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# Taarab or songs of abuse?: verbal duels in east Africa

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## Abstract

For long, it has been believed that song of abuse, as it has come to be called, is a preserve of west African communities. Early inroads into this oral subgenre were made by scholars who, more often than not, hailed from Ghana and Nigeria. A false impression of its locus was created to the effect that it was region-specific. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the pervasiveness of this verbal art, in disguised forms among the Swahili of East African. Drawing illustrative material from communities inhabiting the larger east African region of the continent, I argue that songs of abuse are part and parcel of the Swahili and Bantu groups such as Abagusii's oral repertoire serving crucial expressive needs of the community. Considering that most art in Africa has always been conceived in functional terms, I posit mipasho as a creative art with aesthetic and social purposes – falling in a form of popular entertainment called *mashindano*, an organised competitive event. A survey of Swahili poetry and oral repertoire reveals that taarab, a form of sung poetry, clearly serves the purpose songs of abuse did in west Africa. If art or poetry is a vent for pent-up emotions, and a channel for powerfully overflowing emotions/feelings, then this art forms an important avenue for individual or groups. The paper foregrounds these continuities and regional-specific elements of this art, in particular, i) the competitive or conflictual spirit, ii) it is taking new shape in contemporary times, iii) it tends to be a preserve of women. Specifically, I interrogate the genre's characteristic features, the aesthetic codes and conventions through which it generates meaning and the general social context of performance and interpretation. I explore not just the forms it takes, but also examine its contexts, formulaic usage of linguistic resources and the trend it has taken in contemporary times. Finally, and most importantly I will make a comparative analysis with the West Africa variant.

## Introduction

A cursory glance through modern African literature reveals that oral traditions undoubtedly form an important foundation of its creative matrix. Of these literary traditions, verbal duels such as songs of abuse form a significant base for modern African poetry. This particular category of oral or verbal arts has undergone constant mutation as it has evolved alongside human societies; from indigenous forms various

contemporaneous verbal duels that serve similar if not related functions have organically developed. Definitive aesthetics of this genre have also significantly undergone transmutation to accommodate and respond to societal demands. These forms range broadly in terms of participation and context of performance; from those with clearly defined composition of participants to impromptu and spontaneous ones, from those closely associated with insults and aggressiveness to pastime indulgence, and from those with identifiable formulaic structure to loosely defined ones. But what has been consistent in this genre, cutting across its multifarious manifestations among different communities, is the dialogic element of conflicts. Examined generically, this art falls into the patterns of opposites, factionalism, famous pairings or dualisms which, according to Maybury-Lewis (1989), offer the solution to the problem of social order by holding out the promise of balancing contending forces in perpetual equilibrium.

The critical need to rethink the link between insults or aggressiveness and verbal creativity has attracted the attention of several cross-disciplinary studies. From functionalistic and structural-functionalistic theories, this art has been perceived as a cathartic expression of violence and a vent for negative impulses of individuals or members of a group, hence a means of resolving conflict. By involving disparate forms of insults, this art provides a crucial means of “blowing-off-steam” (Berghe 1963: 414) via an “orderly” and socially acceptable means or organisation (Lefebvre 1981: 80), hence fulfilling a normalising social function. Central to this genre is what Schwebel calls “the artful exchange of ... spoken insults” (1997: 326), whether contextually functional or just for their own sake. Their particular area of focus is that space between mere aggression and actual (physical) violence; a threshold or interface often expressed using insults and verbal assault. In my view, as evident in the examples from the Swahili, this genre helps to construct or imagine a world in which physical violence is unnecessary. Undoubtedly ubiquitous in most societies, they afford participants space to display imaginative creativity, in particular, verbal agility interspersed or spiced with captivating exaggerations and remarkably elaborate use of incisive imagery (Awoonor 1974: 235). Just like other occasions such as death, prayer, initiation rituals, marriage or love, all which provide context and impetus for poetry composition, transmission or performance, conflicts trigger poetic musing. Of particular interest in this paper is how otherwise destructive physical violence is crystallised in the display of what one may call verbalised lethal venom exploiting and usurping creative impulses and inventiveness, as can be discerned in the vividness and lucidity of fantastic imaginative powers among the Swahili’s *taarab*. An art form playing a crucial social function as dissipating aggressive tendencies or as “a cathartic expression of aggression” (Pagliai 2009: 61) in words therefore ends up or doubles as an aesthetic genre, dramatising inter-group/personal conflicts. It is an aesthetic genre because its performance “represents a climax and choreographed articulation of conflicts, tensions, and hostilities among performing groups” (Avorgbedor 1999: 1)

This study seeks to look beyond the current state of criticism which, seemingly, relies on limited sources. Current scholarship<sup>1</sup> creates a false impression that seems to locate the locus of this art as limited to Ewe or Yoruba communities, who, after all, are not so

distantly related, and among African Americans and other diasporic Africans who trace their ancestry in west Africa. For example, Kofi Owusu's (1989) description of "the traditional Song of Abuse, *halo*, of the Ewes (of West Africa)" (1989: 745) implies that if the genre is not exclusive to Ewes, its boundaries do not extend beyond West Africa. As evident from existing scholarship, a sort "halo belt" is insinuated similar to the distinctive pattern of distribution that John Johnson (1980) called the "epic belt" (Barber 2007: 48). Considering the different cultural regions of the African world, and the vital role it plays in society, is it tenable to argue that this practice is localised in the west of the continent or scholarship and criticism have turned a deaf ear to this arguably ubiquitous oral tradition in Africa? Overwhelming evidence to the contrary exists. In this paper, I draw examples from the broader *taarab* repertoire to argue that neither is the number of sources minimal nor is the genre restricted to west Africa. My aim in this paper is to show the pervasive nature of this art, using examples drawn from east Africa's *taarab*; a popular song tradition whose lyrics are often derived from and couched in Swahili poetry and rendered using different styles of vocalisation, instrumentation with shifting performer/audience divide. Much of *taarab*'s text is composed in Kiswahili that draws from archaic vocabulary<sup>2</sup> and often employs metaphor to disguise and hide meanings (Askew 1997: 7). Secondly, in spite of *taarab*'s long tradition and the vastness of its lyrics, it is alarming to discover that this form's textuality remains relatively unexplored in Swahili literature (Khamis 2004). Partly therefore, this study is an effort towards addressing this critical bias.<sup>3</sup> I perceive *taarab* as a labyrinth of verbal genres and forms, one of which is the more contemporary *mipasho* that espouses definitive features typical of songs of abuse. The foregoing bias persists because criticism has tended to suffer the consequences of adopting restrictively limiting definitions of this form. By relying on pronounced forms such as *halo*, or texts that Karin Barber calls the "best models" of any given genre, a distorted and incorrect picture of what verbal duels entail is constructed, foreclosing the genre's apparent diversity. A more encompassing definition is therefore necessary to avoid this pitfall and accommodate the expansive range of possibilities of this genre.

