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**Publicizing the Private: Feminist Locution in Taarab Songs  
and performance**

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Scholars have for long deliberated and debated what is truly public and private in the articulation of feminist agendas in the world of Kiswahili artistic compositions. This is true for the various written literary texts in all genres as well as the diverse strands of taarab music/poetry compositions. The issues that are central in animating feminist locution in these art forms and which contribute to the incessant making and re-making of the feminist public and private spaces are neither fixed nor immutable—hence the shifting of these factors from time to time dictate the nature and essence of the contestations of what ought to be public and private. In other words, given that women’s voice in both are forms—song and written literature—are ever changing, so too is the discussion of what is rightly perceived as public or private. Thus, what constitutes public and private in the myriad interests of feminist discourses and therefore what animates locution in such discourses is dependent on concrete material interests as well as the relations those interests evoke. These interests are central in informing disputations with other contending interests, occasioning either expressions of dissatisfaction or affirmation. Consequently, strategic and pragmatic political positioning, control schisms and schemes, gender relations and material contestations are always constant and continuous themes that get critically nuanced in these disputations—hence the gist of these compositions.

There has been much animated critiquing of feminist image presentations and gender articulation in Kiswahili writing, but there has not been similar and thorough going interest shown in the Swahili taarab song. Yet it is a sphere that is predominantly and conspicuously female in terms of its subject matter, composition and performance, a sphere in which there is a subtle politicization and publicization of supposedly private feminist concerns. However, the few studies on the Swahili taarab song and performance have indeed pointed out that the whole taarab discourse is an intimately female sphere that fosters and advances women’s voices (Fair, L. 2001, Askew, K. M. 2002).

Taarab songs have a long and rich history as a medium of social commentary among the inhabitants of the East African coast. This is a history that dates back to the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1870 onwards) during the reign of Sultan Seyyid Bargash in the Zanzibar Sultanate. Taarab at that time was essentially an elite court music sang in Arabic within the courts of the ruling Arab elite, the merchant class as well as the land owing aristocracy. It was as such inevitably performed on imported Egyptian and Arabic music instruments. Its transition to Kiswahili and therefore, its movement away from the sultan’s courts to the general public is credited to Siti binti Saad a woman of slave ancestry (Askew, *ibid*), who having observed and internalized the intricacies of taarab music, its artistry and potential as a

terrain for social articulation, started composing and singing taarab songs in Kiswahili.

Taarab songs are as such sung Swahili oral poetry, primarily by women as singers and performers and less often as composers. (It should be noted, however, many taarab songs have multiple composers in the sense that one person will be credited with the poem, another with music arrangement and another with singing. It is not uncommon for one person to combine all the credits). Taarab, as Askew (102-3) explains, takes its name from the Arabic *tarabun* meaning joy, pleasure, delight, rapture, amusement, entertainment, music, or ecstasy, a complete engagement with music. It is imperative to add that this “complete engagement with music” spanning poetic composition, music arrangement and performance, is not essentially a private affair but rather a publicly accessible art form whose rendition spans both private and public interests, and in which what is sung is not only open to multiple interpretations, but also constitutes social action deployed to negotiate socioeconomic relations.

Both Fair and Askew are agreed that, taarab songs are composed as social commentaries in which women as “composers” respond to and transform local debates about class, gender and social relations into verse and weave personal and communal experiences into songs, sung as personal statements on morals, relations and probity. The taarab song lyrics are embellished poetic compositions, rich in literary devices through which the songs ridicule socially unacceptable and deviant behavior, praise and insult, warn and admonish perceived or imaginary personal or collective enemies. The messages in the songs are sometimes products of true life experiences, popular beliefs and discernible lifestyles. They also reflect the nature of relations to social institutions, modes of interrelations or material circumstances. They may also be protests to or affirmations of social morals/behaviors such as greed, idleness, gossip, rumour and all manner of abhorrent sexual misconduct. Furthermore, they are also expressions of joy, elation and personal or collective triumph. In essence, the songs are intricate yet generalized responses to social realities, beliefs, traditions, material conditions and institutional dynamics normally projected as personal or collective needs, desires, losses, miseries— in a word, various forms of social, economic and political struggles. They are in essence subtle strategies deployed to question, analyze and reshape material and social relations. They are stratagems set out to publicize and politicize private struggles—thus bringing into the public domain subjects routinely muted, yet important at pointing out marginalized social actors and competing alliances.

By using extracts from three popular taarab songs, this paper examines how the taarab song lyrics in performance are viable spheres for publicizing private pillow business.

Analyses of both the songs and their performances show clearly that they intricately articulate desires either denied or unfulfilled, with nuanced enunciations where the private and the public mutually interconnect and interrelate. Consequently the songs are an exposé, depiction and a rendition of underlying interactions tied to multiple and variable feminist locutions. Primarily, this paper, demonstrates how such locutions considered private are enabled—literally aired—through the public performance, recording and airplay of taarab songs.

## **Background**

Ever since the days of Siti binti Saad, starting in the 1920s, the Kiswahili taarab music and literary cosmos has produced unquestionable talent in taarab compositions as well as nurtured some of the foremost taarab singers like Shakila Tatu Saidi, Bi Kidude, Asha Suleyman aka Malika, Mwanahawa Alley, Khadija Kopa, Zuhura Shaaban, among others. Any close analysis of the rich repertoire of taarab songs, presents one with an array of songs that not only problematize women's innumerable struggles and muted locutions, but that also critically interrogate women's marginalization, patriarchal dependence and social entrapment. This is because taarab songs are an integral part of popular culture and a central stage on which identity formation and negotiation are played out. They provide a psychological and intellectual public space through which gendered, social and political identities are constructed, contested, shaped and manipulated. Women's "inability" to exploit the songs as a site for articulating feminist issues, alluded to in a number of studies, has always been a misperception, given that the articulation has always been there in the public domain, it is the appreciation that been wanting.

