

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN ZANZIBARI *TAARAB* PERFORMANCE AND POETRY<sup>1</sup>

FLAVIA AIELLO TRAORE

*Taarab* in contemporary Zanzibar currently experiences great changes since the Nineties with the emerging and growing success of modern *taarab*. This has shocked the fans of the traditional style (*taarab asilia*) with musical and instrumental innovations, including powerful amplifiers and more danceable rhythms, but also textual innovations, using in their songs, commonly called *mipasho*, a sort of language and poetical imagery very open and non-disguised (Khamis 2002: 200).

The perception of a split between the two musical and poetical styles is widely shared among the artists and fans of traditional *taarab*, but it actually tends to simplify the dynamics of continuity and change of this art deeply rooted within the social and political life of Zanzibar islands.

As a first consequence, in petrifying the abstract category of *taarab asilia* as essentially based on the soft musical style of the big clubs (*Culture Musical Club* and *Akhwani Safaa*), played by large orchestras modelled on Egyptian film music along with elegant, enigmatic lyrics, this opposition obscures the historical depth, the complexity of *taarab* origins, the variety of influences and traditions within this kind of sung poetry.<sup>2</sup>

But more than that, this fracture, flattening the past, also conceals the complexity of the present state, where the whole *milieu* of *taarab*, responding to political reforms and cultural transformation, is restructuring itself in the direction of commercialisation and globalisation. The amazing success of Zanzibari modern *taarab* is in my view not simply a “teenagers phenomenon”, “dance” and “obscenity”<sup>3</sup> imported from Dar es Salaam or from the global music market, but the peak of this complex reorganisation, the novelties of this style being linked to trends already existent in Zanzibari *taarab*, especially in women’s *taarab*, but difficult to decode in a different and ever-shifting setting.

Hereafter I will briefly outline some prominent changes in the *taarab* scene on the islands and then analyse innovations and continuities in Zanzibari modern *taarab*, with regard both to the performance and the lyrics, taking as a significant illustration one song by the group *Zanzibar Stars*, titled *Tutabanana hapa hapa*, very popular still today since its release in 2002.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the geographical, cultural and musical differentiation in *taarab* traditions see Graebner 1991, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> To mention some of the most recurrent definitions of modern *taarab* I heard during my interviews with authors of *taarab* lyrics.

1. On the islands – differently from the mainland, where during the *Ujamaa* political phase *taarab* was viewed as foreign to the national culture – this genre of sung poetry has always been considered intrinsic to Zanzibari identity and was long supported with state and party funding (Askew 2002: 224). In addition, viewing *taarab* as a vehicle for educating the people to the new policies, after the Revolution in 1964 the Government formed the *Culture Musical Club*, a huge orchestra made up of musicians mainly from the outside districts of Zanzibar town (Topp 1994: 161).

A change that occurred in Zanzibar during the last decades was the Government's encouragement of private initiative in *taarab* activities. Today it only sponsors a small and simply equipped group, *Sanaa ya Taarab*, led by the famous singer Fatma Issa. The clubs of *taarab asilia* have thus been solicited to search eagerly for financial resources. Trying to conciliate their needs with an efficient and commercially oriented management, both the numerous and well-equipped orchestras and the smaller clubs exploit the contradictory potentialities of contemporary global world. These clubs take advantage of the international success of "ethnic music" in two different ways. On the one hand they look for sponsorship to afford high-quality recordings<sup>4</sup> and foreign tours, as well for participation in cultural events, such as the yearly *Festival of the Dhow Countries*, widely attended by Western cultural operators. On the other hand these clubs perform for tourist entertainment; to mention some examples, during the summer season 2002 the *Culture Musical Club* played every week at the beach hotel "Mtoni Marine", Mohamed Ilyas and the *Twinkling Stars* performed regularly at the hotel "Serena" and at the restaurant "Monsoon" in Stonetown, and *Sanaa ya Taarab* at tourist villages in Nungwi.

