

Kibiriti Ngoma: Gender Relations in Swahili Comics and Taarab-music

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Abstract

Kibiriti Ngoma is a Swahili slang expression, which is a despising description for a woman with the meaning of „prostitute“. In Tanzania this term became that common in everyday life that it was chosen to be the title of a Taarab song as well as the name of a comic magazine. This article compares the use of the term *Kibiriti Ngoma* in these two genres of popular art in Tanzania thus highlighting the popular discourse on gender relations and sexuality in East Africa. Comic magazines and Taarab music as forms of popular culture serve in this article as an analytical lens to understand social processes.

Introduction¹

Kibiriti Ngoma is a compound of two Swahili Words: *Kibiriti* – matches – and *ngoma* – dance or drum. *Kibiriti* implies the association of explosion and *ngoma* has the connotation of sex and revolution.

Kibiriti Ngoma was originally the name of a sensual dance in Zanzibar. It was danced in the 1940s in Ng'ambo, a quarter of the lower class in Zanzibar. The dance was danced by women and men alike. The fact that it was sensual, very popular and virtually danced by everybody caused a semantic shift. Due to the sexual connotations of that dance also prostitutes acquired the nickname *Kibiriti Ngoma*. Finally also a police station, which was situ-

1 We are grateful to Charles Kayoka for providing us with valuable information, which supplements the data Stefanie Kolbusa collected during field research in Tanzania. The core of this article is a paper presented by Jigal Beez and Stefanie Kolbusa on 2nd July 2003 at the 13th Annual Meeting of the Pan African Anthropological Association in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. We thank the participants of the meeting for their valuable comments.

ated close to the dance site and in which many of the prostitutes were often locked in, was called *Kibiriti Ngoma*.²

Today these origins of *Kibiriti Ngoma* are not known to most people who use this metaphor. Our research revealed, that *Kibiriti Ngoma* is used as one of many designations given to women in colloquial Swahili that have sexual connotations. *Kibiriti Ngoma* has a similar meaning as the common *Malaya* - a word for a prostitute. This does not exclusively mean a commercial sex worker but it is applied to women who have the reputation of easily giving out sexual favours to men.

Most people who have been interviewed about *Kibiriti Ngoma* are not aware of its historical background and its formation. But they offer other explanations in form of popular etymology. One explanation is, that the metaphor *Kibiriti Ngoma* is used for a prostitute or an easy going woman because like matches, she is only lit once. She gives a little explosion and is immediately thrown away after usage by men. The woman's reputation is like a drum, it is heard easily and everywhere.³ Another explanation is that the term *ngoma* - drum - is used to describe the vagina of a loose woman because it is free to be drummed by everyone.

A last explanation we got is that the matchbox, which is called *kibiriti* like the match, is a metaphor for the vagina of a woman. As in other languages, there are many names for a vagina in Swahili, like *andazi* or *kitumbua* (different types of buns) or *shimo* (hole). It can be noted that many names are given to things, which are not allowed to be mentioned or said openly - in this case *kuma*.⁴

In early 2002 a comic magazine with the title *Kibiriti Ngoma* appeared in the streets of Dar es Salaam. Its various cartoons and popular short stories describe a variety of female characters through this metaphor. In the same year the Taarab group East African Melody stormed the Tanzanian charts

2 Interviews Haji Gora Haji, February 2003, Issa Matona December 2001.

3 Interview Shaaban, January 2003.

4 It is a point of debate, whether these expressions are chauvinistic or not. Kayoka finds in his research more names for women and their sexual organs, than for men. He argues that this means that „women have a limited access to language and thus are unable to coin words“ (Kayoka 2003:9). As Kayoka mainly analyses novels written by men it is obvious that he cannot find the female language there. And it is not only men who invent and use these terms. Due to power relations, women do quarrel more among themselves than with men, thus they cannot use strong words against men but are quite inventive in abusing each other.

with a song called *Kibiriti Ngoma*, accusing a woman of immoral behaviour. As metaphors are not a pure semantic phenomenon but must be understood within the context of their usage, our paper will analyse the usage of the metaphor *Kibiriti Ngoma* in different art forms and social contexts. Therefore a comparison between the comic magazine and the Taarab song will give an insight into the different images of women and gender relations expressed in these two genres of Tanzanian popular culture. We will also show that both genres serve to cross borders of the otherwise accepted local protocol. During the analysis we refer to the works of the Tanzanian scholars Charles Kayoka (2001, 2003) and Richard Mabala (1996) who published on Gender images in Swahili popular culture.