The Swahili society has for long had its active, powerful and socially relevant women who provided leadership and guidance on both personal and social issues. Such women like Siti binti Saad (1920-1950) in particular, are credited with making taarab accessible to the general public, Africanizing taarab by singing in Kiswahili when the genre was predominantly Arabic and elitist located in the Sultan's courts. She was, in this sense, a pioneer who made public a genre that had been deployed to serve private elitist and class functions. She was a positive and great inspiration not only for women of her time as a special group but for her society as well. Fair (:169) has asserted that Siti and her band used their skills as performers to give poetic form to often trenchant critiques of economic and political power. Their songs assessed the inequalities that permeated society as well as gave alternative ways to structure personal and social relations. This tradition of breaking new ground and advancing individual, group and societal aspirations has been continued even in the more

open modern taarab songs, the *mipasho and rusha roho* (simply “overt messages” and “heart breaks”—*pasha*/inform, *rusha roho*/throw, cast away one’s heart but much more pointedly in the context of the songs—get heart broken) songs.

### The songs

The following three popular taarab songs illustrate the genre’s range. First is a popular song by Zanzibar Stars “*Tutabanana Hapa Hapa*” (“We Shall Cram and Squish Ourselves Right Here” literally for him) a composition by Haji Machano sang by Mwanahawa Ally; East African Melody’s “*Nani Zaidi*” (“Who is the Better one between the Two of Us”) another composition by Haji Machano sang by Zuhura Shaaban; and Tanzania One Theatre’s “*Mtie Kamba Mumeo*” (“Tether Your Husband”) sang by Khadija Kopa.

“*Tutabanana Hapa Hapa*” is a private war of words (though now made public) between two women in a polygamous marriage, fighting to protect their perceived rights, entitlements and privileges of patriarchy such as getting their husband’s undivided and exclusive attention, love and the fulfillment of economic and material needs. Each one of these women puts forward her case armed with reasons why she thinks she deserves the man’s attention more than her rival. The reasons put forward for deserving the right of attention range from physical beauty, body figure, mastery of cooking—also seen as possession of culinary skills and inevitably the art of love making for benefit of the patriarch. All these reasons are laced with a high dose of sexual imagery like “cooking for him”, “serving him raw food”, “eating from the same plate”, etc. Because each one of them feels she is the better person, no one is prepared to walk out; they would rather cram, squeeze and package themselves in this marriage. Their verbal war is a vicious, no-holds-barred disparagement replete with scorn, abuse, admonitions and outright death threats. The song slowly builds to a climax where the women become resigned to their “fate”, as long as their emotional and material needs are catered for.

There are several issues at play in this contestation; first and foremost this contest is informed by the need to have access to the material needs of life—food, shelter, clothing and money. There is also the issue of control, having exclusive rights to control the means of material supply. It is important to note that these women are acutely aware that while struggling for access is important, they also know that it is not complete without control of the same. Thus, the imagery alluding to the sharing of the husband/patriarch is laced with subtly nuanced connotations of control. For instance, in stanza 5, lines 1-4, the sharing is strictly and

keenly apportioned and the consequences of going beyond one's share of apportionment are well spelled out;

*Lala naye siku mbili*

*I'll let you have him for two days*

*Na kwangu alale mbili*

*Then he will sleep with me for two days*

*Ukizidisha siku moja*

*If you exceed by one day*

*Cha moto utakiona.*

*You will see fire*

The reason why control is critical in this sharing has to do with the fact that the husband/patriarch in this context is a resource, a means to ensuring that supply is both continuous and guaranteed. Having one's husband is not an end in itself; it is a means of access to the attainment and realization of higher goals. It is as such obvious that the sleeping together for a certain time or duration is an investment on the part of these women deployed for higher returns than immediate emotional desires. The contention for control may be seen further as a struggle to break away from dependence and entrapment both social and economic. Consequently, it will be appreciated that the penning, the recording and the circulation of this song was not intended for private consumption per se. There were higher aims involved, the publicization of private struggles, the circulation of private matters for public debate and consideration. Love in all its facets in this context is not emotional exchange, rather, the commodification of love is in exchange for all the material things mentioned above. With commodification and the attendant investments of beauty, culinary skills and bewitching love making we are inevitably invited to think about markets and marketing—we are enabled to see the means of exchange, another public trajectory of the so-called private matters.

“Nani Zaidi” follows a similar pattern, a taunting struggle between two women struggling for a man's love; a struggle that can legitimately be regarded as a struggle for access and control of patriarchal privileges—or better still a struggle for access and management of the economic means of survival. Their rivalry follows similar patterns of glorifying beauty, trickery and sexual skills, which of course are a small investment for the perceived material and emotional returns. In stanza 2, the imagery is premised on investment, control and returns.

