

WOMEN'S TAARAB LYRICS IN CONTEMPORARY ZANZIBAR

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“Less concerned with issues of love and happiness (which dominated earlier taarab weddings songs), women’s poetry today can be hard-hitting; addressing topical arguments and moral concerns, taarab has become a powerful medium of expression for women.”

— Geoffrey Kitula King’ei (1992: 133)

“*Asokasoro hakuna aloumbwa na Muweza.*”

— Fatma Issa¹

Introduction

In a paper which appeared two years ago, I outlined some of the main features of the contemporary *taarab* world in Zanzibar, which is undergoing great changes due to economic, social and cultural factors (Aiello Traoré 2004a).

A recent development that I highlighted is the vanishing of women’s *taarab* clubs, female associations which were very active in the organisation of wedding celebrations, and which hired male musicians from the *taarab* clubs as accompanying musicians for their performances (Topp 1994: 158). As pointed out by some informants,² the high expenses for the hire of musicians was one of the main factors discouraging women from continuing their performances, along with a strategy of co-optation that since the 1990s had encouraged many of them to enter the big *taarab* clubs (Aiello Traoré 2004b: 2).

The greater participation of women within the groups of *taarab asilia* has started, in my view, an interesting confrontation between the tendency for conservation of the codes which are identified as “traditional” and the innovations proposed by female members in music and performance, as well as in the production of lyrics, an area where many women are now regularly involved. In the next pages I will concentrate my analysis on the *taarab* lyrics being composed by Zanzibari women, which are of great interest because of the variety of cultural and social backgrounds, themes, techniques and poetical sensitivities.

My special thanks go to all the Zanzibari women members of *taarab* groups who kindly agreed to be interviewed and also gave me some of their written lyrics. *Asanteni*.

¹ Line of a song called *Kunionya sikatai*.

² In particular 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*. Both women were interviewed during my research, respectively on August 17, 2002 and September 2, 2002.

A brief history

Zanzibari women have been involved in the composition of *taarab* poetry since the inception of this kind of art, but usually it was done on an occasional basis which was out of the public eye. Therefore, together with the fact that the lyrics were often created ad hoc for a performative, contextual situation, and so were not written or recorded, very little material was collected in the past.

The first *taarab* lyrics that are attributed to a woman are the songs by Siti Binti Saad, the legendary singer who embodied the extraordinary versatility of *taarab*, being an art form which is at the same time elite and popular, formal and informal, oral and written, performative and recorded, laudatory, moralising and satirical, romantic and socially engaged. Many pages have been written about the life and work of this artist (see for instance Fair 1994, 2001, Khatib 1992, Mgana 1991, Topp Fargion 1992, 1994, Shaaban 1967, Suleiman 1969), but the songs which are more impressed in the memory of the Zanzibari community are those tied to the informal performances in *Ng'ambo*, often expressing sharp social criticism:

„Ehee, Siti binti Saad mashairi yake yalikuwa hayako kama ya sasa. Siti binti Saad tofauti, alikuwa anaimba mashairi vile vile ya mapenzi, mashairi ya kumuimba mtu. Akifika huko ghafla akifanya ujuba na mambo siyo, ataimba hapo hapo na watu watacheka wote. Halafu mashairi ya Siti binti Saad, beti zake zile tatu tu, fupi fupi yaani. Anasema maneno sita sita, lakini kuna maneno manane tofauti. Siti binti Saad nyimbo zake fupi fupi, lakini zilikuwa nzuri...“ (Interview with Khamis Shehe, old member of Culture Musical Club, 3/08/2002, Aiello 2004a:195)

„Ehee, Siti binti Saad, her lyrics were not the same as those of today. Siti binti Saad's songs were different, she sang lyrics about love and lyrics to criticise someone. When she arrived somewhere she immediately tried to provoke, she improvised her songs and the people laughed. Besides her lyrics were formed of three line verses, very short. Lines of six or, at times, of eight syllables. Siti binti Saad's songs were short but beautiful...“

During the evening sessions at her place in *Ng'ambo*, the men and women present did not only listen to songs, but also had a chance to make comments about relevant events and debate moral values and gender and class relations. The songs were not in the standardised form that is common today, but were short compositions, sometimes improvised about recent news, and not imperatives with regard to meter and rhyme (see Khamis 2004:14).