My view in this paper is that rather than provide an exhaustive definition that will draw neat boundaries into which various instantiations across the continent may be admitted or excluded, certain salient features of the genre be identified. This is because every text – and more so verbal ones – are produced in specific contexts in which emergent elements of contextualisation inevitably enter into the discursive process, shaping and influencing the ways in which the generic framework is used and open the way to generic reconfiguration or change (Bauman 2004: 7). What therefore I foreground as paradigmatic of songs of abuse includes the dialogic form which inscribes the exchange of insults or more generically, argumentative language underpinned by competitiveness, triggered by other factors or enacted/performed verbal conflict. Considering that "genres" are in constant conversations or "multiple dialogues" with other texts as well as immediate contexts and social structures from/against which they are produced, divergences are inevitable. In spite of the diversities, song of abuse is marked by salient features, most notably, abusive language, sensationalism or exaggeration, competitive

or agonistic spirit, and dialogic nature – all directed at quelling or diverting physical aggression. With such definitive features and constellations of formal qualities as I will illustrate shortly, it is incorrect to argue, as Earl Miner does, that the poetic contest itself is not a genre at all but rather the verbal expression of a general mode of human interaction – the aggressive and agonistic – whose roots extend deep into biology and psychology (1993: 925). Moreover, with the fluidity underpinning oral forms such as *taarab*, it becomes untenable to insist on ‘pure’ identifiable genres. Like other expressive forms, one of *taarab*’s definitive aspects remains the bringing together of different and sometimes distinct or related forms under a larger rubric of Swahili poetry.

*Taarab* in general is an exceptionally fluid genre. The particular subgenre of interest in this study is equally hybrid, espousing elements from different manifestations of the genre. To a large extent, *taarab*’s *mipasho*<sup>4</sup> may be considered a reincarnate of *Lelemama*, the publicly shaming of individuals and challenging rival groups (Fargion 2000: 43; Strobel 1976: 197) which was banned in 1945 due to the intensity of bitterness. Underpinning the overarching structure of this subgenre is the dialogic concept which defines *kujibizana*, that is, questioning and answering each other using poetic forms (Biersteker 1996; Graebner 1999), which is evident in *mipasho* exchanges. Closely related to this concept of *kujibizana* is *malumbano*, a form of cross-questioning sung in verse. Whereas *mipasho* may be read as the broadening or superseding of the boundaries of the accepted genre of *malumbano* to enter into personal attacks (Ntarangwi 2000: 56), it may also be located within the confines of *makutano*, which results from stretching the limits of the former (*malumbano*) to the extent that it ceases to be a mere “act of participatory dialogue” (Sharrif 1983), encompassing the bringing of another’s private affairs into public attention. Therefore parallels, divergences and simultaneities remain the hallmark of *mipasho* necessitating the sort of conceptualisation adopted in this study. Of significance, however, is the fact that different genres, or subgenres, specialise in different provinces of reality, hence the tendency to evolve or mutate divergently.

While Marco Jacquemet’s definition foregrounds this art’s spirit of competition, obscene insults and invectives involving more than one party (2005: 4923), Max Gluckman (1963), taking off from the notion of social catharsis, perceives the art as revolving around the purging of emotions. This seems to encompass this art’s content, function, prevalent mood and participation but excludes the context of performance. Hence, like Kofi Anyidoho (1983), I read this art as poetry that tends to dramatise intra-group conflicts, dissipating them in words which I read as echoing the sort of world constructed by this genre. For Okpewho (1985), however, the two most outstanding characteristics of this poetic form are sauciness and sensationalism. He brings to the fore what I regard as fundamental in *mipasho*, that is, the sexual innuendos intended to amuse and hyperbole aimed at belittling or back-biting the opponent. This view is shared with Awoonor who acknowledges that exaggeration is the hallmark of *halo* (1974: 6) as it underpins its aesthetics. Having conceived this form as literary, the question of audience or readership assumes a pivotal position. The definition Pagliai (2009) provides seems to tilt this art away from its conceptualisation within Ewe cosmology, aligning it more closely with mere “performative display of verbal skilfulness” before an audience.

Whether this audience is invited, in-built or part of the performance's textuality is not clear. Although he rightly foregrounds proclivity towards argumentative language, his definition decentres and de-emphasises two essential features of this genre. On the one hand, Pagliai does not seem to recognise the centrality of insults and verbal aggression while on the other, his conceptualisation locates this art more as a preserve of young adults/people. To the contrary, however, it is evident from Awoonor and Anyidoho that a sense of inter-village contest in which women are more active takes centre stage. The performance was keenly driven by the spirit of competition (Dor 2004: 41) with notions of conflict, contest and resolution embedded. The form Pagliai examines appears mild, if pastime, and largely defined by "verbal contest or exchange" for sheer verbal overkill, or in pursuit of recreational values, emphasising the comic and humorous aspects. The audience, in my view, need not be coerced but rather, is guaranteed considering the nature of this art's performance.<sup>5</sup> It is a form that inscribes curious and enthusiastic audience as I shall illustrate. *Mipasho*, like most songs of abuse, is one of the genres that exemplify a text or form which Karin Barber describes as "demanding a heightened attention" (2007: 9). Despite being understood as personal expression, such texts, Barber puts it, are characterised by a form which demand, attract and stimulates attention and intensified awareness. In particular, the fact that songs of abuse generally foreground the use of scandal or the promise of scandal in public displays renders them "so compellingly delightful" (Gunderson 2000: 12) to the audience. Scandals, more often than not, arouse audience's curiosity. What inscribes textuality in these "utterances", rendering them the status of a text,<sup>6</sup> and not mere passing discourse, is precisely what makes them the focus of interpretative activity (Barber 2007: 9). The notion of probing other people's private lives and involving them in scandals, with the sole aim of destroying or tarnishing their reputation not only serves the aggressor or the protagonist but often extends to the audience. It is common for listeners to draw or appropriate something pertinent to their otherwise unrelated arguments from existing repertoire of *mipasho* (Fargion 2000: 50) and hence detachable from immediate discourse. For example, like the pervasive referent "shoga" (homosexual) common in most of these song-texts, they become objects of attention as they are "reproducible" in contexts beyond their original. Partly, as I will demonstrate, herein lies the crux of this art since, following Barber's argument, the text is wholly intentional although it is never confined to the singular intention of a solo originator (2007: 10). In this sense, *mipasho* text is constituted as "quotable" or something "out there", it therefore instances one of the ways in which human creative activities exceeds the specific aims of any individual speaker or individual's private aims (ibid). Besides the "actual" target, this form inscribes a virtual implied "audience".

