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ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4243

# Music of the Comoro Islands

## Domoni

RECORDED BY  
HARRIET & MARTIN OTTENHEIMER



THE TOWN OF DOMONI



SANGIO

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

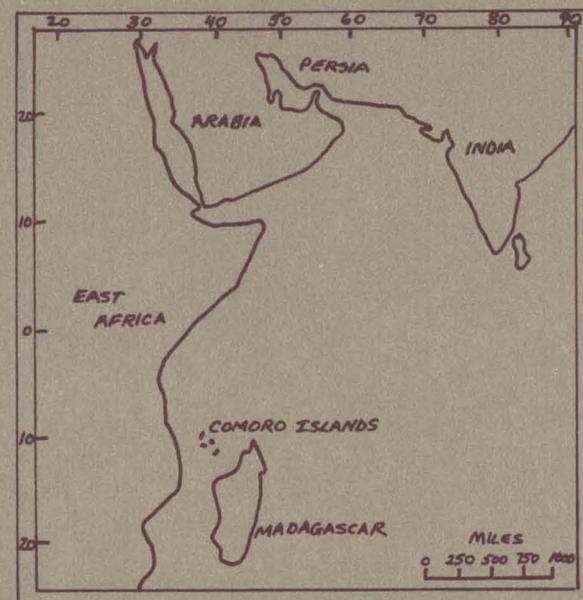
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SIDE 1

- Band 1—Love song with **GABUS**
- Band 2—**NDZEDZE** music
- Band 3—**NDZEDZE** music
- Band 4—**MRENGE**  
(Boxing match acc. by drums)
- Band 5—Two **TARI** songs
- Band 6—Two **TARI** songs
- Band 7—**BALOLO**
- Band 8—**TWARABU**,  
(with the Organisation Assmine Bande)

SIDE 2

- Band 1—**MSHOGORO**
- Band 2—**ZIFAFA**
- Band 3—**SHIGOMA**
- Band 4—**MRISWALA**
- Band 5—**MRISWALA**  
(a pause in the morning procession)
- Band 6—**KORANIC SCHOOL**
- Band 7—**DAIRA**



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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

