

Wondering about Change: The Taarab Lyric and Global Openness

SAID A.M. KHAMIS*

University of Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT

It would be quite naive to say that Swahili poets have never dealt with the subject of 'love' 'sex' and 'obscenity'. In the past however, they composed poems of such themes with a bit of obscurity if not complete opacity. This is true of taarab lyrics which, as a rule specialise in themes of 'love' and sometimes 'sex' and 'obscenity'. But from the 1980s, influenced by mediated global culture(s), taarab has gone fully commercial, targeting a segment of the society interested in dance, booze and sex. The taarab lyric has therefore shifted dramatically to incorporate both these elements. Things that were once upon a time considered to 'taboo' to be articulated openly, have now gone to the public domain with accentuation. This article aims at showing structural and functional mechanism of the taarab lyric and changes that take place vis a vis change of functions, especially the commercial function which demands bluntness in expressing sex and obscenity.

Keywords: taarab, change, globalisation, openness, obscurity

After the Portuguese were driven away from their strongholds along the coast of East Africa by the Sultan of Oman in 1699 (Gérard 1976:7), Swahili literature¹ was charged with the task of reinstating Islamic ideology, which was considered to have weakened during the Portuguese occupation². Centuries after this event, there followed a proliferation of semi-legendary accounts of Islamic wars called *tendi* or *tenzi*. Discussing the problems of Swahili classical poetry in *Four Century of Swahili Verse, A Literary History and Anthology* (1979:xii), Knappert is blunt about the role of the Swahili poet then:

[...] all the writers of Swahili verse and prose between 1650 and 1850 were Muslims, and did not hide the fact. They wrote consciously as believers in the doctrine of their Holy Prophet [...]

Unfortunately, much of what has been documented about Swahili poetry from the 17th century is this élitist poetry in the so-called *Maghazi tradition*. Latent and parallel to this scenario, however, there has been a substantial corpus of secular non-conformist and even erotic literature. For example, at about the same time, Fumo Liongo composed a song entitled *Wimbo wa Uchi* (The Wine

¹ We refer to the written form of Swahili literature and not its 'orature'.

² Knappert (1979:68) confirms this when he states that during the Portuguese period, the port towns of East Africa were transformed into places of pleasure for the sailors and soldiers.

Hymn 68-69) and another, *Wimbo wa Mwana Manga* (Ode to Mwana Munga 84-91):

The Wine Hymn

*We mteshi ulo mnazini
Nipe uchi wangu ulio chungu
Nitekea wa kikasikini
Tesheweo na mgema wangu*

You, tapster from the coconut palm,
give me the palm-wine with a bitter flavour
fetch me also wine from the cask
which was tapped by my own tapster

Ode to Mwana Munga

31. *Kamu natamani
Matiti launi
Kama marijani
Ya makomamanga*

How much I desire
the breast, whose colour
is like red coral
(like the inner part) of pomegranates

32. *Sishuhudiepo
mi siyaonapo
matunda ya pepo
yakwe mwana Manga*

Never have I witnessed,
never have I seen
such heavenly fruits
as those of the Lady of Manga

Though such erotic songs with their nonchalance regarding religious taboos have been present in the repertoire of Swahili literature ever since its inception, rarely is any attention paid to them. This is because their presence does not preclude the fact that a taboo on composing erotic literature has been lurking in poets' psyche ever since, resulting in this relative obscurity. A verse of taarab lyric composed in the 1940s condoning an act of rape and murder in tacit symbolic manner is a case in point:

Kijiti

<i>Tazameni, tazameni</i>	<i>alivyofanya Kijiti</i>
<i>Kumchukua mgeni</i>	<i>kumchezsha foliti</i>
<i>Kenda naye maguguni</i>	<i>kamrejesha maiti</i>

Behold, oh behold	what Kijiti did
He took a stranger	for a game of hide and seek
He took her into the bush	and returned her a corpse

A taarab lyric entitled ‘*Kibiriti na Petroli*’ (Matchbox and Petrol) composed in the 1960s as a warning against keeping people of the opposite sex in close proximity is another example. It is a lyric in a language of sexuality that is obscured by metaphors of fuel, fire and explosives:

Kibiriti na Petroli

<i>Kibiriti na petroli</i>	<i>iwapo utaviweka</i>
<i>Hivi ni vitu viwili</i>	<i>visije kukutanika</i>
<i>Kusalimika muhali</i>	<i>lazima pataripuka</i>

A matchstick and petrol	if you ever keep them
These are two things	that never should come together
Impossible for the friction	not to cause an explosion

We could go on *ad infinitum* showing how taarab lyrics and Swahili poetry in general avoid depicting sex openly because of the ethical and moral inhibitions³ prevailing in the Swahili communities. But those who are familiar with the taarab style that emerged in the later half of the 1980s and continuing to the present day must be aware of a dramatic shift from its traditional élitist form with its lack of inclination to commercialisation. Its modern form, in contrast, is more popularised and commercialised. The name given to this new form of taarab is *mipasho*, meaning *telling things openly and bluntly* – a vulgar and non-euphemistic way of telling things in poetry.