Although this art form can be spontaneous, both Awoonor and Anyidoho foreground its organised structured dimension. As an intentional form, its performance, they suggest, has a clearly spelt out context with well-defined rules governing its enactment. This includes, among others, a rope to demarcate the contestants. Song texts are composed beforehand and go through a rigorous process of editing and rehearsal before actual performance in the set village square. In my view, this explicitness is not a prerequisite for the genre. Verbal duels or songs of abuse may issue from impulsive contexts, triggered

by dispute or unanticipated conflict. These do not require detailed or explicit planning with elaborate rules as *halo* among the Ewe. Rather, they are “performed” in demand as part of the mediation process or negotiation in search of an amicable solution, hence inevitably antagonistic. Whether spontaneous or overtly organised, it is clear that the event/performance acts as an impetus or “mechanisms of innovation” (Gunderson 2007: 7) and hence a fertile site for imaginative thoughts expressed in verbal texts, which outlast their moment or context of creation, irrespective of whether it is embellished with a musical background or not, premeditated or otherwise. The other category which I designate as exclusive to children or youthful members of the society – such as urban Kenya’s *mchongoano*, African American youth’s *dozens* – may be organised with a spelt-out context for performance but remain basically pastime ventures, and not necessarily occasioned or triggered by disagreements, with a few exceptions. In modern taarab’s *mipasho*, however, more often than not, song texts bearing elements of song of abuse issue from actual disputes and serve a critical social function. A closer examination reveals that this art has its provenance deep in Swahili history and culture.

Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example during the Battle of Shell (1812/13), one gets the sense that some wars among the Swahili were effected using means other than actual physical fighting. Some inter-city state wars were actually fought using words. The “official poets” of the respective armies used their war-songs not as conventionally understood, that is, as means of rallying or inciting troops (war-cry) but rather and peculiarly so, as alternatives to actual battles. Thus *mipasho*, which also offers alternatives for physical aggression, has roots in this form. These war-songs, Allen states, were designed to make the enemy flee (1982: 234), and hence a non-violent means of fighting one’s enemy. The father of modern Swahili poetry, Muyaka bin Haji, also played a significant and related role in inspiring the Mazrui faction during military combats, in particular, during the rivalry between the Mazruis of Mombasa and the Sultanate of Zanzibar (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995: 121). These are the forms which, I argue, evolved into or provided foundation for the song duels tradition that is the focus of this paper. However, *mipasho* as vehicles for non-violence or space where verbal insults are traded to the delight of an enthusiastic audience has more recent precursors within Swahili poetry tradition.

Frank Gunderson correctly points out that one of the popular music genres in east Africa currently most associated with song-duel “warfare” is *taarab* (2000: 13) and, arguably, *mipasho* in particular. What lends credence to this position? First, it is important to point out that, of the common subjects tackled by *taarab* performers, that is, love, romance, advice, reproach, censure, warning (Khamis 2004), I single out reproach and censure, and generally conflict as dominating “interpersonal relationship” often voiced in *taarab* texts. Songs of innuendos and reproaches, such as “Kigalawa” and “Muhogo” serve a purpose similar to *halo*’s. Whereas other forms of *taarab* have their own importance in so far as they serve functions other than those of ideal *taarab*,<sup>7</sup> I propose that some have metamorphosed or mutated overtime to play the role songs of abuse accomplished among Ewe; providing nonviolent ventilation for conflicts and rivalry. Two forms of *taarab* in particular come closest to the conceptualisation

Anyidoho and Awoonor give this genre; the so-called Women's *taarab* or simply, "Swahili *taarab*" (Ntarangwi 2003) and *mipasho*. Whereas *mipasho* songs are laden with vibrant local beats designed for dance purposes in which mainly women participate, "Women's *taarab*" refers to the style of *taarab* that is performed at Swahili weddings to audiences expected to be constituted of women and which also borrows heavily from the music styles of Swahili musical genres associated with women (Graebner 1990). I, however, downplay this distinction to perceive the two as merging into song of abuse. This is informed by the generally well documented protean nature of *taarab*. Although this tradition is not often conceptualised as such, its affinities with song of abuse persuasively point towards presence and relevance of this art outside West Africa's "halo belt". In east Africa's coastal and island communities, this art serves to belittle the rival as the *mipasho* lyrics exemplify. Like west Africa's coastal AnloEwe community where it solely functions as "an avenue for dissipating animosity and other hostilities that may endanger group solidarity" (Awoonor 1974: 6) which abound in everyday existence, this verbal art fulfils similar function among modern Swahili communities, that is, non-ethnic Swahilis mostly inhabiting the east Africa's littoral using Kiswahili as first language, mother tongue or preferred language of creativity.

It is therefore my conviction that being such a "useful social practice" that helped and helps the community and its members express their grievances in a non-violent manner (Awoonor 1976: 122–3) could not have been relevant in certain communities and have no equivalents or appropriations in other African communities, considering that contexts demanding its "performance" were not confined to the Ewe or west African communities. Since most verbal arts are a social reality imbricated in, and indeed, helping to constitute social life (Haring 1994: 8), it follows that being a social reality, songs of abuse are an inseparable aspect of communal life which most African societies practice. It clearly instances a case of poetics and performance functioning to regulate social life, in particular mediating inter- and intra-group conflicts. As artistic rendering and perpetuation of conflict or continuation of war by other means (Haring 1994: 9), it is manifested in different African communities multifariously. The various arts of the word thus help constitute African social life at (extended) family and community level. Although they may not be as pronounced and structured as *halo*, these arts exist among diverse communities. So widespread is this form not only because it helps to discourage certain excesses in the society but because it provides individuals a means of relieving their pent-up emotions (Okpewho 1985: 76) besides the pleasure derived by spectators. Specifically, I use the identified characteristic features to interrogate aesthetic codes, conventions and manipulations through which this form generates meaning, its varied socio-cultural contexts of performance and interpretation, and demonstrate that indeed *mipasho* is a variant of this art.

While *halo* may have been explicitly defined as "socio-musical drama" with specified contexts, its context for performance among east African communities remain fluid and largely undefined; abound in *mipasho*, the contemporaneous *mchongoano*, emanate from *emerumi*,<sup>8</sup> among a myriad of other African literary traditions in the region. Despite the impression that it was not regarded as an art, with identifiable aesthetics and crucial



