Muslims and similar to polytheism and idolatry (see Al-Zein 2009).

of the Swahili coast are represented in the world of spirits and in the symbolic sphere of specific types of spirits” (Giles 1999, 145). She describes the world of the Swahili spirits as a categorization system structured around two major oppositions; 1) Between the *kiislamu* spirit and *kafiri* spirit or *kishenzi* respectively civilized Muslim spirit opposed the uncivilized or pagan spirits. 2) Between the spirits of the interior, the *bara* spirits¹⁴, and those of the coast, the *kiarabu* and / or *kipemba* (ibid., 148, 155, 156). For the Swahili, the *kipemba* spirits are spirits from the island of Pemba and the Tanga coastal area; the Mrima region (ibid., 148, 155, 156). In this way, the spirits categories represent for Giles the conceptualization made by the Swahili of the various groups of people which were in touch with them throughout their history. These categories can be of external or internal contribution to the Swahili world. But far from being fixed, the boundary between these contributions is by definition extremely permeable (ibid., 148). The Swahili coast society appears in the spirit world as inclusive rather than exclusive (ibid.). This proposition is very interesting for the *leiwah* case in Eastern Arabia. It allows us to consider, that insofar as the *leiwah* has an East African provenance as *Zunûj* proclaim it, that the same process of “permeability” can be observed among their ritual practice. So, this characteristic needs to be examined by having Eastern Arabia as a reference point

2.2. The material links between *kipemba* and *leiwah* possession rite

The comparative study of ceremonial components between the *kipemba* and *leiwah* rites show us the existence of a number of similar elements as musical instruments having equivalent name and morphology, but also the possibility to have the same “symbolic values” in the musical context despite geographical and temporal distance. In effect, we note that in the two ceremonies -*kipemba* and *leiwah*- the presence of an aerophone: an oboe named *zumari* in Swahili and *zamr* in Arabic, and an idiophone: named *upatu* in Swahili. For Giles (1999), these musical instruments are specific to the *kipemba ngoma* orchestration both for the feasts and for the possession rites realization¹⁵ (ibid., 153, 156). Among the *Zunûj*, they are part of the *leiwah* rite instruments. The *upatu* idiophone has the appearance of a metal disc or a Can of kerosene used in most Swahili dances in Zanzibar and Pemba (Ingrams 1931, 400; Racine-Issa 2001). It is in this latter form that it is known under the name of *patu*, *pato* or *tanak* in the Eastern Arabian *leiwah* (Hassan 1980; Al-Khan 1989; 1994; Shawqi and Christensen 1994; Sebiane 2004; 2007). Concerning the oboe, if it has probably a similar musical use in *kipemba* and *leiwah* ceremonies, there are significant morphological differences between Swahili *zumari* and the Eastern Arabian *zamr*. The *zumari* seems to have a smaller length as compared to its equivalent in Arabia. It has six holes while the *zamr* has seven. Finally, its conical bore is smaller. But in the both case the oboe appears as the lead for the melodies proposition while the dancers-singers are the choir that will respond to it (Le Guennec-Coppens 1980).

On another side, the *msondo* drum is also inseparable from the *leiwah* as the *zamr* and the *patu /tanak*. This massive drum in the shape of chalice was also noted in Iraq among the black population of Basra (Hassan 1980, 34-35, 150-151). In the Sultanate of Oman, the term “msondo” among the *Zunûj* is specific to designate their *leiwah* main drum, while it is used generically to describe a class of membranophones among the Swahili (Askew 2002, 213).

¹⁴ The word *bara* is a swahilization of the Arabic term *bar* meaning “mainland; campaign ”(Kazimirski 1860, 103), which is also found in the Vernacular Eastern Arabic meaning “ hinterland ”.

¹⁵ The word *ngoma* in Swahili means at first a drum as the one universal accompaniment of all merrymaking, and ceremonial; *ngoma* is extended to include (1) any kind of dance, (2) music in general. But also: beat a drum; join in a dance; dancing for amusement; dance for the exorcizing of a spirit (Madan 1903, 290). For contextualized descriptions see also (Campbell and Eastman 1984; Eastman 1986; Fair 1996; Giles 1999; Askew 2002).

