IMAGES OF LOVE IN THE SWAHILI TAARAB LYRIC: LOCAL ASPECTS AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE*
SAID A. M. KHAMIS
University of Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT

Taarab is a music complex that demonstrates the fusion of local elements and those from Arabia, Europe, India, the USA, and Afro-Cuban. Until recently, the taarab lyric has been normally composed following prosodic rules found in Arabic poetry and written to portray mainly ‘romanticized love’. In a taarab sub-category called mipasho conceived in the 1990s, the form, shape and function of the taarab lyric have changed radically. The lyric is now often composed in blank and free verse styles, about anything that opiates and expresses wishful thinking based on consumerism and rivalry between individuals and groups. This essay sets out to show the type of images the Swahili poets use to constructs many facets of love in the taarab lyric in its traditional and modern form. Initially, this essay was presented as a paper in a colloquium jointly organised by the Department of Islamic Studies and the Professorship of the African Literatures in African languages of the Bayreuth University (Universität Bayreuth) in May 2003, in one of international meetings organized to provide discussion of various interdisciplinary topics under the umbrella project “Local Action in the Context of Global Influences” sponsored by the Humanities Collaborative Research Centre (Kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungskolleg – SFB/FK560).

Keywords: image, love, taarab, lyric, globalisation

Another way of looking at it (i.e. love) is that of the poets. ‘Tis not hereafter, sing the drunken old men in Twelfth Night: present mirth hath present laughter. It is a prick, it is a sting, suggests George Peele: it is a pretty pretty thing; it is a fire, it is a coal. And how many other things too, pretty or stinging. A red red rose, an ever-fixed mark, a sickness full of woes; it is of God and passes human wit, but it has pitched its mansion in the place of excrement. It is begotten by despair upon impossibility. And so on and so on: the poets never tire of this senior-junior giant dwarf Dan Cupid...

(Love and Marriage: Literature and its Social Context by Laurence, Lerner (1979: ix).)

* Permission to make digital or hard copies of this article for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission.
INTRODUCTION

Throughout this essay, Cuddon’s view of ‘images’ (1991: 442–443) as …[c]overing the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and sensory or extra-sensory experience is adopted. As such, images may be literal or figurative and appear as single or overlapping complex wholes created from sorting out, organising, analogising and framing the artist’s physical, ideological, psychological and socio-cultural world(s). In this essay however, the range of images does not refer only to the ‘system of nomenclature’ of a given culture, but also to incoming flows of images increasingly mediated through modern mass communication channels; national or transnational. In our view, four possible scenarios constraining a creator of images are identifiable.

The first, is about what can be exploited from ‘physical environment(s)’ as both discrete entities or as processes that define our world the way it is – as a conglomeration of oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, forests, bushes, animals, deserts, mountains, hills, valleys, sky, heavenly bodies, waves, volcanoes, tempests, floods, droughts and floods. In fact, this means all actions and phenomena emanating thereof.

The second is related to the first and is about what is derived in a relativistic sense, from artist’s material and ideological culture, offering countless choices of items and concepts for the formation of images through observation, isolation¹, and analogy. The emphasis here is that, images are considered varying from culture to culture. That is, an object or concept may be found in one culture, but not in another. Perhaps the object or concept is present in both cultures but the logical bases behind the creation of the same image may vastly differ from culture to culture. For example, the item mwezi (the moon) or qamar (Arabic) as often appears in taarab, should be a universal object since the concept ‘moon’ is every language. However, its comparison with an unreachable lady as expressed in the Swahili taarab lyric Mwezi (The Moon), may be inconceivable in another culture. This is to say that items, phenomena, processes and concepts may be culturally specific or non-specific depending upon whether they are locally or transculturally acquired, and images may be accepted or rejected on the basis of whether or not they conform to the existing cultural ‘matrix’ of a society.

For example, when I heard for the first time a woman being romantically compared to nyama choma (roasted meat) in a song from Kenya, I considered the analogy to be quite incongruent and aesthetically unacceptable. Not until I

¹ This is very important – for a certain item may be present in two different cultures, but only in a certain significance and poignancy in one and not in the other, hence its utilisation as a metaphorical subject in one and not in the other culture. For example, Kunguru is used as a metaphor in reference to a cunning woman in a taarab song in Zanzibar, but has never appeared elsewhere in East Africa, though kunguru are at large in other regions of East Africa and the world.
got to know the ‘taste’ of nyama choma and the sexual nuances attached to it. The same is probably true when an image tasi (sea-water fish) from a taarab song in Zanzibar, referring to the beauty and sexual appeal to a lady, may appear incongruent and unacceptable to the cultural milieu of an audience in mainland Kenya and Tanzania.

The third scenario has to do with the creative skills that vary from one artist to another depending upon the power of observation and the ability to present sharpness in the images s/he creates to distinguish his or her style from those of other artists. We therefore talk of appealing and less appealing images or images that are stylistically and semantically effective as opposed to those which are dull and uninteresting.

The fourth scenario is about whether certain material and ideas (e.g. objects, commodities, signs, icons, images, symbols, tropes, ideologues) from outside cultures have been brought relatively closer to the world of an artist (e.g. taarab poet) through printed media, phonograph record, sound film, radio, audio cassettes, video cassettes, transnational television channels and currently electronic mail and Internet. The dissemination over time, through mass media, of various images from other parts of Africa, Arabia, India, Europe, Latin America and USA\(^2\), has extended the range of choice of global images by taarab poets – a phenomenon that has helped to make some images in the taarab lyric assume universal presence and global character.

1. **Love Intricacies**

Referring to Shelly’s categorisation of love, Kitzberger (1977: 1) puts love as … [a] trinity comprising three aspects: ‘love between the sexes’, ‘love from mankind’ and ‘love from nature’. In this essay, we will focus on the images of love between the sexes and love for ‘things’ or ‘material’, featuring abundantly in *mipasho*, a sub-genre of modern taarab. In so doing, we keep in mind the fact that the concept of love, even in its narrowest sense, is highly incorporating and semantically elastic, appearing as attribute, process, narrative, interrogative lament and expressing yearning, tenderness, sadness, wonder, eroticism, peace, affection, rejection, possession, dispossession, faithfulness, betrayal, beauty, loneliness, intimacy, sensuality, friendship and rivalry.

In addition to this, love itself, is referred to in many ways in Swahili lyrical poetry as ‘adulterated love’, ‘promiscuous love’, ‘unquenched love’, ‘unfortunate love’, ‘love rivalry’. Not to mention its derivatives and composites as mapenzi/pendo/hiba\(^3\) huba(Ar)/mahaba(Ar) (love), mpenzi(Ar)/habibi(Ar)

---

2. In the context of taarab songs – this goes back to at least 1920s if not prior to that, since it may be possible that some of the tropes and images were introduced in the Swahili literature already in the 17\(^{th}\) century in the Fumo Liongo’s love songs and some might be derived from Swahili classical poetry.

3. (Ar) is a symbol for Arabism.
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

(lover), bingwa wa mapenzi (love-adept), mwanagenzi wa mapenzi/mchanga wa mapenzi (love-child), mshibaji wa mapenzi (love-devotee), ndoto za mapenzi (love-dreams), mwasha moto wa mapenzi (love-enkindled), ushehenezi wa mapenzi (love-laden), maombolezo ya mapenzi (love-lament), ugonjiwa wa mapenzi (love-sick), zinduko la mapenzi (love-awakening), mkosefu wa mapenzi (loveless), -a kupendeza (lovely), uzuri, (loveliness) etc.