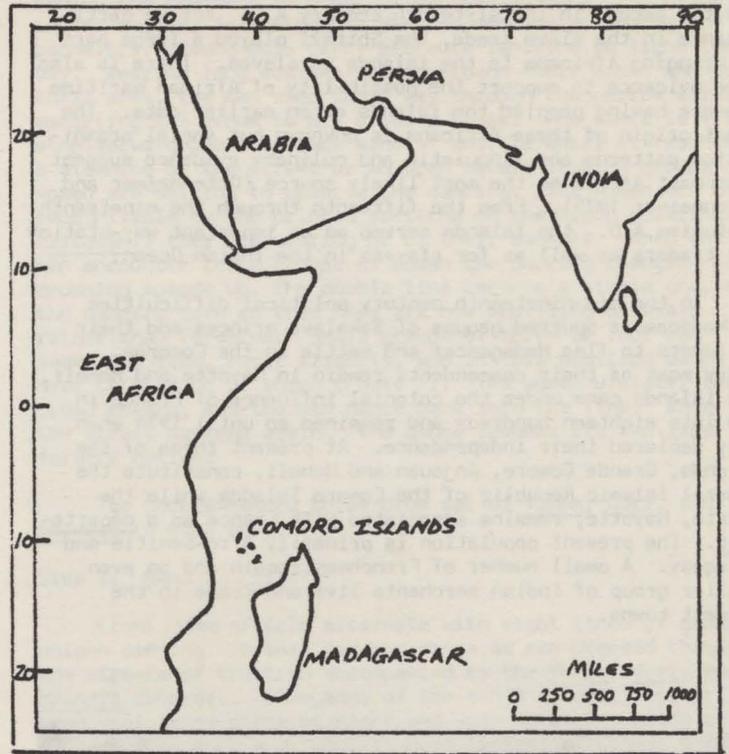
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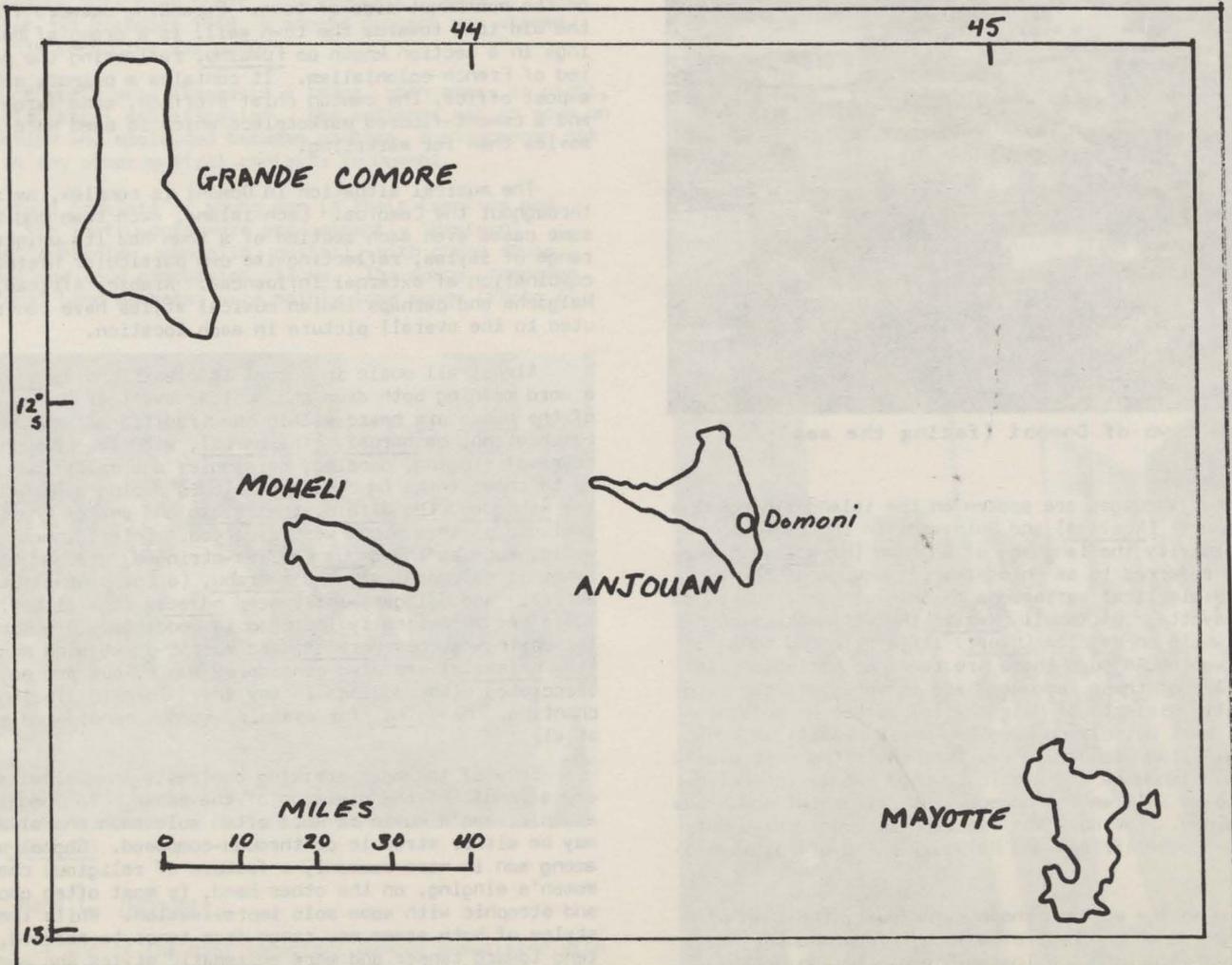
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The Comoro Islands are located approximately twelve degrees below the equator in the Mozambique Channel, midway between the northern tip of Madagascar and Mozambique. The four-island archipelago is of volcanic origin and enjoys a tropical climate modified by sea breezes. The population is grouped into dense townships along the coasts, ranging from five hundred to ten thousand inhabitants. Smaller villages predominate in the mountainous inland areas. The basic sources of subsistence are agriculture and fishing. There is also some animal husbandry -- sheep, goats and cattle are the main livestock. In the past, trade with Africa, Arabia, India and Madagascar was also an important economic activity and has had a lasting impact on life in the islands (M. Ottenheimer n.d.).