The term *msondo* in Swahili means "conduct" the dance (ibid.). It is used to designate the musical accompaniment during the possession rites and *ngoma* dances performed along the Swahili coast. These dances are mixed-gender (Ingrams 1931; Askew 2002; Fair 1996; Topp Fargion 2002; Eastman 1986). According to Ingrams (1931, 399-419), the *msondo* drum and *mshindo* drum was widely known among the Mijikenda groups of Mrima region and Tanga¹⁶, in the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar in the early twentieth century¹⁷. They were used both in the spirits cult practices and in entertainment music practices during the feasts (ibid., 401-419; Skene 1917), like that is observable in the *leiwah* practice in the Persian Gulf nowadays. Moreover, other sources (Rovsing Olsen 1967; Hassan 1980; Al-khan 1989; Sebiane 2004; 2007) also mention the term *pipa* as a common name for this type of the *leiwah* drums in the Persian Gulf. This term is derived from the Swahili word *pepo* meaning "wind" and "spirits" (Giles 1987; Bacuez 2007; Alpers 2000; Racine-Issa 2001) as aforementioned. Concerning, the two cylindrical drums with two skins, *rahmani* and *kasir*, we can also find the use of the name *tshambua* for the *rahmani* in UAE (Sebiane 2004; 2015a; 2015b) and that of *mchapuo* in certain regions of Oman, for the *kasir*. This term (*mchapuo*) is phonetically very close to the word *chapuo*, a name for a category of small drums used in the *ngoma* of Pemba and the coastal East-Africa (Ingrams 1931, 399). *Chapuo* has morphological and technological characteristics very close to these both membranophones of Arabia.

Finally, the similarities that emerged on different fields like the possession spirits conception, spirits names, musical instruments names and morphology are common traits. These traits indicate that the historical and the cultural boundaries between the black populations of Eastern Arabia and the Swahili Coastal people including the Mijikenda of Mrima region are relative. They allow us to envisage, and it shows, in a more concrete way, structural filiations on the cultural and historical level. It is in this perspective that we can consider the hypothesis of a probable continuity of the ceremonial practices between the two regions. These ceremonies are probably not identical in their concretisation, but the symbolic signification of their components are enough to signify on the symbolic level the maintenance of a cultural and historical continuity to the eyes of the *Zunûj*.

3. The East African symbolic connections of *ramsat-al-leiwah* rite

At the junction between the *Zunûj* discourse, the *ramsa* possession rite observations, on linguistic and anthropological studies of the concerned geographical area, it can be noted that the *ramsa* dances names and probably the realization of its musical stages come from the Mijikenda musical and ritual practices of the Mrima region. Indeed, on this topic, the research avenue privileged is the same as it is used previously on the ethnolinguistic level for the possession spirits conception, spirits names and instruments names. I propose now to highlight some preliminary observations which indicate the probable symbolic dimension underlying this possession rite in Eastern Arabia (See figure.3.1).

The name of the first musical stage of the *ramsat -al-leiwah* is *leiwah*: the first dance among the *Zunûj*. This word is a transliteration made by Poul Rovsing-Olsen (1967). It is a phonetic transcription of the verbal locution *lewah* or *lewa* used by some old East African ex-slaves in Eastern Arabia. According to Shawqi research on this practice in Sultanate of Oman during the late of the seventies, the term "*lewah*" means "to get drunk" in Swahili. "It seems that the costal people (the black people in Oman) used to invite each other to drink a traditional fermented brew before performing this old African dance. The words used to invite

¹⁶ A Bantu-speaking population composed of nine groups: *Digo, Chonyi, Kambe, Duruma, Kauma, Ribe, Rabai Jibana* and *Giriama*. The Mijikenda are established behind the coast of Kenya (in the hinterland of Mombasa) and Tanzania.