Another recent development is the vanishing of women's *taarab* clubs. In the past these female associations, who took inspiration from the charismatic singer Siti binti Saad, were very active in the organisation of weddings, and hired young male musicians from the *taarab* clubs for their performances (Topp 1994: 158). As pointed out by Mariam Hamdani, manager of the old singer Bi Kidude and member of the *Twinkling Stars*, and Khadija Baramia, leader of the former female club *Nuru el-Uyun*,<sup>5</sup> the high expenses for the hire of musicians was one of the main factors discouraging women to continue their performances, along with a strategy of co-optation that encouraged many of them to enter the big clubs of *taarab asilia* and alternatively or eventually the modern *taarab* bands.

In urban Zanzibar business and rational management are indeed features which belong to contemporary *taarab* as a whole, expanding its activities beyond the usual domains (namely weddings, religious and political celebrations), but with diversified strategies: Whereas the clubs and artists of *taarab asilia* and *kidumbak* cleverly exploit the charm of historical continuity and tradition, the Zanzibari modern *taarab* bands, as I will describe on the next pages,

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<sup>4</sup> For instance those produced by Globestyle (UK).

<sup>5</sup> Both women interviewed during my research, respectively on August 17, 2002 and September 2, 2002.

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take advantage of the commercial potentialities of the female *taarab* style, i.e. with more danceable beats and more straightforward lyrics, shifting it from the separate context of weddings to the open domain of contemporary music industry, in other words, an extraordinary diffusion through radio, television, the selling of tapes, videos, CDs, tours and crowded paid-concerts.

2. A modern *taarab* concert is in fact a very spectacular event, where Zanzibari women (the majority of the public) display their elegance (dresses, jewellery, hair-styles and henna) and dancing abilities. The dance has become an integrated part of the performance, while in traditional *taarab* concerts people sit down listening to the songs, sometimes walking majestically or slowly dancing to join the stage and reward the singer.

The lyrics of the songs, nevertheless, are still the main element, which can decide the success of a song, establishing it as a real “hit”. In July 2002 I went to a concert of the band *Zanzibar Stars*, founded at the beginning of the year by departing members of the group *East African Melody*, but already presenting their third album. During this crowded event at the *Ngome Kongwe*, the Old Fort, presently used for concerts and cultural manifestations, I noticed that the majority of the public was dancing the known songs, while listening to the new ones.

The most popular song was *Tutabanana hapa hapa* (We will keep tightly together right here), whose tunes were circulating in town all the time through radio and tapes. Women were dancing passionately and interacting through glances and gestures associated to the song texts, in strong contrast to the aloofness of traditional performances. The combination of song texts with both performance practices – dance, eye and finger movements while rewarding the singer or the musicians (*kutunza*) – and shared local knowledge as a means for negotiating social relations is not a novelty but a very distinctive feature of women’s *taarab* along the Swahili coast (Askew 2002: 128) and on the islands. This practice is only amplified in modern *taarab* performances where the act of rewarding has been prolonged as an element of the dance itself, with women waving banknotes a long time before effectively giving them, thus allowing even more symbolic space for allusive gestures strengthening or contesting social relations.

The author of the lyrics of *Tutabanana hapa hapa* is a young man, named Haji Machano, who explained to me the message of the text using the following words:<sup>6</sup>

*Nimetunga kwa sababu kuna watu mpaka leo wanakataa kuolewa wawili, ushafahamu? Mimi ni Mwislamu. Kama mwanamme ana uwezo anaweza kuoa wanawake wawili watatu mpaka wanne. Madhali sisi tunafuata dini na wanawake kwa kiwango kikubwa wapo wengi. Tunavoamini wanahitaji kuolewa. Sawa? Kwa hiyo ni vyema kuoa kwa system ile tuliyoruhusiwa katika dini. Wawili, watatu mpaka wanne. Sasa kuna wengine huwa wanakataa kataa lakini hawana legal reason sawa, kwa hivyo ndo hawana sababu ya kukataa. Kwa hivyo nilijaribu kuwaambia wanawake wale wanaokataa kwamba wasikatae kukaa na wenzio.*

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<sup>6</sup> During an interview, July 23, 2002.