Taarab music

Taarab is a style of popular music widely spread at the East African Coast stretching from Somalia in the north to Mozambique in the South. *Taarab* blends African, Indian, Arab, and Western styles of singing, composition, and instrumentation. It is a musical genre that combines singing of Swahili *mashairi* (poetry) with instrumental accompaniment.⁵ One of the most well known artists in the Taarab scene, Zuhura Swaleh a female singer of Mom-basa, has defined it the following way: „Taarab is a type of Swahili music with a long tradition and also there is a lot to be gained from it. Because Taarab discusses the life of human beings in every way, like to help a person to get over the grief when someone has died. There are other songs that may calm your soul by showing you that everything that happens in your life is arranged by God. To help in a desperate situation, you may be poor, and maybe really downtrodden, you may think about eating poison. There are Taarab songs of comfort, showing you that it is not only you who is in trouble, it is this world. There are love songs, there are comical songs, to make you happy. Taarab songs are really a collection of all different kinds of things in the life of humans, Taarab is an explanation of life. This is its value.“⁶

5 For further definition of *Taarab* see Anthony 1983, Askew 1997, Graebner 1991, Khatib 1992, Knappert 1977, Mgana 1991, Ntarangwi 2000, Topp 1992

6 <http://www.swahilionline.com/culture/music/bios/zuhura.htm>

The setting in this paper is Dar es Salaam, the biggest city of Tanzania. In Dar es Salaam there are many groups, which play Modern Taarab. Modern Taarab is the local term for the modern type of Taarab in distinction to the classical Taarab. The discussions about the difference between these two types are manifold, and controversial. To name just one obvious feature everybody agrees upon is the instrumentation. Modern Taarab bands consist of several male instrumentalists like keyboarder, guitarists and bass players and mostly female singers soloists and choir. They perform in various bars in different districts of the city and outside of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania or Kenya and sometimes on the Arabian Peninsula.

The type of Taarab we are going to elaborate about is called *Mipasho*, a term often synonymously used for Modern Taarab. *Mipasho* means „backbiting“, it is the lyrics of a song, the insulting character of it, which makes a song *Mipasho*.⁷ Our main focus will be on the communicative role of *Mipasho*. It serves as a means to negotiate values and disputes, and communicates matters, which are otherwise not possible to express. To demonstrate some aspects of *Mipasho* as communication, we will refer to a dispute between two women observed during a Taarab performance. As will be shown, the song *Kibiriti Ngoma* played a central role.

Picture in printed version

Cover of the tape of the *Mipasho*-song *Kibiriti Ngoma*

⁷ Askew 1997

One evening in 2002 Asha went to a Taarab performance of the famous Taarab group East African Melody in a bar in one of Dar es Salaams suburbs. Asha is herself a singer and very fond of Taarab. It was already 10 o'clock when Asha noticed some of her friends Daria and Amina who were accompanied by Rukkia. As usual they all wore long shining evening dresses, covering more or less their shoulders. Their hair was beautifully done, gold-jewellery shining at their ears, arms and necks and small handbags revealing mobile telephones. In front of the stage was a dance-floor. Finally the musicians went on stage. Except for some homosexuals only women went to dance. The men stayed seated to watch the scene.

After the song Daria pointed to Rukkia and remarked: „she wants to cause problems“. Though for outsiders there was not much to notice but their engaged dancing style. After the song Rukkia returned furiously to her seat. The reason was that Rukkia was quarrelling with a woman called Sauda, and her company, some homosexuals.

Rukkia went on dancing, waving with a 5000 /= TSH (around 5 €) note in her right hand. The dancing of the women goes together with the singing of the song and the appropriate gestures, which emphasize the content of the lyrics. Fingers are more or less decently directed towards each other. So did Rukkia and Sauda and her friends, some of them homosexuals. Everybody else seemed to go on enjoying the evening, leaving the dance floor joking and chatting, but the atmosphere between Rukkia and Sauda heated up. The situation escalated and the friends of the two women tried their best to calm them down. Daria went to the dance-floor and tried to stop Rukkia, but no success.

In the course of the evening the atmosphere escalated, an open dispute with swearwords aroused and at the end of the performance around 2 o'clock a.m. Sauda's friends waited for Rukkia outside the bar. Afterwards Sauda's friends told Asha and me that they had beaten up Rukkia.

What was the reason for Rukkia and Sauda to quarrel?

Rukkia and Sauda had been very close friends but now Sauda cannot stand to see Rukkias wealth. She is married to a well-off husband, has got two children and is staying in her own house. At the same time Rukkia caused the separation of Sauda with her former lover. Her former lover is a very well known personality and their affair had been in the papers. These days she is better off, financially. The reason for them to separate though was

Rukkia's gossip. One day she was with Sauda's former lover in a bar and told him that Sauda had got another affair with an Arab. Though Sauda claims to be better off, financially, without her former lover she still was angry with Rukkia ruining her relationship: "And that only after drinking one beer". Since then Sauda ignores Rukkia. Sauda explained the quarrel by the fact that it hurts Rukkia to be ignored by Sauda.

Contents of the songs Kibiriti Ngoma and Ngangari Feki

The first lyric, which was played during the above described performance and which Rukkia used to *kupasha* – „cause somebody to get” or „backbite” was *Kibiriti Ngoma*. As will be seen by having a closer look on the lyrics the song offered Rukkia a welcome platform to retaliate for Sauda's behaviour. *Kibiriti Ngoma* was one of the latest hits by the time in 2002. The song was composed by Nassor Seif. *Kibiriti Ngoma*, is about a woman who boasts of having a lover and at the same time derides her rival of not being capable to compete with her.

