

AMBIGUOUS SIGNS: THE ROLE OF THE *KANGA* AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION*

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Introduction

This article deals with the communicative uses of the printed wrap cloth *kanga*. Specifically I will show how the *kanga* is constituted as a communicative sign and is at the core of ambiguity processes that are pervasive to this communicative genre. Because of its high degree of ambiguity the question arises whether we can, for communication by way of *kanga*, still speak of communication in any sense. In my opinion, we can only do so if it is possible to analyze the communication process within existing models of communication.

Starting from the hypothesis that the *kanga* indeed has communicative potential communication is understood as social interaction, whereby the focus is not solely on meanings in a pragmatic or semantic sense, but rather on social meaning, i.e. the negotiation of relationships between the interactants in an area of tension between individual, social and cultural interests (within which meaning in a linguistic sense does play a role, too) (Anderson & Meyer 1988, Burgoon et al. 1996). This will be shown in the first part of the analysis. In the second part of this article I will describe and explain the role of the medium *kanga* within this process of ambiguity. This article is based on material collected during two field periods in 1994/1995 and 1996 in Mombasa and, from 1995 onwards, in various archives in the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Historical background

The *kanga* is a printed cotton cloth frequently used as a dress by women all over East Africa. The cloth measures about 110 cm in height and 150 in length. It is defined by a border (*pin-do*), a central field (*mji*) and usually contains on the lower third a printed, proverbial inscription (*jina*). We know that it was 'invented' around the 1880s in Zanzibar and imported from Europe in this form, i.e. already imprinted with patterns and inscription (Linnebuhr 1994, Beck 2001:41ff). It played an important role in the emancipation of slaves and their integration into the Muslim, Swahili community of the East African coast (Beck 2001:52ff, Trillo 1984, Fair 1994). As a symbol for their emancipation it referred both to their 'new' status as members of this community and at the same time to their descent from the former

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slave population. The patterns, for instance, were inspired by the precious needlework of rich and patrician women. By wearing such a *kanga*, a woman could indicate her knowledge of culturally important patterns and taste and assert her integration into coastal society. On the other hand, exactly because these patterns were not handmade but machine-printed, it was not the 'real thing' and thus referred to her new status on the bottom end of social hierarchy. Elements of adoption (such as floral and geometric patterns and motifs) and independent development (such as the invention into the iconography of card games, aero-planes, watches, radios, cars, furniture etc.) interact in complex processes of innovation and conservatism. These processes were made visible on the *kanga*, at the same time the *kanga* itself was part of these processes in which social affiliation and power were negotiated.

Communicating with *kanga*

In the following the communicative uses of the *kanga* shall be at the center of attention. As Saida Yahya-Othman, a Zanzibari linguist, writes, "K[anga]N[ame]s are recognized to possess utteranceship." (1997:138). This is illustrated in the following case study:

Ataka yote hukosa yote - 'Who wants all, loses all'¹

About fifteen years ago, Ms. Hafswa was given a *kanga* by her neighbour, Ms. Yasmin. It had the inscription *Ataka yote hukosa yote* - 'Who wants all, usually loses all'. Ms. Hafswa got very angry and went to confront Ms. Yasmin and ask her why she gave this particular *kanga*. But Ms. Yasmin denied a communicative intention by saying that because she was illiterate she didn't know the meaning of the inscription. Ms. Hafswa did not believe Ms. Yasmin, because it is common knowledge that even illiterate women take part in *kanga*-communication. But she had to retreat, fuming and with feelings of utter impotence and loss of dignity.

The incident occurred shortly before Ms. Hafswa separated from her husband, a distinguished member of the community. With the gift of this *kanga* she felt that the blame for the breakdown of her marriage was put on her, but also that people gossiped about her. She saw this gift as an unjustified intrusion into her privacy, and also that the other woman had probably been jealous and was now rejoicing at what she saw as her failure.