*Sasa kabadili*

*He has moved away from you*

*Mengine visiya*

*The rest are stories*

*Nimeshamtwaa*

*He is in my grip, I have taken over*

*Nakula ahadi*

*I swear,*

<i>Sitomwachia</i>	<i>I will never let him go</i>
<i>Hata ukinichukia</i>	<i>Even if you hate me</i>
<i>Huyu sitokuachia</i>	<i>This one, I will never let you have him</i>
<i>Naye natamba naye</i>	<i>I proudly strut around with him</i>
<i>Naye nakula naye</i>	<i>I dine and wine with him</i>
<i>Naye nalala naye</i>	<i>I sleep with him</i>
<i>Nikiamuka naye</i>	<i>And wake up with him</i>
<i>Nani zaidi</i>	<i>Who then</i>
<i>Mimi au wewe</i>	<i>Me or you?</i>
<i>Utajaza mwenyewe</i>	<i>You can answer yourself.</i>

In “Mtie Kamba Mumeo” Khadija Kopa takes this war a notch higher. The song starts with the flirtations of a married man—a kind of public market research—a SWOT analysis if you wish, who gradually gets encouragements in these amorous advances. He abandons his wife, family, home and responsibilities. He is ensnared by the young woman’s *mizungu* (bewitchments), throws caution out of the window and pitches camp at her abode. It climaxes with this young woman relishing her triumphs and sweet victory; wrecking a marriage and snatching the ultimate prize; another woman’s husband—read resource and market control. She proudly extols her winning ways which inevitably range from culinary skills to bewitching love-making. She spites her opponent, the complaining wife, “*Kama unaweza, mtie kamba mumeo*” “*If you can, please tether your husband*”. Again, the line articulates and communicates the whole idea of investment, control and returns is encountered here. Stanza 4 boasts of these control dynamics;

<i>Yangu mimi akiba tu</i>	<i>For me, I treasure this</i>
<i>Ndiyo yanayomridhi</i>	<i>Mine, is what satisfies him</i>
<i>Raha na yangu mavitu</i>	<i>With the bliss and my things</i>
<i>Hajimudu, hajiwezi</i>	<i>He is left speechless and exhausted</i>
<i>Na wala hajali</i>	<i>Nor does he have a care in the world</i>
<i>Anakula kitu “heavy”</i>	<i>For he is relishing something heavy</i>
<i>Na wewe shoga ulie tu</i>	<i>And you my friend, keep crying</i>
<i>Yangu mimi huyawezi</i>	<i>You cannot compete with me</i>
<i>Nakuambia ulie tu</i>	<i>I tell you, keep crying</i>
<i>Huwezi kuchuna buzi</i>	<i>You cannot skin the billy-goat</i>

(See appendix for a transcription of the songs).

There is evidence that the lyrics/poems in these songs are penned by men. One of the obvious indications is the stereotypical labeling where women are either seen or projected as sexually promiscuous, available to be used and discarded. Women are equally mischaracterized, as is also typical in the cognate band and dance music, where they are depicted as sexual bed witches, sensuous mistresses, bad-mannered servants, but even more demeaning as cunning whores, devious, disdainful, foxy, flirtatious and man-wise home wreckers—as would be seen in the first six lines, stanza 3 of Nani Zaidi?).

<i>Mimi najua kwenda</i>	<i>I know how to walk</i>
<i>Kwa miondoko ya kike</i>	<i>With feminine gait</i>
<i>Amini mimi si wewe</i>	<i>Believe it, I am not like you</i>
<i>Mimi najua kupenda</i>	<i>I know how to love</i>
<i>Mwanamume apumbazike</i>	<i>And leave a man speechless</i>
<i>Maishani asinitoe</i>	<i>Never to forsake me for anybody for life</i>

This portrayal is perceptibly informed by patriarchal machinations and scheming thus creating the impression of women as imagined and constructed by men. This patriarchal maneuvering does not strip women of their social relevance both in the songs and in societal contexts. Though the lyrics are subtly deployed to serve patriarchal interests that clearly negate the very existence of women, they nonetheless produce results that run counter to those patriarchal interests. Through the performance of these songs, we need to note here that performance is strategically deployed to address specific social issues, we are made to witness with a sense of trepidation, women weathering social and cultural tribulations. We see women contesting limited and limiting social and cultural spaces, we observe women looking for recognition and respect in social interactions, women fighting invisibility, clamouring empowerment. In performing these songs, women are simply reasserting their presence; they are foregrounding their edifying attributes as loving, dependable and compassionate.

How is their location in restrictive contexts to be understood, one may ask? Mudimbe, V.Y. (1988), from a purely philosophical standpoint, has argued that such restrictive situations for women arise out of despair to break free of patriarchal structures, something that contradicts the historical roles that women have been played as keepers of traditions, creators of knowledge and embodiments of collective histories. Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) has explained this despair in terms of colonial intrusion



The factors that legitimated (women's) centrality shifted from those based upon age and sex to those based upon the knowledge of the colonizer's language--English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. The sexual politics and Victorian ideals of colonial education created a hierarchy privileging men by virtually erasing any meaningful female presence (, 139).

This sense of alienation and erasure that marks women as a social category, as singers, performers and as characters in taarab songs locates the Swahili woman in the same predicament with other women in African literatures and music compositions; that is, locating them in marginal positions where they are alienated and their creative expression severely circumscribed. As such, they become what Obioma Nnaemeka calls "characters of reaffirmation". This sense of reaffirmation and their placement within the marginal peripheries of a masculinist literary and creative culture forces them to negotiate their reinscription by deploying subtle strategies that appear inward-looking and self-effacing, yet constructive and reassuring.