2. AIM

If we consider taarab’s long tradition and the bulk of its lyric, it is alarming to discover that the lyric remains relatively unexplored in Swahili literature. The reason behind this perhaps is that, whereas few Swahili poets, who compose the taarab lyric, do so mainly to express love between the sexes, the majority of modern Swahili poets and critics are preoccupied with ‘serious’ issues (i.e. moralistic political and social ones) as shown in poetry and other forms of Swahili literature in general. However, ‘love’, in its many and varied facets, is so important a human attribute that it cannot be turned down like that in any literature or literary criticism. It is from this conviction that this article is written. Precisely to show that love poetry exists in Swahili literature as it exists in many other literatures of the word, and such, it carefully selects from local and global repertoires objects, concepts and processes to create complex images as a way of speaking or expressing ‘love’ and its protean nature.

In addressing love images in the Swahili taarab lyric however, the description of ‘global images’ is particularly very daunting. This is because these are so intricately embedded in the Swahili nomenclature that it is hardly possible to distinguish them from local ones. Any attempt to set a clear demarcation line to separate them from the local ones is often futile. The way out of this predicament is perhaps to trace every suspected global image not from one possible parameter, but several: from for example, historical allusions, religious references, Indian Ocean connection, the Bible and Kor’an and other books, from radio, audio and video cassettes and films; including old Indian, Arabic and Western films of the 1960s to 1970s. This is to be followed by a systematic comparison and contrast before any decision on boundaries or inclusion and exclusion is made.

This rigour is notwithstanding, tracing each and every single ‘images of love’ in all taarab lyrics is hugely meticulous and practically not amenable. We will therefore concentrate on recurring images captured in the following sub-

4 In taarab songs, this goes back to at least to the 1920s if not prior to that since some of the tropes and images were already introduced in the Swahili literature in the Liyongo’s love songs.

5 A distinction is to be made between ‘musical lyric’ (or sung lyric) from ‘epic’ (recited/chanted lyric) and ‘drama’ (spoken lyric). Nonetheless, the poem written to be sung remains the one kind to which no critic can deny the label ‘lyric’ … (Lindley 1985: 2).

3. LOVE IS PRAISE AND LURE OF BEAUTY

If as Lerner (1979: ix) puts it … [a] theory of intersexual attraction and love which holds that love is an affectionate response to one who is instrumental in the gratification of individual’s need – then we should expect lovers, lured by beauty of their loved ones, to shower them with praises. Very often in poetry dealing with this theme, poets reach for hyperboles, figures of speech and colourful images so as to capture the eulogies.

Hence the Swahili taarab lyric is full of love praises and gratifying expressions about perfect beauty. Images that crop up together with these praises and gratification normally appear as allied metaphors, geared at constructing meaningful wholes. Several objects, concepts, processes and narratives are used in such allied imagery: flowers (e.g.; waridi(Ar) [rose], asumini(Ar) [jasmine], asu(Ar) [wild jasmine]), fruit(s) (e.g. tunda la heba(Ar) [fruit of love], tunda la thamani(Ar) [valuable fruit], tufaha(Ar) [apple], komamanga6 [pomegranate], nanasi(Per) [pineapple], mung’unye [a kind of guard used for vegetable], ratabu(Ar) [dates], balungi(Per) [shaddock], kitamli [a coconut fruit of kitamli whose juice is preserved for drinking purposes only]), birds (e.g. ndege wangu [my bird], twuyuri(Ar) [bird], tausi(Ar) [peacock], njiwa [dove], kunguru mjanja [a cunning crow]) and other animals (e.g. kipaka Luluwa [the little kitten Luluwa], tasi [a kind of seawater fish], and ghazali(Ar), [gazelle], chesi [a deer]. Other items and concepts range from heavenly bodies like mwezi or qamari / ya qamari(Ar), [the moon], nyota [star] to nakshi [design/pattern], sega langu la asali [my beehive], bibi wa mabibi [the lady of ladices], mabanati wa peponi [the maidens of paradise] and parts of the body like macho yake [her eyes].

Let us now take some stanzas to illustrate the complex combination of these images. First two of the four stanzas of the song Waridi Lisilo Miba (A Rose without Thorns) showing an interplay of the mundane and heavenly images all geared at creating the necessary overstatements in describing a lady whose beauty is almost ‘mystical’. Though Knappert (1972: xii) tends to exaggerate his statement, there is some truth in saying that … [I]n Swahili Islamic culture, every poet’s work is soaked in the implicit assumptions of Islamic imagery, among other things.

6 Literally meaning ‘the dwarf palm of Oman’ that is mkoma wa Manga; Manga being a Swahili name for Oman.
7 (Per) is a symbol for Persian.
Waridi Lisilo Miba

Ewe kiumbe wa shani  
nalipenda umbo lako
Mzuri uso kifani  
kakuumba Mola wako
Katu humu duniani  
hapana mfano wako
Ewe ua la peponi  
waridi lisilo miba

Kwenu kakutoa nani  
kwenye masikani yako
Bilisi(Ar) au Ruhani(Ar)  
kakuiba kwa wenzako
Mabanati wa peponi(Ar)  
hao ndio fanı yako
Ewe ua la peponi  
waridi lisilo miba

The Rose without Thorn

You, a miraculous being, I love that figure of yours
You’re unequalled in beauty, the Lord has perfected you
There is none in this world, to compare with you
You the flower of paradise, the rose without thorns

Who has driven you out of your dwelling?
Did the Devil or Spirit, stole you from your kind?
It’s the maidens of paradise that are your equal
You the flower of paradise, the rose without thorns

Another song is Mwezi (The Moon) which works not only on the mystical or luminous beauty of the moon, but on the concept of distance, alienation and implied kinaesthetic effect. It is a poem of wishful thinking in which the poet craves for almost the impossible – though, at the same time, the audience realises that what the poets wants is not beyond his reach – after all, he is, by implication, talking not of a spatial separation, but a psychological one, between himself and a lady he loves who seems, for now, unreachable.

Mwezi

Unapochomoza  
na uzuri wako
Unanipumbaza  
kwa kicheko chako
Kuwa n’naweza  
ningekuja kwako

Chorus:  
Ewe mwezi ewe azizi  
nipe mbawa nirukie(Ar)
Ewe mwezi ewe mpenzi  
nipe ngazi nipandie

---

8 The word ‘pepo’ is a Bantu word, but the concept, *ua la peponi* (the flower of Paradise) is an Arab/Islamic concept.
Nordic Journal of African Studies

When you appear with all your grandeur
You beguile me with your smile
Were it possible, I would’ve come to you

Chorus: Oh, the moon, Oh the precious one, give me wings to fly to you
Oh, the moon, Oh my love, give me a ladder to climb to you

When I see your face, I really lose control
Far over there where you live, when will I reach you?
Would you (at least) give me your word, that you also love me?