The interpretation of this incident is based on the following background:

1. Events of this kind – communication by way of *kanga* – are not singular, but they constitute a **communicative genre**. In other words, it is a socially well known and (to a certain degree) accepted means for solving communicative problems, whereby such problems are understood to be an expression of social processes (Bergmann & Luckmann 1995). Included into this notion of communicative genre is the idea that communication is not permanently invented *ad hoc*, but is historically set within social processes of negotiations about prevalent ideals and norms of behavior and specifically the position of individuals within their social networks.

¹ This case was related to me in June 1996. In order to protect the identity and privacy of the women involved quite some information is left out here. Names and other details have been changed. Neither divorces nor the giving of a gift such as this *kanga* is exceptional in the context of Swahili Muslim society. Inferences as to the identity of the women are not possible.

2. For the case of the *kanga* the problem that needs solving and that may be seen as the background to the communicative genre is to compensate for communicative barriers (or communication gaps, Bearth 2000). Specifically the *kanga* is able to voice domains of daily life that are subject to speech prohibitions: mainly conflicts, envy, jealousy, discontent, quarrels, but also sexuality and to a certain degree adhortations and advice. The strategies of the *kanga* may be seen as positive or negative politeness in the sense of Brown & Levinson (1987).² Such speech prohibitions hold in principle for all members of the Muslim society of the East African coast, but especially for women (Hirsch 1998). These topics are felt to touch centrally on the domain of highly valued and strictly protected privacy: The loss of privacy or its violation is equal to a loss of honor (*heshima*) and social standing (Middleton 1992, Swartz 1991:171). According to dominant (male) ideology women are less cognizant of honor and social standing and the violation of such norms is almost expected from them (Swartz 1991:160). The inclination toward conflict and its verbal expression are seen as 'badtalk' and as a sign of powerlessness, because such behavior is mainly ascribed to women and young men (Swartz 1988-89:209).

For the communicative genre *kanga* we find an oscillation between the realization and violation of speech prohibitions, because on the one hand there is a communication about such topics, but on the other hand it is not spoken about.³ Also the proverbiality of the inscriptions on the one hand reflects important ideals of Swahili poetry,⁴ on the other hand the topics do not conform to these poetic ideals (Beck 2001:139ff). During the interaction as described in the case study above the semantic core as expressed in the proverb *Ataka yote hukosa yote* – 'Who wants all usually loses all' is not spoken about at all. Rather the negotiations concern the question whether there was communication or not. The relevance of this negotiation will be discussed further below.

3. Such **communicative barriers** that contain the above mentioned thematic domains, are especially effective in situations where we find a hierarchical relationship between the interactants. In the Swahili coastal context social hierarchy is perceived to exist between persons of varying age, descent and gender (Strobel 1975, Swartz 1991, Middleton 1992). As I could show (Beck 2001: ch. 5), in situations where the communication addressed the negative face

² Central to their theory is the notion of face, i.e. that part of one's self that is displayed in public, and face work, i.e. communicative acts in which we attend to face by creating, supporting or threatening it. In conversation, according to Brown & Levinson, we attend to the faces of one's self and the other. But this attention is marked by a dilemma. On the one hand we wish to act on our free will, on the other we have the need to associate. If we speak, we have to take care to not impose on the other (or threaten her/his negative face) and to not dissociate from each other (or threaten her/his positive face). In some situations these needs may be endangered, for instance by requesting, by arguing, by admonishing, or by making compliments. Such communicative acts are face threatening and subsequently an interlocutor would engage in strategies to attend to the face wants of the other and her/himself. Politeness, as Brown & Levinson call it, is the outcome of this face-work. Politeness has been the subject of an extensive academic debate, for instance in the journal *Pragmatics*; see also Holtgraves (1998), Yahya-Othman (1994, 1995), Obeng (1996), Blum-Kulka (1987).

³ Note the difference between verbalizing and speaking

⁴ On these ideals see Mieke (1995), Shariff (1988).

of the interactants – **negative politeness** – (conflict, jealousy, sexuality) the *kanga* was used ‘from below’. In other words, young women of non-patrician descent would communicate with negative undertones more often with *kanga*. This is in correspondence with expectations that such communication would originate from them. The addressees of negative messages usually are – relative to the addressing person – elder women, women of patrician descent, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, neighbors, and the husband. Another preference in this category of negative politeness is with women of the same social standing. With respect to **positive politeness**, i.e. when the topics deal with advice, adhortations and well-wishes, the communication often proceeds from ‘top to bottom’.