The constraints imposed on this commercialised music genre striving to penetrate both local and world markets are obvious. Firstly, it has had to be restructured, reorganised and re-directed to fit into a new situation and to attract a new audience. Given such a motivation, it must have lost a large part of its old devotees – in its new guise it challenges the very ethical and moral codes that it is supposed to cherish and safeguard. A major consequence is that it provokes

³ Even when there were some tendencies for eroticism in the past, the songs were few and did not have wider exposure and circulation comparatively. To day taarab songs are produced abundantly and have more affinity with mass communication – hence wider dissemination. In public debates, poets have urged to exercise caution and refrain.

both distaste and criticism. Again, commercialisation may also mean stringent competition, which is not necessarily a good thing, since it may result in a confusion of mediocrity for excellence.

Hence, the idea of ‘wondering’ with which this essay has been written derives from this *unchecked change* which has been triggered both internally and externally. For *mipasho* lyrics to contain cynicism, sexism, sensationalism and exchanges of insults as its salient thematic or for the performance of *mipasho taarab* deliberately calculated to appeal by means of sensuality and eroticism (and this with considerable frequency and in a diversity of forms in a society struggling to emerge from strict religious and political inhibitions) must indeed be a bewildering situation. Something phenomenal must be taking place internally. Our approach to understanding this internal situation, while tentative, finds its justification within a number of parameters.

Firstly, there is the fact that a society that has been subjected to taboos for too long is bound to assert itself in the form of extreme situations, given the opportunity for openness and the relaxation of restrictions, with the result that there will be mediocrity and decadence. Secondly, the situation may be aggravated when laxity goes hand in hand with abject poverty, causing élitist cultural values to crumble⁴. Thirdly, when these two factors occur at a point when a society has yet to acquire the means⁵ of criticism necessary for the maintenance of a certain standard to be achieved, then a complex cultural crisis will develop.

Why, then, does the *mipasho taarab* so readily attract such fascination and devotion in some sectors of East African societies? The *Mipasho taarab*, with its *ngoma* beat that permits erotic movement(s) of the body, its lyrics that depict the harsh realities of everyday life and are always full of sexism, cynicism and alcoholism, provides a means for escaping the ever-growing hardships of life.

Thus, through ‘change’ and ‘openness’⁶ the *mipasho taarab* has acquired its current popular attractiveness. Whereas, for example, a traditional élitist taarab in Zanzibar still uses instruments such as the *udi* (lute), *ganuni* (Arabian zither with 78 strings), violins, cello, accordion, electric guitar and double bass, the *mipasho taarab* uses only an electric guitar and a key-board for melodic counterpoints, electric bass for harmonic references and, most recently, Western drum-kits for rhythm and various additional percussion instruments such as the tambourine, rattles and timing stick.

⁴ My interview with several performers of the ‘mipasho taarab’ reveal the fact that they are for the first time in their lives earning sufficient money to live comfortably, since the ‘mipasho taarab’ attracts huge audiences through performances and the audio-visual material which they sell. In consequence, the artistes feel that they are not morally bound to write song lyrics that may not please their audience.

⁵ In the USA for example, social responsibility theory operates in the broadcast media [...] where the Federal Communication Commission can, within limits, protect society from threatening broadcasts (Hiebert/Reuss 199:33).

⁶ Until this is properly researched it remains somewhat speculative.

There are several reasons for this change of instrumentation. The reduction in the number and type of instruments used is to approximate as much as possible to the danceable mode associated with *Muziki wa dansi* – this is dance music of the Lingala type, whose popularity has been replaced by the *mipasho taarab*, with the result that the former mode has gradually been side-lined in the market. This change has given the audience a feeling of experiencing a new type of music that still retains a flavour of the old – the previous favourite. The faster rhythm and tempo played in the *mipasho taarab* has automatically converted taarab from being listening music to dance music. The reduction in the number of musicians and singers in a *mipasho taarab*, group allows such groups to travel lightly and economically and maximise profit.

However, the most remarkable change from the élitist taarab type using the so-called *mahadhi* or music lines, which uses over 30 tones based on ways of reciting the Qur'an⁷, to a *mipasho taarab* type whose singer retains only a touch of the voice quality associated with *mahadhi*, is the fusion of danceable musical lines from local ngomas, the *mipasho lyrics* calculated for their content of sexism, cynicism, scandalmongering, exchange of abuses and insults and the like and also for their exaggerated sexist body movements. It is the feature of 'exaggerated sexist body movement' in the *mipasho taarab* that is derived internally and externally. At least in part, it demonstrates the kind of erotic body movement of the kind to be seen in rap and other pop music on the global MTV television channel and others like it. Hierbert and Reuss (169), writing about *Sex and Sensationalism in the Mass Media*, observe that:

[...] The mass media are business enterprises not supported by taxpayers or subsidised by government. They need to sell to make a profit to stay in business. Sex and sensationalism have therefore become a staple ingredient in much mass communication in order to gain an audience and earn a profit.