Chorus: Oh, the moon, Oh the precious one, give me wings to fly to you
Oh, the moon, Oh my love, give me a ladder to climb to you

In your luminous composure, your light is overwhelming
You expel all the stars under you
You drive them away wherever they are

Chorus: Oh, the moon, Oh the precious one, give me wings to fly to you
Oh, the moon, Oh my love, give me a ladder to climb to you

One of the best examples of the taarab lyrics that uses integrated images for the praise and lure of love is Shada Langu la Maua (My Cluster of Flowers). The word ‘shada’ (cluster) itself, stands for the idea of ‘bringing together’ variety of items in ‘symmetry’ and ‘harmony’. The word ‘langu’ signifies ‘possession’ and ‘maua’ (flowers – in plural), a beloved lady with many different positive qualities. Thus, in this lyric we observe the lavish use of items of beauty – especially flowers or parts of flowering plants, implying also the lavish tropes and attributes directed towards the beloved one.
Shada Langu la Maua

Jema shada la mauwa laua kwa rangi yake
Limepangwa kwa muruwa sioni kifani chake
Na asumini kutiwa hakika mahala pake
Shada hili limekuwa la pepo(Ar) na watu wake

Rehani na mawaridi hizo ndizo shanga zake
Tena halafu mkadi ‘mefungiwa yasitoke
Harufu yake baridi shada hili sifā yake
Shada hili zuri hadi Ni stadi fundi wake

Pachori na pompiya(Oc)9 utasema zumaridi
Jinsi linavyonukiya kwa uzuri lmezizi
Hadi limepindukiya shada hili ni shadidi
Na ‘mi nalitunukiya sifa yake maridadi

Shada kiweka shingoni hupendeza sawasawa
Hutulia kwa makini kama sahani na kawa
Huvutia mshetani na majini wenye mbawa
Malaika na ruhani wote wanalitambua

My Cluster of Flowers

Beautiful is my cluster of flowers, I’m dying for its colours
It is elegantly arranged, the like of it, I cannot find
To be inserted with jasmines, that is what it deserves
This flower has been, the flower of paradise for her people

Sweet basil and roses, these are its beads
Then flowers of a screw pine are tied to secure them
Its cool scent, is among the qualities of this cluster
How beautiful this cluster is, skilful is its maker

Pachori10 and pompia11 you would think an emerald
The way it smell makes it even more beautiful
It excels in beauty and scent, and its qualities are emphatic
I have but to reward it with all these praises

---

9 (Oc) stands for Occidentalism.
10 A kind of plant with sweet-smelling foliage and florets.
11 Derived from a perfume brand; perhaps from France.
When placed on the neck, it appears extremely gorgeous
It rests in gentleness, like a food plate and its cover
It attracts the Satan and genies with wings
The angels and spirits, they’re all beguiled by it
And they finally all recognise it.

4. LOVE IS MORE THAN LURE OF BEAUTY

There are many examples in taarab lyrics showing love is not necessarily caused by the lure of beauty, but also by other qualities and behaviours. The Swahili believe that whereas beauty lures, character counts more. In Swahili marriage tradition, before anyone marries s/he is advised to make sure that the proposed partner has all the qualities of a good wife or husband. There are so many songs in taarab that are reproachful to those who are lured by beauty at the expense of character. Here is the song Wasia (Advice), which is specifically written to insist on the importance of good character:

**Wasia**

Ichukue hii siri iwe kwako ni wasiya
Huwi katika wazuri ila kwa njema tabiya
Uwe mwenye kusubiri siivamie duniya

Chorus: Tabia kitu azizi kiumbe akiwa nayo
Si hoja sura nzuri na watu kukusifiya
Au umbo la fakhari mwenyewe kujivuniya
Huwi na nyingi jeuri hayo yakasaidiya

Chorus: Tabia kitu azizi kiumbe akiwa nayo

**Advice**

Take this secret, so that you be heeded
You won’t be among good people, except for good character
You should be patient, don’t pounce upon the world

Chorus: Good character is precious when one has it

What counts is not the beauty and praises of people
Or a glorious figure to be proud of
To be too proud will not help you

Chorus: Good character is precious when one has it
It is also important to keep promise of ever loving your partner and of cherishing the love, an act that is also regarded as a good behaviour as the poet in Miadi Kitu Azizi (A Promise is a Precious Thing) claims. Actually, this song is a lament in which the poet blames his partner for not keeping his/her promise of loving and cherishing their love:

**A Promise is a Precious Thing**

A promise is a precious thing, when a lady/gentleman keeps it  
It is not a trivial thing, a promise is a great thing  
You shouldn’t ignore it, when a promise is given

5. **LOVE IS A PLEASURE**

Here, the Swahili poet expresses cheerfulness and joy in order to show the brighter side of love. After all, love is going on smoothly with both sides reciprocating positively as they nourish and cherish it – hence there is every reason to celebrate the success. To show love is a joyous thing, various types of hyperboles and dense images are employed to create the desired effect. In the lyric La Waridi (The Rose) for example, the poet expresses his joy and satisfaction for having the ‘rose’ as the ultimate choice:

**La Waridi**

Nanipate narijisi\(^{(Ar)}\) asi mini\(^{(Ar)}\) na kiluwa  
Hamu yangu hainisi  
Lawaridi kwangu basi  

**The Rose**

Even if I get the narcissus, jasmine and kiluwa\(^{12}\)  
My thirst will not be quenched and my heart will find no peace  
The Rose is the ultimate flower, it excels all other flowers to me

In Ndege Wangu\(^{13}\) (My Bird), the poet celebrates his success in having the bird whose beauty the poet describes in ‘divine’ and ‘mystical’ images:

---

\(^{12}\) Sweet-smelling flower and foliage from local plant called Mkiluwa.  
\(^{13}\) The word ‘wangu’ suggest possession.
Ndege Wangu

Ndege wangu kaumbika mzuri aso kifani
Utadhani malaika (Ar) anapendeza machoni
Katulia hana shaka yumo mwangu mikononi

My Bird

My bird is perfectly created, her beauty has no resemblance
She is like an angel, so amazingly beautiful to look at
She’s quite relaxed (and) not worried, (for) she is in my hands

Sometimes the adventures and dangers of love are also celebrated as struggles that end up in victory when love is finally secured as shown in the lyric Nacheka ni Furahani (I’m Laughing in Great Joy):

Nacheka ni Furahani

Sijali kulaumiwa kwa kukupenda fulani
Lolote litalokuwa ‘mekuchagua moyoni
Maovu nimetupiwa siyajali asilani

Chorus: Si hasara asilani nyuki kufa asalini
Nacheka nifurahani ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha

I’m Laughing in Great Joy

I don’t care being blamed for loving you
Whatever happens, you are the choice of my heart
I’m branded with evil accusations, but I don’t care about them

Chorus: It’s not a loss for a bee to die for honey
I’m laughing and rejoicing, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha

6. Love is a Token

Love needs to be reinforced, maintained and perpetuated. At least love fervour needs to be kept constantly alive. This can be done not only through exchange of gifts, but most importantly, through verbal exchange and eulogies. Examples of reinforcing love through material and verbal exchange abound in the taarab lyric. One example is shown in the lyric, Pete Mevaa Kidoleni (I’ve Put the Ring on My Finger) – an act that perhaps, springs from the Western rites.
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

Pete Mevaa Kidoleni

Zawadi ‘menitunukiya pete ya dhahabu ya shani
‘Mepata kwako metuliya ‘mejivalia kidoleni
Moyo ‘mejifurahiya ‘mepata pete ya fulani
Pete kaa kwangu kidoleni meumbiwa ajili yangu