Kibiriti Ngoma

Idd 2002, Nassor Seif

1	1. ooh hunipi presha ewe mwenzangu	My dear, you don't put me under stress
2	hunipi presha mwenzangu nnatamba kwa mapana	you don't put me under stress I swagger proudly
3	aah vicheko vya batwaani kila unapo-	ohh your, frivolous laughter whenever you
4	niona aah	see me
5	ooh unanicheksha, unanichekesha mradi huna maana	ohh you make me laugh, so long as you are useless
6	darling nnae ndani cha kukiringia hu-	
7	na	I have got a darling inside, you don't have anything to be proud of
8	24 hours pia tunaliwazana wewe hakuwazi shughuli imembana	24 hours we comfort each other he doesn't think of you affair holds him fast
9	acha gozigozi acha gozigozi kwako wewe haja hana	stop causing trouble, he doesn't desire you
10	shughuli nnayo shughuli nnayo mimi	I have got an affair, I hold him back
11	nimemzuia hasara yako mwenzangu huyawezi mambo	it is your loss, you don't know anything my dear, you don't have anything to offer
	yamekushinda mwenzangu huna lako jambo	
12	2. rusha roho zako hazinishughulishi	Your provocations don't bother me I will put

	timu nitakushushia	you down
13	nimejizatiti sikupi nafasi kwenye channal kusogea	I have accommodated myself, I don't give you a chance to approach the channel
14	kwenye netwoki hatoki chachandu zimemchengua	he doesn't leave the network, hot pepper ⁸ has turned his head
15	wee acha tu mambo shega mwanangu sijui wewe kizushi	stop your affairs, my affairs are super what about you, you slanderer
16	namna gani vipi uwache kujilengsha	what's up, stop to crawl
17	huna mpya roho umrushe nani	you don't have anything new to offer, so whom will you excite
18	mbona umebainika shoga wa ku- chomekea	how comes you have been discovered of stir- ring up things
19		now you have been kicked off how comes he
	sasa umepigwa buti mbona ameku-	has resisted you
20	kumudu	you don't put me under stress my dear I keep the amusement from going
	hunipi presha mwenzangu hunipi presha mwenzangu ngoma nimeizuia	
21	3. kipi ulonacho cha kujigambia kuwa utamchukua	What have you got to be proud of that you will take him
22	ovyo umekuwa <i>Kibiriti Ngoma</i> nani utamzingua	trash, you have become a prostitute, who will
	ooh havinitishi nahau na vijembe vyako	you deceit
	...	

In the song the literal 'I' derides her rival to try to seduce her lover. She calls the rival *Kibiriti Ngoma*, which through the additional remark of *ovyo* – trash (line 22) gets an even worse connotation. The literal 'I' makes fun of her rival of not knowing anything to satisfy a lover. (e.g. line 5, 10, 11, 17, 21) It is not made explicit, which kinds of qualities the literal 'I' refers to, but from the context it is obvious that she is referring to sexual qualities. As we have mentioned in our introduction, *ngoma* can have different meanings. The second verse reveals that in this song the interpretation is „sex“ (line 20). In contrast to the derision of her rival the literal 'I' boasts of having all the necessary skills at her disposal to keep her lover (e.g. line 14, 31, 39). To put the rival down, the literal 'I' boasts herself of having a satisfying and romantic relationship (line 6) and therefore tries to rise jealousy.

8 a metaphor for strings of beads worn around the waist

Furthermore the song reveals that a woman's value is dependent on whether she has got a lover or not (line 5). Not having a lover is interpreted as the inability to attract a man. And being attractive defines the value of a woman. The crux of this matter is, that on the one hand a woman is judged by her attractiveness and her lovers, but on the other hand the ridge walk between being an attractive woman and a prostitute is very small. One key to an understanding of the difference is given in the second verse (line 18). Making affairs public is regarded unsuitable and brings a woman a bad reputation.

In the song *Kibiriti Ngoma*, a woman's attractiveness is only referred to as sexual capacities. In many other songs though physical attractiveness is an important issue. As in many songs beauty is of major concern.

As an example here some lines of another song, which was played in the performance described above. The song is called *Ngangari Fake*, „fake steadfast person“ composed in 2000 by Hajjy Machano. This is another song to outdo a rival. As the demonstrated lines reveal, the figure of a woman and the knowledge to make herself up is important. The ideal of a women's figure in Mipasho circles is big well shaped buttocks, a thin waist and well shaped legs.

A woman also has to know how to make herself up, beginning with the way she dresses to hair-dressing till make-up. Another important factor is the display of wealth.

Ngangari Feki

Idd 2000 Hajjy Muchano

1	1. shepu yenyewe ya tembo, baraka ya kubwa tumbo, chunusi tele usoni na makea miguuni	a shape like an elephant your blessing is a potbelly plenty pimples in your face and rashes at
3	yanachana bedshiti hakutaki afriti	your legs the bed sheets are torn he doesn't want you,
4		you malicious person
	REF.:	
5	hata na wewe ngangari nashangaa	even you, you steadfast person, I am sur-
6	Mungu bariki wa njaa	prised
7	ungekuwa mbaazi	God bless the hungry
8	usingetuharibu nazi	if you were a pigeon pea you would not de-
9	ngangari zenyewe omba ombea hunitishi	stroy the coconut the steadfast person herself just begging

10		you don't frighten me at all
11	huna hata wanja wa kunipindua huna hata wanga kujaribu kunitoa	You don't even have eyeliner to turn me over you don't even have magic to try to get me away
12	2. miguu kama spoki nyuma sahani	legs like spokes in the back a tin plate
13	ya bati na huko mbele huchezi na nyuma	in the front you don't dance in the back you don't move
14	hutikisiki ngangari bullshiti ebu ishia mitini	you are bullshit you steadfast person get lost
	...	