Just to quote an example of this kind of repertoire, here are two verses from a song called *Kijiti*, that I heard being performed by the *udi* player Said Nassor and the old singer Bi Kidude during the 5th Festival of the Dhow Countries:

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KIJITI

<i>Tazameni tazameni</i>	<i>alivofanya Kijiti</i>	Look you, look you at what Kijiti has done
<i>Kumchukua mgeni</i>	<i>kumchezesha foliti</i>	To take a guest and to play <i>foliti</i> ³ with her
<i>Kenda nae maguguni</i>	<i>kamrejesha maiti</i>	He went with her to the bush and brought her back as a corpse
<i>Kijiti alinambia</i>	<i>ondoka mama twenende</i>	Kijiti said to me: "Come on girl, let's go!"
<i>Laiti ningelijua</i>	<i>ningekataa nisende</i>	If only I had known I would have refused, I wouldn't have gone
<i>Kijiti unaniua</i>	<i>kwa pegi moja ya tende</i>	Kijiti you kill me for a single shot of <i>tende</i> ⁴

Taking inspiration from this charismatic woman, in the 1930s-1940s women started to perform *taarab* (*taarab ya wanawake*). They were living, though, in a changing social and cultural context, characterised on the one hand by large scale immigration from Tanganyika, and on the other by colonial policies of privilege and/or rationing according to "race", so that, for the ancient communities living in *Ng'ambo*, it became important to underline their "Arabness" and to affirm their indigenous identity as opposed to that of the new arrivals. These aspirations of a social and "ethnic" nature were also formulated through the redefinition of socially appropriated female behaviour and through a new style of *taarab*, performed only for women, especially on the occasion of weddings (Fair 1994: 284).

The songs featured during the sessions of *taarab ya wanawake*, whose forms recall the East-African tradition of *ngoma* competitions (Khamis 2005: 118), were either of a celebrative nature or intended to deride the rival club. Being very much tied to the extemporary, informal situation, very few women's *taarab* songs were recorded, an exception being the registrations made by the musicologist Janet Topp Fargion in the 1980s.⁵

A good example of a laudatory lyric is a song called *Piloti Bibi Amina*, composed by Fatma Toti in honour of one of the founding members of the *Royal Air Force* club, Bi Amina Aboud, which testifies to the competitive nature of women's *taarab* clubs (Fair 1994: 296-297):

PILOTI BIBI AMINA

<i>Piloti mwenye arry Bi Amina msifika</i>	Resolute pilot Bi Amina is worthy of praise
<i>Watu hawaogopi shari madhubuti kwa hakika</i>	People do not fear destruction, we are strong with no doubt
<i>Kideti amesimama forci inanaurika</i>	The cadet is standing, the Force is shining

³ *Foliti* is a children's game.

⁴ *Tende* literally means date, but it also refers to a kind of home-made super alcoholic drink.

⁵ Two collections edited by J. Topp Fargion: *Taarab 3: The Music of Zanzibar*, GlobeStyle, UK, 1990, and *Zanzibar: music of celebration*, Topic Records/British Library National Sound Archive, UK, 2000.

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<i>Ni bure wanayosema nyoyo zao zimeazilika</i>	What they say is useless, their hearts are full of shame
<i>Vijicho vimebwana forci juu yatubuka</i>	They've been eaten up with envy, the Force is glorious
<i>Walahi tunajivuna bure wanaathirika</i>	Oh God we are boasting, it's useless this attempt to destroy us
<i>Forci twaruka hewani twahukumu bila shaka</i>	We of the Force are flying in the air, we are the rulers with no doubt
<i>Adui watabani wamebaki kuropoka</i>	Our enemies are finished, they have been left behind to talk nonsense
<i>Kiitikio:</i>	Chorus:
<i>Forci asha, forci asha...</i>	The Force is built of stone, the Force is built of stone

A great part of the repertoire of women's *taarab* performances was made up of *mipasho*, songs with texts composed in a very immediate language, aimed at ridiculing and/or offending a rival person or group. By the end of the 1970s these verbal attacks had become very biting, as in an exchange of invectives between *Nuru el-Uyun* and *Royal Air Force* which has been documented by the Janet Topp Fargion. A member of *Nuru el-Uyun* composed a song aiming at hurting the leader of *Royal Air Force* (the "Pilot") saying (Topp Fargion 2000: 47-48):

<i>Piloti wakumbuka</i>	Do you remember, Pilot
<i>Usiseme huelewi</i>	Don't say that you don't understand
<i>Kakayo kaolewa Chwaka</i>	Your brother got married in Chwaka
<i>Kwa ngoma na hoihoi</i>	With dances and rejoicing
<i>Mambo yalipochafuka</i>	When things went wrong
<i>Kenda uzia Dubai.</i>	He sold himself in Dubai

The author intentionally used the verb *-olewa*, to marry s.o., normally employed for women, in reference to the brother of the pilot, implying his homosexuality. *Royal Air Force* immediately replied with a song accusing the women in *Nuru el-Uyun* of having lesbian relationships (Topp Fargion 2000: 48):

<i>Kumezuka papa kuu</i>	There is a huge shark
<i>Si jike wala si dume</i>	Neither female nor male
<i>Lina miguu mitatu</i>	It has three legs
<i>Na mikono minne</i>	And four hands
<i>Wanifukeni watoto</i>	Protect your children
<i>Papa lisiwatafune</i>	So the shark will not eat them