I’ve Put the Ring on My Finger

A gift is given to me, a wonderful golden ring
That I got it from you I’m comforted, I’ll put in on my finger
My heart is overjoyed, I got a ring from so and so
Stay on my finger the ring, you have been made for me

In this case, a token is a letter and/or a photo as shown in the lyric Zawadi na Baruwa (A Gift and a Letter). Though the gift is not specified in the title, we learn from the lyric that it is a photo – also an act that represents the Western way of courting:

Zawadi na Baruwa

Baruwayne na zawadi imefika mikononi
‘Meketi sitaradadi aloandika ni nani
Mara ipige raadi njiwa kakaa usoni

Picha yake ‘mechukuwa nzuri mno yakini
Hanena yeye kapowa yuko pahala fulani
Hapo mbio kajitowa hamkabili machoni

A Gift and a Letter

A letter and a gift got into my hands
I sat in wonder who might have written it?
Soon a thunder stroke and a dove stood before me

The dove carried her photo, indeed a very beautiful photo
She told me (in the letter) that she was calmly waiting for me some where
I rushed out, and went to stand before her

In the lyric Mazoea Yana Taabu (The Longing Troubles Me), the verbal exchange clearly indicates something secretive that may be interpreted as the sharing of the ‘flesh’:
Mazoea Yana Taabu

Nyama zetu za ulimi
Na mengineyo sisem
Ni makubwa kwangu

ambazo tukipeana
tuliyo ‘kifanyiana
sijapata kuyaona

The Longing Trobles me

How I long of the sweet words we used to exchange
Other deeds I can’t mention which we used to share
Great was the impact, never did I experience it before

7. LOVE IS SOMETHING TO BE SHARED BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

The axiom: ‘It takes two to tango’ – is well revealed in Swahili love lyrics asserting that it is ‘natural’ that man and women should fall in love. It is almost impossible to find a Swahili lyric dealing with love between the same sex, except when it is about one’s parents or God and prophets. Nor is any kind of Platonic love allowed, for that would be like an act of keeping petrol and matchbox in close proximity as warning goes in Kibiriti na Petroli (Matchbox and Patrol), which is about sexuality obscured in the images of fuel, fire and explosives (Khamis 2002: 200):

Kibiriti na Petroli

Kibiriti na petroli
Hivi ni vitu viwili
Kusalimika muhali
Bora uvitenge mbali

iwapo utaviweka
visije kukutanika
lazima vitaripuka
hapo utasalimika

Chorus: Pamoja ukiviweka
Muhali kusalimika

hiyo ni hiari yako
patazuka mripuko

Matchbox and Petrol

A matchbox and petrol, if you ever keep them
These are two things, that never should meet
Never, for, that affinity will cause an explosion
Better to keep them apart, to avoid an imminent danger

Chorus: If you keep them together, it’s your choice
The danger is unavoidable, an explosion will occur
The philosophy behind the danger of Platonic love here, is definitely derived from Islamic tenets, where the purity of love of man and women culminates in marriage. Love without marriage is a sin, always equated with that of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, who because they disobeyed God, were severely punished. In the following lyric the apple is a sex symbol; a fruit not permitted to be eaten illegally. Here is the lyric; *Adam na Hawa* (Adam and Eve):

**Adam na Hawa**

Wa kwanza walioumbwa  wazee hao wawili  
Sura zao zilikiwa  mfano wa ukamili  
Wakalila hilo tunda  kuikhalifu amri  
Maafa yakawafika  Duniani wakajiri

**Adam and Eve**

The first people to be created are those two ancestors  
Their appearances were an example of perfection  
They ate the forbidden fruit as they did not obey the order  
Calamities befell them, as they were driven to the earth

It is God who gives us everything – including partners of opposite sex. If we are to live satisfactorily, we have to follow His orders as the lyric *Mungu Kanipa Hidaya* (God Gave Me a Token) explicitly emphasises:

**Mungu Kanipa Hidaya**

Furaha nyingi moyoni  Rabi kanijaaliya  
Vipi nikuelezeni  ili yapate weleya  
Ndoto yangu ya zamani  leo imekamiliya  
Siku zote peke yangu  nikiranda na duniya  
‘Napowaona wenzangu  husuda nawaoneya  
Moyo kiona uchungu  fanaka kunifikasiya  
Umenitoka upweke  yangu yamekamiliya  
Rabi amenipa mke  mzuri alotimiya  
Karimu ni roho yake  imani yake tabiya  
Mola kwa imani yake  yeye kanifikasiya  
Tena kwa khiyari yake  mwenye wene kaniumbiya  
Kisha kwa fadhila zake  miye kanitunukiya

43
God Gave Me a Token

My heart is full of happiness, filled in by God
How can I explain this joy so that you can understand
My long-standing dream, is today fulfilled

I was all these days alone, roaming in the world
When I saw my friends (with partners), I became envious
My heart became bitter asking why success didn’t come to me?

You’ve delivered me from solitude, my things are now perfect
You’ve given me a wife God, a beautiful perfect lady
She’s generous in her heart, her compassion to me is a habit

God the giver has shown pity to me as He has thought of me
And in His own will, He has created this one for me
And with His grace, he has rewarded me this lady

8. LOVE IS A CHOICE

A choice of love partners may, at a quick glance, seem to contradict with Mungu Kanipa Hidaya (God Gave me a Token). The notion of choice seems to give ‘love’ a sense of freedom which is not there when one takes God’s providence as the source of love and partnership. But to Swahili poets this is not contradictory at all, for it seems, God’s providence does include freedom of choice in the sense that it is God who induces the choice after all. Here is Mpenzi Wangu (My Darling) emphasising the importance of freedom of choice in the proverbial sense of Love is blind:

Mpenzi Wangu

Kwa mtu nimpendaye mbaya huwa mzuri
Yeyote nimtakaye na mwenyewe akakiri
Katu sitokani naye japo awe na athari

My Love

To the person I love an ugly one becomes beautiful
Anyone I want, provided s/he consents,
Never will I depart with her, though s/he might have a defect

But sometimes a choice may be difficult as exemplified in the lyric Ua Lipi la Kuchuma? (Which Flower to Pick Up?).
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

**Uwa Lipi la Kuchuma?**

Mambo yamenikanganya katu sina la kusema
Mauwa hujitawanya kwenye bustani njema
Na ‘mi sina la kufanya silijui la kuchuma

Chorus: Uwa lipi la kuchuma hili ndilo au lile?

**Which Flower to Pick up?**

I’m totally confused, I’m almost speechless
The flowers are abundantly showing off in this beautiful garden
And I don’t know what to do, I don’t know which one to pick up

Chorus: Which flower to pick up, this or that one?