The lyrics performed

The way women singers as well as the audience act in a Taarab performance, reflects these topics. By way of intimation, women demonstrate their sexual capacities through the sparse dance.

As described, figure, make up, dresses and wealth are abundantly displayed and negotiated in the performances. A dress has to be costly and to reveal the shape. But the line between being attractive and vulgar is a very thin one and under constant discussion. Dresses do not have to be too revealing which means too tight, too short, slits do not have to be too long and décolletés not too daringly low-cut. These issues are always subject of discussion. The fact that Rukkia gets furious when told, that her dress is from the second hand market elucidates the importance of the value of it. The abundant display of gold-jewellery and the waving with big banknotes attribute to the display of wealth. Wealth though is again a confirmation of female qualities for it demonstrates a woman's attraction to men. The quarrel between Sauda and Rukkia exemplifies this. Rukkia is proud to live with her wealthy husband in their own house. Sauda's remark to the end of her affair with this very well known personality „it is better this way, I am now better off financially“ too, points to the fact that the economical aspect of a relationship is important.

The point, which makes Sauda vulnerable to the insult of *Kibiriti Ngoma* is that Sauda's affair had even been in the papers. As already mentioned above, through the public knowledge about her affair she trespassed the line from being a desirable woman to a prostitute.

The incident between Rukkia and Sauda shows, that it is not only general issues about womanhood and female qualities, which are discussed in

Taarab songs and performances but it furthermore serves to communicate disputes, which are otherwise not possible to communicate in daily life. To directly say what is on one's mind violates the rules of conduct, for it puts shame on the sender as well as on the addressee.⁹ The indirectness and the ambiguity of a Taarab performance therefore offers an arena to expand and even to cross the limits of the local protocol. It gives space to express such disputes, which is otherwise not accepted in daily life. One could assume that the urban setting itself provides the actresses with the necessary anonymity to trespass norms and negotiate values. But as a matter of fact the Taarab community meeting in certain bars knows each other quite well. Actually it is the very social knowledge about each individual, which makes this interaction possible.

The metaphor *Kibiriti Ngoma* performed not only reflects the usages, meaning and features of the term but it reveals actual discourses of a part of urban Dar es Salaam society. Similar discourses on this metaphor are found in another genre, comic magazines.

The Comic Magazine

As a popular metaphor *Kibiriti Ngoma* also influenced other forms of popular art. Besides its acoustic performances there is also a representation of *Kibiriti Ngoma* in visual art. *Kibiriti Ngoma* was chosen as a name for a comic magazine.

The first issue of the comic magazine *Kibiriti Ngoma* appeared in early 2002.¹⁰ It is not unusual to name a comic magazine after a slang word for woman. Other examples would be *Mama Huruma* (Mother Mercy), *Sanda ya Changudoa* (Shroud of the Prostitute), *Kula Mtoto wa Bosi* (Eat the Child of the Boss), or without direct sexual connotation simply *Maua* (flowers). But even *Maua* does not only praise the beauty of women but also indicates, that they can be picked, and that there are new ones blossoming everyday while

⁹ Ntarangwi 2000, in this article Ntarangwi has a closer look on the Mombasa Swahili notion of shame and honour which principle can also be applied on the Dar es Salaam Taarab community

¹⁰ There is very little known about East African comic art and its history. References are Beck (1999), Beez (2003), Gikonyo (1986), Graebner (1995) Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2001), Knigge (1996) and Kyungu (1991, 1993). Recently there is also some information available in the internet: <http://www.vmcaa.nl/bongotoons/engels/pages/index.php> and <http://www.worldcomics.fi/tzarticle.html>

old ones wither. Titles with this connotation suggest for the reader to expect love stories and scandals. At the same time they reduce women to be just objects of pleasure for men. They are just there to prove the potency of men, what the Tanzanian educationist Charles Kayoka calls „phallucentrism in its purest form“ (Kayoka 2003:7). Other comic names refer more to humor like *Tabasamu* (smile) or are acronyms of the names of their publishers like *Sani* and *Ambha*.

Kibiriti Ngoma is published in A5 format in contrast to the well established Swahili magazines *Sani*, *Bongo* or *Kingo* which are printed in the bigger A4 size. The A5 format became popular around the year 2000. It was used by artists for mainly adult comics like *Kula Mtoto wa Bosi*, *Mama Huruma* or *Jumbo*, but also for fantasy stories like *Kisiki cha Mpingo*. Towards the end of the year 2001 the Tanzanian government banned comics with pornographic content, to prevent the Tanzanian public from the drawings of naked bodies.¹¹

The publication of A5 size magazines continued nevertheless, but with a tamed content. Also for newcomers, the small format is of an advantage as the production of an A5 piece is cheaper than A 4.

Kibiriti Ngoma is published by Wasaa Publications in Dar es Salaam. Its content is a mixture of love-story comics (*katuni za mapenzi*), which are relatively long, up to 14 pages and partly serialized and funny short cartoons (*katuni za vichekesho*). Some of the *katuni za vichekesho* are sections, which appear in every issue, others have just a single appearance. The love-story *nini chanzo* (what is the beginning) is a regular feature cartoon on AIDS education. This cartoon follows the tradition of education in Swahili popular art, which, beside entertainment, has the intention of educating the people (Beez 2003:110, Kipanya 2001:6). Thus education comics, *katuni za elimu*, form another category of Swahili-comics.