Arabic, Shirazi, African, Indian, Malagasy and European peoples have contributed to the present population of the Comoro Islands (M. Ottenheimer 1976). Although it is possible that Arabs from the Hadramut in Southern Arabia sailed to the



Map 1: The Indian Ocean



Map 2: The Comoro Islands

islands before the time of Mohammed, tradition refers primarily to a group known as the Shirazi who arrived in the islands in two waves of migration: The first in the twelfth century and the second in the sixteenth century A.D. Active participants in the slave trade, the Shirazi played a large part in bringing Africans to the islands as slaves. There is also some evidence to support the possibility of African maritime traders having peopled the islands at an earlier date. The exact origin of these Africans is unknown but social organization patterns and linguistic and culinary evidence suggest Southeast Africa as the most likely source (Ottenheimer and Ottenheimer 1979). From the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries A.D., the islands served as an important way-station for traders as well as for slavers in the Indian Ocean.

In the mid-nineteenth century political difficulties in Madagascar spurred groups of Sakalava princes and their followers to flee Madagascar and settle in the Comoros. Today most of their descendents remain in Mayotte and Moheli. The islands came under the colonial influence of France in the late eighteen hundreds and remained so until 1974 when they declared their independence. At present three of the islands, Grande Comore, Anjouan and Moheli, constitute the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoro Islands while the fourth, Mayotte, remains associated with France as a département. The present population is primarily Afro-Semitic and Malagasy. A small number of Frenchmen remain and an even smaller group of Indian merchants live and trade in the largest towns.



Photo 1: The town of Domoni (facing the sea).

Two Bantu languages are spoken on the islands: Hingazija on Grande Comore (Ngazija) and Shinzwani on the other three islands. Primarily the language of Anjouan (Nzwani), Shinzwani is also referred to as Shimasiwa ("language of the islands"). Dialectical variations of Shinzwani are spoken on Moheli and Mayotte. On Moheli (Mwali) the variant is known as Shimwali while on Mayotte (Mauri) it is referred to as Shimauri. Even on Anjouan there are regional variations in Shinzwani. All of these languages are commonly written with Arabic script. Dialects of Malgache are spoken on some of the islands, most notably on Mayotte, and Kiswahili is known and used, mainly on Grande Comore. French is the most widely known European language and Arabic is used mainly for religious worship as well as for speeches at ceremonial occasions such as weddings. The dominant religion is Sunni Islam but there are also some African and Malagasy forms of spirit-possession.

Situated on the eastern shore of Anjouan, the town of Domoni is nestled at the base of a long thin promontory which juts eastward into the Indian Ocean. To the north and to the south of the town, recessed into the shoreline, are beaches which, sheltered by the promontory, provided

safe landing sites for trading ships in the past. Domoni was important enough as a trading center in the fifteenth century to be referred to by Ibn Majid, a famous Arab pilot said to have shown Vasco da Gama the way to India (Grosset-Grange 1978:25). While the promontory helped to protect the town and its ports, a long wall, now in ruins, surrounded the town also, affording a measure of protection from attack by land.