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The double meaning of the word *papa*, shark, which is also a vulgar term for female genitalia, clearly conveyed the sense of the song. After these episodes of verbally aggressive competition, the government, in the mid-eighties, obliged the women's clubs to be registered (Topp Fargion 1993: 120) and the song texts to be approved by the Censorship Board. As one artist recalled:

“...*mimi nilikuwa nikitunga mashairi yakisha kwenda kwenye Sensa Board na lazima yapite kwenye Sensa Bodi na Sensa Board ina sheria zake, wanatizama kuna mizani, kuna maudhui ya mashairi jee kuna maneno ambayo yataavunja utamaduni wa kizanzibari katika lugha nzuri, lugha ya matusi au lugha ambayo itasikilikana kama lugha ya kupotosha au vipi au utovu wa nidhamu. Wale Sensa Board wanakupigia line wanakwambia nenda katengeneze line hii au la si hivyo inakuwa inapita moja kwa moja.*” (Interview with Khadija Baramia, 2/09/2002, Aiello 2004a: 223)

“...I composed the lyrics which then went to the Censorship Board, it was necessary to have their approval, and the Board had its rules. They looked at the form, the poetic content, whether there were words which offended the culture and the elegant language of Zanzibar, whether there were vulgarity or expressions that perverted the language or were ungrammatical. The Board would underline a line and tell you to go away and change it, otherwise they would pass it directly.”

After that the groups of *taarab ya wanawake* started to disappear, as I have already said, and many women entered the big *taarab asilia* clubs. The female *taarab* groups were mainly involved in organising dance performances at weddings; since their disappearance new trends have developed, like the use of tapes of *modern taarab (rusha roho)*, or the habit of inviting *kidumbak* and *ngoma* groups.

Recent developments in women's *taarab* poetry

The more and more active participation of women as singers in traditional *taarab* groups has intensified a cultural exchange between the tastes of the female groups and those of the male artists in the big clubs, *Culture Musical Club* and *Akhwan Safaa*. The results of this dialectical process are evident both in the musical structure of the songs and in the lyrics. The *Culture Musical Club*, for instance, has a beautiful, huge orchestra, playing the soft *taarab* style in vogue since the 1950s, but with many concessions to the taste of women, so that the classical songs often contain short faster parts, which encourage the hip-moving dance (*kukata kiuno*), typical of *kidumbak* and women's *taarab* performances (Aiello 2004a:51).

But also, the increased cooperation between men and women and the contamination of aesthetic values has brought about innovations in the poetry composed by each gender. Moreover, a certain number of female artists have started to write their lyrics openly, although the majority of women continue to compose *taarab* poetry anonymously, especially if they are young and unmarried.

“*Kwa hakika mimi nimeanza kutunga mashairi nina umri mdogo labda miaka kumi na tano kumi na sita na mashairi yangu nilikuwa nikitunga manake kuna aina, namna ya kutunga mashairi kwani unaweza kutunga mashairi kwa sababu ya imagination, imagine tu, nataka kutungia chupa. Kwa hivyo usanii wangu kwa vi-*

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le ulikuwa unanipa tu kwa kupenda kutunga mashairi, napenda kutunga mashairi lakini siwezi kutia jina wakati ule kwa mila zetu mtu kama bado mdogo au bado hajaolewa kuweza kutunga nyimbo ukasema mapenzi watu watakuuliza ‘mapenzi umeyajua wapi? wee bado mdogo.’” (Interview with Khadija Baramia, 2/09/2002, Aiello 2004a: 224)

“To tell the truth I began writing poetry when I was very young, about fifteen or sixteen, and my lyrics were of the sort you compose on the basis of your imagination, you simply imagine something, for instance you write about a bottle. Therefore my skill was my own, I simply enjoyed composing poems, I enjoyed it but I couldn’t sign them at the time because according to our costumes, if a woman is young and unmarried and writes a love song people ask her: ‘what do you know about love if you are still a little girl?’”

The *taarab* lyrics composed by women are generally characterised by fresh and direct language, but differently from the *mipasho* performed by former female groups, these compositions are not explicit in their contextual references, and criticism is not expressed in such an offensive way. That kind of openly provocative and “impolite” language has remained a prerogative of *kidumbak* groups, not formally registered and partially performing extemporaneous texts, which are thus very elusive with regards to censorship. In my opinion, although concern about censorship is one of the reasons for the moderation of the lyrics written by female members of *taarab* clubs, the fact that the women are influenced by the poetical style of *taarab asilia* is also important.

