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## **Taarab music and improvisation take center stage in the 36th Bienal de São Paulo Invocation in Zanzibar**

*The third Invocation of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo highlights Taarab culture and philosophy, exploring its expressions through music and poetry, while considering Taarab as a space of conjugating humanity.*

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**São Paulo, Jan 13th, 2024** – The **36th Bienal de São Paulo** continues its global journey with its third *Invocation*, titled ***Mawali–Taqsim: Improvisation as a Space and Technology of Humanity***, which will take place in Zanzibar from February 11th to 13th, 2025. The *Invocation* will be hosted by **Maru Maru Hotel** and **Golden Tulip Stonetown Boutique**, with the **Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA)** as a partner institution.

The program delves into the multifaceted world of Taarab music, exploring improvisation as a space and technology of humanity. The program is also inspired by the concept of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo, entitled *Not All Travellers Walk Roads – Of Humanity as Practice*, which draws from AfroBrazilian poet Conceição Evaristo's poem "Da calma e do silêncio" [*Of calm and silence*]. Under the curatorial leadership of Prof. Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, alongside co-curators Alya Sebti, Anna Roberta Goetz, and Thiago de Paula Souza, co-curator at large Keyna Eleison, and strategy and communications advisor Henriette Gallus, the 36th Bienal explores the idea of humanity as a practice rooted in shared histories and cultural intersections.

The *Invocation* in Zanzibar focuses on the philosophical and artistic dimensions of Taarab, a genre that epitomizes the island's cultural hybridity and resonates as a profound medium for expression, sentiment, and resilience. Improvisation, a fundamental part of Taarab music, offers a profound metaphor for human adaptability and interconnectedness. Echoing the complexities of Zanzibar's history – a crossroads of African, Arabic, Asian, and European influences – the third *Invocation* offers the possibility of reflecting on nuances and accents of humanity on an island that is a point of

intersection of multiple cultures, philosophies, sciences. In the words of Djibril Diop Mambéty, art serves as “the grammar of our grandmothers,” and Taarab embodies this ethos through its eclectic blend of musical instruments, poetic lyrics, and improvisational techniques. Zanzibar’s cultural tapestry, reflected in its language, Swahili, and its emblematic Taarab music, provides the setting for this *Invocation*.

### **About the *Invocations***

In preparation for the 36th Bienal de São Paulo – *Not All Travellers Walks Roads – Of Humanity as Practice*, and to introduce and tune in to the conceptual thread, a series of public programs called *Invocations* takes place in four different cities around the world: Marrakech; Guadeloupe; Zanzibar; and Tokyo.

Each edition mirrors the exhibition concept of Humanity as Practice from a specific local context, reconfiguring and expanding it through live events and a publication. The aim of the *Invocations* is to expand the vocabulary of humanity, at points of intersection between different longitudes and latitudes.

If humanity were a verb, how would it be conjugated in these different geographies? The Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty once described film – and therefore art – as “la grammaire de ma grande mère” [my grandmother’s grammar], alluding to the familiarity of art, the intergenerational aspects of artistic practices, the colloquialism of art and art/artistic practice as grammar. The four *Invocations* will explore how artistic practices around the globe help to situate, enrich and expand these grammars.

### **Program:**

#### **Feb 11, 2025, Tue, Maru Maru Hotel**

7pm – 7:45pm: Introduction and welcoming by Prof. Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Khamis Muhamed Juma (DCMA), and Bernard Ntahondi

8:20pm – 10pm: Performance by Siti Muharam

#### **Feb 12, 2025, Wed, Golden Tulip Hotel**

10am – 10:45am: Lecture by Mr. Thabit Omar Kiringe, who is transcribing

traditional Taarab music of Zanzibar into notation at DCMA

11am – 11:45am: Lecture by Rukia Ramadhani, from one of the oldest Taarab groups since 1905

2pm – 3pm: Presentation by Mohamed Ameir Muombwa. Taarab: An audience experience in the heart of Zanzibar

4pm – 6:15pm: Lecture by Thania Petersen

7pm – 7:45pm: Music performance and talk featuring DCMA Young Stars band

**Feb 13, 2025, Thu, Maru Maru Hotel**

10am – 11am: Lecture by Aisha Bakary (Hijab DJ) exploring her research into music and identity