But one can choose or pick up a wrong flower (person), in the sense that the chosen one is not willing to reciprocate love and therefore what one gets is only a reproach: *Pendo Kitu cha Hiari* (Love is a Free Choice):

**Pendo Kitu cha Hiari**

Pendo kitu cha hiari vipi wanilazimisha?
Kama mimi sijakiri huwezi kunipendesha
Ingawa wewe mzuri sio kujirakhisisha

Chorus: Wengi walokuja kwangu na wote nimewakhini
Ghali sana pendo langu ovyo halipatikani

**Love: A Free Willing**

Love is something of a free choice, how dare you force it to me?
If I have not accepted it, you cannot make me love you
Though you are handsome, I’m not ready to make myself cheap

Chorus: Many who approach me, I reject them all
My love is too expensive, it is not so easily acquired

**9. LOVE IS A SECRET**

There are several reasons why love is supposed to be a secret in Swahili culture. From Islamic point of view, open expression of love to anyone who is not one’s husband or wife is a sin. It follows then that there is a social inhibition towards free and open love to an extent that anyone in love must approach the subject in a covert manner. As a result of this one who is in love is never so sure of how
the loved one may respond if s/he approaches her/him or announces his/her love openly to her or him. This act may even infuriate one who is approached for ‘love’ proposal. We thus have lyrics such as *Mapenzi Yapo Moyoni* (Love is in my Heart), *Nampenda na Kumwambia Siwezi* (I Love Her/Him, but Can’t Tell Her/Him), *Ishara Zanisumbua* (Signs Trouble Me) and *Moyo Nisitiri* (My Heart, Save Me from Shame). The best example of love as a secret is demonstrated in the lyric, *N’napenda kwa Ishara* (I Love By Showing Her/Him Signs):

**N’napenda kwa Ishara**

Kama kupenda ni dhara mwenzenu nimeshadhurika
N’napenda kwa ishara naogopa kutamka
N’nachelea izara na kuja kufedheheka

Chorus: Mwenzenu nishadhurika Wala sina manusura
Naogopa kutamka Naichelea izara

**I Love by Showing Her/Him Signs**

If loving is harmful, I’ve already been harmed
I love only by showing signs, I dare not utter a word
For I fear disgrace, and to be so ashamed

Chorus: I tell you my friends I’m already harmed, hence nothing can save me
I fear disgrace, and to be so ashamed

But love can be so pressing sometimes that one cannot suppress his/her feelings and hence is bent at confessing to someone he/she loves whatever happens. In a situation like this, there is no hesitation but to speak out. We thus, have such lyrics as *Leo N’natowa Siri* (To-day I Break the Silence), *Mapenzi Yamenisibu* (Love Has Afflicted Me), *Kukupenda Sitochoka* (I Can’t Tire Loving You), *Kusbiriki Sitoweza* (I Can’t Wait), *Pendo Halizuilibi* (Love is Unstoppable) and perhaps the more pervasive is *Niibe* (Steal Me):

**Niibe**

Niko radhi kuibiwa madhali mwizi ni wewe
Kwenye khatari kutiwa nimekubali mwenyewe
Niibe nipate tuwa kinipunguwe kiwewe

Chorus: Ni wewe pweke ni wewe niibe ‘sinidhulumu
Nakuruhusu mwenyewe nitachukua jukumu
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

Steal Me

I’m willing to be stolen, only if the thief is you
To be put into dangers, I have accepted whole-heatedly
Steal me so that I can rest, and my worries be reduced

Chorus: It is you, only you, steal me so as I shouldn’t be tormented
I give you my permission, I’ll take all the responsibility

10. LOVE IS A POSSESSION

Love and egoism are inseparable – they always go together. S/he who ever loves wants to monopolise ‘love’ and the loved one. Swahili love lyrics of this type are full of possessives ‘-angu’ as uwa langu (my flower), mali yangu (my property), mpenzi wangu (my darling), kibaya changu (my bad thing). In this category, there are those lyrics that insist on rightful possession, those that remind others not to interfere with his/her possession and those that warn others to stop their moves to interfere with their love affair. Kibaya Changu is the lyric that insists on the rightful possession and reminds others of such possession:

Kibaya Changu

Naona ajabu Umeshughulika
Wajipa adhabu na mengi mashaka
Dunia aibu mwisho takufika

Chorus: Nambiye kizuri alokupa Mungu
Sitokibadili kwa kibaya changu

Wewe una chako kisichokutoka
Chako mali yako huna mshirika
Cha halalali yako kakupupa Rabuka

Chorus: Nambiye kizuri alo kupa Mungu
Sitokibadili kwa kibaya changu

My Bad Thing

I’m surprised, that you are so busy (looking for what is mine)
You actually punish and put yourself in distress
A disgraceful situation that’s what you’ll end up in

Chorus: Give me the best that God has offered you
I won’t exchange it for my bad thing
You have yours, that cannot part with you
That is your property, you have none to share it with
It legally belongs to you, it is given to you by God

Chorus: Give me the best God has offered you,
I won’t exchange it for my bad thing.

_Bure Mnajisumbuwa_ (You Just Put Yourselves in Distress) is a lyric that warns others against any approach to the poet’s lover:

**Bure Mwajisumbuwa**

Mwanieonea choyo ati miye nimepewa
Japo mkisonga nyoyo Mola hatonipotowa
Bure mnaona hayo miye nimekusudiwa

**You Just Put Yourselves in Distress**

You are envious of what I have been given
Though you suffer pain in your heart, God will not dispossess me (of her)
It is in vain that you feel that way, it is to me that gift is intended

11. **LOVE IS A DELICATE THING**

Here a ‘delicate means love can last and survive ‘only’ if lovers take meticulous care to nourish and protect it. One way of expressing this in the lyric is to show how much lovers care about love and about their loved ones, for if they do not love will fall apart. This is done by praising the loved one or by showing that the loved one is the only person the lover cares for. The following lyrics _Macho Yake_ (Her Eyes) selects in the metonymy _macho_ (eyes) as the most attractive part of the beloved’s body that beguiles the lover:

**Macho Yake**

Wasfu wake ni jamali siwezi kuudharau
Umbo lake ni kamili tangu chini hatu juu
Kumuona ni awali ni siku ya sikukuu

Chorus: Si umbo wala si yeye ila macho peke yake

Yapo mengi siyajali ila macho yake huyu
Lisitokee suali mpenzi _I love you_
Mengineyo sikubali ila macho yake tu

Chorus: Si umbo wala si yeye ila macho peke yake
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

Her Eyes
Her countenance is beautiful, I can’t degrade it
Her body is perfect, from below to the top
It’s my first time to see her, this is a day of perfection to me

Chorus: Her figure and countenance notwithstanding, I love her eyes the most

She has plenty to be admired, but I love only her eyes
There should be no question, I love you my darling
I wouldn’t mark anything else, but her eyes only

Chorus: Her figure and countenance notwithstanding, I love her eyes the most

Another way of showing love is a delicate thing, where the love and the loved one are literally fragile. The song Yai (An Egg) in which the poet shows that both love and the loved one should be handled with care, is a good example:

Yai
Rafiki yangu mpenzi mpenzi u mahabubu
Mwenzangu n’nakuenzi sipendi upate tabu
‘Menifanya mpuuzi hunijibu kama bubu

Chorus: Yai ukilichezeya mwisho hukuvunjikia

Yai ni kitu laini halichukui sulubu
Ujuwe lina thamani kulipata lina tabu
Meneno haya amini usidhani nakusubu

Chorus: Yai ukilichezeya mwisho hukuvunjikiya

Yai unapolipata lichukue taratibu
Wende kwa mwendo wa tata kwani lataka sababu
Watahamaki ladata Iwe kwako ni adhabu

Chorus: Yai ukilichezeya mwisho hukuvunjikiya

An Egg
My friend, my darling, the beloved partner
I do value you a lot, that’s why I avoid to cause any discomfort to you
But you make me look like a fool, for you treat me like a dumb
Chorus: When you play with an egg, finally it will burst on you

An egg is a fragile thing, it does not resist rough handling
Behold it for it is a valuable thing, and difficult to get
Believe my words, do not think I am abusing you