social function, traces of its existence cannot be dismissed. In *mipasho*, for instance, the form assumes a protean and composite-form. Although evidently more explicitly defined among west African communities because it assumes what Dor describes as an artistic amalgam of drama, poetry, music, dance, and visual arts (2004: 39), this art is alive in east Africa. The point Kofi Anyidoho and Isidore Okpewho make is significant in relation to the argument being advanced in this paper. Anyidoho (1983) proposes that the notion of tradition should not be limited to identifiable items of folklore, but should be enlarged to include styles and techniques of verbal expression. Such a re-orientation, Anyidoho concludes, accommodates the appreciation of new items as properly belonging to tradition as long as their styles and techniques may be identified as traditional (1983: 137). This is the argument I use to regard snatches of *taarab's mipasho*, *mchongoano* and *emerumi* as deploying styles and techniques considered the preserve of song of abuse tradition. On the other hand, so widespread is this form of poetry, Okpewho argues, “that in *some* societies it was a recognised form of art” (1985: 76 emphasis added to draw attention to the distinction). This correctly suggests that besides the two examples – *halo* among the Ewe of Ghana and *udje* among the Urhobo of Nigeria – Okpewho provides, or any others into which notable scholarly interest has hitherto been shown, there is no reason to doubt their existence outside the so called “song-of-abuse belt” despite not enjoying the status of “a recognised form of art” in west Africa. Within the larger *taarab* text, there are embedded subtexts such as *mipasho* which implicitly or explicitly allude to this genre. Thus the contexts of execution and the main participants involved provide significant insights into the nature of this form. Whereas *mchongoano* tends to be more a preserve of young adults or children, basically involving what Awonoor terms “indulges in sheer verbal overkill” (1974: 235) – and very close to what Abrahams (1970) describes as “playing the dozens” among Afro-American youth, *halo* and *mipasho* are clearly gender marked. To a large extent, they are performed by women. *Mipasho* are delivered against a typical *taarab* musical background with occasional signals to a real life situation. For example, in one of Khadija Kopa’s<sup>9</sup> performance, the climax of the song “Kubali Matokeo” (Accept the Outcome) enacts a typical song of abuse contest in the west African sense. With an “imaginary rope” in between, the lead vocalist together with the backup singers form a sort of line and seem to be addressing the rival group as they point fingers and “throw” or hurl insults across. The sneering facial expressions dramatise actual verbal duels, augmented by typically taunting Kiswahili expressions such as “nyooo” and the exaggerated laughter “heheeee” designed to heckle and mock the addressee. The accompanying sneering and jeering often provoke hostility from the opponents. A rejoinder is thus inevitable, the opponent having been provoked.

Cutting across all these forms is the general acceptance and acknowledgement that it is a creative rather than a destructive channel for aggressive tendencies, irrespective of the category of social class or group which it predominantly serves. *Mipasho*, like *emerumi*, become useful whenever disputes arise, availing space for the display of verbal prowess and may be deployed by any disputing parties, although arguably, it is believed/accepted that women not only tend to excel or dominate but are known to compose

most of those in circulation at any given time. This is natural considering that different genres specialise in different provinces of reality, realities which are often specific to different social groups. To a large extent, *mipasho* speaks to what may be considered a product of gender specialisation of certain genres, as is the case with *halo* among the AnloEwe of Ghana. Striking parallels can be drawn between *halo* and “women’s taarab” whose lyric expresses *ushinde*, or rivalry derived from a long standing Swahili cultural tradition of urban *ngoma za ushinde* such as *gungu*, *lelemama*, *unyago*, *beni*, *bomu*, *kunguwia*, *ndege* and *changani*. All these seem to have been factored into what has come to be called *mipasho*, hence, more fruitfully, may be understood in the light of Bakhtin’s thesis. Bakhtin (1986) divides everyday or primary genres as being absorbed and digested into more complex literary genres “composed of various transformed primary genres” (1986: 98). Rather than treat them as intrinsically different, I consider these precursors to *mipasho* as foundational forms that have been “altered” to “assume a special character” (1986: 62), consequently losing their everyday or earlier significance to *mipasho*. They are de-contextualised but reassigned a new context; one arguably with affinities with song of abuse-proper. In the case of *mipasho*, it has been re-contextualised to be “particularly distinctive for the expression therein of jealousy, competition, obscenity ... the extreme case of rivalry, and abusive ring of the lyric evident in the verbal exchange” (2005: 148). It therefore comes closest to what may be lumped under the umbrella of songs of abuse. *Mipasho*, according to Khamis, derives its name from a type of lyric that thrives on openness, cynicism, sexism, sensationalism and exchange of *abuses and insults* (2002: 201 my emphasis). Derived from the Kiswahili verb “pasha”, meaning “cause to get” or “back-bite”, the centre of this art’s attention and importance is idiomatically to “cause” one to get abuse and humiliation (2004: 26). For this paper, Fargion’s (2000) definition captures what I wish to foreground; emphasis on rival *ngoma* like *lelemama*.

Within the broader *taarab* genre, a substantial corpus that sharply departs from sentimental songs to, more or less “crude rivalry songs in which issues are personalised and language becomes abusive, insulting, drawing attention to itself” (Khamis 2005: 149) exists. This is the form that has divergently evolved into a sort of songs of abuse-type. The emergence of a new style performed only by women (Fair 1994: 284) signals the participant specificities that I earlier associated with this genre. Women’s *taarab* (Topp1992; Fargion 1993) or *mipasho* as a (sub)category therefore, is one in which women’s musical rhythms are incorporated into *taarab* accompanied with texts that “use strong and often abusive language with the intention of hurting and degrading the subject in the eyes of the public” (Fargion 1993: 118). Besides the celebrative mood, this variant is quite profoundly intended to deride rival clubs and trade insults. Although it is not my intention to delve into the mutable nature of *taarab*, a brief mention of the transformation leading to the current *mipasho* will suffice. There have been shifts in lyrical orientation of *taarab* from the aforementioned “ideal” and once marginalised societal issues to more normally plain, transparent, blunt and preoccupation with issues regarded as private and personal in the Swahili culture – or what critics have termed “reversion” (Khamis 2005: 149). Apart from shift from prosodic to being relatively in

blank or free in style, this form shows a lot of fragmentariness, fuzziness and incoherence (2004: 27), the lyrical content has changed (from being oblique and romantic) to being direct, “sexist *and abusive* or anything that opiates” (ibid. my emphasis) or aimed at ridiculing and or offending a rival person or group (Traore 2007: 184). The focus here is on the abusive aspect, which, I hold, is definitive of the genre. The blunt and abusive nature of the lyric’s style directed at belittlement of rival contenders echoes the halo scenes. Conflicts of diverse magnitudes – from interpersonal to inter-group – are inevitable in the society, and call for resolution via different socially acceptable means. Other than the earlier mentioned war-song, there is evidence in the history of the Swahilis of literary expressions mediating conflicts. A case in point is the exchange between different Sultanates or city-states along the coast which inspired several *utendi* compositions hence the use of ingenious imaginative expressions executed in terse verse-form to dissolve rivalry.

Similarly embedded through all these form is what Awoonor sees as the essence of this verbal art, that is, characteristic verbal agility, exaggeration and elaborate use of imagery (Awoonor 1974). For the narrow space of this paper, however, I limit most of the illustrative material to a selection of *mipasho* to elaborate these phenomena. These texts not only incorporate but also foreground the typically agonistic spirit of competition of music and dance performances in this community, which is expressed diversely. I will use three examples, that is, the cross-exchanges between Bhalo and Maulidi in the early 70s, then the animosity between *Nuru el-Uyun* and *Royal Air Force*, Siti Binti Saad versus Siti Peponi and finally that between TOT and *Muungano* to illustrate how *mipasho* constructs a world void of physical aggression, and hence encouraging non-violent means of resolving conflicts. Such rivalries are also evident among *Musiki ya dansi* bands and, recently, among hip-hop groups, although, arguably, not as pronounced/veiled as in *mipasho*. Saavedra Casco (2006: 237) regards it a common feature which Tanzanian hip-hop only added another dimension to. The examples celebrate the tradition of institutionalised rivalry between *taarab* groups achieved most effectively through *mipasho* texts.