Within the remains of the wall are the three main sections of the old town of Domoni: Momoni, Hari ya muzhi, and Maweni. Momoni is at the base of the promontory and has many old stone buildings, some of which are in ruins today. It is probably the oldest section of Domoni and one of the old stone buildings is said to have been occupied by some forty rulers before the administrative center of the town was moved to Hari ya muzhi. Another old stone building in Momoni is said to have once been the house of a wealthy Indian trader. Many of the town's fishermen and farmers live in Momoni today.

Hari ya muzhi, or "the center of town," is just to the west of Momoni. It contains some of the largest of the ancient stone buildings. With second-floor latrines, stone ductwork and facilities for hot water, some of these houses apparently date to the fifteenth century. Many of the descendents of the Shirazi group now live in this area of town.

Maweni, in the southern portion of Domoni, has fewer stone buildings and more of the thatched, two-room houses typical of rural Anjouan. There is in this part of town an old stone mosque which was renovated in the fifteen hundreds and it is here that many of the waves of immigrants over the centuries have taken up residence.

Another expansion has taken place in recent years on the northwest side of town. Expanding outward from the old town towards the town wall, is a group of buildings in a section known as Fukuzhu, reflecting the period of French colonialism. It contains a primary school, a post office, the canton chief's office, some large homes, and a cement-floored marketplace which is used more for movies than for marketing.

The musical situation in Domoni is complex, as it is throughout the Comoros. Each island, each town and in some cases even each section of a town has its unique range of styles, reflecting its own particular historical combination of external influences. Arabic, African, Malgache and perhaps Indian musical styles have contributed to the overall picture in each location.

Almost all music in Domoni is classified as ngoma -- a word meaning both drum and musical event or dance. Most of the ngoma are heard within the traditional wedding celebration, or harusi. The harusi, with its prescribed round of singing, dancing, ceremonies and feasts may take up to three weeks to complete. It is during a harusi that the mshogoro, the zifafa, the balolo and one of the tari included on this album were recorded. Entertainment music, such as the gabusi (a five-stringed lute and the songs it accompanies), the twarabu, (a European-style concert) and Malagasy-influenced ndzedze (box-zither) music are occasionally included in weddings. Drumming for boxing-matches (mrenge) and spirit-possession music (the mrizwala) are also considered music, but are not associated with weddings in any way. Islamic singing, and chanting, the daira, for example, is not considered music at all.

Some of the most striking contrasts in musical style are a result of the division of the sexes. In Domoni, for example, men's music is more often solo than choral and may be either strophic or through-composed. Choral singing among men is more commonly a feature of religious chant. Women's singing, on the other hand, is most often choral and strophic with some solo improvisation. While the vocal styles of both sexes may range from tense to relaxed, men tend toward tenser and more melismatic styles and women tend toward the more relaxed styles. Men's and women's dances take place separately and although men may not ob-

serve most of the women's dances, women often are spectators at men's dances and usually add their labial ululations to the general tonal scene.

Instrumentation and dance styles are different, too. Women's dances are generally accompanied by singing and drumming. A single headed frame drum (tari) or tambourine is most often the instrument of women, along with gongs, sticks, coconut shells and handclaps. Some women's dances are executed in a seated position (the tari, for example) while others involve counterclockwise circles and fluid hip movements. There are also occasional processions through the streets but the women take care to be fully covered from head to toe on these occasions in accordance with the custom of purdah followed by the women of the town.

Nearly all of the men's dances involve a procession through the streets. Accompanied by a set of three double-headed drums (fumba, dori and msindio), the men generally walk or dance in single or double file. In large open areas they may stop and execute a variety of other steps with swords, canes or scarves. Stringed and wind instruments are exclusively within the men's domain as are the recently introduced European and Malagasy instruments.

Men's styles, in general, reflect more arabic, European and Malagasy influence than do women's styles. Since it was the men who were traditionally engaged in the long-distance trade in the Comoros it should not be surprising to find these influences in their music. It is interesting to note that the cantometric profile for men's music in Domoni most closely approximates Lomax's Old High Culture profile (Lomax 1968).