“...tokea nilivyokuwa mdogo nilikuwa shule vile, tokea sherehe ndipo nilipoanza mie kutunga, kwa hivyo nilikuwa nachukua juhudi naandika nyimbo za kidumbaki, naziangalia vile vile za wale akina Bakari Abeid, hawa mwalimu Abbas naziangalia zile. Kwa nini na mimi nisiweze sasa ikawa na mimi najaribu kwa maneno yangu mimi lakini naangalia vile vina.” (Interview with Aisha Saleh, 5/7/2002, Aiello 2004a: 163).

“...since I was little, when I was still at school, I have been writing for celebrations. I made an effort to write songs for *kidumbak*, taking those by authors such as Bakari Abeid and *mwalimu* Abbas, referring to those songs. I asked myself why I couldn’t do it, and tried to use my own words, although I referred back to them for the rhymes.”

The result of this effort is in many cases the creation of lyrics with a strong emotional content in a more accurate form and a more elegant language. A good example is a song by Fatma Issa, *Kunionya sikatai* (I don’t refuse criticism):

KUNIONYA SIKATAI

<i>Kisa kilonichukia maovu kunipakiza</i>	This story that you hate me and destroy my reputation
<i>Ikiwa ninakosea wajibu kuniongoza</i>	Even if I made mistakes I take my responsibility
<i>Ikiwa ninapotea wajibu kuniongoza</i>	Even if I was wrong I take my responsibility
<i>Wala sioni vibaya mimi kunielekeza</i>	And I don’t see why I shouldn’t explain my point of view
<i>Kinachonipa udhia ni kule kuniapiza</i>	What hurts me is all this criticism of me

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<i>Asokasoro hakuna aloumbwa na Muweza</i>	There is no person created by God who has no defects
<i>Mwenye lile hili hana ndiyo kazi ya aza</i>	Who has one quality is missing another, this is the work of the Eternal
<i>Tabia kutolingana si jambo la kushangaza</i>	Not comparing people shouldn't be surprising
<i>La msingi niiteni na wala sitopuuzwa</i>	Tell me the important things and I will not ignore them
<i>Sikatai nambieni Wallahi tawasikiza</i>	I tell you that I will not refuse, oh God I will listen to you
<i>Mengine msinidhani ya kuwa nitawabeza</i>	Do not think other things, that I will despise you
<i>Nami tawashukuruni kwa vile mmenifunza</i>	And I will thank you for what you have taught me
<i>Kama kosa nimefanya na iwe nimeteleza</i>	If I made a mistake I made it unwillingly
<i>Dogo msilipe mwanya likaja kuwatatiza</i>	A little thing shouldn't disturb you
<i>Mkawa mwavyokusanya nyinyi mnaendeleza</i>	In this way you grouped together and continue to do so
<i>Hivyo sitokaa kimya lazima tawaeleza</i>	That's why I will not keep silent, I have to explain to you
<i>Kiitikio:</i>	Chorus:
<i>Kunisema sichukui kusengenya haifai</i>	I don't accept your bitching, gossiping is not good
<i>Nimepima kila rai kunionya sikatai</i>	I've heard so much but I don't refuse criticism

The author of this lyric, Fatma Issa, is one of most popular *taarab* singers in Zanzibar. Almost in her fifties, living in Mikunguni, an area of the Zanzibari suburbs, she comes from a family of artists: her mother was singer and actress and her father was a singer and violinist who used to play with Siti binti Saad. For many years she sang in *kidumbak* performances and learnt Siti's songs from Bi Kidude. Then she entered the *Culture Musical Club*, but around the end of the nineties she left after having been badly criticized by members of the club. Now she is the leader of the government-sponsored group *Sanaa ya Taarab*⁶, after a short experience with the TOT, a band of *modern taarab* based in Dar es Salaam. The experiences she suffered within the *Culture Musical Club* inspired the singer in the composition of her first lyrics:

“Kumbukumbu yenyewe ni kuwa sipendezi mle katika Club, hawanipendi watu na sana walikuwa wanawake. Basi nikasema ngoja nijaribu kutunga shairi, nikatunga shairi la mwanzo linaitwa “Bughuda sitaki”, nikawa naimba nalia basi tena tokea siku hiyo nikawa natunga. Nikatunga hiyo halafu nikakaa nikatunga

⁶ Today the Zanzibari Government only sponsors *Sanaa ya Taarab*, a small and simply equipped group, although on the islands this genre has always been preferred by the leadership as a vehicle for political communication and was, for a long time, supported with resources (Askew 2002: 224). Since the nineties, though, the economic crisis on one hand and the spread of a mentality of liberalization within the establishment on the other have led to a reduction in funding and to encouraging private initiative in *taarab* activities.