In the case study above two neighbors communicate. On the background of the above mentioned study (Beck 2001), Ms. Hafswa is considered to be the one with higher social position, because she was married to a highly respected man within his community. We don’t know anything about the neighbor, however, the constellation that a woman with high standing was addressed negatively, points to the possibility that either Ms. Yasmin was of lower social standing or, as neighbors, of similar social standing. As we shall see later (compare Conclusion), there must have been some social difference between them.

4. **The central feature** of this communicative genre is that the addressing person cannot be held responsible for her actions. This is of such importance because socially inadequate topics are discussed here. In this context one may speak of equivocation which is defined as the degree of qualification of elements relevant in the communicative process, especially addressing person, addressee, medium, content and context (Bavelas 1983:313).⁵

In the case study above, **addressing person** and **addressed person** are clearly defined as the one giving the gift and the one receiving the gift. At a first glance the **content** is clearly defined, too: The inscription says *Ataka yote hukosa yote*, a proverb (cf. Scheven 1981). What it refers to, however, is unclear in relation to several dimensions. First, proverbs are ambiguous per se, because their mode of reference is metaphoric or analogous (Lieber 1984). Secondly, and this is an inherent property of proverbs,⁶ because the inscription mentions neither the discourse partners (‘I’, ‘you’) but rather an (unspecified) third person, nor gives temporal directions but rather uses the habitual tense *hu-*, nor gives a definite lexical-semantic reference to the object but just some general mention of ‘everything’ (*yote*). Finally the **context** is unclear, i.e. the event the *kanga* refers to. Bavelas defines context quite narrowly as the statement that immediately precedes the equivocal statement (Bavelas 1983:131). For the *kanga* the context structurally remains unclear, because the temporal and spatial distance to the pre-

⁵ She defines equivocal messages as ‘disqualified’: “[...] all messages should convey, explicitly or implicitly, *sender*, *content*, *receiver*, and *context*. In a perfectly straightforward message, it would be clear that *I* am saying *this* to *you* in this *situation*. ‘Disqualified’ messages would be those that render one or more of these four basic aspects unclear” (Bavelas 1983:313, her emphasis).

⁶ Compared to Farsi’s collection of proverbs (1958) the corpus of *kanga*-inscriptions contains more than six times more predicates (verbal p. and copulae) that use 1st or 2nd person references (Beck 2001:183). Ca. 10% of all inscriptions could be found in Scheven’s (1981) collection of proverbs

ceding statement – or event – cannot be estimated and must be thus considered highly undefined. The main reason for this distance is the change of medium that takes place with the *kanga*: The spoken discourse is exchanged for a written, materially represented medium.

An important question is, to what degree processes of ambiguation or equivocation may take place until interaction breaks down, or until we cannot speak of communication any longer. The ambiguation of the communicative interaction extends further than the above mentioned elements (Bavelas): Ms. Yasmin denies any communicative intention. In order to explain this aspect of ambiguation, it is useful to introduce the notion of **communicative frame** (Anderson & Myers 1988, see also Burkhart 1995:25-29)⁷: In order to be able to communicate, two (or more) parties must agree to interact and negotiate the conditions for this interaction. If this is not the case, there is no communication, or rather, there is only some meta-communication on the question of whether two persons want to communicate or not. This aspect is implicitly or explicitly a constitutive basis for all models of communication. If Ms. Yasmin denied the validity of this communicative frame – did or did she not communicate? Ms. Yasmin would say no, Ms. Hafswa would insist that there was communication, but she could not prove it.