Influences on women's styles are more difficult to identify. Since they were less directly involved in long-distance trade than the men their music can be expected to be more conservative. The cantometric profile for women's music in Domoni is strikingly close to Lomax's Tribal India profile. Although the profile for Tribal India is based on an extremely small sample, it does appear to have analogs in most of the coastal areas of the Western Indian Ocean. It would seem that the style areas themselves need to be reexamined. The musical evidence from Domoni suggests a common Western Indian Ocean style, shared by the trading communities of the area and perpetuated in the women's music of Domoni.

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Photo 2: Gabus

Side 1. Band 1. Love song with gabus

A small, pear-shaped lute, the gabus has five strings and is plucked with a small reed plectrum. Four of the five strings are tuned in pairs and one sounds alone. The body of the gabus is about ten inches long and four inches wide and the neck is another ten inches long (see photo 2). The singer uses a lower pitch for this Shinzwani song than he does for his Arabic and Swahili songs.

Songs accompanied by gabus are most often performed for small groups of men as part of an afternoon's or evening's entertainment but may also be sung within the context of a wedding, for the men, after their dancing and ceremonies have been completed for the evening.

Side 1. Bands 2 and 3. Ndzedze music

Similar to some of the Malagasy valihas, the ndzedze, or box zither, is a rectangular wooden box, twenty by six by four inches, with eight metal strings on each of the two largest sides. The strings are tuned to a diatonic scale with pairs of movable bridges. The tones of the scale are alternated between the strings on the two sides, facilitating the playing of triads as well as arpeggios. The instrument is set vertically on a chair, between the knees, and is plucked with the fingers.

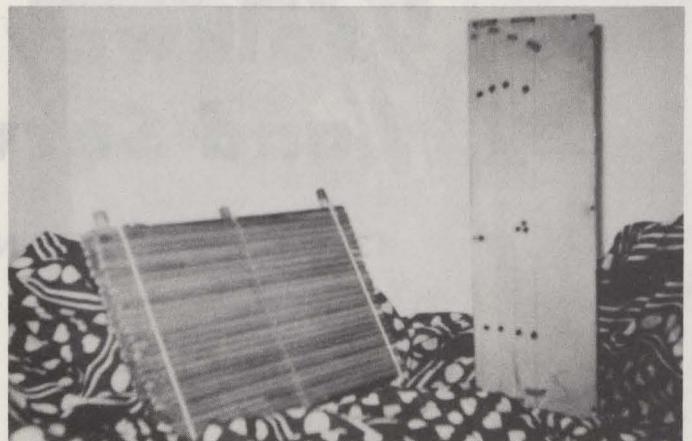


Photo 3: Ndzedze and Nkayamba

Accompanying the ndzedze is a raft rattle, or nkayamba. This is constructed of two rectangular cane rafts, lashed to four wooden edge pieces, resulting in a shallow ten by twelve by one inch box. Filled with small, red, lentil-sized seeds, it is held in one hand and shaken in duple and triple rhythms, accented with occasional thumps against an elbow or knee.

These two instruments, the ndzedze and the nkayamba, together accompany a large repertoire of Malagasy and Shinzwani songs. Generally the songs are played one after another, without pauses, for a continuous performance. The music is played and sung mainly by fishermen and farmers of the Maweni section of town, some of whom are semi-professional musicians. They play for some of the men's and women's dances at weddings but these recordings were made in the ethnographers' home.

The first of the two selections, "O Sorma Naina Vale," is Malgache. The second, "Marahaba, Bweni," is Shinzwani but is sung with a Malgache accent and with a large number of borrowed words (Photo 3).