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tena “Haya Maumbile Yangu”, nikakaa nikatunga “Kunionya sikatai”, basi tena nikawa naendelea mpaka leo kwa ile bughuda ya watu waliokuwa wakinifanyia ya kuwa vile hawanipendi. Sasa na mimi kazi yangu kuimba, nitawaambia vipi, nikasema ngojea. Nikatunga, nikatizama nilipokwisha kutizama nikampelekea mtu ambaye ana uzoefu nikamwambia nitizamie shairi langu akanitizamia akaniambia liko sawa sawa. Sasa unataka utiwe mziki nikamwambia aa mziki nitatia mwenyewe. Sasa kwa kuwa nilikuwa mpenzi sana wa michezo ya kihindi. Napenda sana senema vile basi nikawa na mie napata, basi nakaa nafikiri, nafikiria basi nami nikawa natunga basi ukaja tu mziki...” (Interview with Fatma Issa, 18/7/2002, Aiello 2004a: 178-179)

“I remember that I wasn’t well liked in the club, especially by the women. So I thought to myself, wait while I try to write a poem, and so I wrote my first poem, I don’t want bitching, when I was singing it I started to cry, and since then I’ve continued writing poetry. After the first I wrote This is my nature, then I don’t refuse criticism, and so on until today, starting out from that bitching by people who were against me. My job is singing, so I thought about writing a song, then when I finished it, I took it to a maestro who said it was fine. He asked me if I wanted someone to put it to music, and I said that I’d do it myself. Since I liked Indian films a lot, I was inspired by them, and I chose a piece of music which was apt for that lyric, and I’ve continued to work like this until today.”

In this lyric, now often referred to as *Asokasoro hakuna*, Fatma Issa expressed all her bitterness at being envied for her charisma and vocal qualities and heavily criticised over her private life, creating a beautiful poem that has moved many Zanzibaris (people say that when she sang this song at an official celebration, even ex-President Mwinyi burst into tears). The sense of dignity which emerges from the lyric reminds me of Siti’s style a lot, but what is also evident is the model of Bakari Abeid and Haji Gora, to whom Fatma Issa often turns in order to improve her poems.

Another author I met is Khadija Baramia, a very well-known woman in the Zanzibari community. Of Comorian origin, also in her fifties, Khadija Baramia is a wholesale trader, importing from the Arab countries, who lives in the area of Kisiwandui. Her mother was a member of the *Nuru el Uyun* club which she also entered and which she later became leader of. When Khadija Baramia was young, mother of three children and pregnant with her fourth baby, her husband was arrested for political reasons and died in jail. She then composed a lyric, *Madhulumu moyo* (Oppressed heart) to express her feelings, her desperation, in a sober, but sincere and moving form:

MADHULUMU MOYO

<i>Madhulumu moyo</i>	<i>sinapo pa kuegemea</i>	My heart is oppressed, I don’t know what to rely on
<i>Sina hamu nayo</i>	<i>imeshanichosha dunia</i>	I have no desires, the world has weakened me
<i>Sisiti kiliyo</i>	<i>kwani moyo wangu meumia</i>	I don’t hide my tears, because my heart is hurt
<i>Nalia ni pweke</i>	<i>mwenzangu kanitangulia</i>	I cry I am lonely, my husband has gone before me

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<i>Na akiba yake</i>	<i>kawacha kaiwaga dunia</i>	And has left me his kids in leaving this world
<i>Rabbi uniweke</i>	<i>akibae kumtunzia</i>	Oh God help me to take care of them
<i>Nimshike nani</i>	<i>wanao kunisaidia</i>	Who should I hold onto, to help me with your children
<i>Mikono shingoni</i>	<i>yatima wanajililia</i>	They are upset they cry at being orphans
<i>Twalia yakini</i>	<i>mambo yametuelemea</i>	We really cry, events overwhelm us
<i>Sikutowi kosa</i>	<i>Mola ila naelezea</i>	I don't want to blame God, except to explain
<i>Mengi yanitesa</i>	<i>na simanzi kutujalia</i>	Many things torture me and we are facing great sorrow
<i>Tunalia khasa</i>	<i>tukikumbuka mazowea</i>	We cry especially when we remember the things we used to do
<i>Rabbi nipe nguvu</i>	<i>akibae kumtunzia</i>	Oh God give me the strength to take care of his kids
<i>Unipe werevu</i>	<i>nijuwe mwema na mbaya</i>	Give me the cleverness to distinguish a good person from a bad one
<i>Nipe utulivu</i>	<i>nikutii na maulaya</i>	Give me the serenity to accept your will
<i>Kiitikio:</i>		Chorus:
<i>Nyamaza silie</i>	<i>hii ndiyo hali ya dunia</i>	Keep quiet, don't cry, this is how the world goes
<i>Mola muwachie</i>	<i>yote atakusahilishiya</i>	Be confident in God, he will make everything right

With regards to the most typical theme of *taarab* poetry, especially since the fifties, i.e. sentimental relationships, the female poetical production shows a prevalence for “aggressive” rather than romantic songs, and clear, not enigmatic language (Aiello 2004a: 80).