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*Wakiolewa na mwenzio kama wawili watatu wakubali tu kukaa naye muishi  
msikilizane provided Bwana anagawa kila kitu sawa sawa...*

The composer of the lyrics has picked a theme very important in the social life of Zanzibari community: the relationship between co-wives is a very sensitive issue in Swahili culture, to be expressed only through mediation, like for instance also in the *kanga* writings (see Beck 2001). Significantly, in fact, after the *kanga* saying *Tutabanana hapa hapa*, the answer to it (*Utabanana na nani wewe mchafu*) soon appeared. Moreover, it is a meaningful theme for Muslims also elsewhere, which facilitates the diffusion of the song on a wider East African market.

One ingredient of the great success of this title in my view is the interesting verbal strategy of the poem, whose narrating voice is a woman, precisely a co-wife claiming equal rights with the first wife in a rather explicit language. Let us have a look at the introduction of the poem, sung by the chorus:

*Tutabanana hapa hapa nakwenda nawe sambamba (2)  
Kama wewe wa nyumba kubwa na mimi wa nyumba ndogo  
Sote wa mume mmoja sote tuna haki sawa  
Usilete za kuleta kunitimua huwezi  
Sinifikiri goi goi mimi niko fit kishenzi  
Tutabanana hapa hapa tule mkono kwa mkono  
Ukishindwa shauri yako ukisusa hiyari yako (2)*

The use of an introduction is a stylistic innovation in Zanzibari *taarab* lyrics, generally composed by four stanzas, mostly quatrains of 16 syllables lines rhyming in regular patterns,<sup>7</sup> and a brief recurring refrain (*kiitikio*). Whereas the lines of the stanzas generally respect the rhyme, in modern *taarab* songs the introduction and the much longer refrains are frequently in free verses, giving the impression of a very familiar, ordinary language. The locutions used are very open, sometimes offending and full of sexual allusions, like in the following stanza:

*Eti unajiekti na nyodo kunitilia/Huniwezi kwa lolote mimi mambo yangu poa (2)  
Kwa mapenzi hunipati raha nazijulia/Penzi nnampa lote yeye anafurahia (2)  
Wewe hujui chochote mimi nnavyosikia/Na kupika si yako arti vibichi wampikia (2)  
Ndio maana siku zote huja kwangu kujilia/Tutabanana hapa hapa sote wa mume  
mmoja (2)  
Lala nae siku mbili na kwangu alale mbili (2)  
Kizidisha siku moja cha moto utakiona (2)*

It is this kind of language that has upset the Zanzibari artists and fans of traditional *taarab*, who lament that the *mipasho* songs are deteriorating the art of *taarab* with texts full of *matusi*, of invectives and brutal, vulgar lexicon, in total contrast with the taboos of the traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Although three-lined stanzas are also employed, especially in the early *taarab* production (Suleiman 1969: 87).

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*taarab* poetry, which allows the expression of polemic arguments or erotic references only through *mafumbo*, through a sort of language and imagery difficult to decipher and thus not disturbing the sense of dignity and respect (*heshima*). This, in modern *taarab* concerts, is further threatened by the act of dancing under the stage but also on it; for instance, during an interview Bi Kidude deplored the singer Khadija Kopa for borrowing body movements from the *unyago* dances.

The composers of modern *taarab* lyrics are much aware of the feelings aroused by their texts. For instance, the title of the third album of *Zanzibar Stars*, namely *Wakerekao shauri yao* (The ones who feel irritated, it's their problem), seems to be ironically referring to their slanderers. They defend their choice, as stated by Haji Machano:

[*Nyimbo*], za sasa ni very transparent, wazi, zamani walikuwa wanaficha wanatumia nyimbo za mafumbo. Akisema analipenda tunda, analipenda, analihusudu, analisifu tunda anavyolipenda kumbe sio tunda ni mtu. Lakini siku hizi huwezi kusifu tunda unamwambia yule mtu mwenyewe moja kwa moja nakupenda nakutaka, I need you, I love you na vitu kama hivyo. Lakini zamani unatumia vitu kama ndege, ndege hawa birds. Unaweza kumsifu ndege wako vile anavyoruka na kutua na vipi kumbe unamsifu mtu. Sasa kikubwa nilichokigundua mimi ni kwamba zamani walikuwa wanaficha walikuwa wanatumia lugha ya sitiari. Lakini siku hizi wanaweka wazi wazi kuelezea kila kitu.