¹⁷ The *mshindo* drum in UAE has the same musical function as the *msondo* in Oman; it is a wide cylinder which rests on three feet. Its morphology is similar to what was mentioned by Ingrams (1931, 399-419).

others for drinks are “*ki lewah*”, or “*ko lewah*”. The first syllable was dropped and the name of this tradition became *lewah*” (Shawqi and Christensen 1994, 105). This indication is not unrelated to the fact that during the *ramsa* rite, the participants consumed an alcoholic beverage. Indeed, the Swahili word to mean “be drunk” or “to become drunk” is *lewa* (Madan 1903, 195; Krapf 1882, 186; Sacleux 1939, 471). It is the same word that was used at the end of the nineteenth century to designate a rite of possession named *Pepo wa lewa* in the Mrima region. For Velten (1903, 159-161) and Allen (1981, 107-109), *Pepo wa lewa* -translated in English by Allan as *The Dizzy Spirit*- was a therapeutic possession rite practiced by the Coastal people of the Mrima region in the 19th century between the cities of Bagamoyo and Mombasa. The dance of this rite was performed with sticks during five or seven days carried out primarily for women patients. We can note also the use of the three drums: two *chapuo* (as aforementioned); one *mrungura*¹⁸ and *zumari*.

The second musical stage -the second dance- of the *ramsa* rite is called “*sabâta*” among the *Zunûj*, it seems that this term is a vernacular adaptation in Arabic of the Swahili entertainment dance named “*msapata*” used in Tanga area of the Mrima Region. For Krapf (1882, 246), Madan (1903, 246) and Rechenbach (1967, 354) *msapata* means a kind of Swahili dance. According to Rechenbach (ibid), Mbangale (2008, 232) and Kiraithe and Baden (1976), this Swahili word was borrowed from the Portuguese language; it is a phonetic adaptation of the term *sapatear* (shoes) used to designate the percussive footwork -hit the ground with his feet shod- called *sapateado* in Portuguese and *zapateado* in Spanish (Castro Buendía 2014). In the Mrima region, the Mijikenda groups use metal rattles on their feet for their entertainments dances and possession rituals. They ring their rattles by trampling the ground with their feet¹⁹. This passage from one language to another, particularly from Portuguese to Swahili suggests that this dance was known since 16th century during the *Lusophone* presence in East Africa, but also the particular feature of this dance (the percussive footwork) is a significant element underlying the use of that name. It should be emphasized that this dance denomination is completely unknown in the rest of the African descendants population of the Persian Gulf except the *Zunûj* group of Oman.

At last, the “*medondo*” denomination for the third musical stage of the *ramsa*, is similar to what we can find in the Mrima region. This term is used locally to designate the rolling drum or a particular type of musical execution. According to Madan (1903, 222), the word “*mdundo*” means a rolling, rumbling sound, as of drums or a band. For Krapf (1882, 200), the term “*mandôndu*” means a large drum related to *ngoma ya msondo* musical practice. For Rechenbach (1967, 309) “*Mdundo*” refers to the sound of a drum and a kind of drum. Thus, if the *Zunûf* have not expressed to me the signification of this word, however, one can observe that the *leiwah msondo* player realizes a specific rolling drum with his hands at this musical stage. This play is totally different from what we can see in the other stages, where he always uses drumsticks to beat this drum. Would it be a coincidence?

Finally, according to some interlocutors of Arab descent from Zanzibar (Tanzania), it is within the Mijikenda group, particularly in the subset of *Digo*, that this denomination is still used today to designate their music and dances related to their agricultural activities or the seasonal harvest celebration. In some villages of the hinterland of Mombasa, the local population gathers to celebrate, through songs and collective dances, the new harvest and

¹⁸ According to Ingrams (1931, 399), a *mrungura* drum is “A Pemba drum [...] Small [...] on three or four legs which are all on a stand”. For Sacleux (1939, 592) it is a kind of drum used to tell the workers the beginning and the end of work on a plantation. For Lenselaer (1983, 322) it is a large drum used to bring people together, but it is also used for the dance with other drums. These testimonies suggest that this word is a Swahili generic denomination for a type of membranophones regardless of their size.