Photo 4: Drums at an Mrenge

Side 1. Band 4. Mrenge (Boxing match accompanied by drums)

Mrenge are performed primarily during the fasting month of Ramadhan and only at night, after the evening meal. It is the young men who box. Older men, women and children all come out to watch and cheer for their favorites. As this is an outdoor event the women wear head-to-toe coverings of red and white printed cotton (ziromani) to conceal them from the gaze of the men. The boxing matches are generally intra-town, but some inter-town matches are arranged on occasion. Mrenge are only found in the islands of Anjouan and Mayotte although it is said they could also be seen in Grande Comore in previous years.

The three-drum set of fumba, dori and msindio is used to accompany the boxing and also to play between matches. In addition, an old oil can is laid on its side and beaten with rocks. The three-drum set is essential to most of the men's dances in Domoni. Each cylindrical wooden drum has two skin heads, tied on with rope ties. The largest, fumba, is about thirty inches long and has heads of eighteen inch diameters. The medium sized one, dori, is twenty by fifteen inches and the smallest, msindio, is about fourteen by eight inches in size (Photo 4).

Side 1. Bands 5 and 6. Two Tari songs.

The word tari (plural, matari), like the word ngoma, refers to a type of drum (Photo 5), as well as a musical event and its songs and dances. A women's event, the tari, like so much of the music in Domoni, is an integral part of the wedding ceremony.



Photo 5: Women dance through the streets at night with tari drums

Gathering at the bride's house in the afternoon or evening, women sit in rows, some on mats and some on chairs, in a semicircle. All are facing the musicians who are at one end of the room. As men do not generally watch women's dances, the cotton coverings (ziromani) do not need to be worn. The dancing takes place in seated position and consists of gentle swaying movements of the arms, head and torso. Cigarettes and soft drinks are passed around at intervals and a tray is passed around at least once during the evening to collect money for the musicians.

The tari drum is a circular, wood-frame drum with a single skin head. It is about three to four inches thick and ten to fifteen inches in diameter. Some have metal jingles inserted into the frames and function as tambourines (matari ya kengele). All are held in one hand (usually the left) and beaten with the other. Tari drums are generally used by women rather than by men.

Side 1. Band 7. Balolo

A women's ngoma associated with weddings, the balolo is performed around 11 p.m. at the bride's home. Most of the women are seated in rows of chairs facing the center of the room. In the center are the bride, three musicians (women) and a small space for dancing. The singing begins slowly without any accompaniment but soon picks up tempo and regularity as the instruments (two drums and a gong) join in. As the tempo increases some of the women get up to dance, facing one another and with arms extended and hips gyrating. Women watching add ululation. Drinks, snacks and cigarettes are distributed from time to time. Balolo songs are said to be very old -- referring back to the first wanzwani (inhabitants of Anjouan).

The gong (patsu), about twelve inches in diameter, is laid on a larger metal tray and beaten with two long, narrow (twelve by half-inch) strips of bamboo skin. The drums are two of the double-ended cylindrical drums of the sort more commonly used by men than by women. Made of wood with skin heads and rope ties, one is fourteen by eight inches and one is twenty by fifteen inches. Each one is laid across the musician's lap and beaten with the hands, one hand for each end.



Photo 6: The Organisation Assmine Bande

Side a. Band 8. Twarabu, with the Organisation Assmine Bande

The O.A.B., as it is popularly called, is Domoni's first "pop" music band. It formed in the spring of 1968 soon after its leader acquired a saxophone and began learning to play it. In three months they gave their first concert (twarabu). Six months later, in December 1968, a second concert was staged, at which this recording was made.

Both concerts were staged in a large, open area, at night, and used electrical amplification. The audience sat in rows on folding chairs and applauded between numbers, a phenomenon not observed in any other musical contexts in Domoni.

The group consists of young men in their twenties and thirties. The instruments were predominantly "Western" (saxophone, accordion, mandolin, guitar), with conga drums, bongo drums and wood percussion sticks. The songs, composed by individual band members, were mainly love songs (Photo 6).