Texts about the rejection of a lover are very frequent, for instance *Usinifatefate sitaki* (Don't follow me, I don't want [you]) and *Nenda utakako* (Go where you want) by Fatma Issa, or affirming the strength of a relationship in spite of the intrigues of envious people (*mahasidi*), like *Msijisumbue* (Don't get yourselves problems) by Mariam Hamdani, *Letu Hamtoliweza* (You will not destroy our love) and *Fitina* (Intrigues) by Fatma Issa, *Mtaumwa* (You will suffer) by Aisha Saleh, *Mtachoka vyenu visa* (You'll get tired of your stories) by Fatma Abdisalami, and *Ua* (Flower) by Khadija Baramia. This latter song is interesting because the author uses a typical cliché of the “ideal”, male *taarab* poetry, that is the employment of metaphors from the natural world, like flowers, fruits or birds, to describe a woman,

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to express feelings and passion in a covert way, subverting it through an open declaration of love to a man in spite of all the backbiters.⁷

UA

<i>Sikusudii lawama</i>	<i>kuwalaumu wenzangu</i>	I have no intention of complaining, of blaming my companions
<i>Wanaonisemasema</i>	<i>mimi na mpenzi wangu</i>	Who bitch about me, me and my lover
<i>Nimezama ninasema</i>	<i>mesabili pendo langu</i>	I say I am totally immersed, I surrender to my love
<i>Kuwa nae ni lazima</i>	<i>ni ua la moyo wangu</i>	To be with him is a necessity, he is the flower of my heart
<i>Yeye ua la haiba</i>	<i>la chanua kifuani</i>	He is the flower of beauty, to blossom on my breast
<i>Pendo langu kwake tiba</i>	<i>na ishara zioneni</i>	My love for him is a medicine, take a look at the symptoms
<i>Sibakhili wa mahaba</i>	<i>na mimi sitomukhini</i>	I am not ungenerous with love, I won't refuse him anything
<i>Kwa pendo lake meshiba</i>	<i>mwengine simtamani</i>	I am satisfied with his love, I don't desire anyone else
<i>Nampenda akisema</i>	<i>ashiki wa moyo wangu</i>	I love him when he calls me, passion of my heart
<i>Nampenda kitizama</i>	<i>hunyongonya mwili wangu</i>	I love him when he looks (at me), it weakens my body
<i>Nampenda akihema</i>	<i>atajapo jina langu</i>	I love him when he breathes, when he says my name
<i>Nampenda nishazama</i>	<i>bahari tamu si chungu</i>	I love him I am immersed in a sweet sea, not bitter
<i>Kiwewe na uchukivu</i>	<i>pashawa mekupateni</i>	and hate, I've given you something to talk about Hysteria
<i>Mnatulilia wivu</i>	<i>na huku mwatufitini</i>	You make us cry because of your jealousy, while you try to cause discord
<i>Pendo letu li werevu</i>	<i>si lao watu fulani</i>	Our love is clever, unlike that of other people
<i>Kupenda si upumbavu</i>	<i>hata nanyi mwatamani</i>	To love is not to be a fool, even you have desires

⁷ The song was performed by Munira Said Mohamed (voice) and by members of *Akhwan Safaa* for the CD: Saleh, S.S., Ahmed, A.M., *Taarab I: The Music of Zanzibar*, GlobeStyle, UK, 1989.

WOMEN'S TAARAB LYRICS IN CONTEMPORARY ZANZIBAR

<i>Kiitikio:</i>		Chorus:
<i>Wacheni kulia wivu</i>	<i>tunapendana ni sie</i>	Stop being envious, we love each other
<i>Bure wenu uchukivu</i>	<i>mtajuhudi wenyewe</i>	Your hate is useless, you will only disturb yourself

This lyric can be contrasted with another taarab poem, *Waridi lisilo miba* ('Rose without thorns'), which was composed in 1960 by Seif Selim, member of the *taarab* club *Akhwan Safaa*. The following verses are a transcription of a performance by the orchestra of Zanzibari *The National Taarab Group (Kikundi cha Taifa cha Taarab)* on 13 July 2002, day of the final concert of the 5th Festival of the Dhow Countries (*Tamasha la Nchi za Jahazi*) at the Old Fort in Stonetown.