¹⁹ See Orchardson-Mazrui (1998) as example for the use of rattles among Mijikenda Society.

share their agricultural productions. Thus, besides the probable historical link between the *Digo* and the *Zunûj* mentioned above, this oral information invites us to think that there would be a cultural continuity between these two population groups, notably with regard to the symbolic agricultural dimension underlying the *leiwah* ritual practice and its history in eastern Arabia. But, at this stage of the research, it is not possible to confirm the accuracy of this assertion. We arrive at the limit of what we can learn from the interviews and the written consulted sources at the historical level. From this point, the “trace” gets lost. A detailed field study in East Africa appears necessary to clarify more broadly these relations or connections.

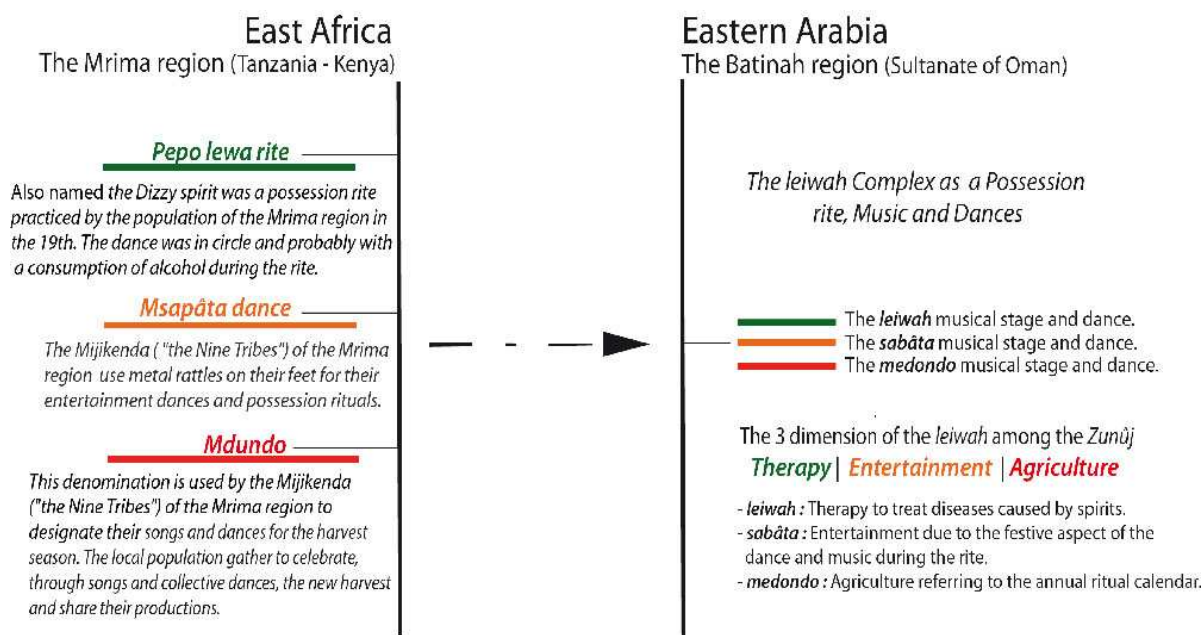


Figure.3.1: The *ramsat-al-leiwah* three symbolic dimension hypothesis.

Epilogue

As we have seen, if the *Zunûj* of Eastern Arabia constitute probably a heterogeneous group of people maybe not totally native from the Mrima region given the difficulty to trace their provenance after the slavery Era, their *leiwah* possession rite practice expresses the “traces” of their African cultural background and history²⁰. Thus, we can estimate that the *ramsat-al-leiwah* is a cultural expression, even if it is not completely verbalized by the *Zunûj* regarding to their particular history in Eastern Arabia (Sebiane 2015a). It does not reflect a non-conceptualization of their history on their part. It is appropriate to consider that it is through the organization of their ritual and its realization that this history is sketched. As we have seen, to the extent that we find common traits in terms of musical stages, spirits names, musical instruments names and morphology, but also in term of symbolic dimension: (1) ritual therapy; (2) agricultural celebration; (3) entertainment dance. We can consider that we are not in the presence of a fortuitous phenomenon. For the *Zunûj*, these elements are inextricably linked to their *ramsat-al-leiwah* practice. It implies that their ritual may appear as the perpetuation of “symbolic value” shared within the Swahili society more than a century ago and despite the break in the cultural and material links between the both populations since that time.