The subtext and the nuances of the rich metaphors, imagery, connotations and allusions in taarab music compositions that underwrite this "self-effacing" articulation do not affirm feminist marginality; rather they enable a rethinking of private and public spheres for women. For instance, in the song **Mtie Kamba Mumeo**, when the singer says *Nami nazidi kukaza uzi/I am busy tightening the noose*, given the context of the contestation, the metaphorical allusion is evident that the "tightening" alluded to is not for the benefit of the patriarch but rather for the woman entrapped in this relationship. This may be understood in a dual sense—on the one hand tightening as a demonstration of being in control and one the other hand, tightening as a way of letting men experience the effects of operating in limited and limiting spaces. In so far as what constitutes the gist of these songs is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the people (women) as well as the cultural and economic realities which inform their composition, their appreciation and interpretation is inevitably intertwined with a public appreciation of their circumstances.

The taarab song as a form of creative expression is markedly subtle in pursuing a thorough revision of gendered marginality. The taarab song cosmos appears to subtly and ingeniously reemphasize women's marginal locations and their attendant locutions on the one hand; and uphold the patriarchal order on the other. This, however, is a clever and intelligent ploy that ensures the public circulation of muted feminist locutions, a strategy that guarantees that issues concerning women are always present in the agendas of social relations. These are,

therefore, simply different ways of coming to terms and dealing with the realities of entrapment, dependence, presences and absences as well as gender power struggles, especially considering the counter discourse nuanced in the imagery of a tethered husband, the cramming and squishing and the twisted choice that the patriarch has to make between two alluring beauties.

In order to make sense of this fixation with love rivalry as well as the control and protection of “patriarchal privileges”, it is important to view song as a sociocultural practice that inscribes and circulates cultural values and images, which in turn participate in identity formation and placements in social and cultural locations. The social and cultural functions of songs like those of literature are always closely tied to ideological influences on a number of levels such as ideological influences both outside the sphere of the song as well as the dynamics generated within and by the song itself. In essence, ideological considerations, which are themselves informed by economic realities, inform and influence perceptions of self as well as the placement of that self in economic, cultural and social locations. Song, as an artistic form of expression has its own range of dynamics, cultural inscriptions and discursive formations. Perceptions are generated which while seeming to underwrite the denigrating presentation of women as subjects in harmony with lowly locations, actually enable the relocation of such images from private, restrictive and peripheral spheres to the open public domain. In song, women have an opportunity to assert their presence, in song they are continuously remembered and in song their struggles, desires and aspirations are immortalized. In song they are assured of opportunities for their recreation and regeneration.

Taarab songs, in view of the above, have been and still are a very critical terrain of social formation in the day-to-day lives of the Swahili people—and in recent times, in the lives of the larger Kiswahili peoples. They are as such intricately implicated in the values and identities of their community. It is important to note that such values may also be replicated in other forms of literary and artistic production which are generally and overtly in public circulation. Innovative developments and new interpretive perspectives in one discursive formation have a tendency to engender intertextual relations and conversations in others, in this case the public circulation of innovations in other forms of artistic expression have had direct implications for the taarab song. Such perspectives may also deeply and thoroughly affect the dominant epistemologies, creative forms and literary canons across the cultural paradigm. The public performance and circulation of these songs in view of these dynamics have contributed to reinforce an interpretive perspective that now interrogates demeaning communal, cultural and religious values that have always been accepted as the norm.

When women sing songs that appear to lend support to issues like the “passive acceptance” of polygamy together with the social and religious reasoning upon which they are premised, it is important to confront the issues that inform this interpretation. One, it is true that behind many of these songs are male composers advancing patriarchal agendas. The male composers of these songs find nothing wrong or unacceptable with second, third or multiple marriages as such. They do not care that their compositions are centrally implicated in initiating and in some cases reinforcing petty rivalries among and between women to ensure women remain disorientated while at the same time deflecting attention away from male complicity in these rivalries. The spirited efforts to inscribe docility and tameness in women about their domestic and other marginal roles perpetuate patriarchal dominance in these songs. This is brought out through the concept of *kunyenyekaa*, (that is, humbling one’s self—read the female self in particular). This is an insidious and constant motif in many of these songs. Though this is deployed to forestall rebellion, “rebellion” is nevertheless not entirely uncommon. By making the songs publicly accessible through public performance, rebellion is enabled thus disrupting the *kunyenyekaa* conversation that the male composers advance.

The unconstructive and subservient representation of women characters, feminist agendas and aspirations in taarab songs, in which women’s beautiful voices are exploited to advance male hegemony, is a tactical patriarchal strategy that is meant to hold back women’s advancement, yet it has not inhibited women’s social relevance and material gains from emerging in all forms of social interactions. Whereas the veneer of taarab songs may be seen as essentially conformist and in tandem with patriarchal machinations, oftentimes the reverse is true. The songs can justifiably be viewed as an antithesis, a critique of the stereotypical images of femininity—beauty, motherhood, self denial, docility, sex—they thus engender a critical engagement in which composing, recording, singing and performing, being the emblematic signatures of taarab songs, circulate an awareness of women’s struggles while at the same time questioning the unequal relations of power. In this converse perspective, the songs can be seen as calling for a critical rethinking of how social conditioning, legal structures, political culture and epistemological traditions underpin women’s rights and humanity. The male-female relations of taarab singing and performance and the images of women that they present find resonance in the deconstruction of male-female social and economic relations. The overbearing language of patriarchy that oversimplifies the intricate relationships between men and women has more than accidental parallels in taarab songs.