WARIDI LISILO MIBA

<i>Ewe kiumbe wa shani</i>	<i>Nalipenda umbo lako</i>	Oh you marvellous creature, I love your shape
<i>Mzuri uso kifani</i>	<i>Kakuumba Mola wako</i>	Beautiful with no equal, your Lord created you
<i>Katu humu duniani</i>	<i>Hapana mfano wako</i>	Nowhere in this world is there anyone like you
<i>Kwenu kakutoa nani</i>	<i>Kwenye maskani yako</i>	Who tore you from your place
<i>Bilisi au Shetani</i>	<i>Kakuiba kwa wenzako</i>	The devil or a demon stole among your companions
<i>Mabanati wa peponi</i>	<i>Hao ndio fani yako</i>	The girls of paradise, you are just like them
<i>Nani atakuthamini</i>	<i>Akijue cheo chako</i>	Who will respect you, recognising your position?
<i>Nani atakuzabuni</i>	<i>Alipe thamani yako</i>	Who will appraise you, appreciating your value?
<i>Naapa ulimwenguni</i>	<i>Simdhani kama yuko</i>	I swear in this world, I don't think he exists
<i>Naipotea imani</i>	<i>Kifikiri tabu yako</i>	I lose confidence if I think about the problems with you
<i>Huingiwa na huzuni</i>	<i>Kikumbuka pendo lako</i>	It makes me sad when I remember your love
<i>Kama utaniamini</i>	<i>Nifanye ni mlezi wako</i>	If you believe me, please make me your custodian
<i>Kiitikio:</i>		Chorus:
<i>Ewe ua la peponi</i>	<i>Waridi lisilo miba</i>	Oh you flower of paradise, rose without thorns

The musical and poetical production composed in those years by members of the male *taarab* clubs, *Michenzani Social Club* and *Akhwan Safaa*, is what is considered to be the truest, ideal tradition in contemporary Zanzibari community. The lyrics written by these clubs in the 1950s and 1960s focused principally on sentimental themes, representing love relations-

hips through a metaphorical use of language (*mafumbo*). Female figures were depicted through the images of flowers, birds, fruits and other elements from the natural world. In these lyrics, women are generally represented as beautiful and fragile creatures to be protected by their lovers from the advances of other men. This kind of language reflected the great changes of gender relationships happening at the time, and the new standards of dignity emerging in Zanzibari society (Fair 1994: 310).

Still in the 1970s, this conception of *taarab* as sentimental, enigmatic songs was so dominant in the *taarab* clubs that if a Zanzibari woman composed a song text of a different nature, only women's groups would accept and perform it. Such an episode was referred to by Mariam Hamdani, founding member, together with her husband Mohamed Ilyas, of the 1980s *taarab* group *Twinkling Stars*:

“Kulikuwa na shairi nilitunga “Chupa” “chupa” hili ambalo linaelezea madhara ya kulewa. Nikapeleka Akhwan Safaa lakini unajua huwa wanataka mambo ya mapenzi. Kwa hivyo ile Chupa iliwahi kuimbwa na Sahibul-ari waliwahi kuimba “Chupa, chupa, chupa nalaumu ile chupa, chupa chupa gani wewe unaniletea madhara”, manake nikishakutumia akili inakuwa si yangu, nakuwa najivunja heshima, ni bora kuepuka na wewe.” (Interview with Mariam Hamdani, 17/8/2002)

“I compose a lyric called Bottle, which dealt with problems of alcohol. I took it to *Akhwan Safaa*, but they, you know, just wanted love songs. So the song was performed by *Sahibul-ari* [a female *taarab* group], they sang “Bottle, bottle, a curse on that bottle that just brings me problems”, in other words if I am intelligent I will see that it isn't something for me, I destroy my dignity, so it's better if I avoid it.”

Another common theme of women's love songs is criticism of a rival, i.e. a lover or another wife. Many examples of this kind can be found in the songs by Aisha Saleh, a singer of the *Culture Musical Club*. She is in her forties and comes from Chakechake (Pemba), lives in the *Uswahilini* and has got a small shop. For a while she was a member of a female group, *Royal Navy*, before joining *Culture*. She says that she loves to interpret in the first person and put her lyrics to music, a lot of which are written in the language of *mipasho*, provoking and full of sexual references, like in *Huniwezi* (You don't beat me), *Utajaza* (You will be eaten up with jealousy) and *Huna lako* (You have nothing to boast about).

HUNA LAKO

<i>Sina nnachomughini</i>	<i>chochote namridhisha</i>	I don't refuse anything to him, I satisfy him in every way
<i>Nawe wakereka nini</i>	<i>lakupita ukizusha</i>	And why do you feel offended, if you turned him back to his past
<i>Mwenyewe kwa nini</i>	<i>pendo amenibebesha</i>	Why did he carry his love to me
<i>Nisimpende kwa nini</i>	<i>nami aniburudisha</i>	Why shouldn't I love him if he entertains me

