



The 'Waswahili' and Their Hold on East Africa's Popular Musical Culture

By Stanley Gazemba



Port cities are melting pots of culture world over. They spur the evolution of new cultures, languages and act as gateways to the world. It is within this context therefore that *taarab*, a distinct music form that defines East Africa internationally, found fertile ground along the vast coastal strip that was previously the domain of the Sultan of Zanzibar.

The East African Coast has had a profound effect on the hinterland in terms of trade and cultural development and is home of the Swahili civilisation that came into strength during the Daybuli period between AD 900 and AD 1200. It is the Swahili who controlled the region's trade from AD 1200 and bequeathed modern East Africa its lingua franca, the Swahili language and left their mark on the musical cultures of the inland indigenous peoples.

A sensuous melodic music deriving from diverse cultures that impacted the coastal culture over the years, *taarab* easily takes centre-stage in Swahili culture. While it is not necessarily amongst the oldest music forms in the region, given that ethnic groups in the hinterland had been creating music on reed flutes and thumb pianos for generations, *taarab* is amongst the earliest to be recorded commercially and exported from the region. Performed and recorded for nearly a century now, *taarab*, which has its origins in the Arab court music of nineteenth-century Zanzibar, owes its development to the political class of Zanzibar.

Sultan [Said Barghash](#), who ruled Zanzibar between 1870 and 1888, is credited with introducing *taarab* to the East African coast and shepherding its growth into the cross-cultural *mélange* it has become today. Barghash, who loved music, and recognised its power as a social tool, looked to Egypt to develop his own court music, bringing in an Egyptian band to teach local musicians and sending a Zanzibari musician, Ibrahim Muhammed, to study music in Cairo.

On his return, Muhammed formed the Zanzibar Taarab Orchestra to entertain at the palace. The success of Muhammed's group inspired the formation of other groups, notably [Ikhwani Safaa](#), which continues to be active and popular in the present day Zanzibari music scene.

But the one musician who took the music out of the palace to the mainland and beyond is [Siti binti Saad](#), a Zanzibari woman who Swahili-nized and popularized the genre beyond Zanzibar in its formative years.

Siti was a woman of many firsts. She introduced Swahili lyrics to the then predominantly Arab music. She also broke the glass ceiling for female musicians in a conservative Islamic culture and started a revolution. Her Swahili lyrics helped spread *taarab* to the mainland, as far as Rwanda and Kismayo. Gradually female singers started taking up the lead role, with men playing instruments as backing performers.

In the early 1930s while recording in India for Columbia Music Recording Company, Siti teamed up with Egyptian musician Umm Kulthum in a collaboration that introduced the full Egyptian cello, violin and bass strings section, playing alongside the familiar accordion, *oud*, *qanun* zither and *ney* flute. The result was a string of crossover recordings that attained huge commercial success, turning Siti into a veritable star at home and in India until her death in 1950.

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Siti's success paved way for another iconic and controversial Zanzibari female musician, Fatuma binti Baraka, better known as Bi Kidude, who would go on to popularise her "*unyago*" brand of *taarab* worldwide, borrowing from her own radical past and characterized by its feminist politics in a conservative Islamic Sultanate. Although she started singing in the 1920s, Bi Kidude's career remained in limbo for close to 50 years until the mid-70s when she rose to international prominence. In 2005, the cigarette-smoking grandma of *taarab* was awarded by World Music Expo (WOMEX) in recognition for her contribution to world music as a composer and performer, and is immortalized in Andy Jones' 2006 [documentary](#), *As Old As My Tongue: The Myth and Life of Bi Kidude*. Although her date of birth is unknown, she was allegedly over 100 years when she passed away in 2013.

Traditional *taarab* has gone on to spawn more pop-oriented styles such as *beni*, *kidumbak* and 'modern *taarab*' that do not necessarily adhere to the traditional set structures of composition and arrangement, but lean more towards the dance styles popular on the streets at the time, and whose compositions are often spontaneous and whimsical, oft-times medleys of popular songs by other non-*taarab* musicians, and which are geared towards making the audience sing and dance along as they have a good time. These new styles often accompany the popular street parades at festivals in modern Zanzibar such as the annual Festival of the Dhow countries and Sauti za Busara.