Photo 7: Mshogoro

Side 2. Band 1. Mshogoro

This is one of the most important dances associated with a wedding celebration. Performed on a Wednesday night, following the couple's first sexual contact, the mshogoro is a

dance-procession of men with an audience of ululating women. In the evening, after the last prayers, the men gather in the streets near the mosque and arrange themselves in two lines behind the drummers in order of decreasing age. The groom is in the middle, following the married men and preceding the bachelors. Young boys carry pressure lanterns to light the way. Wearing long scarves draped around their necks and down their arms, the men wind their way through the narrow streets, escorting the groom to his bride's house. The dance is a two-step-forward-one-step-back kind of shuffle until it reaches a widening of the street or an open square in which groups of women are waiting to observe the dancing. The women are only recognizable by the printed patterns on the cloth coverings (ziromani) they are wearing or by their sandals. When the men encounter these groups of women the dancing changes; the drumming speeds up, the double line becomes a single one, and the dancers turn so that they are now shuffling sideways rather than forwards. Small groups of three or four men leave the line, squat slightly, and in this position dance over to a group of women (Photo 7). The women ululate, the crowd cheers, and the men dance back into the line. When the street narrows again, the dance resumes its two-line forward motion.

The double-headed three-drum set of fumba, dori, and msindio is used here.

Side 2. Band 2. Zifafa

Eight lines of solo alternate with eight lines of group unison singing in this wedding dance as men proceed through the streets of the town accompanied by the fumba, dori, and msindio drum set. Like many of the men's dances, this processional takes place at night and ends up at the bride's house. This one, a zifafa, is more typical of Grande Comore than it is of Domoni but friends and relatives from many regions attend wedding ceremonies in Domoni and visiting groups often contribute songs and dances of their home towns to the festivities (Photo 8).

Side 2. Band 2. Shigoma

Occasionally a group of townspeople get together for a day or two of dancing and picnicking. Although it may be organized by a small group from one of the sections of town, the affair is open to any townspeople who care to participate. Beginning at night the group dances through the streets until, in the morning, they go out into the countryside to prepare a picnic meal. After eating in the afternoon, they return to town, dancing a shigoma. They are accompanied by an mzumara (oboe) and the fumba, dori, and msindio three-drum set.



Photo 8: Men dancing through the streets at night

The mzumara player produces a continuous tone by backblowing, a technique in which air is taken in through the nose, stored in the lungs and forced out through the mouth.

Side 2. Band 4. Mriswala

A spirit-possession dance, the mriswala is performed primarily by farmers and fishermen of the Momoni section of town, but members of other groups in Domoni also occasionally participate and people from all over the Anjouanese countryside may come to Domoni for an mriswala. Accompanied by the usual three-drum set of fumba, dori and msindio, and performed in an open area in Momoni, the mriswala is an entire night of singing and dancing at which participants may become possessed and pierce their bodies with nails or spikes, drawing no blood and leaving no scars. It is said that in the past more spectacular feats such as disemboweling could be witnessed but these are not seen today.

Side 2. Band 5. Mriswala -- a pause in the morning procession

In the morning, after dancing and singing all night, the group that performed the mriswala have a procession through the streets of town. Passing a mosque the group pauses while some of the men sing and pray. The group is on its way to the main gate of Domoni where, it is said, sacrifices were made in ancient times. This is where the mriswala will end.

Side 2. Band 6. Koranic school

Until they are old enough to attend the French school in town boys, and occasionally girls, are expected to attend Koranic school. There they learn to read the Koran, reciting the Arabic verses aloud and receiving correction and discipline from the teacher (fundi).

Even after enrolling in French school some children may continue Koranic school lessons.

Side 2. Band 7. Daira

Religious chant is not strictly considered music in Domoni. Most chants are heard during prayers in mosques. The daira ("circle") of the Shadhiliya sect of Sunni Islam, commemorating a deceased relative or other important person, is performed on the seventh and fortieth nights following their deaths as well as on the anniversary of the death of important persons.

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