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<i>Leo nakwambia wazi</i>	<i>bure wajitaabisha</i>	Today I tell you openly, it is useless to be in distress
<i>Pendo latokea enzi</i>	<i>vipi utaliangusha</i>	Our love is strong, there is no way to make it fall down
<i>Hata uza usingizi</i>	<i>kwa kuinunua kesho</i>	Even if you sold your sleep to keep vigil
<i>Utabaki simulizi</i>	<i>baraza kustawisha</i>	You would remain talking and gossiping on the baraza ⁸
<i>Wewe hakukuamini</i>	<i>huwezi kumridhisha</i>	He doesn't trust you, you can not satisfy him
<i>Kwenye pendo hukuwini</i>	<i>lako lakubahatisha</i>	In love, you did not play the right cards
<i>Mazungumzo ya ndani</i>	<i>huwa unarusha rusha</i>	The private conversations, you publicised them
<i>Kakuona punguwani</i>	<i>ndipo akakufurusha</i>	When he realised that you were stupid, then he drove you away
<i>Nacheza nae nyumbani</i>	<i>raha nnamuonyesha</i>	I have fun with him at home, I make him feel at ease
<i>Nampa penzi laini</i>	<i>tena lamnawirisha</i>	I give him tender love that makes him feel healthy
<i>Kwako akumbuke nini</i>	<i>mtuzi sie kutosha</i>	Why should he miss you, if you didn't please him sufficiently
<i>Amekutowa thamani</i>	<i>huna cha kumrudisha</i>	He gave you precious things and you did not return anything
<i>Kiitikio:</i>		Chorus:
<i>Kwanza katafute kazi</i>	<i>ukasomee mapenzi</i>	First get yourself some lessons in love
<i>Lakini kwa siku hizi</i>	<i>kurudi kwako hawezi</i>	But for now, he can not return to you

Aisha Saleh's lyrics are more explicit than most in sending a message, a provocation to a rival in love, and in talking about sexual relations, things that are generally regarded as "bad taste" on the *taarab asilia* circuit. On the other hand, they are the most frequent themes in modern *taarab* songs. It is no surprise, in fact, that Aisha Saleh was the only author from a traditional *taarab* club who expressed a positive opinion of modern *taarab* style during an interview with me. In this kind of songs a construction of female identity emerges which is very different from the cultural expectations in an Islamic community. The woman stands as an active protagonist in her sentimental relationship or marriage, and manipulates her sexuality in order to gratify herself from an emotional and material point of view (see Ntarangwi 2003: 206).

⁸ Sitting area outside traditional Swahili homes, a place for conversation.

The dialogue between genders has also brought a wave of novelty to the poetical repertoire of male authors, who have to some extent adapted themselves to the tastes of the female singers, and created *mipasho*-style texts, albeit milder or *mipasho laini*, using the definition of Cheri Chimbeni, master of ceremony of *Culture* (Aiello 2004a: 193).

This is what happened for instance to Suleiman Said Mohamed, head poet of the *Culture Musical Club*. Suleiman Said Mohamed started writing very sentimental poems, like *Arifu* (Declaration), *Hulinganiki kwa hadhi* (There is no one like you), *Ameniridhi mwenyewe* (You made me happy), *Habibi* (Love), but has slowly, with time, produced more and more texts which are nearer to the sensitivity of the women, for instance *Unachekwa ni wewe* (It is you who will be derided), sung by Fatma Abdisalami, *Hujui kama ni basi* (Don't you realise that it's over), sung by Fatma Juma, or *Huna unaloliweza* (You can't do anything good), put to music and interpreted by Aisha Saleh. In these lyrics Suleiman Said Mohamed moves in the opposite direction to the female authors, hiding the provocative, offensive and sensual messages typical of *mipasho* behind the use of *mafumbo*, images to be deciphered, as in the first verse of *Huna unaloliweza* (Mohamed, *Tungo zangu*, unpublished manuscript):

HUNA UNALOLIWEZA

<i>Wadhani punju asali</i>	<i>unajaribu kuramba</i>	You exchange poison for honey and try to taste it
<i>Kupona mbona muhali</i>	<i>umeishiwa kutamba</i>	Then recovery is difficult, you have stopped strutting
<i>Huna sasa ufedhuli</i>	<i>sema upate jigamba</i>	Now you are no longer insolent, you can't boast anymore
<i>Lilo lako sheli sheli</i>	<i>ndizi keshaila komba</i>	You have only got the bread fruit, the banana has already been eaten by the bushbaby

Conclusion

In this paper I have made a preliminary study of the *taarab* lyrics composed by women in contemporary Zanzibar. This production is often still unknown, but in recent times it has been slowly entering the public domain. What emerges from this first analysis is that the growing participation of women in traditional *taarab* groups since the end of the 1980s has encouraged a cultural exchange between the tastes of the older female groups and those of the male artists in the big clubs. This is with regards to music, performance and also to the texts that a certain number of female artists have started to write openly. In the preceding pages, I explored some aspects of this interesting lyrical production, i.e. themes, use of language and contamination of aesthetic values, as exemplified through a number of song texts.

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