Indeed, the hypothesis developed here is not unfounded given that the *Zunûj* possession ritual practice structured around three distinctive dances/musical stages seem neighbours -if they share also the same cultural substratum- with three known dances of

²⁰ See E. Alpers point of view (Alpers 2000, 83) mentioned in the introduction to this article.

different Swahili groups of the Mrima region and dedicated to particular social functions among the Mijikenda society. Following this finding, it should be emphasized that it is not possible to affirm that the *leiwah* practice in Eastern Arabia reflects a specific foreign “cultural identity” or “origin” as we can see through the few attempts to solve this problematic in the Gulf nation-states. The *leiwah* ritual complex, including the *ramsat-al-leiwah* and the *leiwah* entertainment dance, probably carry some information that the *Zunûj* consider relevant to maintain their social organization as a native and specific cultural group alongside the other local cultural groups such as the Arabs, Persians, Kutchi, Banyans and Baloch. The *Zunûj* discourses never express that they consider themselves as an exogenous East African cultural group grafted in eastern Arabian societies. This appears to indicate that the identity dynamic among the *Zunûj* today, is not specifically related to Africa and what it represents as a cultural reference, as we can see among some other groups of slave descendants in the western world.

In a broader perspective, the *ramsat-al-leiwah* and all the meanings which it underlies appears partly as a synthesis of various contributions from different East African cultural groups. It is, therefore, likely that this realization results from complex processes of borrowing and appropriation – as Linda Giles’s notion of permeability (1999, 148) suggests it - involves both “symbolic values” (as we saw it), but also artefacts (as the instrumentation for example). The meaning has been probably transformed according to specific statutory conditions of the *Zunûj* during the slavery era as well as the dominant cultural space and the new natural environment which surrounds them. In this summary, we can perceive how the *Zunûj* adapted their way of thinking and acting since their settlement in Eastern Arabia. The *leiwah infrastructure*²¹ as a particular cultural expression is a subject to the fact that “The own of the Culture is to mutate and to be transformed” (Jullien 2016, 5, 45). Everything suggests that if the *leiwah* of the *Zunûj* sketches some aspects of its past, it always stays in interaction with its present. This finding invites us to explore more broadly how it is established in Eastern Arabia and how it can become something else in terms of its significations through time. This opens a very different perspective to the study of musical or ritual objects in context of cultural transfer in Eastern Arabia following the *leiwah* example.

To go even further, I endorse Godelier’s (2009, 60) view of the importance of anthropology also valid for ethnomusicology which perfectly summarizes the approach developed in this case study: “The anthropology is necessary more than ever in the world we live in. Practiced in the field by being conscious of the place we occupy there, and by leading systematic long-lasting investigations, with the cooperation and the intelligence of those among whom we came to live and to work, by submitting its methods, its analyses and its conclusions in a permanent critical reflection, the anthropology is an essential discipline to understand one can better the globalised world in which we live and shall continue to live”. This approach of the Mankind societies associated to a critical historical perspective in the *longue durée* allows to lift the veil of phenomena at work escaping to the immediate understanding. In other words, if it is possible to envisage the underlying history of the *Zunûj* possession rite in Eastern Arabia and its *cultural influences* after almost half a century of questioning, it results from the listening with understanding of the concerned first ones: the *Zunûj*. It is clear for our comprehension at this stage that their *leiwah* takes its sources beyond Eastern Arabia and that its history is not yet finished.

²¹ I mean by “infrastructure», all of the hidden or obscure facts underlying a perceptible reality. See also Merleau-Ponty (1945, 65).

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