11 To fulfil their voyeuristic desires these days, the Tanzanians can make use of videotechnology and the internet. Blue movie videos are even shown in village pubs and the XXX-sites are watched in public internet cafés.

Female Figures

The covers are coloured and show men and women hugging each other. They clearly do what Kayoka states for other comics magazines: „The front page drawings of women in such entertainment magazines like Sani, Bongo, Amba and the like, usually portray women bodies in unnatural exaggerated appearances” (Kayoka 2001:7). This representation of too feminine traits has been called by the Tanzanian scholar Richard Mabala the product of the „male gaze” (Mabala 1996:198) of the writer or in this case drawer of the story. The women have unusual big hips, which corresponds with the Tanzanian beauty ideal. On all three covers the women look similar, though they are in different surroundings: in a bathroom, in front of a disco entrance and in a bedroom. On every occasion they wear the same kind of dress, a red costume consisting of a tight red short top which emphasises the breasts and displays an naked navel and a red tight mini skirt (in one case a tight short) exposing naked thighs and legs. The cover girls have red coloured lips, long red earrings and wear thin chains around the neck. Their eyebrows are thin and rounded and their hair has been smoothed. Thus they represent the artists stereotype of a „*mrembo*” (Kayoka 2001:8), a beauty without individual traits.¹²

The Kibiriti Ngoma Story

The core of the *Kibiriti Ngoma* magazine is the serialized novel *kibiriti ngoma*. The story was taken over from the magazine *Kijaluba* where the pilot issue appeared before *Kibiriti Ngoma* became a magazine of its own with this serialised novel as a trademark. For this paper three issues of *Kibiriti Ngoma* will be analysed, as more were not published at the time of research. Thus we do not know the end of this story, probably it is still continuing.¹³

12 The display of nakedness on the cover drawings is part of what Kayoka calls „institutionalized exhibitionism” (Kayoka 2001:7, 12). Newspapers use the willingness of women to pose in tight clothes for cover shots to sell their papers. In the case of the cartoon drawings however, there are no women involved. Nearly all commercially successful comic artists in Tanzania are men.

13 The Tanzanian comic artist Chris Katembo once told Jigal Beez in an interview, that for a serialized story all you need to know is the beginning and the end. The course line of a story is determined by the reactions of the readers.

The main protagonist of *kibiriti ngoma* is Leila Mzungu, a beautiful young lady. Her surname Mzungu has the meaning of European. Light skinned women are considered beautiful in Tanzania, a fact which the cosmetic industry exploits by selling skin lightening creams. The story is about Leila's relationship to Abdul Sultan, a Tanzanian business man based in Oman. His surname Sultan refers to his richness and power. Through flashbacks, the reader gets to know Leila's past. These flashbacks are separated from the main story by italic script. Leila is born in a village and was raised by her grandmother, as her father is unknown and her mother died early.

Picture in Printed version

Cover of the first issue of the comic magazine Kibiriti Ngoma

Being subversive: challenging the rules

When Leila reaches puberty, her grandmother catches her masturbating. To describe this act in a story is a kind of scandal on its own because issues like sexuality, lust and pleasure are not discussed in Tanzanian public beyond anti-HIV campaigns. Of course a quarrel starts among Leila and the grandmother. As they are members of different generations they are not supposed to interfere in each other's sexuality. But the grandmother reproaches Leila that she has inherited the randyness from her mother who had become a prostitute. As Leila dares to ask the grandmother from whom her mother inherited her randyness – indicating that it must have been from the very grandmother - she is chased away. Thus Leila becomes a rebel. Instead of

being passive, sitting somewhere crying¹⁴, she becomes active by escaping rural traditional patriarchal society and resisting her grandmother, somebody who should be respected according to conventions. In this way she is behaving contrary to the Tanzanian norm and her behaviour can be regarded as subversive (Mabala 1996:165, 173). Being subversive or acting contrary to good old Tanzanian customs is a trait of many Tanzanian comics as they pick up non-mainstream attitudes. A common example is that women take the initiative to start a relationship with a man, something which they are not supposed to do. In the story *Saa 2 Bafuni* (8 o'clock in the bathroom) of the first issue of *Kibiriti Ngoma*, a female teacher seduces a male form four student (Beggy Hemed 2002a). The common view that women should not start relationships is challenged by this behaviour. Women who take younger lovers (or daughters who are after the houseboy) are a challenge to the traditional gender images of the omnipotent man and the obsequious woman. Thus they are subversive, being a challenge to the common view that women should not initiate relationships. They challenge the view of the superiority and power of man and the weakness of women (Kayoka 2001:12).