The *mipasho* songs, however, have not been played first by modern *taarab* bands: they were usually part of women's *taarab* performances (Topp Fargion 2000). The women's clubs were very competitive, they also used the form of *mipasho*, with livelier songs, often covers of Kenyan or Arabic songs in vogue with newly created lyrics fully immersed in the politics of human relations, and sometimes challenging the dignity and reputation of the rival group or singer. Around the mid Eighties, following scandals due to the exacerbated rivalry between two female clubs (*Nuru el-Uyun* and *Royal Air Force*), the Government forced the women's clubs to register and had the lyrics controlled by the Censorship Board (Topp Fargion 2000: 48).

Since then many things have changed, and the continuous fading away of female clubs has favoured the exchange between women's musical and poetical trends and the big *taarab* clubs. Consequently new rhythms and *mipasho* lyrics, composed by women and men, were introduced in the repertoire of the big clubs, although in a mild way, *mipasho laini*, as defined by Suleiman Said Mohamed, Chief Poet of the *Culture Musical Club*.<sup>8</sup>

One of the first men who created successful *mipasho* in a modern style is Abdulla Eissa, member of the club *Akhwani Safaa*. Around the beginning of the Nineties he was director of the new band *East African Melody*, founded in Dubai, who released many popular *mipasho*.<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of Zanzibari modern *taarab*, a prevalently male circuit but

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, July 3, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> More information about the singer/composer and some texts are downloadable at Abdulla Eissa's home page: <http://www.dumbak.com>

commercially targeting overall a young and female public, as the song *Tutabanana hapa hapa* perfectly exemplifies. In fact, it was no coincidence that a cosmetics firm sponsored the concert by Zanzibar Stars I recalled above. The event was also associated to a fashion show by Farouk Abdalla, a Zanzibari stylist who presented very trendy dresses made of *kanga*, and the consequent election of Miss *Kanga*.

Zanzibari modern *taarab* has fully realised the commercial potentialities of shifting the use of *mipasho* songs from the context of weddings to the domain of paid-for concerts and mass media. Lyrics like *Tutabanana hapa hapa* clearly aim at provoking those personal dynamics, which are part of the dispute regulation and negotiation of social status through *taarab*, however sometimes degenerating in physical attacks, as explained by Haji Machano:

*Kwa sababu nyimbo inaweza ikaimbwa sasa kama kuna watu wawili kwenye tarab wana uhasana na ile nyimbo pengine inamwelekea kumwambia yule mwenzie, pengine mke mwenzia, ushafahamu. Ile nyimbo inasema kwamba na mimi amenioa oh! Tutakula sahani moja ntabaki hapa hapa. Kama kuna mtu katika ile tarab wapi sasa kuna mmoja kaolewa hivi karibuni. Basi anaweza kwenda kumsusika mwenziwe kwa udole kama anamuonyesha ishara kwamba hiyo nyimbo unaimbiwa wewe. Mwanamke hatokubali na yeye wanaweza hata wakapigana.*

By rendering more explicit and more visible women's use of song lyrics - associated to dance, tipping, glances and gestures - as a means of negotiating social relations, modern *taarab* performances have thus raised the morally biased perception of a cultural break, upsetting the artists and enthusiasts of traditional *taarab* (as often reported on the official press, Zanzibar Leo). At the same time, the introduction of musical innovations and the use of a sort of language more explicit, familiar, rich in slang expressions and common English borrowings are further ingredients that have widened the audience of Zanzibari *taarab*. Zanzibari modern *taarab* bands, in fact, are very popular among the young people and also on the mainland. The massive spread of their songs through the radio, together with the evidence of a more tolerant attitude on the part of the Censorship Board, seems to indicate a certain attraction to this novelty by more pragmatic segments of the establishment.

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