This question, whether there was or was no communication is of importance here, because with it we may give a reply to the fundamental question whether *kanga*-communication may be treated (and described) within existing models of communication and their methods of analysis. In my opinion there was communication. However, for the analysis neither the perspective of the addressing nor of the addressed person can be taken as the starting point, exactly because of the fundamental conflict between the interactants that concerns intentionality. Models of communication (e.g. Burkart 1995) that use this perspective prove to be not stable enough to explain *kanga*-communication. Instead a focus on the medium is chosen here, the *kanga*, and the way it is used. This view allows for a perspective on how the medium forms and influences the communicative process (Schmidt & Zurstiege 2000:141) through a socially shared coding system (Burgoon et al. 1996:13f).

The constitution of *kanga* as a communicative sign

One of the prerequisites of a code is that it contains signs that form a socially shared system: in our case this is the *kanga*. In order to understand the semiotic processes that are at the basis of the constitution of the *kanga* as a communicative sign a very simple semiotic model is used as analytical instrument.⁸ Starting from Saussure's dichotomy of form/content and with refer-

⁷ It is impossible to communicate without having used a communicative frame beforehand. The communicative frame indicates a communicative intention from/between the interactants. The formulation of this intention is independent of the content of the interaction. Frame and content must be understood as analytically different units (Anderson & Meyer 1988, Burkart 1995:25-29).

⁸ For a general introduction see Nöth (1985).

ence to general semiotics it is assumed that a sign may consist of any kind of signifier ('signifiant') that refers to a signified ('signifié').

In this sense the sign *kanga* consists of a pattern and an inscription which are allocated to each other in the sense that both are printed color on cloth. The pattern and motifs taken for themselves may be interpreted on their own, for instance as an allusion to historical events, such as the motif *karantini*, a cross, which refers to an epidemic of yellow fever around the turn of the 19th/20th century. The ill were put into quarantine on a ship with a Red-Cross-flag that anchored outside the harbor of Zanzibar (Abdullah 1984:50). The inscription, on the other hand, is in itself a sign insofar as the sounds of a language are transcribed visually into letters. And the language, in turn, forms a system of signs, too. Two complex signs in their own right – pattern and inscription – are combined to form another complex sign.

In order to understand the *kanga* as a source of ambiguity it is important to consider the way signifier and signified are allocated.⁹ With respect to the *kanga* the relationship between pattern and inscription is **arbitrary**, i.e. with the exception of a few and mostly historical examples it does not depend on similarity. Because of its production, the marketing and its quality the *kanga* as a sign is highly instable: New *kanga* are ordered by local (mostly Indian) merchants at local or international factories and appear constantly on the market. In the mid-90s several hundreds of *kangas* were available on the market, because every month 4 to 20 new designs came out (Linnebuhr 1994, Schmitt & Beck 1993, Beck 2001:127). *Kanga* until relatively recently were the most important garment of women and their use has permeated everyday life as well as ritual practice. It plays a great role especially in married women's lives, starting with marriage itself, where the *kanga* until today is prominent as parts of dresses, presents etc. The demand for *kangas* is high and they are regularly bought and consumed. The importance of fashion as an aspect of *kanga*-consumption may play an additional role here (cf. Linnebuhr 1994). On the other hand, women collect *kanga*, therefore sold-out *kanga* may still exist and be used in communication for a long time. In summary, the allocation of inscription and pattern is of undefined temporal validity and therefore contributes to the general ambiguity of the sign.

In the past 125 years of its existence, the *kanga* has developed an inventory of motifs and an iconography (Beck 1997, Linnebuhr 1994). With respect to the inscriptions, though certain thematic domains dominate (see above), nevertheless the possibilities to formulate a text or its variations remain indefinite. As a result we find over and over again similar or identical designs/patterns with different inscriptions. Or different cloths with similar or identical inscrip-

⁹ In accordance with semiotics in general I discern three kinds of signification: 1. the iconic sign, that depends on a similarity of signifier and signified. Whereby similarity is culturally defined (Epskamp 1984:210). 2. the symbolic sign, which is the result of conventional allocation, i.e. the signifier is arbitrarily allocated to the signified. If the relationship of the signified and the signifier is not arbitrary, but "real and existential" (Epskamp 1984:210), we speak of indexical signs. The three types of signs are not always clearly distinctive. For instance, iconic signs always contain aspects of conventionality and arbitrariness, exactly because they are culturally specific and may only be decoded with culture specific knowledge.

tions. The multiplicity of patterns and inscriptions and their arbitrary allocation in combination with the indefinite temporal validity mentioned above render the *kanga*-sign highly unstable. As a code in communication the sign *kanga* is weakly defined or, inherently ambiguous.