Critiquing taarab songs in Kiswahili has always operated outside the paradigms of social and economic power relations. Appreciating taarab compositions has always inadvertently treated economic and social power systems as incidentals to social relations rather than the core and essence of these relations. Economic viability and social relevance are always critically nuanced in many of these songs. In appreciating the songs presented here, one cannot fail to notice that women in these songs are located within the patriarchal intersection of social deprivation, psychological oppression and physical dominance. The artistic and cultural image formations of women as marginalized can thus be traced to patriarchal systems and power relations that limit women's access to the means of economic sustenance. Just like restricting access to economic feasibility is depriving, limiting access to knowledge equally dispossesses women of social and economic privileges and disempowers them from the exercise of power. This must not be seen just as a creative imaginary, it is a social reality as well; which is why taarab songs should never be seen as an abstraction and distraction from the real pertinent issues of locating women's lived experiences in their social, cultural and historical contexts.

There have been assertions that even in their formative stages, taarab compositions are not strictly individual effort and most compositions actually reflect collective undertakings. Most of these compositions are local news, gossip, collective struggles and worldviews transformed into song (Fair, *ibid*). Consequently, taarab songs may be perceived as occasions that call to mind the social and cultural heritage of women's lost experience and significance. It is rarely acknowledged that woman's stereotypical presentation that projects muted effacement results from a dual disadvantage. Though they are foremost knowledge creators, women's contribution to knowledge creation is hardly acknowledged in social conversations. Secondly, knowledge creation in the taarab cosmos either in its repository or circulatory nature has always been explained from the perspective of the dominant patriarchal culture. However, taarab songs can be seen as providing an alternative environment and an enabling means through which the listener is enabled to understand the essence of women's identity between overtly and sometimes insidiously imposed social forms. It is in such forms that women's disadvantaged existence can be read and reinscribed into representative and equitable social and cultural positions.

Many taarab songs are overtly and explicitly love songs, presented in the widest possible range of themes. In its copious facets, love is thus a leitmotif that runs through virtually all taarab songs. This recurrent and intermittent love theme has in many ways been a *faux amis* that has led some scholars to declare that taarab songs are in every possible way

essentially romantic, idealistic and unrealistic fairies. Although there may be supporting evidence underwriting these positions, these declarations nevertheless adversely obscure the fact that, even overtly romantic taarab songs are nonetheless intricately inscribed in relations of power—relations of access, relations of control, relations of ownership, relations of material returns and relations of privilege. Indeed, given their rich embellishments, such declarations are not unexpected. Many of the songs, while appearing simple and straightforward love fantasies, are highly coded almost needing the services of master interpreters to decode their true meaning. They are intimate agonies, desires and struggles made public. By cloaking these songs in love imagery, the composers as well as the performers are freed from external restraints—thus enabling wholesome creativity, message conveyance, image creation and role allocation. There is no doubt that the songs are simply beautiful in themselves, accomplished creations that give pleasure and joy to the listener, yet any close analysis of the lyrics of these songs reveals that they are composed to counter, resist or even undermine such relations. Askew has asserted that;

Sometimes beneath the banal declarations of romantic love lie layer after layer of social critique, political positioning, gender debate, identity contestation and dispute negotiation. One of the most common features—indeed, a defining characteristic, of this sung poetry is the heavy use of metaphor, innuendo, allusion and double entendre. Metaphor produces multivalence and transforms the song into power-laden weapons commonly exploited in the negotiation of social relations (126).

Certainly, the social relations manifest in these songs are not informed by the cultural or ideological constructs of women, rather they deal with real women either in their individual or collective material and lived histories. Women's locution in taarab songs is not, therefore, located or confined in the cultural ideological constructs, but in immediate material circumstances. Understanding this locus enables us to recognize the overwhelming and harrowing living experiences of women. For instance, marriage (even polygamous marriages) is one social institution that is seen as an entrapment, an ensnarement in which women have very little say. It is even more disheartening when it is taken as fate. These lines from stanza 3 of "**Tutabanana Hapa Hapa**" are very telling;

*Kwa raha na kwa shida*

*Kwa uzima na ugonjwa*

*In comfort and in distress*

*In health and in sickness*

<i>Nitakwenda nawe sambamba</i>	<i>I will watch, mark your every step</i>
<i>Utake usitake</i>	<i>Whether you like it or not</i>
<i>Tutabanana hapa hapa</i>	<i>We shall cram and squish ourselves right here</i>
<i>Kwa mwanamume mmoja</i>	<i>For this one man</i>
<i>Sote tule kwa pamoja</i>	<i>We shall all eat (share) together</i>
<i>Kwa nini matusi, ugomvi na mabishano</i>	<i>Why the insults, quarrels and demurs</i>
<i>Kama wewe ni mkewe</i>	<i>If you are his wife</i>
<i>Na mimi kashaniaoa</i>	<i>I am also befittingly married</i>
<i>Ya nini hasama, choyo na kununiana</i>	<i>Why the hostility, meanness and sulking</i>
<i>Kama wewe ni wa nyumba kubwa</i>	<i>If you are resident in the big house</i>
<i>Na mimi ni wa nyumba ndogo</i>	<i>I am also resident in the small house</i>
<i>Nitabanana nawe hapa hapa</i>	<i>I shall squeeze myself here with you</i>
<i>Niko nawe tele</i>	<i>I am all over here with you</i>
<i>Niko nawe sikuachii</i>	<i>I am here with you, I am not letting go</i>
<i>Na ukizubaa, hapa nakutoa</i>	<i>If you will be puzzled, I'll eject you</i>
<i>Na ukilegea, nje nakutupa</i>	<i>If you weaver I'll throw you out.</i>

This thematic sampling is not exhaustive, but it is representative of the taarab cosmos, the cultural and material contexts in which taarab songs are composed. Though these compositions seem informed by personal reflections and experiences, they nevertheless are in public circulation, meaning that every aspect of that what seems privately romantic has a public trajectory. For instance, the willingness to share a husband between these two women, even under the choking circumstances of cramming and squishing, must be seen as resulting from the lack of access to economic and material needs. That women are subsisting in a state of deprivation and dispossession is an issue of public concern. In other words, the machinations of patriarchy as implicated in women's economic and material well-being is one major theme that is obvious in these songs.