11:15am – 12:15pm: Lecture by Tryphon Evarist, DCMA's artistic director and award-winning Taarab artist

2pm – 4pm: Break to activate energy

4pm – 4:45pm: Poetry session with Mohamed Ilyas, exploring the inseparability of poetry and Taarab

5pm – 5:45pm: Lecture by Bi Mariam Hamdan

7pm – 8:00pm: DJ set by Aisha Bakary (Hijab DJ)

**Feb 13, 2025, Thu, Maru Maru Hotel**

8:15pm – 9:15pm: Performance by Uwaridi Female Band

**About the participants:**

**Aisha Bakary (Hijab DJ)**

Aisha Bakary, known professionally as DJ Hijab, is a trailblazing Tanzanian music producer and DJ celebrated as the first female DJ from Zanzibar. Born in 1995 on Pemba Island, she grew up in Unguja, where her passion for music

was ignited at an early age. Deeply inspired by the rhythms of Taraab music she loved as a child, her journey into the music world would later make her a pioneer in the industry.

**Bernard Ntahondi**

Tanzanian professional specializing in film curation and heritage management. He is currently a curator at the Dar es Salaam Center for Architectural Heritage, where he integrates his knowledge of architecture and history into his film-related endeavors.

**Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung**

Born in 1977 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, Ndikung is the chief curator of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo, director and chief curator of Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), founding director of SAVVY Contemporary, and also a professor at the Weißensee Academy of Art Berlin.

**DCMA Young Stars**

Is a project composed of students from Zanzibar's Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA). The DCMA Young Stars program was established to perform at Alliance Française's world music festival at Dar es Salaam. The band features a diversity of styles and instruments and performs unique combinations of taarab, dance, African and Latin genres.

**Keyna Eleison**

Curator, writer, researcher, and Griot heiress. Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She was part of the African Heritage Commission for the Cais do Valongo UNESCO World Heritage designation and managed Rio's cultural centers (2015–2017). Former pedagogical coordinator at Escola de Artes Visuais – Parque Lage (2018–2019), curator of the 10th SIART Biennial in Bolivia, and artistic director of MAM Rio (2020–2023). Curator of the first Amazon Biennial (2023). Works in the development of exhibitions and meanings of works of art and artists, guiding artistic processes, curating exhibitions, teaching art, with the precedent of coordinating art education and storytelling reinforcing the relationship of passage and capturing oral knowledge.

**Khamis Muhamed Juma**

A highly accomplished artist, curator, and cultural advocate from Zanzibar. With over three decades of experience in fine arts, cultural management, and community development, he has dedicated his career to preserving and promoting African and Swahili art forms through education, exhibitions, and

creative projects.

**Bi Mariam Hamdan**

An accomplished journalist, musician, and cultural advocate. After retiring, Maryam used her pension to purchase musical instruments, often second-hand, and became the first woman in Zanzibar to play the qanun instrument publicly. In 2009, she founded Tausi Women's Taarab (meaning "Peacock"), Zanzibar's first all-woman taarab orchestra. This group delivers performances of Swahili taarab music, revolutionizing a traditionally male-dominated art form. Maryam also serves as the Chairperson of the Taarab Association, which includes seven taarab groups in Zanzibar.

**Mohamed Ameir Muombwa**

An accomplished media professional, government advisor, and social development advocate with a career spanning over three decades in public service and journalism. His extensive experience in government, media relations, and community development has positioned him as a key figure in promoting Zanzibar's cultural and political narrative.

**Mohamed Ilyas**

One of Zanzibar's most iconic taarab musicians, known for preserving and enriching the islands' cultural heritage. His music blends the Arabic roots of taarab with a distinctly Zanzibari style, often incorporating European-inspired melodies into his songs.

**Rukia Ramadhani**

Rukia Ramadhan is a celebrated Zanzibari singer and musician whose journey into the world of Taraab music reflects her lifelong passion and dedication to the art form.