Comics can also narrate new forms of gender relations. The confusion of the changing gender relations is expressed in the story *Mdudu Ndani Ya Kokwa* (an insect in the kernel), where the rich girl Sharifa wants to get Hemed, a young man. In the beginning of the story Sharifa has been advised by her sister to tell Hemed her love for him. But Sharifa hesitates to reveal her feelings towards Hemed and reasons: „ninavyofahamu mimi, mwanauume ndipo humtongoza mwanamke. Sio mwanamke kumtongoza mwanauume. Kwa utamaduni wetu wa kiafrika ni jambo gumu sana. Wenzetu wa ulaya wanaweza kufanya hivyo” (*Transl: As I understand it, it is the man to flirt with the woman. Its is not the woman to flirt with a man. In our African culture this is a very hard matter. Out friends in Europe can do these things.*) (Begge Hemed 2002b:3). But finally Sharifa lures her beloved in a guest house and reveals

14 According to Kayoka „crying in Kiswahili has become a usual silent language for women”. This is because they are denied the „freedom to use the language” (Kayoka 2003:12). In cartoons there are many examples where women become active. Though there is also the display of an even more silent form of language than crying: suicide. In „Nini Chanzo” (*Kibiriti Ngoma* 3), one of the educational comics, the girl Tausi kills herself because she does not want to get married to an old man.

her intentions. In this case, new forms of gender relations are tried out by the protagonists.

Urbanity

Leila from the *kibiriti ngoma* story fled from the village to Arusha town, where the urban setting of the story is introduced. She becomes a „first generation urban dweller“ (Mabala 1996:163), like most of the population living in cities nowadays. The urban surrounding is typical for Tanzanian popular novels, which are mainly read by the young urban population. Mabala differentiates between „serious“ and „popular“ novels (Mabala 1996:164). Whereas serious novels are supposed to be concerned about traditional values and the effects of state policies, popular novels put emphasis on urban issues, not being interested in politics and being written for mainly a young audience. Mabala’s typology is also fit for the genre of comics as a popular narrative form and the serialized novel *Kibiriti Ngoma* .

The writer Kajubi, as quoted by Mabala, states that popular novels „have at least been able to give enjoyment to their fellow citizens in the middle and lower class“ (Mabala 1996:181). This statement can also be referred to comics. Writers of popular novels as well as Swahili comic artists, belong to the same class they are writing for.¹⁵ Popular culture is mainly urban in character. In big cities there is a big clientele with enough petty cash to spend on these new art forms, therefore making the production of popular culture profitable. In the busy urban context, many experiments are possible and new art forms develop, which would not be possible in rural areas where there are more rigid concepts of life. Thus urbanity does not only create new forms of expressions as Swahili-comics but new forms of life and gender relations, which are expressed through new popular art forms.

15 Thus popular novels and comics are related to the famous Nigerian Onitsha Market Literature from the 1950s and 1960s. Mabala quotes Obiechina: „In the main, the content of the pamphlet literature reveals a preoccupation with the problems of a changing society in which the growth of new cultural elements stimulated new desires, new attitudes and new values“ (Obiechina in Mabala 1996:181). The situation for the Swahili comics is similar. They became popular at a time when Tanzania was going through changes: the economic liberalisation, introduction of multi-party system, a greater degree of press freedom which enabled media boom in TV, private radio stations and comic magazines. The values in Tanzanian society changed from the humble ideas of Ujamaa to the free display of status symbols.

Sex, money and romance

After fleeing the village Leila Mzungu spends the next night on the streets of Arusha town and narrowly escapes rape. She meets the bus-conductor Momasal, who becomes her first lover and brings her to Dar es Salaam, where he rents a room in a guest house for her. Here, Leila corresponds to the traditional woman image. Momasal takes initiative and takes care of Leila. Leila is the one who receives and the only thing she can give to Momasal is her body, something which in his opinion rightfully belongs to him as he pays the bills. But while Momasal is on duty as bus conductor, Leila starts going out with other men, finally separating from Momasal and becoming a prostitute. Here her status in the novel changes. In the beginning she is the victim of her grandmother, of a rapist, and probably also of Momasal. Now she changes to become a wrongdoer, a perpetrator by betraying Momasal. But by doing so she gets rid of the old passive woman image. She stops being a nice woman, only being there to provide a pleasant life for the man. As a prostitute, Leila is an ambivalent figure to the reader. On the one hand, one sympathises with her as she has to sell her body to make money. On the other hand, as a prostitute she makes men spend money on her and behaving in a way, that spoils their family life and career. Thus she fits into Mabala's pattern for prostitute descriptions in Tanzanian novels of „victim“ and „predator“ (Mabala 1996: 191). Leila is going to the city where she expects freedom, at least freedom from her grandmother. Women claiming their freedom are often branded as prostitutes in the Tanzanian context (Mabala 1996:186) and indeed Leila ends up as one. She becomes a *kibiriti ngoma*, a drum to be beaten by every man, a bitch.

Being a sexual object seems to be the only qualification possible for a woman. If a woman achieves richness in comic stories it is hardly through her own capabilities but because she has been given favours by lovers. Kayoka states the same for the Tanzanian society: „The society defines the woman not in terms of what she can potentially achieve through superior intellect, but through how she can peddle her body to hook eligible males who will provide her with all the necessities of life“ (Kayoka 2001:6). Phrases like *Kibiriti Ngoma* and other comic titles like *Mama Huruma* (Mother Mercy) or *Sanda ya Changudoa* (Shroud of the Prostitute) display the male view of the artists on women (Kayoka 2003:3). Here language directs women to a subordinate position by insulting them as bitches. The portrait

of Leila being randy as if she is always looking for sex, is the dream of the male author and the male audience, who would like to see women as potentially interested in having sex. Leila's randyness somehow also reflects the general male view that prostitutes „are prostitutes because they are prone to that behaviour“ (Kayoka 2001:17). Therefore the woman is made responsible for sleeping with the man. Thus men distance themselves from immoral acts (Kayoka 2003: 5). If women sleep around they are called *jamvi la wageni* (visitor's mat), *daladala* (public bus) or *kambare tope* (cat-fish, meaning an easy catch). But the promiscuity of men is praised as they are called *shapu* (sharp) or *jogoo*, a cock who is much superior to the *majimbi* the hens (Kayoka 2003:3f.).