Women's economic viability is manifest in taarab songs, but always intricately articulated and veiled to reflect the perceived privileges that women aspire to enjoy because of their strategic positioning in the patriarchal order. The whole picture of economic inviability is captured in stanza 5 lines 7-18 of "Tutabanana Hapa Hapa;"

<i>Tena komesha wako umbeya</i>	<i>And please stop your gossip</i>
<i>Kutuma watu nyumbani</i>	<i>Sending spies to my house</i>
<i>Kuja kwangu kuchunguza</i>	<i>To come and pry</i>

*Nakula mlo gani*

*Pia wataka kujua*

*Ninavaa vivalio gani*

*Mume wetu “bajeti” sawa*

*Wivu na choyo cha nini*

*Hakuna cha peke yako*

*Hususa hapa mjini*

*Kugawana na wenzako*

*Siku hizi ni “pensheni”*

*Tutabanana hapa hapa*

*About what kind of food I eat*

*You also want to know*

*What dresses and dress style I put on*

*Our husband caters for our needs equally*

*Why the jealousy and meanness*

*There is nothing for you alone*

*Especially here in town*

*Sharing your man with others*

*Is the pension these days*

*We shall cram and squish ourselves right here*

As a consequence, most women are not presented as active creators of material wealth but rather as passive recipients of such wealth and are as such socialized to protect their status of “privileged recipient” by frustrating, obstructing and alienating potential or actual female rivals. This idea of passive reception is constantly implied in the subtext of taarab songs, as is the projection of women as economic dependants. Taarab highlights women’s dependent relationships based on sex and perpetuated through social, educational and economic institutions.

The articulation of one woman’s dependency is a thematic trope arising out of social and economic relations in the public sphere where, women as a group are equally implicated in giving shape and essence to these relationships. This dependence is then replicated in the lives of every other woman. So when a singer alludes to sharing a husband/man, the idea under interrogation is the unequal and restrictive access to material needs. Closely scrutinized, women’s dependence is a direct result of deprivation, disempowerment and dispossession--a state of affairs where the patriarchs are presented as creators and providers and matriarchs as takers. Thus, songs composed as private musings and ruminations, cannot avoid their public trajectories, consequently the private sharing of a man/patriarch is inevitably projected into the public realm and given public currency and circulation. The private contestations shrewdly turn the patriarchal machinations on their head and instead foreground the poignant argument that if women were enabled equal access and opportunity this vexing sharing of husbands would not have been necessary.

Women’s presence in taarab songs has always been and is very central, never subordinate because, as in many African communities, women are always present at all the critical public moments of life: at birth, naming ceremonies, marriage negotiations, weddings,

dispute negotiations and even burials. They are also very visible tilling the land; planting, sowing and harvesting. In other words, women are always present at the critical moments of cultural and knowledge production. Such critical presence is equally discernible in the performance of taarab songs in Kiswahili culture; thus making women play the role of disseminators of news, information, rumours and gossip on the surface level of such songs. But in the subtexts of these songs, women are both creators and couriers of beliefs, cultural ideals, personal and collective histories. They are also intimately and thoroughly entailed the creation of a philosophical worldview, a culture and a universe of social and material relations in their roles as “composers”, re-creators and transformers of existing oral traditions. However, many studies have not appreciated this ubiquitous presence as a strategy for sustaining women’s struggles as well as their myriad locutions in the public sphere. Women as singers and performers may be seen as merely replaying their male-constructed functions that determine their social identities, but they actually end up subverting such functions.

In conclusion, this paper avers that even when not over-emphasizing the centrality of the taarab song both as a social discourse and discursive formation, it presents a space for self presentation with a deeply nuanced articulation of women’s struggles, desires and aspirations. Thus taarab songs enable a constant and sustained engagement with women’s struggles, they further enable the production and dissemination of otherwise legitimate but occluded knowledge that informs social relations.

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## APPENDIX

### TUTABANANA HAPA HAPA

Zanzibar Stars

Composer: Haji Machano

Singer: Mwanahawa Alley

Tutabanana hapa hapa	We shall cram and squish ourselves right here
Nitakwenda nawe sambamba	I will watch your every step
Kama wewe ni wa nyumba kubwa	If yours is the big house/ If you are resident in the big house
Na mimi ni wa nyumba ndogo	Mine is the small house/ I am also resident in the small house
Sote tu wa mume mmoja	We are both wives of one man/ We are both wed locked to him
Sote tuna haki sawa	We have equal rights
Usilete vya kuleta	Do not start mooting irrelevancies
Wewe kunitimua hautaweza	You cannot ruffle and dislodge me
Usifikiri mimi ni goi goi	Do not imagine that I am a weakling
Niko "fit" sitishiki	I am fit you cannot daunt me
Tutabanana hapa hapa	We shall cram and squish ourselves right here
Tule mkono kwa mkono	We will eat from the same hand
Ukishindwa shauri yako	If you get outdone, too bad for you
Ukishusha hiari yako	If you choose to demean yourself, that is your choice
Unasema nini kinyago usiojijua?	What are you saying you ignorant caricature
Usinitie midomoni machungu kunipikia	Do not scandalize me with your dirt mouth
Kama kakuweka ndani	If he is keeping and cohabiting with you
Na mimi keshaniaoa	He has befittingly married me
Kajua yangu thamani	He knows my worth
Ndio akanichagua	That is why he chose me
Ampenda zangu mboni	He loves my eye pupils