With the advent of *mipasho*, the lyric of love-making has, for the first time, entered the general repertoire of the taarab lyrics. 'TX' is a typical example of such lyrics which, despite its surgical guise, fails to submerge the bluntness of obscenity. The lyric works through layman imagery in which the tenor and the vehicle are not kept strictly apart and thus retaining a great deal of transparency. The sexist and booze culture depicted in the *mipasho* lyric with the intention of providing the basis for escapism, the very ordinary everyday language employed therein and the relative transparency of *mipasho lyrics* indeed signal a revolt that fits together very well with the noisy, vigorous and sensational rhythms and the obscene movements of the body in *mipasho taarab*. But the language in the *mipasho* lyrics also seeks to impress through 'global' imagery by means of *code mixing* and sometimes *code switching*. It is, therefore, a language directed at an

⁷ Some of the traditional singers and composers of music whom I interviewed told me that whereas in the past taarab followed this as a rule, nowadays it is something to be avoided in modern taarab, although some residue remains that makes it still a type of taarab.

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audience (mostly of women) that is obsessed with sex, booze, sponging upon local or foreign expatriates with fat wallets full of dollars, rivalry, competition, cynicism, craving for gold accessories, cosmetics, elegant dresses, high-heel shoes, mobile telephones and merry-making.

TX

*TX mpenzi dokta
Amespeshalaiizi
Ananipasua tezi
TX nipasue*

*wangu wa zamani
digrii yake Sir Joni
siku nyingi tumboni
toa maradhi ya ndani*

*TX ana cheti
'Kinipa nusu kaputi
Na fahamu siipati
TX nipasue*

*kapasi Ujerumani
huzimia kitandani
nangojea uperesheni
taja vyote sikuhini*

*Mimi nd'o mgonjwa wake
Napenda sindano zake
Abinyapo dawa zake
TX nipasue*

*bibi jiweke pembeni
haziniumi mwilini
ganzi tele maungoni
mimi na 'we hatunyimani*

*TX akipasua
Kisu anachotumia
Hafanyi kwa kuripua
TX nipasue*

*raha hupanda kichwani
kimoja sio thineni
apasua kwa makini
mwengine simthamini*

*TX hasiti
Hupasua katikati
Kwa nyuzi za gatigati
TX nipasue*

*kufanya uperesheni
hanipasui pembeni
ashona ndani kwa ndani
nipate afuaeni*

Kiitikio

*Nipasue daktari
Nipasue TX nipasue*

*toa maradhi ya ndani
Napenda uperesheni*

*nipasue
ee nipasue*

TX

TX has been my love-doctor for a long time now
He has a degree of specialisation, Sir John,
He has been operating on the tumour in my belly for many days
Operate on me TX, remove the inner diseases

TX has a certificate, he graduated in Germany
When he gives me the anaesthetic I lose my senses in bed
I fall into a (love) stupor while waiting for the surgery
Operate on me TX, I won't refuse you anything

I'm his only patient, (hey) lady intruder step aside
I love his injections, they don't harm the body
If he spatters his medicines, my body turns numb
Operate on me TX, we've never withheld anything from each other

When my TX operates on me, nice feelings go into my head
The knife she uses is just one, not two
he operates carefully, never in a hurry or crudely
Operate me TX, no one else I regard so highly

When he starts the surgery he never pauses
He aims at the middle, and ignores the sides
With durable strings he stitches inwardly
Operate on me TX, and bring me some relief

Chorus

Operate on me doctor, operate on me, remove the inner diseases
Operate on me TX, operate on me, I love your surgery, yes operate on me

The East African region, like any other part of the world, is intricately connected with a complex global network of cultural exchanges and the flux of influences. In a situation where everything is nowadays geared to selling and buying, shrewdness and survival become the order of the day. Shrewdness and survival are to do with playing with people's psychology. Taarab artists do indeed exploit the local musical and poetic structures, but they also make use of wider repertoires which they have discovered from records and films in the past and now television, video and audio material(s) freely circulating in the region. The musical, linguistic and performative ingredients that these artists internalise from television music programmes transmitted from the US and other Western countries all contribute to the musical frenzy created by these artists, which is readily well received by an audience wanting, at least for a while, to escape the harsh realities of daily life.

*Dr. Khamis is a professor of African literatures in African languages with a tenure at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. He is currently engaged in a research project entitled *Local and Global Aspects of Taarab: A Popular Music Entertainment in East Africa under the umbrella topic 'Lokales Handeln in Afrika im Kontext globaler Einflüsse'* funded by the

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Apart from this he is also researching on the Swahili novel and poetry.

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