Picture in printed version

Leila bargaining with a customer:

“With condom 2000 (TSh), without condom 5000 (TSh)”

One night Leila meets the rich Oman-based business man, Abdul Sultan in a night club. They fall in love with each other, but due to her past Leila does not see a future in their relation and refuses to marry Abdul.

Mabala reports cases in Tanzanian novels where women do resist marriage in order to advance in their own life (Mabala 1996:201). But Leila's reasons appear to be more noble, as she wants to prevent Abdul from the shame of marrying a prostitute. Leila says:

„Nasikitika kuwa una fikra za kuishi na mwanamke changudoa kama mimi... Mwanamke ambaye thamani yangu imebaki au fanana sokoni pindi anapokutana na mteja... leo hii mwenye kufanya mwili wangu sawa na thamani ya shati la mtumba!! Mwenye mia tano, elfu moja au hata chipsi

mayai twende.. Abdul mimi sikufai na nitakutia aibu. Achana na mimi” (Anonymus 2002b:18) (*Transl „I am sorry that you have thoughts about living with a woman like me who is a prostitute... A woman, whose value resembles the market place while meeting a customer. Today my body is made similar to the value of a second hand shirt. If you have 500 or 1000 or just chips with eggs, then let’s go... Abdul I am not worthy for you, I will put a shame on you. Leave me alone.”*)

Mabala (1996:187) claims for Tanzanian novels that love is only an illusion and marriage leads to suffering. But in comics, the romantic love is a major topic. Leila does not want to get married though marriage seems to be the „ultimate wish” for Tanzanian women (Kayoka 2001:14). She considers her stigma as prostitute too strong as it could be washed off.

Leila feels that marrying Abdul would be a swindle destroying their love, as the novelist puts it:

„Uso wa Leila ulionekana kuwa na mawazo mengi, alimfikiria sana Abdula na maamuzi yake ya kutaka kumuoa, lakini alivyotafakari hakupata kuafiki kuolewa na Abdul, mwanaume ambaye alimuona kama tapeli kwake. Pamoja na umalaya wote aliokuwa nao Leila, hakisita kumkumbuka mungu kwa mitihani na majaribiu anayopata.” (Anonymus 2002b:19) (*Transl: „On Leila’s face many thoughts were to be seen, she thought a lot about Abdul and his decision to marry her but as she reflected upon it she could not agree to get married to Abdul, a man whom she saw as her swindle. Together with all her prostitution Leila thought of God giving her these examinations and trials.”*)

But the rejection of the marriage proposal is also a sign that she does not want to be controlled by Abdul. In spite of Leila’s refusal to marriage, Abdul still cares for her and leaves her a beautiful house behind as he travels to Oman for a business trip. As they bid each other farewell at the airport, Leila accidentally meets her first lover Momasal again. He offers her a lift back home and they finally refresh their love while Abdul is away. Thus she becomes Kibiriti Ngoma again, a randy woman being unable to live without sex, and cheats the man who gave her all she could have asked for. This is the end of part three.

Mabala’s statement for Kiswahili novels that, as almost all the writers are male, they produce typical male-stereo-types of women characters (Mabala 1996:159), is also valid for comics. Most of the women in the *Kibiriti Ngoma* magazine appear as young good-looking singles without children. But other

points which Mabala detected in novels do not fit for comics. The comic artists do not write about old patriarchal relations nor do they criticise modern postcolonial patriarchal relations with the result of nepotism and corruption as did the novelists (Mabala 1996:165ff., 175ff.). In fact in most comics of the *mapenzi* genre it does not really matter where the money comes from, but it matters to have money to buy status symbols like cars, designer clothes, electronics or big houses to impress the lovers. In Tanzanian comics there is no criticism of corruption or illegal ways to acquire money but sheer admiration for the possession of money.

The comics propagate the view that there are women who are always desperate to have sex. They are *kibiriti ngoma*, easy picks for men, a frequently beaten drum. It is the rule that the one who wants sex has to provide the partner with a material reward. But the comics show a new dimension in the gender relations: not only man can take the initiative. Also women can become active. But the condition is that they can provide favours for their male lovers. This means that the structure in a love affair has not changed. There is the role of the provider giving out money, goods or other favours and the role of the receiver who offers his or her body in return. The innovation is, that also women can take the role of the provider and men the role of the receiver as described in the story *Saa 2 Bafuni*. This challenge of established views makes comics „a site of struggle between dominant discourses and forces of resistance“ as Mankekar has put it for popular culture in general (Mankekar 2002: 11734). Slang metaphors like *Kibiriti Ngoma* are weapons in this struggle while the medium comic provides the arena.