While *taarab* has achieved international stature as authentic East African music, it has never ruled the dancehalls of the region unlike Tanzanian *dansi* music, *benga* music from Western Kenya, Congolese rumba, and modern derivatives of *dansi* such as '*bongo flava*'.

As *taarab* was continuing its dalliance with the Middle East and the Orient in its development, on mainland Tanzania the musicians were being encouraged to look inwards to their roots for inspiration. The phenomenal growth of '*dansi*' or '*ngoma*' music on mainland Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s is also attributed to politicians; and like *taarab*, its umbilical cord is attached to Dar es Salaam along the coast, despite drawing inspiration and musicians from the myriad indigenous cultures of Tanzania. When Julius Nyerere took over leadership of the newly independent Tanzania in 1964, he created the Ministry of Culture and Youth, whose main mandate was to marshal and revive Tanzania's cultural wealth. Nyerere actively set up cultural centres in towns all over Tanzania and encouraged musicians to mine their rich cultural heritage even as they embraced foreign concepts.

It is his steerage that led to the establishment of vibrant performance spaces in Dar es Salaam such as the DDC Social Hall in Kariakoo and the Vijana Social Hall, and the memorable resident bands that played in those venues during events mostly sponsored by government parastatals and corporations. Bands sponsored by individuals also received support from the State, notably mega hit maker [Mbaraka Mwinshehe](#) and his Morogoro Jazz whose highlights included representing Tanzania at a World Fair the Osaka 1970 Exposition (Expo 70) in Japan. Radio Tanzania inundated Tanzanian living rooms with hits from notable bands nurtured by Nyerere's hand such as the ruling party TANU-sponsored [Vijana Jazz](#) Dar es Salaam Development Corporation's [DDC Mlimani Park Orchestra](#), the National Union of Tanzanian Workers' NUTA Jazz; among others, spurring a veritable sense of patriotism among ordinary Tanzanians.

By the late 1970s Dares Salaam, the country's musical epicenter, was at its most vibrant, with up to 30 active bands performing in different venues almost every day of the week. A good percentage of these bands were made up of itinerant Congolese musicians who had settled in the city, bringing with them a rich musical experience from Kinshasa via Paris and Brussels, and which further enriched the *dansi* oeuvre.

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Most multi-national record companies active in the 1970s and early 80s like Polygram and CBS had their regional headquarters in Nairobi. Tanzanian and Congolese bands crossed over to Nairobi to record at the superior studios, influencing the Kenyan bands they interacted with in the process. Nairobi pirates made a kill too, snapping up the hits and inundating the streets with bootleg tapes. The growth of *dansi* was phenomenal spreading its tentacles from the pleasure halls of cosmopolitan Dar es Salaam to other outback towns all over Tanzania and beyond, spilling Tanzanian bands like Wanyika and its various off-shoots, among them Simba Wanyika, Super Wanyika and Les Wanyika, across the border into Kenya, where they went on to dominate the scene in Nairobi in the late 1970s and 1980s. A notable scion of the Wanyika stable was Issa Juma Singano, who sat in as studio drummer on a number of *benga* hits recorded at Chandarana Studios in Kericho town in the mid-70s. A drummer dictates the pace of any piece of dance music.

The growth however came to an abrupt end when Nyerere stepped down in 1985, paving way for a new youthful sound, '*bongo flava*', which drew influences from zouk, reggae, hip-hop and a slew of other foreign musical styles, the lyrics, increasingly abandoning the classic Kiswahili for street slang

and the producers maximising digital technology.

But even as the coastal strip continued to exert its influence and dictate the direction the music and popular culture of the modernising East African states, the hinterland remained suspicious of the coast, silently resisting the influence of their culture. It is an old suspicion of the world-wise and mixed-blood 'Waswahili' that dates back to the slave-trading days when the *kanzu*-clad coastals were often at the head of the slave-raiding parties wielding their fire-spitting muskets.