Na macho ya kurembua	And my enchanting beautiful eyes
Na “figa” la wastani	And my shapely figure
Nyonda limemzingua	My love bewitches him
Wewe una uzuri gani	What is the worth of your beauty
Si basi tumesitiriwa	If he has opted to keep us both.
Kwa raha na kwa shida	In comfort and in distress
Kwa uzima na ugonjwa	In health and in sickness
Nitakwenda nawe sambamba	I will watch your every step
Utake usitake	Whether you like it or not
Tutabanana hapa hapa	We shall cram and squish ourselves right here
Kwa mwanamume mmoja	For this one man
Sote tule kwa pamoja	We shall eat together
Kwa nini matusi, ugomvi na mabishano	Why the insults, quarrels and demurs
Kama wewe ni mkewe	If you are his wife
Na mimi kashania	I am also befittingly married
Ya nini hasama, choyo na kununiana	Why the hostility, meanness and sulking
Kama wewe ni wa nyumba kubwa	If you are resident in the big house
Na mimi ni wa nyumba ndogo	I am also resident in the small house
Nitabanana nawe hapa hapa	I shall squeeze myself here with you
Niko nawe tele	I am all over here with you
Niko nawe sikuachii	I am her with you, I am not letting go
Na ukizubaa, hapa nakutoa	If you will be puzzled, I’ll eject you
Na ukilegea, nje nakutupa	If you weaver I’ll throw you out.
Unajieti na nyongo kunitilia	You contemptuously scorn me
Uniwezi kwa lolote	You are no match for me in anything
Mambo yangu poa	I have everything under control
Kwa mapenzi hunipati	You cannot rival me in the art of love
Raha nazijulia	I am a master of bliss and comforts
Penzi nampa lote	I indulge him in my whole/total love
Yeye anafurahia	He relishes my love
Wewe hujui chochote	You, you know nothing
Mimi ninavyosikia	From what I have heard
Na kupika si yako hadhi	And cooking is not your fame
Vibichi wampikia	You serve him raw food

Wewe hujui chochote	You, you know nothing
Mimi ninavyosikia	From what I have heard
Ndio maana siku zote	So that is why every day
Huja kwangu kujilia	He comes to eat in my house
Lala naye siku mbili	I'll let you have him for two days
Na kwangu alale mbili	Then he will sleep with me for two days
Ukizidisha siku moja	If you exceed by one day
Cha moto utakiona.	You will see fire
Nala naye hapa hapa	I am dinning with him right here
Sibanduki ubavuni	I rarely can be peeled off from his company
Tena komesha wako umbeya	And please stop your gossip
Kutuma watu nyumbani	Sending spies to my house
Kuja kwangu kuchunguza	To come and pry
Nakula mlo gani	About what kind of food I eat
Pia wataka kujua	You also want to know
Ninavaa vivalio gani	What dresses and dress style I put on
Mume wetu "bajeti" sawa	Our husband caters for our needs equally
Wivu na choyo cha nini	Why the jealousy and meanness
Hakuna cha peke yako	There is nothing for you alone
Hususa hapa mjini	Especially here in town
Kugawana na wenzako	Sharing your man with others
Siku hizi ni "pensheni"	Is the pension these days
Tutabanana hapa hapa	We shall cram and squish ourselves right here
Hunipiku asilani	Never will you outdo me on this
Nipisheni niwe chini	You let me be the under dog
Nile kama moto wa kifuu	I will eat mine like a smoldering fire
Usijisumbue	Don't trouble yourself
Cheo chetu ni kimoja	Our rank is the same/ We are of the same rank
Usinitie kizungumti	Do not begrudge me
Tunakula "plati" moja	We are eating from the same plate
Natanga kwa tashtiti	I stroll with him provocatively
Tunacheza sauti moja	We dance in one accord
Mimi ndiye "super beauty"	I am the super beauty
Ananipenda zaidi	He loves me more

Talaka mimi sipewi	I will not be divorced
Kama kupewa ni wewe	If anybody will be divorced, that will be you
Kazi kwako	It is up to you
Mimi naishia kwake	I will dwell with him
Kanipenda mie	He loves me
Natamba naye	As I strut around with him
Nachanua naye	As I bloom with him
Nadunda naye	As I bounce around with him.

### **NANI ZAIDI**

East African Melody

Composer: Haji Machano

Singer: Zuhura Shaaban

Nani zaidi	Who is the better between us
Mimi na wewe mwenzangu?	Me and you, my friend?
Mimi nilikuambia	I told you
Mimi ni zaidi	I am the better one
Hukunisikia	You did not heed me
Kwangu kafuatia	He has come to me
Kuja kuburudi	To relish the comforts,
Raha za dunia	The ecstasies of the world
Lililomvutia	Allured by
Tambo la “bodi”	My shapely body
Na njema tabia	Impeccable manners
Sura jamalia	My angelic beauty
Rangi ya wazi	My unblemished tone
Vimemzingua	He is bewitched by all these
Ameshakutoa	He has gotten rid of you
Sasa kabadili	He has moved away from you
Mengine visiya	The rest are stories
Nimeshamtwaa	He is in my grip, I have taken over
Nakula ahadi	I swear,
Sitomwachia	I will never let him go
Hata ukinichukia	Even if you hate me