A popular rivalry between Bhalo and Maulidi from the 1970s to the late 1980s epitomises how feuds may help inspire and construct *mipasho* texts. Sparked by a money-related dispute, this rivalry began in 1974 and developed into a popularity contest (Ntarangwi 2003: 60) and, in my view, a fertile ground for trading insults. Considering that they had worked together before and therefore knew quite a lot about one another, the inter-personal attacks were often directed at exposing the other’s scandalous past to the delight of their fans. With time, their sparring escalated; as Maulidi accused Bhalo of being a voyeur, peering into people’s houses to watch them have sex, the latter accused the former of being a homosexual or “shoga”. This tag shoga has come to be one of the most common references in *mipasho* to the level of almost being acceptable and not regarded as an insult. Used within the confines of song duels, shoga which might provoke violent responses in other contexts become desensitised and insignificant due to frequent deployment and de-contextualisation of its meaning/connotation. However,

vulgarity and obscenity are a common source of verbal insults. Occasionally, insults go beyond such more acceptable insults into deep sexual overtones as was the case in Bhalo-Maulidi grudge. Unlike in Ghana's *halo* where the tradition was enthusiastically performed since its inception around 1912 until its proscription by the government in 1960,<sup>10</sup> it took religious leaders, concerned at what they believed to be great violations of conduct, to raise objections to Bhalo-Maulidi exchanges. The intervention from religious leaders discouraged people from listening and anticipating insults and rejoinders. This eventually led to the rivalry subsiding,<sup>11</sup> however, not before the audience had been exposed to hilarious invectives. Of particular interest to this study is the fact that despite the objections of many, this rivalry offered people a source of recreation. As a definitive feature, Kofi Anyidoho reads "the double-edged nature of poetic insults" as hurting the target but offering "infinite pleasure to onlookers" (1983: 237) and listeners as was the case for the Maulidi-Bhalo rivalry. People eagerly waited for the latest cassette and often got together with friends to decipher its meaning.<sup>12</sup> The interest and enthusiasm these exchanges cultivated is evidence of the popularity of this art, whose function like any other literary forms, is also to enthrall the audience. It is on record that "men and women could meet with their peers, socialize, and converse over the latest events in the feud" (Ntarangwi 2003: 60). By incorporating their rivalry into the song's textualities, the feud opens new spaces for *taarab* songs affording people a forum to discuss issues that they are not normally be able to talk about in standard social interactions (ibid), hence significantly renegotiating social boundaries. In a society subscribing to the virtues of "minding one's own business" or, as captured in the Quran, *neni la mwenzio usilitoe nje*,<sup>13</sup> exchanges such as

Linguine langu tamko pulika Utamakani iwapo chako kimako ni Kovu yangu usoni je, yako kwenye Tako alokutia ni nani ?	My next speech listen carefully, if your worry is the scar on my face. Who put the one you have on your buttock?
Na iwapo wakataa kovu hiyo Mbele yetu siruali ulovaa ivue Uonye watu wahakikishe jamaa Kama kweli huna kitu	And if you deny existence of that scar, remove your pants for people to see and ascertain that you have nothing. (Fargion 2000: 64)

were considered to have transgressed and flouted the Swahili community's highly upheld moral norms. Evidently, the song's thematic textuality is couched as a space for smearing the opponent with insults. The effectiveness of the particular one quoted above lies in the fact that the addressee may find it difficult proving the aggressor wrong, as undressing in public may prove even more embarrassing. This therefore may be regarded an apt rejoinder for slur oscillating around accusations of voyeurism, homosexuality, in addition to scathing attacks such as the profoundly metaphorical "futility of whipping a fool" who, as the contextual interpretation suggests, cannot change. This is an allegory to an actual event involving the target, Bhalo. It is common for *mipasho*'s metaphoric language to deploy allegories that are familiar only to a few, as is the case in this one. The lyrics are sometimes pregnant with hidden meanings as well as double entendres,

relating to people or events known only to the composer. In the example above, the fool is Bhalo. The allegorical nature of *mipasho* makes it a perfect vehicle for social criticism and ideal for trading insults.

As performers aim to outdo one another using verbal assaults, the competitive spirit or rivalry engulfs their fans, eventually involving the whole community – as was often the case in west Africa. While in Eweland, for instance, a day was set aside for *halo* contest with an entire village providing audience, the lead-singers or performers act as representatives of their bands and audience. It is significant to point out that these rivalries – although driven by competition for better musical instruments and popularity – quite often drifted into personality contests. One such rivalry which encapsulated an entire community is that pitting *Yote Huwa* against *Wakti*. With half of the village in Matadoni supporting *Yote Huwa*, and the other half favouring *Wakti* (Ntarangwi 2003: footnote 95) the magnitude echoes *halo* setting in which an entire village – through its leading *halo* performers – assault neighbouring ones.

Although the exchange refrained from overtly conflictual personal attacks that characterised Bhalo-Maulidi dispute, it may not be ruled out that “naked insults” remained part of the songs. However, unlike the former, members of the feuding groups exercised some modicum of restraint by attacking their rivals’ singing ability and musical talent only. Their lyrics demonstrate that rivalries exist for the sake of fun and recreation, avoiding the back-biting of rival’s character that Bhalo-Maulidi clash propagated. This milder version echoes urban Kenya’s *mchongoano* in which the contest is first and foremost for the sake of the spectators’ delight – and not occasioned by actual disagreement between the warring parties. *Mchongoano* is ushered by cues such as “wasee wasee” (guys guys ...) with exchanges solely aimed at delighting the audience and not necessarily hurting the opponent as such. The main difference in my view lies in the fact that to a large extent, *mchongoano* contest may lead to physical violence and aggression – considering the age of participants – while *mipasho* on the other hand intervenes and offers an alternative physical fight.

It is evident that this genre combines two distinct and on the surface antagonistic elements of oratory: praising and abusing. Self-praising is disguised or embedded in the insults hailed at rivals. Thus *mipasho* merges elements of song of praise with song of abuse. In other words, the song’s texture is woven in such a way that it is simultaneously a praise-song embedded within song of abuse. Apart from being panegyric and romantically expressive (Khamis 2004: 13), *mipasho*’s textual landscape is interspersed with scathing and derisive insults directed at a veiled perceived rival, competitor or enemy – common in most *mipasho* being the co-wife. This predilection stems from this tradition’s (*taarab*) evolution over time from pastime to commercial praxis but always with “inclination to voice interpersonal relationship” (Khamis 2004: 7). Before examining the more recent and arguably most pronounced, one in which the songster Khadija Kopa is at the centre, a brief mention of the famous rivalries between *Nuru el-Uyun* and *Royal Air Force* is crucial.