Chorus: When you play with an egg, finally it will burst on you

When you get an egg, hold it carefully
Walk slowly with it like a child, a wrong move will cause it to break
You’ll only make it burst and cause problem to you

Chorus: When you play with an egg, finally it will burst on you

12. LOVE IS A PARADOX

Love exits in dualities of opposition – ‘liking’ and ‘hate’, ‘loyalty’ and ‘betrayal’, ‘possession’ and ‘dispossession’ etc. Thus, love entails ‘smiling’, lamenting’ and ‘shading of tears’. The Swahili taarab lyric has epitomised this moods/qualities of love paradox in various ways as ‘lost love’ in Mapenzi Yameshapita (Love is Gone), as ‘remembered love’ in Mbona Sasa Warejea? (Why Are You Coming Back?) as ‘betrayal’, in Mume Wangu Hatosheki (My Husband is Not Satisfied), as ‘painful love’ in Juu ya Miba Inochoma (On the Piercing Thorns), as ‘love full of lies’ in Sinikadhibishe14 (Don’t Call me a Liar) and as ‘fickle love’ in Kisebusebu (Fickleness). In Juu ya Miba In’ochoma, love is compared with piercing thorns:

Juu ya Miba Inochoma

Juu ya miba inochoma sithubutu kurejeya
Vikali imeniuma nikavumiliya
Nimetubu nimekoma Si haba nimeumia

Chorus: Sithubutu kurejeya juu ya miba inochoma
Kuteswa sikuzoweya nemetubu nimekoma

On the Piercing Thorns

On the piercing thorns, I dare not return
They severely hurt me and I persevered
I regret it all for I was not hurt a little

14 The whole concept of this song was taken from Arabic song, La Takziby by Mohamed Abdulwahab.
Chorus: I dare not return, on the piercing thorns
I’m not used to torture, I reject it, that’s the end of it all

In *Kisebusebu* the poet shows the fickle nature of love as revealed by the indecision of the loved one:

**Kisebusebu**

Wajidai hunitaki wenzio kuwasifiya
Kunisengeya huchoki maovu kunizuliya
Kumbe unataharuki na mate kunimezeya

Chorus: Wafanya kisebusebu na kiroho kiko papo

**The Fickle Nature of Love**

You pretend you don’t want me, you speak highly of yourself to your friends
You never tire of backbiting me and never stop speak badly of me
But you care so much about me, and you water your mouth when you see me

Chorus: You pretend you don’t love me, but I know I am in your heart

And ‘*Sinikadhibishe* is about confronting the loved one who is spreading lies against his/her lover.

**‘Sinikadhibishe**

Bure ‘sinikadhibishe kunitia uwongoni
Wala sijibabaishie mimi nimekuoneni
Bure sijikurupushe ‘mekukuta mikononi

Chorus: Ni bure hiyana yako hiyo ulonifanyiya
Nimempata mwenzako mwenye sifa ya tabiya

**Don’t Call Me a Liar**

Don’t call me a liar and don’t lie to me
Don’t try to confuse me, I caught you red-handed
Don’t dodge the issue, I saw you in his/her hands
13. Love is Betrayal

Love can be as fickle and treacherous as lovers themselves. Why do lovers lose direction and become disloyal is a topic in psychology, but disloyalty in love affair is a common misdemeanour and is substantially dealt with in the Swahili taarab lyric. *Naitafuta Mizani* (I’m Looking for a Love Measure) is a song of lament in which a lover is appealing to the audience that his or her loved one should be brought to a love court where their love would be measured on a scale so as to know whose love is a true one.

**Naitafuta Mizani**

Naitafuta mizani ya kupimia mapenzi
Tuyatie kipimoni tulinganie azizi
Yako hayaonekani yangu wayaona wazi

Chorus: Mapenzi yetu yapimwe yajulikane yakini

**I’m Looking for a love Measure**

I’m looking for a love measure to weigh our love
Let’s put your love and mine into it to weigh and compare
Your love will not be seen, mine will be seen clearly

Chorus: Our love should be measured to be known which weighs more

In *Sasa Njiwa Kakutoka* (Now the Dove has Left You) the betrayal is more obvious. A third person is celebrating a victory after he has won the love of a woman who is loved by another man. The dove, so to say, has found another keeper. In fact the captive bird is a common archetype as Belcher (1987: 69) observes … [T]he captive bird has traditionally touched the sensibility of poets, either as a bird in a cage or as a bird in the fowler’s nets … In *Sasa Njiwa Kakutoka*, the dove is as a captive bird who has just exchanged keepers, which seems to indicate that the fate of being kept in a cage follows her wherever she goes.

**Sasa Njiwa Kakutoka**

Njiwa alikuwa wako nyumbani alituliya
Ukavifanya vituko ndipo akakukimbiya
Sasa keshatoka kwako naapa hatorejeya
Now the Bird has Abandon You
The dove was yours, she was living peacefully in your house
But after mistreating her, she has abandoned you
Now she is not in your house, she won't return to you

14. LOVE IS TORTURE

The mere fact that love is not reciprocated is the cause for brooding and lament as the titles of these songs indicate: *Wanikutisha Hilaki* (You are Torturing Me), *Mpenzi Nifikirie* (Darling Be Thoughtful), *Nachelea Pendo* (I’m Scared of this Love), *Mapenzi ni Kitu Ghali* (Love is an Expensive Thing), *Namtafuta Mpenzi* (I’m Looking for My Darling), *Napenda Kitu si Changu* (I Love Something that is not Mine), *Pendo Lipi ni la Kweli* (Which Love is True), *Fikira na Mazoea* (Thoughts and Being Used to You), *Hanijali* (She Doesn’t Care about Me) etc. The culmination of love torture is ‘tears’ as in *Machozi Yananimwaika* (Tears are Pouring from My Eyes):

**Machozi Yananimwaika**

Msidharau mapenzi
Katu kula huwezi
Kazi kufanya huwezi

Chorus: Machozi yananimwaika
Nalianalia ninasikitika

**Tears are Pouring from My Eyes**

Don't belittle love, love is a miracle
Never can you eat, when things overwhelm you
You can’t do any work, when love burns you so much

Chorus: Tears are pouring from my eyes, I have none to comfort me
I’m sobbing and sobbing, for love tortures me

15. LOVE IS A SEXUAL ACT

In response to the question what is love, Lerner (1979: 212) puts ‘love’ in relation to ‘sexuality’ and ‘marriage’ as … [t]he epiphenomenon of sexual appetite and marriage as an institution for the regulation of sexual behaviour. In the Swahili taarab lyric both terms ‘love’ and ‘sexuality’ have in the past been used with maximum reticence, but nowadays, poets write about love with explicitness. For example, in the past, the shape and appearance of a female
sexual organ was described in the symbolism of the flesh of a duck which represents the female sexual organ and eating it is an act of copulation.