Conclusion

The contributions of this paper about Taarab and comics supplement each other. Within the Taarab-part, emphasis was put on the reception of the music by the audience, whereas in the comic part the focus was on the interpretation of the stories. There are many connections between Swahili comics and Taarab music. One reason is that in both art genres a similar language is used. The phrase *Kibiriti Ngoma* is part of a pool of expressions, which were popular in the year 2002 in Dar es Salaam.¹⁶ Some of these expressions are used as hooks in popular art forms like comic magazines and Taarab music. Therefore they are found in both genres. For example the expression *chachandu*, which means „hot pepper“ and is also a word for the bead chain around a woman’s waist, is used in a Taarab song and as a title for a comic magazine. Also the term *Mama Huruma* constitutes a name for a comic magazine as well as a topic in a Taarab song. Even *Mipasho* itself has become a magazine title. There are also connections between *muziki wa dansi*, modern Tanzanian dance music, and comics. *Kisiki cha Mpingo*, stump of the ebony tree, is a title of a song from the *Mchinga Sound Band* (*wanakipepeo*) and a comic drawn by John Oscar and Emmanuel Soko. The artist Chris Katembo started the comic series *Shauku Studio’s Bongo Flava* for the *Shauku* magazine. The first cartoon of this series visualises the lyrics of a local rap song „*Bongo – Dar es Salaam*“ by Nigga J. 4T Ndilla - thus uniting rap and comic.

That Taarab music and comics use the same colloquial language may indicate, that their audience is constituted of the same social strata. However, it is mainly women who are the audience in Taarab events and through their dancing they are part of the performance as well. There has not been any research on the Swahili comic audience yet, but if one takes the published letters to the editors as a rough measure, it is possible to state, that comics are mainly read by young men. Therefore Taarab and comics can be interpreted as a female and male art form for the same social context, the young urban population.

Although the singers of Taarab are mainly women, most composers are men, just as most comic artists are men. This means that in spite of the het-

¹⁶ Friends from Moshi and Arusha who were contacted via email do not know this phrase, neither do Kenyans.

erogeneous discourse on gender relations this „zone of debate“ (Gupta 1995) is dominated by men.

Popular culture like comic and taarab are agents of socialisation. They influence the thinking and behaviour of the people as well as they are influenced by them. Mankekar writes: „Popular culture plays an important role in constituting and representing the public to itself“ (Mankekar 2002: 11734). In a dialectical process the artists are inspired by the gender images of their environment while at the same time forming the public perception of gender images with their stories. Just as Kayoka puts it for mass media, also comics and Taarab „slot women in gender stereotypical jibs thus making women“ (Kayoka 2001:1). But women also pick up these images. Some want to dress more liberal and claim their rights to do so. The problem of indecent dress is the problem of men according to a letter of a female reader to the editor of a magazine: „Hilo ni tatizo la wanaume wa Tanzania, mawazo yao ngono ngono tu“ (*Transl: „This is just the problem of Tanzanian men who only think of sex“*) (Kayoka 2001:9).

What the conservative society calls a subversive tendency, can according to Kayoka also be interpreted as a form of resistance and demystification of the body by showing what is seen as improper to show. Subversive sexual tendencies are displayed in comics and Taarab settings. One subversive tendency is homosexuality. The general Tanzanian view about homosexuality is very conservative, considering gays as ill - or worse. But within the Taarab context homosexuals are treated in a liberal way as they are accepted as part of the audience. Even some comics (e.g. *Jumbo*) take up homosexuality as a topic, though from a voyeuristic point of view. Another subversive tendency is the display of what is considered as indecent dress, for example mini skirts (Kayoka 2001:4). In displaying behaviour contrary to the dominant norms, popular culture articulates, negotiates and consolidates identities.

Though Kayoka claims that according to media images „mainstream society still thinks and operates in the same ways“ (Kayoka 2001:18), popular culture offers space for stories beyond this mainstream. With their stories about romance and scandals, comic magazines and Taarab songs provide a stage for discussing sex and gender relations more openly than before. Thus they are agents of a liberalisation of society, which e.g. may enable a better

HIV prevention campaign. Hence Taarab and comics also play a crucial role in the construction of new practices of gender and sexuality.

This article tries to demonstrate that popular culture can be used as an „analytic lens to understand sociohistorical processes“ (Mankekar 2002: 11733). Discourses on gender relations and sexuality are reflected especially in popular culture. The case of *Kibiriti Ngoma* in comic magazines and Taarab songs reveals these discourses in Tanzanian society.

Zusammenfassung

Kibiriti Ngoma ist ein Swahili-Slangausdruck, der in verachtender Weise eine Frau beschreibt und sie als Hure darstellt. Dieser Begriff ist im tansanischen Alltagsleben so beliebt, dass er sowohl zum Titel eines Taarab-Liedes, als auch zum Namen einer Comic-Zeitschrift wurde. Der Artikel vergleicht wie der Begriff *Kibiriti Ngoma* in diesen beiden Genreformen tansanischer Populärkultur benutzt wird und stellt somit den populären Diskurs über Gender und Sexualität in Ostafrika vor. Comic-Zeitschriften und Taarab-Musik als Formen von Populärkultur dienen dabei als eine analytische Linse zum Verstehen sozialer Prozesse.

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