The fact that by the end of the 70s, the trend in this subgenre signals clear inclinations towards what I am delineating in this paper evidences the singular focus on interpersonal

relationships and insults in particular. The genre drifts towards emphasis on verbal attacks as insults became more vulgar. With time back-biting takes the centre-stage of the genre's aesthetic and lyrical text. In the second example of inter-taarab bands animosity breeding songs of abuse, two groups *Nuru el-Uyun* and *Royal Air Force* come into mind. Janet Fargion (2000) documents some of the duels that this rivalry gave rise to but gives little attention to the exchange of invectives as a potential equivalent of songs of abuse. Their exchanges are marked by insults clearly moving beyond musical rivalry to include attacks and accusation revolving around subjects' morals and individual behaviours, significantly depart from accepted social norms. They accused one another of theft, incest, miscegenation among others. In one instance, the band leader of the *Nuru el-Uyun* and hence the "pilot", is the target of *Royal Air Force's* insults. They describe the pilot's brother, Chwaka, as involved in a homosexual relationship (Traole 2007: 184) which, considering that this is in a predominantly homophonic society, is an insult. This recalls the sensationalism and exaggeration Awoonor and Okpewho associate with songs of abuse. In their counter-accusation, *Royal Air Force* metaphorically describes the pilot as a lesbian. However, this response is not bluntly stated but rather creatively coated thus

Kumezuka papa kuu	There is a huge shark
Si jike wala dume	Neither female nor male
Lina miguu mitatu	It has three legs
Na mikono mine	And four hands
Wanifukueni watoto	Protect your children
Papa lisiwatafune	So the shark will not eat them (Fargion 2000: 48)

Since obscenity provides one of the richest repertoires of content of abuses, then the above lines allude to song of abuse-type texts. Kiswahili, being a language immensely rich in double meanings in a number of its lexical items, provides an apt medium for this art. One of the salient features of *halo* and song of abuse in general is the double-edged nature of poetic insults (Anyidoho 1983: 237). While "papa" may designate shark, in the above context it is used as a vulgar term for female genitalia. This is quite prevalent among the Ewe's *halo*. Like *halo*, *Mipasho* also tends to rely on direct language, using explicit contextual references and criticism often expressed in offensive language, and openly provocative – though not always valued among the Swahili. Sometimes the lyrics are pregnant with hidden meanings and highly allusive expressions. The exchange between Maulidi and, this time with Sitara, illustrates cautiously couched insults. Sitara's "Wembe wa Kutu" (Blunt Razor Blade) and Maulidi's "Nataka Sema" (I Want to Talk) may be envisaged as argumentative language marked by allusive expressions leaning towards aggression. Whereas Maulidi metaphorically and sarcastically attacks his rival thus

I have words to say, listen residents  
 About a wise person whose needs are unending  
 (S)he is inside a well but begs for a mouthful of water  
 Surely this world is full of surprises

Do not blame me people I wish to tell you  
There are ten people sleeping on one bed

...

She has abandoned steak for 1/4 kilo of bone

....

There is a witch who is never reputable  
For lack of mercy people are perishing  
When they are well the sick complain

To which Sitara replied:

A pot sits on three stones I will cook their tongues  
That blunt one I know their blade  
On three stones I see their poet  
They mix everything, concocting their instigation  
But whatever they wish will never happen (2003: 188–9)

The conflict was triggered by Sitara's departure from the band in 1994. Aesthetically, the lines are poignant with slur. For example, she says that she has a blunt blade for them, implying that they (Maulidi and Party band) are so low that they are not worth a sharp blade to be shaven or cut to size (Ntarangwi 2003: 190). Accusations of witchcraft and the bad blood between them serve to demonstrate the gravity of the conflict.

To ask is not taboo please tell me  
I have exhausted my knowledge I do not  
Know what to do  
How does a pot without a crack leak?

Another feud involves two *taarab* singers in different bands.

Recognised as the first woman to have composed or been involved in the creation of *taarab* lyrics, the legendary Siti Binti Saad embodies the extraordinary versatility of this genre. Some of her compositions incorporate the aspects of songs of abuse. At one time in her career, Binti Saad's relations with Siti Peponi<sup>14</sup> soured as they were entangled in bitter rivalry. This animosity found expression in their compositions, often taking a derision angle common to songs of abuse. In one of her songs, Siti Peponi challenges Binti Saad, questioning her personality

Siti binti Saad kawa mtu lini?  
Akaja mjini na kaniki chini

Kama si sauti angekula nini ?  
eat?

When did Siti become a person?

She came to town with a cheap cloth to  
cover her

If it weren't for her voice what would she  
(2003: 176)

On the one hand, this may be read as Siti Peponi's recognition of her rival's great voice and with which she was able to make ends meet. However, it is more directed at how desperate and miserable she was before her musical career struck the right chord, or, as she implies, "became a person" – suggesting that she would be "something" else were it not for her voice. To this, Binti Saad retorted

Si hoja uzuri na sura jamali  
 Kuwa mtukufu na jadi kubeli  
 ancestors  
 Hasara ya mtu kukosa akili  
 (2003: 176–7)

It is not the face or good appearance  
 To be an exalted person with approved  
 The real loss for a person is to lack brains

Whereas Siti Peponi posits that her rival only becomes of worth or of substance because of her voice – suggesting that it is earnings from music business that make humans “human” – her rival subtly reminds her that money has nothing to do with being human or “person-ness”. Sarcastically, Binti Saad reminds her that the greatest tragedy to befall any person is lacking brains, indirectly implying that, indeed, that is Siti Peponi’s fate. Clothing and appearance or being born into a royal or prominent family may not therefore be compared with smart brains, a common wisdom among the Swahili. Their rivalry is integrated into their song texts and the duel seems dialogic or antiphonal by nature. Thinly veiled insults (“call”) obviously trigger a response(s), and this may go on for some time. The spirit of competition which often tilts towards open rivalry with outright animosity expressed in public through songs echo west Africa’s *halo*. The audience aspect though looming rather than physically present, exchange of insults creatively coated and fused with verbal dexterity and profound, incisive imagery abound in this form.

Underpinning all verbal duels is a certain shared team antagonism. The context for these exchanges can be discerned in “the innuendos and fierce but highly amusing war of words hidden in the lyric of competing clubs or writers” (Khamis 2005: 144). The burgeoning of dissident sentiments among women not only expressing gender inequalities but voicing inter-personal conflicts to a large extent remain the driving force behind this genre. This, however, should not imply that it is gendered art. Men are equally involved and participate in verbal duels in form of songs of abuse. However, the dominant and most active voices of this art are women. The final example of *taarab* musical rivalry providing space for trading insults in a typically song of abuse manner is the long battle between Tanzania Theatre One (TOT), owned by a businessman and Muungano, closely associated with the ruling party, CCM. But at the centre of this rivalry is, to a large extent, the songster Khadija Kopa. Fondly referred to as the queen of *taarab*, she started her career with TOT but was later forced to move to Muungano before eventually rejoining TOT again in 1997. She is the embodiment of what this subgenre has come to be associated with, considering the fact that in her career, she has criss-crossed between the two bitter/perennial *taarab* bands. Most of her songs appear to be directed at a certain rival who, apparently, will never beat her in the game (whichever it may be), often posing as superior in every sense. She always seems to address a certain “wewe” (you) whose antics will never march hers. In “Huna Mambo” for example, Kopa taunts the addressee, attacking her by putting a negative ring on her age, “desperate” attempts to look good and bad body odour:



Uzee umekukumba, hata ukijipodoa	old age surrounds you, even if you use cosmetics
Kutwa wajiremba remba, hupendezi nakwambia	you apply make-up the whole day, but you still look bad
Mwili unanuka vumba, bure unajichuchua	your body oozes awful stench, it is caking off

This echoes the Ghanaian *halo* poet, Amega Dunyo's "It is in the Hands of Destiny", in which he dares his antagonist, "a whore", to

Come and hear the voice of slander.  
 You clutch the earth like a leather bag.  
 On your stem you stand like the porcupine in clothes.  
 You run like the bush rope.  
 Your back caves in rising like the hillock.  
 Beneath your stomach is the hyaena's ravine...  
 Will this too insult the poet? (57)

Running through this stanza are similes aimed at equating the subject with repugnant images such as a "porcupine in clothes" and "bush rope". As in *mipasho*, the language remains that of direct and blunt insults with instances of allegoric and allusive constructions. The repertoire of insults also remains by and large the same. With the aim often being to prove the worthlessness of the rival, and win the audience's favour, eliciting of laughter and ridicule from them (audience) as well as exuding anger from the targets is the hallmark of this art. This is the same approach Khadija Kopa deploys in these lines from "Kinyang'unya" (or You Old Rag)

Kinyang'unya hupendezi hata ukivaa nini (x2)  
 Kinyang'unya usitake ya watu kinyang'unya  
 Kinyang'unya yako yakushinda kinyang'unya (x2)

Niambie ndiye wewe shoga mbona umechusha (x2)  
 Umenyorodoka wewe karagosi unatisha (x2)

And:

Kava yatu la butu	She's put on worn out shoes
Kwenye soli limekwisha	whose soles have been eaten away
Amejisuka mabutu	She's plaited her hair in an old-fashion style
Nyewelee wiki hajaosha	Hair not washed for a week

From this text, what warrants all these insults and the latent vehement animosity is deriving pleasure from others' weaknesses and from meddling in other people's affairs. To fully appreciate her compositions, the bitter rivalry that marked the heydays of TOT and Muungano is of critical significance. In most of these texts, the "wewe" or target of her sharp invectives is always, collectively, the entire rival band and occasionally its band leader. For a long time, the rivalry between these two has produced some of the most deliberately offensive *mipasho* song lyrics. Underpinning all these songs is

the agonistic spirit which signals duality or addresser and addressee, best exemplified in “Tutabanana Hapahapa” (We shall square/fight it out right here). On the surface, the song is a response by co-wife in a marriage, detailing her strong desire to stay in the marriage through thick and thin. She assures her that she will not relent whatever the circumstances. However, at a deeper level, this song is about the long battle for supremacy between Muungano and their sworn enemy, TOT. This song captures the quintessential agonistic spirit and urge to scandalise the opponent, which runs through this genre. Tormenting her arch rival that what she desires has eluded her, Kopa tells her that she may toss her heart on a plate:

Ulimtaka hakukutaka	you wanted him but he did not like you
Sasa rusha roho sahanini.	You may now toss your heart on a plate

This implies that the glory they are dying for has eluded them. Derogatively describing the rival as, among others, “goigoi” (means more than just indolent, or idle) “kinyago” (clown, comedian or mask, with a Swahili connotation), the essentially dialogical or question-answer structure of the exchanges can be discerned in most songs of abuse. From her song texts, a number of deductions may be made. First, some of her common imagery in *mipasho* texts gives an indication of the Swahili community’s worldview, exposing its prevalent attitudes. Responding to the challenge of creative prowess and innovativeness, Kopa describes the rival TOT as “limbukeni” or country pumpkin, with nothing new to offer the audience. This image signals the Swahili’s disdain for upcountry folk or “wabara”. Similarly, Swahili women’s obsession with cooking skills may be discerned in the expression “chele limezidi tui” to hint at the rival’s pathetic kitchen expertise. It is common to hear inhabitants of coastal towns in east Africa boast of their cooking prowess and perfect precision in combing ingredients – and using the contrary as the undoing of upcountry housewives.

As suggested earlier, this genre thrives on an overarching antiphonal structure, embracing output of warring musical bands. This dialogic pattern, together with the highly allusive nature, may be appreciated by examining Khadija Kopa’s “Utalijua Jiji” (You will learn the city), whose tone and mood are clearly directed at some veiled recipient. By addressing “him”, “her” or “them” directly, the persona does not hide her intention. She belittles her target(s), describing how backward and unexposed to urban life or modernity they are. This again is in reference to members and fans of TOT. It is worthy quoting at length two stanzas which bring to the fore the contextual creative and imaginative texture of this poem.

Kazi yako ufisadi, jeuri ngebe na nongwa,  
 Baraka ya ukaidi, ukali kama embe bwagwa,  
 Vituko vya maksudi, si bure we umerogwa,  
 Badala ya soda baridi, ama juisi ya chungwa,  
 Ushamba umekuzidi, andazi wanywia togwa,<sup>15</sup>  
 Mwenzangu huna ujuzi, mpenzi umemuudhi,  
 Kaja kwangu nimempokeya.

Pokea chako kibomu, shoga ninakutumia,  
 Hata ukinilaumu, wako nishamchukua,  
 Penzi ulimdhulumu, visa ukamfanyia,  
 Chachandu vitamutamu, bwana hukumpatia,  
 Bwana kapata wazimu, kashindwa kuvumilia,  
 Kwangu akatia timu ....

With explicit references such as “pokea chako kibomu ...” (literally, receive your “small” bomb), the persona’s intentions cannot be doubted. This is taken from a common Kiswahili phrase “Kupiga bomb”, which means “to drop the bomb” as a metaphor for the “attack” mode of this competitive art form (Gundersen 2000: 13). On the surface, the rivalry stems from a love triangle in which the addresser and addressee are ensnared and the song is meant to add insult to the injury. By saying how “uncivilized” the rival is, for example, not able to distinguish cold soda or orange juice from traditional beverages such as *tongwa*, the persona justifies her action of “husband snatching”. But read contextually, it is not the snatching of a husband but rather of fans and hence proud of her accomplishment of winning the following and support of *taarab* audience. What Gerard Moore says about Awoonor’s vitriolic “Songs of Abuse” and the tradition of African abuse poetry may as well apply to Swahili’s *mipasho*. What matters is not the accuracy of the epithets used, but that they should overwhelm the opponents with superior violence or more deadly venom (253). The insults usually range from physical appearance, deviant behaviour to (inter)personal histories often fabricated or exaggerated, hence the inclination towards obscenities or “naked/plain-abuse” are not uncommon. Ojaide Tanure (1992) observes that satiric or abuse songs, such as the *udje* of Nigeria’s Urhobo people and the *halo* of the Ewe of Ghana and Togo, were composed to check the excesses of individuals in a communal society through insults and hence a sort of transformative role in society.