**Nyama ya Bata**

Bata ni mtamu sana ukijua siri yake  
Ni laini kutafuna kama sufu nyama yake  
Bata mle kwa kunona na masala umpake

The flesh of a duck is so delicious if you know  
the secret of its taste  
It’s soft to the bite, like wool is the flesh  
You eat it when it is juicy and you put heavy gravy on it

16. **LOVE IS AN IMPOSSIBLE ROMANTIC ADVENTURE**

Lovers plunge into adventures for a number of reasons. They may love without being loved and think persistence is the only way to secure the denied love. They may suffer inferiority complex by thinking that they may not be accepted. There may just be affected by a degree of uncertainty that hinders them from venturing into love proposal. They may have to fight their way towards winning love of someone who already loves somebody else. They may indulge themselves in stealing other people’s lovers etc. The poets in this case will paint the predicament and augment it as a nerve-breaking phenomenon. In *Lulu* (Pearl) the poet undertakes a journey of picking up a pearl at the bottom of the sea, as he ventures through strong waves and undercurrents in an ocean full of sharks and octopuses. The poem becomes a narrative, relating a story of adventure:

**Lulu**

Nilipiga mbizi kati ya bahari  
‘lisema siwezi mawimbi makali  
Kunisha pumzi mimi sikujali

Si papa si pweza wanyama khatari  
Niliwashangaza kwa moyo jabari  
Sikuvichokoza sikutaka shari

Roho nimeuza kwa kitu fakhari  
Ni lulu si chaza il’oniathiri  
Il’onipumbaza ni yake jamali

Na kumbe siwezi kuvunja safari
**Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric**

Nimejipa kazi kurudi muhali
Ni kama mkizi nakufa kwa ari

Chorus: Rabi univue lulu niipate
Khatari sioni lulu naitaka

**Pearl**

I made a dive, deep into the ocean
I thought I couldn’t make it, cutting through the fierce waves
I never cared that the waves would suffocate me

I feared no sharks or octopus, these indeed dangerous creatures
In fact I startled them all for my daring act and valiant heart
However, I never stirred them up for fear of trouble

I sold my soul for this precious thing
It was the pearl not the oyster that affected me
What did beguile me was her beauty

I realise I couldn’t break the journey
I gave myself a task, I wouldn’t turn back
It’s like cuttlefish, I will rather die in the hands of the catcher

Chorus: God help me to get the pearl
I don’t mind the dangers, all I want is to get the pearl

**17. Love is Craving for Material Things**

Prior to the 90s, the taarab lyric was normally known to depict romanticized love or love between the sexes – however, with the introduction of liberalisation policies in Tanzania and the intensification of global influences through the mass media, the emphasis has shifted dramatically. In *mipasho* – a sub-genre of modern taarab, the lyric is full of cynicism, abuses, rivalry and craving for material things. This is hardly surprising, for globalisation goes with commodification and the psychology of consumerism or cargo mentality. The lyric of the song, *Mimi wa Karne Ishirini na Moja* (I’m a Lady of the Twentieth Century) says it all. It is not only a song which depicts aftermath of the global phenomenon with a perverse sense of individualism and materialism, but also marking the change of times, values and love tendencies including a change from romanticized love to crude love or love for material things. He is the *song Mimi wa Karne ya Ishirini na Moja*: 

55
Mimi wa Karne ya Ishirini na Moja

Chorus (1): Haiya, haiya, haiya namlambe, namlambe
Haiya, haiya, haiya New Millenium imeingiya
Tizameni wa karne nimeingiya
Mimi ni top teni nimeingiya
Tizameni wa karne nimeingiya
Mimi ni top teni nimeingiya
Nafanya mentanens kwa soft-weya
Nafanya mentanens kwa had-weya
Nafanya mentanens kwa softiweya
Nafanya mentanes kwa hadiweya
Microsoft staili naichezeya
Microsoft staili naichezeya
Microsoft staili naichezeya
Microsoft staili naichezeya
Haiya, haiya, haiya, namlambe namlambe

Solo: Ndiye miye mwanamke wa karne hii mpya
Niliyeumbika kike nd’o miye nimetokeya
Ndiye miye mwanamke wa karne hii mpya
Niliyeumbika kike nd’o miye nimetokeya

Nyote namkusanyike shamba na mjini piya
Bure msihangaike Mi’ hamtonifikiya
Nyote namkusanyike shamba na mjini piya
Bure msihangaike Mi’ hamtonifikiya

Mkitaka msitake wakati wangu miye
Niacheni nitambike Ilobakia mliye
Mkitaka msitake wakati wangu miye
Niacheni nitambike Ilobakia mliye

Chorus (2): Mimi ndiye topu wenu karne ishirini na moja eee
Zimekwisha ndaro zenu hamna chenu kimoja
Mimi ndiye topu wenu karne ishirini na moja
Zimekwisha ndaro zenu hamna chenu kimoja

Nimepoa sina presha nakula nakshinakshi
Nyiye yenu yamekwisha mimi hamnishughulishi

Ndipo najifaraguwa ni nafasi yangu miye
Kwa mambo n’noyajuwa kiboko yenu ni miye
Ndipo najifaraguwa ni nafasi yangu miye
Kwa mambo n’noyajuwa kiboko yenu ni miye
Solo: Na hili bodi ni saizi
Tazama yangu mavazi
Na hili bodi ni saizi
Tazama yangu mavazi
Nguo za hadhi na ujuzi
Si tetroni kudarizi
Nguo za hadhi na ujuzi
Si tetroni kudarizi
Hiyo ndiyo yangu hadhi
Ndiyo yangu matunuzi
Hiyo ndiyo yangu hadhi

Chorus (3): (Repeat as above chorus 2)

Solo: Kwenye barahi ya huba
Matamu yangu mahaba
Kwenye bahari ya huba
Matamu yangu mahaba
Nawaliza majibaba
Zaidi hatosiriba
Nawaliza majibaba
Zaidi hatosiriba
Nayajuliya si haba
Kwa hizo zangu huba
Nayajuliya si haba
Kwa hizo zangu huba

Chorus (4): (Repeat as above chorus 2)

Solo: Kwenye mpya same chaji
Nitazameni hodari
Kwenye mpya same chaji
Nitazameni hodari
Kwa sayansi ni mahiri
Utabaki na ushari
Kwa sayansi ni mahiri
Utabaki na ushari
Mimi kwenu natesa
Teknolojiya ya kisasa
Mimi kwenu natesa
Teknolojiya ya kisasa

Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric
Chorus (5): (Repeat as above chorus 2)

Solo: Mkija kwa juu nawadaka nyiye nyiye hamnitatizi 2
     Mkija kwa chini nawachota nyiye nyiye hamna ujuzi
     Mkija kwa mbele nawakamata nyiye nyiye hamniwezi
     Mkija kwa nyuma nawasukuma nyiye nyiye nawapa dozi
     Mkija kwa juu nawadaka nyiye nyiye hamnitatizi
     Mkija kwa chini nawachota nyiye nyiye hamna ujuzi
     Mkija kwa mbele nawakamata nyiye nyiye hamniwezi
     Mkija kwa nyuma nawasukuma nyiye nyiye hamna ujuzi

     Narusha roho muumiye narusharo ho mpagawe nyiye
     Narusha roho muuguwe narusharo ho muuguwe nyiye
     Narusha roho muumiye narusha roho mpagawe nyiye
     Narusha roho muuguwe narusha roho muuguwe nyiye

     Kitikititi natikisika nimebobeya siigizi miye
     Na hekaheka hainisumbuwi nimebobeya n’na cheti
     Kitikititi natikisika nimebobeya siigizi miye
     Na hekaheka hainisumbuwi nimebobeya n’na cheti