Huyu sitokuachia	This one, I will never let you have him
Naye natamba naye	I proudly strut around with him
Naye nakula naye	I dine and wine with him
Naye nalala naye	I sleep with him
Nikiamuka naye	And wake up with him
Nani zaidi	Who then
Mimi au wewe	Me or you?
Utajaza mwenyewe	you can answer yourself.
Mimi najua kwenda	I know how to walk
Kwa miondoko ya kike	With feminine gait
Amini mimi si wewe	Believe it, I am not like you
Mimi najua kupenda	I know how to love
Mwanamume apumbazike	And leave a man speechless
Maishani asinitoe	Never to forsake me for anybody for life
Mbele yangu huna “tenda”	Before me you are no competition
Ni bure yako makeke	Your posturing is worthless
Mimi sasa ndio mwenyewe	Now, I am the one and only
Nimemiliki nyonda	He is in my possession, he is my love
Hukipati chake	You will get nothing of his
Toka usitusumbue	Please leave, stop bothering us
Leo nitakuchemsha	Today, I will sting you
Ukome lako hashuo	Till you forget your favorite
Unijue mimi ni nani	Till you know who I am
Hujui nguo kunitisha	You know nothing about clothes to tease me
Nguo si fani yako	Fashion is not your field
Usijitie mkumboni	Don't bother getting into the shove
Hutakiwi umekwisha	You are unwanted, you are expired
Imeshuka hadhi yako	Your worth has depreciated
Hebu jiweke pembeni	Please, move aside
Ninaye nakutonesha	I now have him, let it prick you
Hiki nyonda si chako	This love is longer yours
Natamba naye	Let me proudly stroll with my love
Mimi ni zaidi	I am the better one
La kusema huna	You have nothing to say

Yuko kwangu “dear”	He is my dear one
Jicho la bahati	My eye spotted this fortune
Na huba mwanana	And with an alluring love
Ameniteua	He has chosen me
Wacha kujieti	Stop your contemptuous pretences
Cha kupendwa huna	You have nothing worth loving
Ya nini “kali kiti”	Why bother with the curl kits
Hizo nywele huna	You have no hair to talk about
Za kutia dawa	Where do you apply your cosmetics
Umepigwa “buti”	You have been booted, kicked out
Humpati tena	You will never have him again
Kwangu keshatua	With me he is settled
Nimemdhibiti	I now have him
Nampenda sana	I love so much
Na sitomtoa	I will never let him go.

### **MTIE KAMBA MUMEO**

Tanzania One Theatre (TOT)

Singer: Khadija Kopa

Kama unaweza	If you can
Mtie kamba mumeo umzuie	Get a rope and tether your husband
Ukitahamaki, mumeo kaachika	Otherwise, without notice, you will be divorced
Mbio kanikimbilia	He ran after me in haste
Akiniomba mapenzi	And sought my love
Mbio kanikimbilia mumeo	Your husband hastily run after me
Akaniomba mapenzi	Begging for my love
Nami nikamringia	I bragged and showed off
Nikaona hayawezi	Thinking he knew nothing about love
Kumbe amenivamia	Lo! He had ambushed me
Kanizingua kijizi	Like a thief, he swept me off my guard
Nami nikamridhia	Then I yielded to him
Kila kitu laazizi	Letting him have everything my darling,
Nikamwambia chukua	I told him, please take it all
Upendacho laazizi	Take all that your heart desires, my love

Kwa yangu makazi	Into my abode
Aliingia kiujuzi	He cunningly came in
Kwa yangu makazi	He moved into my house
Alihamisha mashati	He moved his shirts
Alipoonja ashiki	Once he tasted passion
Nikampa mishikaki	I gave him marinated and spicy meat
Na chai ya tangawizi	And ginger flavored tea
Aliniambia sitoki	He swore not to leave
Siogopi umanisi	I am not afraid of scandal
Aliniambia sitoki mie	He said he won't leave
Bwana huyu kaniganda mie	This man pursues me
Wala hanipi pumzi	Never giving me space to breathe
Na mimi ninayapenda	I love it though
Nazidi kukaza uzi	And I am busy tightening the noose
Wewe baki huna ureda	You, keep your loneliness, you have nobody to comfort you
Hakupendi, hujitunzi	He doesn't love you, you don't know how to take care of yourself
Wala hujui kupenda	You do not even know how to love
Na mambo huyamalizi	And when it comes to what matters, you leave things incomplete
Hakusihi, ndio maana	He doesn't beseech you, and that's why
Kila siku kiguu na njia	Everyday you are on the trail seeking him
Nimemchukua mchana	I have taken him, in broad day light
Mchana jua likiwaka	Broad daylight, with the sun shining
Mchana jua la utosi	During the mid day sun shine
Wenye chuki, na chuki zao	Those with hate, let them keep their hatred
Wenye udhia, na udhia wao	Those with vexation, let them keep their vexation
Wakina nani?	Who are those?
Si hao waliopewa kazi	Those who have made it their business
Kufuatilia ya wenzao	To poke their noses into other people's affairs
Lakini kwa hapa, watachoka wao	But on this one, they will sure tire for nothing
Yangu mimi akiba tu	For me, I treasure this
Ndiyo yanayomridhi	Mine is what satisfies him
Raha na yangu mavitu	The bliss and my things
Hajimudu, hajiwezi	Have left him speechless and exhausted
Na wala hajali	Nor does he have a care in the world



Anakula kitu “heavy”  
Na wewe shoga ulie tu  
Yangu mimi huyawezi  
Nakuambia ulie tu  
Huwezi kuchuna buzi

For he is relishing something heavy  
And you my friend, keep crying  
You cannot compete with me  
I tell you, keep crying  
You cannot skin the billy-goat