## Conclusion

This paper has primarily focused on conflict and the rivalry it engenders as expressed through *mipasho* texts. The impetus behind this emphasis stems from the premise that such conflicts are key to unlocking meanings embedded in the insults often traded by warring or competing parties. This means that one needs to read *mipasho* within the context of rivalry and therefore the conflict/antagonism or enmity is a prerequisite in deciphering or in order to grasp the intended or hidden meanings in the song texts as they are frequently used to communicate in public ill feelings about fellow artists (Lange 2000: 78) – who in most cases constitute the major targets of the insults. Such hostility provides space for the creative imagination in the form of insults. As expressive spaces and arena where differences are made public and negotiated using verbal dexterity, *mipasho* serves a critical socio-cultural function. It is a literary means of managing conflicts and hence a site where difference as norm is contested, equalised and subverted.

The examples from *taarab's mipasho* underscore the relevance and presence of this genre in east Africa. In terms of social significance, the genre constructs a world devoid of physical violence and aggression. Partly, this may be gleaned from Khadija Kopa's "Kubali Matokeo" (Accept the Outcome) in which she highlights the attitude that underpins this genre. By pointing out that "matusi sio sumu" (that is, mere verbal insults are not poison) and therefore should never warrant physical responses or extended beyond the verbal realm,<sup>16</sup> Kopa's texts and Mipasho in general conceive a world where violence is unwarranted. This signals how the community perceives this art as central in achieving societal order. Since they are not poison, they cannot kill or harm the individual and should not be taken as such. Equally of significance is the cathartic fulfilment achieved by the addresser. Besides the addresser and the target, the onlookers or members of the audience are immensely entertained. Part of *mipasho's* aesthetic achievement lies in the "quotability" of the texts, especially when extended and stretched indefinitely to encompass different conflicts or disagreements. For example, the texts examined are not limited to the specific context that created or gave rise to them but rather, as Ntarangwi (2003: 197) observes, members of the audience use the lyrics against anyone they have a disagreement with. Ntarangwi correctly points out that a *taarab* song with a message that correspond to the particular disagreement may be used to express one's feelings and opinion on that particular disagreement. This is also evident in performance contexts, especially using the gesture of tipping the songster, often done exaggeratedly.

The paper has also attempted a comparative analysis of indigenous forms and more contemporary renditions of this art, as well as possible similarities and dissimilarities between west and east African variants of the genre. Parallels between these two forms are further compounded by the fact that whereas in Ghana it took the colonialist government to censure and later outlaw performances of this form, episodes of verbally aggressive competition in Zanzibar led the government to obliging various women clubs to be registered and their song texts be approved by the Censorship Board in the mid-eighties. This alone should serve to illustrate the idea that the two forms, by and large, served similar functions and deployed equally lethal verbal invocations. The form has therefore evolved variously in different regions but still serves similar, if related, social functions. Considering that any given instantiation of a genre is always in relation to the whole field or entire spectrum of the genre in general, then, east Africa's *mipasho* may be perceived, not as departure but rather as an 'utterance' within the song of abuse discourse – responding to context-specific conditions. As part of a larger poetry tradition in the region, *mipasho* adheres to the strict and rigid prosodies of the classical Swahili quatrain as evident in the rhyme schemes.

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## Notes

- 1 This includes Kofi Awonoor (1974), Kofi Anyidoho (1983), Newell (2007), Daniel Avorgbedor (1995; 1999; 2001 and 2005) and Corinna Campbell (2002), all who have delved into composition and performance of this oral tradition among the Ewe people of Ghana, and Ojaide (1992) who has examined a variant of this genre among the Urhobo of Nigeria. Of these, none focuses on its more contemporaneous manifestations. Beyond the continent, research among US college students (Schwebel 1997), French Algerian teenagers in France (Tetreault 2009), people of Indian origin in Fiji (Brenneis and Padarath 1975), and the African American "dozens" studied by Labov (1972) seems to foreground the diasporic factor.
- 2 More often than not from the Ki-Ngozi dialect which was the main language of poetry in the north where the art's provenance may be traced.
- 3 Scholarly examination and ethnomusicological research among the Swahili of East African coast has been confined to the analysis of musical practice as distinct social phenomenon (Campbell 1983), as a historical performance (Franken 1986), a process of localization through women's participation (Topp 1992), as a language of communication (King'ei

- 1992), as a political history (Fair 1996; 1997) and as a producer of national culture (Askew 1997). This study is specifically limited to a sub-genre of taarab, mipasho and how, as a distinct category, it shows affinities and parallels with what has been termed songs of abuse.
- 4 Translated as ‘back-biting’, the genre may be defined as a type of *taarab* that draws attention to itself by means of its lyric in which motifs are expressed point blankly, emphasized through repetition, issues are *personalized* and the melodious mode used to characterize the traditional form is relegated to percussive one (Khamis 2004: 26). Personalizing of issues, against the backdrop of “point blankness”, inevitably leads to verbal confrontations.
  - 5 They need not be summoned as Pagliai seems to suggest but more often than not, are attracted and often find themselves engrossed in the duel.
  - 6 By text here I mean a coherent and complex web of signs.
  - 7 Of the three categories Topp (1992) identifies in taarab, the ideal modelled on Egyptian forms, its counter-form known as *kidumbak* developed by people of African descent and lastly, *taarab ya wanawake* straddles between the two; aesthetically leans towards the ideal but in performance style orients itself towards Africanisations of taarab (1992: 3). Ideal *taarab* is basically sentimental in its lyrical texture. Distinctly, it also relies on heavily metaphorical allusions and hardly used explicit references.
  - 8 This is a verbal duel among the Bantu’s Abagusii community.
  - 9 As the queen of taarab, Khadija Kopa is arguably the most prolific and representative of this genre. Having criss-crossed top taarab bands, starting with TOT then forced to move to Muungano before eventually rejoining TOT again in 1997, she embodies what this genre has come to be associated with.
  - 10 Implemented through *Acts of Ghana, Criminal Code Act 29, S295, 1960*.
  - 11 Sometime in the late 1980s, the Chief Kadhi (Islamic judge) responsible for handling most disputes in Mombasa asked the musicians to stop the dispute (Ntarangwi, “Malumbano or Matukano”, 58)
  - 12 Ntarangwi (2003: 60) quotes Bunu Said saying that “during that time they [Maulidi and Bhalo] sold so many cassettes because they will see what Bhalo will reply to Maulidi. And when Maulidi produces new cassettes they sold a lot because people just want to know a lot of stuff about Bhalo.”
  - 13 Do not expose or publicise other people’s private matters.
  - 14 A female musician from Lamu and based in Mombasa and a known competitor of Siti Binti Saad (Ntarangwi 2003: 178).
  - 15 Traditional non-alcoholic beverage, Togwa, in East Africa, produced from maize flour and germinated finger millet.
  - 16 In such competitions, the Swahili saying “what’s important is not winning and losing, but how you play the game” is crucial to an appreciation of the song’s context.