I’m a Lady of the Twentieth Century

Chorus: Haya, haya, haya, you say whatever you want to say
     Haya, haya, haya, a New Millennium has arrived
     Look at me! The lady of the New Millennium has arrived
     I’m among the top ten to arrive
     Look at me! The lady of the New Millennium has arrived
     I’m among the top ten to arrive
     I do the maintenance with software
     I do the maintenance with hardware
     I do the maintenance with software
     I do the maintenance with hardware
     Microsoft style I’ve mastered it all
     Microsoft style I’ve mastered it all
     Microsoft style I’ve mastered it all
     Microsoft style I’ve mastered it all
     Haya, haya, haya, let you say whatever you want to say

Solo: I’m a lady of this new century
     A perfect lady I’m, one destined to emerge
     I’m a lady of this new century
     A perfect lady I’m, one destined to emerge
Images of Love in The Swahili Taarab Lyric

Let all of you group up, from villages to the city
Do not trouble your selves, you wont reach my level
Let all of you group up, from villages to the city
Do not trouble your selves, you wont reach my level

Whether you want it or not, this is my time
Let me strut and swagger and you just cry
Whether you want it or not, this is my time
Let me strut and swagger and you just cry

Chorus (2):  I’m the top among you, I’m of the twentieth century
Your intrigues have finished you have nothing else to offer
I’m the top among you, I’m of the twentieth century
Your intrigues have finished you have nothing else to offer

I’m at ease, I’m without any pressure I’m eating my things with style
Your intrigues have finished, you don’t worry me at all

That is why I strut and swagger, it is my chance, it’s really mine
For what I know, I’m the best among you, I am
That is why I strut and swagger, it is my chance, it’s really mine
For what I know, I’m the best among you, I am

Solo:  And my body is of perfect size, it attracts anyone
Look the way I dress, my body looks just fine
And my body is of perfect size, it attracts anyone
Look the way I dress, my body looks just fine
Elegant dresses that I know to choose and buy them with US dollars
It’s not tetron that I wear and expose myself in the streets
Elegant dresses that I know to choose and buy them with US dollar
It’s not tetron that I wear and expose myself in the street
That is my status, the meek should know
That is my buying, the ball is at your court now
That is my status, the meek should know
That is my buying, the ball is at your court now

Chorus (3):  (Repeat as above, chorus 3)

Solo:  In the ocean of love, I, the expert, am swimming
Sweet is my love, it’s full of psychology
In the ocean of love, I, the expert, am swimming
Sweet is my love, it’s full of psychology
I make rascals cry, (even) those who are so attractive
He wont change me as a result of this, I have a new technology of love to change him
I make rascals cry, (even) those who are also attractive
He wont change me as a result of this, I have a new technology of love to change him

I know how to give it to them, I do make them crazy
For that love of mine, you can’t compete with me
I know how to give it to them, I do make them crazy
For that love of mine, you can’t compete with me

Chorus (4): (Repeat as above, chorus 2)

Solo: With new same charge, I put you all in distress
Look how skilful I’m, alive in the satellite
With new same charge, I put you all in distress
Look how skilful I’m, alive in the satellite
As for science I am so knowledgeable, I fly in a rocket
You will remain quarrelsome, you are outdated
As for science I am so knowledgeable, I fly in a rocket
You will remain quarrelsome, you are outdated

I put you in distress, you should know that
The modern technology is my line
I put you in distress, you should know that
The modern technology is my line

Chorus (5): (Repeat as above, chorus 2)

Solo: When you drop from above, I’ll catch you, you don’t startle me
If you emerge from the bottom, I just pick you up, you don’t have the know how
If you come from the front, I just capture you, you can’t defeat me
If you come from behind, I just push you aside and make you go crazy

When you drop from above, I’ll catch you, you don’t startle me
If you emerge from the bottom, I just pick you up, you do not have the know how
If you come from the front, I just capture you, you can’t defeat me
If you come from behind, I just push you aside and make you go crazy
I am mocking you so that you become inflicted with pain,
I am mocking you so that you go crazy
I am mocking you so that you fall sick
I am mocking you so that you fall sick
I am mocking you so that you become inflicted with pain,
I am mocking you so that you go crazy
I am mocking you so that you fall sick
I am mocking you so that you fall sick
I am carried over on a throne as I swing about,
I am an expert I imitate no one
Bad times never bother me, I’m used to it, I’ve a certificate
I am carried over on a throne as I swing about,
I am an expert I imitate no one
Bad times never bother me, I’m used to it, I’ve a certificate

The change from the traditional taarab lyric to mipasho lyric is not only a shift from images of romanticized love to those of love of material things, but a shift from strict prosody to blank and sometimes free verse style or a mixture of these. It is also a shift from some dynamics of textuality to dynamic of orality with more repetitive, antiphonal and choral effects. This makes the lyrics appear too long and monotonous from a chirographic point of view, though the emphasis here is not the value of words of the lyric, but the percussive effect that provide the dance mode.

CONCLUSION

In describing love images in the taarab lyric, we have tried to demonstrate how the Swahili taarab poet reaches for objects, concepts, figures of speech, tropes, symbols and icons to create the appropriate images for different facets of love, love processes and love situations. Most of the images like kunguru (a crow), tasi (a kind of sea water fish), lulu (pearl), nanasi (a pineapple), zambarau (a damson fruit), mung’unye/mumunye (a gourd resembling a vegetable marrow) etc are derived locally. Others are derived from cultural exchange through the intercontinental trade between the peoples of the Arab world, of Persia, India, and China, and also eastern and central Africa (Mazrui & Shariff 1994: 3). The scope of image acquisition however, goes beyond the cultural exchange through intercontinental trade. It includes an exchange of ideological culture encapsulated in concepts, icons, metaphors, words, phrase and images like mwezi or qamary (the moon), waridi (a rose), nyota (a star), ghazali (a gazelle), mabanati wa peponi or hurul-l-eyn (ladies of paradise), ratabu (dates), komamanga (a pomegranate) and asumini (a jasmine) that are of Arabian origin.
Nordic Journal of African Studies

– passed over to Swahili culture perhaps from Arabic taarab via mass media such as print media, phonograph record, sound film and radio.

However, images like kibiriti (a match box), petroli (petrol), pete (a ring), asali (honey), simu ya mkono (a mobile telephone), buzi (a boozer), dala (US dollar), pajero, (a Pajero) masidi (a Mercedes), vazi (dress), softweya (software), hadiweya (hard ware), intaneti (internet), roketi (rocket) and bingwa (expert) may have originated from Europe through the same media channels or perhaps, very recently, from transnational television channels.

A separate category however, can be delineated – especially the one referring to images of women such as those derived from heavenly bodies (e.g. mwezi & nyota), flowers (e.g. waridi, asumini & afu), fruit (e.g. embe dodo, nanasi, tini, balungi & tufaha), birds (e.g. tausi, njiwa, chiriku, kunguru, kuku, bata, ninga & mnana), other animals (e.g. ghazali, chezi & nyoka), sacred places (e.g. peponi & firdausi). Some of these images are derived locally and others transculturally, but all show that taarab, both from a point of view of local practices and global influences, is indeed impregnated with interesting gender issues and sexuality.

REFERENCES

Belcher, Margaret. 1987.


Knappert, Jan (ed. & tran.) 1972.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


Askew, Kelly M. 2002. 

Barber, Karin (ed.). 1997. 


Blake, Kathleen. 1983. 

Brewster, Anne & Guess, Jeff. 1990. 


_The Swahili Taarab Lyric_. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hyde, Thomas. 1986. 