In most Kenyan trading towns that the ancient traders established along the old slave routes there's always a Swahili settlement variously called Majengo or Mjini, often seedy tin-roofed rectangular blocks with wattle walls and a thin veneer of plaster built around a central courtyard, and which cluster around a mosque. Often there will be a palm tree or two in the village square that never comes to fruit in the inland climate, a reminder of the residents' heritage. It is here that you might chance to hear strains of *taarab* wafting from an open doorway as the *khanga*-clad housewife busies herself at the *jiko* preparing *kaimati* or *muhogo wa nazi* for sale.

Outside these quasi-urban settlements, the Swahili are still perceived as sly and cunning. It could be the reason why *taarab*, unlike the rumba-flavoured *dansi*, has never had a profound effect beyond the coastal strip. Moreso the music's sensual rhythms appear best suited to the unhurried lifestyle associated with the coast, the lyrics – oftentimes co-wives and mistresses bickering and bad-mouthing over a lover or a shared husband – more at home in a perfumed coastal harem than a sun-baked thatched village inland. The interior, it would seem, pulsates to its own rhythms, which better find expression in the more vigorous and malleable *dansi*.

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Which may explain, why the few times *taarab* has been embraced by the people of the interior it has had to adapt to their rhythms'. There was a [revolution](#) on Zanzibar Island in 1964 when the Swahili populace decided they had finally had enough of the Arab overlords. The bulk of these Swahili people, were freed slaves brought in from the hinterland called 'wangwana', who served the Arab traders as carriers, soldiers, gun-bearers and interpreters on the slave and ivory-raiding forays that had penetrated as far inland as Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika by 1830. They were also instrumental in the success of David Livingstone's 1856 expedition and those by Henry Morton Stanley into the Congo in 1876. The majority 'wangwana' wanted to have a say not just in the politics of the island, but its culture as well. It is this revolution that ushered the more eclectic beats of the hinterland into the island's music, and which would later bear off-shoots of *taarab* like *kidumbak* and *beni* that were more danceable.

In Kenya, when musician Asha Abdo Suleiman, better known as Malika, exploded on the national music scene in the mid 1990s with her smash hit '[Vidonge](#)', it was the first time that a *taarab* song had achieved remarkable cross-over pop success. *Vidonge* was a massive hit that was redone by Nairobi-based Congolese band [Virunga](#). But there was something unique about 'Vidonge', and which may have been its selling point, especially in the hinterland; it wasn't pure *taarab* in the traditional sense. Instead it was heavily laced with *chakacha* rhythms from the Bantu-speaking Mijikenda people who live along the Kenyan coast.

Likewise, when Malkia Rukia attained pop stardom with her *taarab* hit '[Penzi Kwetu](#)' her producer, the fabled Andrew Burchell, better known as Rais Madebe of Mombasa's Jikoni Records had to do

the unthinkable, adapting the music to a hip-hop beat and inviting rapper Buda Boaz to rap over her smooth *taarab* lyrics in order for it to find favour with the mainstream club DJs. It proved to be scandalous in the staid Muslim culture that could not accommodate crude slang expressions like Buda Boaz's 'shusha dada' (literally 'let slip, sister') and their euphemisms in a *taarab* song, causing Malkia marital problems; but it worked, going on to feature on Charlie Gillett's popular 'World of Music' on BBC World Service.

Other Mombasa *taarab* artistes would later follow suit, including Nyota Ndogo and Prince Adio, who both found success with a mainstream listenership doing sassy street-savvy *taarab* music to a hip-hop beat, as opposed to the way it was traditionally done.

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Beyond *taarab* and *dansi*, the coast has had a profound impact on other genres of Kenya's popular music as well, with Mombasa artists often occupying the centre-stage of new developments on the urban music scene. In the experimental funky 1970s when young urbanites were trying to come up with a fashionable and youthful musical sound that they could not only dance to in the disco halls but also claim, it is the musicians from the coast in Mombasa who led the way. Names like Slim Ali, [Kelly Brown](#), Faisal Brown, Ishmael Jingo, Steele Beuttah and Sal Davies set the capital's disco floors on fire, with [Sal Davies](#) and Kelly Brown venturing further abroad, both finding success in the UK and Germany respectively.