**Siti Muharam**

She reimagined what had been formal court music into a private form of improvisation, laced with a spirit of inclusivity that combined Arabic and Swahili lyrics. In doing so, she paved the way for other female taarab singers, including Bi Kidude. In turn, Siti Muharam now animates the life and legacy of her legendary great grandmother. With support from The Vinyl Factory, Songlines, Pan African Music, British radio DJs Gilles Peterson and Tom Ravenscroft and ecstatic reviews from *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*,

*The Wire* and *Mojo*, Siti Muharam's first music release 'Siti of Unguja' looks set to be rated among the Top African music albums of 2020.

#### **Thania Petersen**

A multi-disciplinary artist who uses photography, performance and installation to address the intricacies and complexities of her identity in contemporary South Africa. Petersen's reference points sit largely in Islam and in creating awareness about its religious, cultural and traditional practices. She attempts to unpack contemporary trends of Islamophobia through her analysis of the continuing impact of colonialism, European and American imperialism, and the increasing influence of right-wing ideologies.

#### **Tryphon Evarist**

A musician, composer, traditional dancer, and teacher from Zanzibar, Tanzania, where he serves as the Artistic Director of the Dhow Countries Music Academy. Tryphon has mastered a diverse array of musical instruments, including the accordion, clarinet, qanun, and traditional drums, with a commitment to preserving African cultural arts.

#### **Thabit Omar Kiringe**

A highly respected music educator and one of the founders of the Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA). His contributions to music education and the preservation of traditional taarab music are widely celebrated.

#### **Uwaridi Female Band**

A group of talented, passionate, energetic, and active female musicians. The group combines different types of instruments, traditional with modern to create the sound of victory, evolution of women in, aim of preserving Zanzibar culture and fuse with modern themes. Uwaridi band compose, arrange, create, produce the Sound of New Hope and Rejoice with their packages, Taarab Asilia, Tarafusion, Kidumbaki, Traditional ngoma, Gogo music, and Fusion Music.

The Fundação Bienal de São Paulo thanks its master sponsors: Itaú, Bloomberg, Bradesco, Petrobras, Instituto Cultural Vale, and Citi.

#### **About the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo**

Founded in 1962, the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo is a private, nonprofit institution with no party political or religious ties, whose actions aim to democratize access to culture and foster interest in artistic creation. Every two years, the Fundação holds the Bienal de São Paulo, the largest exhibition of the Southern Hemisphere, and its traveling exhibitions program in several cities in Brazil and abroad. The institution is

also the custodian of two items of Latin American artistic and cultural heritage: a historical archive of modern and contemporary art that is a standard reference in Latin America (the Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo), and the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion, the head office of the Fundação, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and listed as historical heritage. The Fundação Bienal de São Paulo is also responsible for conceiving and producing Brazil's representations at the Venice Biennales of art and architecture, a prerogative bestowed upon it decades ago by the Federal Government in recognition of the excellence of its contributions to Brazilian culture.

**About the Dhow Countries Music Academy Zanzibar (DCMA)**

The Dhow Countries Music Academy Zanzibar (DCMA) is a non-profit, educational, and cultural organization registered in March 2001. DCMA opened Zanzibar's first music school in September 2002 providing music lessons as well as instruments at minimal cost to anyone interested in studying music related to their cultural background or acquiring mastery of an instrument. Special emphasis has been placed on teaching traditional musical instruments and styles such as Taarab, Beni, and Kidumbak. The overall aim of DCMA is to preserve and promote the musical heritage of Zanzibar and the Dhow region.

**Service**

**36th Bienal de São Paulo – *Not All Travellers Walk Roads – Of Humanity as Practice***

Chief curator: Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung / Co-curators: Alya Sebti, Anna Roberta Goetz, Thiago de Paula Souza / Co-curator at large: Keyna Eleison / Strategy and communications advisor: Henriette Gallus

*Invocation #3 – Zanzibar, Tanzania*

Mawali–Taqsim: Improvisation as a Space and Technology of Humanity

Feb 11–13, 2025

free admission

Maru Maru Hotel

Tue, 7pm–10pm

Thu, 8:15pm – 9:15pm

Gizenga St, P.O. Box 4053

Golden Tulip Stonetown Boutique

Wed, 10am – 7:45pm

Thu, 10am – 8pm

Malindi Road, P.O. Box 271

Zanzibar, Tanzania

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The title of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo, 'Not All Travellers Walk Roads', is made up

of verses by the writer Conceição Evaristo.



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