In the hip-hop era of the 1990s and it is Mombasa street emcees Buda Boaz and Fundi Frank who again pioneered, hawking out home-made mix-tapes in which they experimented laying Swahili lyrics over electric grooves lifted from the tapes they had sourced from US marines who had docked over in Mombasa. Nairobi's latter-day bad boy of rap, [Poxi Presha](#), was a Mombasa product. All these talented musicians had to shift base to Nairobi to earn fame because that is where all the studios, record labels and media houses were.

One of the most recognisable bands to rise out of the Mombasa beach circuit of the 1970s, and which went on to become a Kenyan export of repute abroad is [Them Mushrooms](#) band. Composed of the Harrison siblings hailing from Kaloleni in Mombasa, and the brainchild of the eldest, Teddy Kalanda Harrison, Them Mushrooms had everything in place to propel them to their place in history as Kenya's first successful musical export internationally.

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Hailing from a middle-class family in Tudor, Mombasa, the Harrison siblings were bitten by the musical bug early in life, cutting their teeth doing covers of the *dansi* and Congolese classics that dominated VOK (Voice of Kenya) radio. With a loan from their supportive mother in 1976 they bought their first drum-set and turned professional, joining the lucrative Mombasa beach hotel circuit where they landed their first contract with the Eden Roc Hotel. It is at the beach hotels that Them Mushrooms gradually started defining their individual style, settling for a cross of reggae, zouk and high-life laid over *benga*, rumba or the *chakacha* and *nzele* rhythms of their native village in Kaloleni. They called this sound 'mushroom soup'. It is this style that they would later popularize at The Carnivore restaurant when they moved to Nairobi, where they were the resident band from

1986 till 1989.

The chart-topping and decorated band exhibited unmatched discipline and versatility during their prime and took their social responsibilities seriously. In 1988 they released a song about AIDS at a time when the condition was still very much a taboo subject. The Ministry of Health went on to use their song '*Ukimwi ni Hatari*' extensively in their public-awareness campaigns. Sadly, the band never received a cent from the government in royalties, nor did they receive official recognition for their role.

Of all Kenyan bands, it is Them Mushrooms that has made the most forays abroad. In 1990 they were officially invited by the Ethiopian government to play at a conference in Addis Ababa. This would later sire a month-long tour that took them to diverse regions of the country, and which earned them a solid fan-base in Ethiopia. They would later follow up with successful sojourns in the Middle East in the mid 90s, touring Djibouti, Sharjah, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and many other Emirate states before deciding they were ripe enough to try and conquer Europe, thanks in large to their smash hit '*Jambo Bwana*' that had not only grown to become the unofficial anthem for promoting Kenya abroad as a tourist destination, but had also made it to the silver screen, with the slogan "Hakuna Matata" from *Jambo Bwana* featuring in the Walt Disney movie '*Lion King*', catapulting the band to international stardom.

So successful was '*Jambo Bwana*' internationally it was redone by the European pop band Boney M. This, and the response from their European fans who frequented The Carnivore, convinced the band that they were ready for Europe. They first toured Italy before winding up in Germany on the invite of a friend.

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Bristling with youthful energy, they tried to find gigs, crossing the border to Switzerland, where another friend, cabaret singer Joe Mwenda, had landed them a temporary gig. Frustrated, they moved to London, where they attempted to find work with the assistance of Osibisa band's Teddy Osei. But their attempt to find a foothold in the competitive European showbiz circuit was to prove disastrous in Germany, thanks in part to unscrupulous dealers who took advantage of their naivety and the fact that they were foreigners.

Fortune may have evaded the band in Europe, just like it has their compatriots at home, but musicians from the coast continue to play a crucial role in the direction popular music in Kenya takes today, their rich heritage cemented in the country's national anthem, which borrows from a Miji Kenda folk tune.

Them Mushrooms three-month sojourn in Europe is winding and heart-breaking, but the short of it is that this was one band that was well-placed to make a success, had they received just a fraction of support - mostly logistical — from their own government, like the Tanzanian *dansi* bands did.

By denying Them Mushrooms support, the intransigent interior, had once again scored a hit at the 'Waswahili', putting paid to the Swahili saying that a prophet is never appreciated in their hometown.

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