A further aspect that contributes to the ambiguous character of the *kanga* are considerations of **readability**. The moment one is able to see and read the inscription on the *kanga* is very short. The cloth is usually wrapped around the waist, the inscription is visible ca. at the height of the back of one's knee or calves. When slung over the head, the inscription is visible at the small of one's back. Because of the movement of the body of the wearer the cloth permanently moves, the inscription is visible only a very short moment and usually only partially. Not to speak of reading it. As the photograph illustrates, the inscription *sina neno ila amri ya mungu* – 'I don't have a word except through the will of God' is scarcely readable, although the woman poses and stands still for the photo (taken by R.M. Beck). In addition it is very rude to stare at people, and it is considered intrusive to look at

someone longer than absolutely necessary. This has to do with notions of privacy and nosiness.¹⁰ In a sense the inscription is not only absent as spoken text, but also as read text.

This **relative absence** may be compensated by memorizing the inscription. Women read the text (or have the text read out to them) and memorize it as allocated to a certain pattern. The pattern is the part of the *kanga* which is conspicuous and visible for a relatively long time. Women therefore speak of 'names' of *kangas* (*jina*, cf. also Yahya-Othman 1997) and know up to several hundreds of names.¹¹ The term 'name' (*jina*) refers to the semiotic allocation of pattern and inscription. Only through this allocation a *kanga* obtains its communicative potential. Though the semiotic process, where a merchant combines a design and a text for production at a factory and for selling at the market, is the basis of the *kanga* as a **sign**, it is the

¹⁰ During my field-stay in Mombasa in 1996 it happened to me that a friend with whom I was in town, remarked on someone staring at me. I had not noticed myself, but from what she said I understood that she considered this person very rude and intrusive.

¹¹ I myself knew about 100 to 150 *kanga* after 6 months.

memorizing and thus more or less conscious allocating of pattern and inscription that gives a *kanga* 'a name' and constitutes it as a **communicative sign**.

Strategies of ambiguation

Since the semiotic process is based on memory, analphabetic women are able to take part in the communication, too, because they do not rely on the readability of the inscription but rather on the practice of semiosis. At the same time the double semiosis – of the *kanga* as a sign and as a communicative sign – allows for a double interpretation: Analphabetism may be put forward as pretext, just as Ms. Yasmin did in the case study above. The double use of patterns and colors – as part of the (communicative) sign and as part of fashion – allows for a similar strategy: A woman may always claim that she had worn a *kanga* or given it as a gift for reasons of fashion, that it was the last, newest, most outrageous cloth, that the colors were most pleasing etc. Here again the actors touch upon the communicative frame (see above), which is negotiated or may be denied and thus ambiguated.¹²

With this we have not yet reached the end of ambiguation processes. The following strategy uses as a starting point some characteristics of script. Script, not taken as a system of symbols, but rather as a symbol in itself, as referring to spoken language. If one wants to deny the communicative frame, i.e. that one wants to communicate that one does not want to communicate, it is usual to wear a *kanga* inside-out. Either the cloth is put on headfirst, i.e. the inscription is hidden in the folds of the cloth around one's hips (or in the folds around the head), or the writing is presented in mirror-writing. With respect to the communicative sign *kanga* script is detached from its symbolic character as signifier of (spoken) language. Because the inscription is memorized in combination with the pattern of a cloth, in communication it is no longer necessary to refer to script as the material referent of language. Script – as one part of the (basic) sign *kanga* – receives an alternative interpretation, namely as signifier for the communicative frame: The way script is presented – and this is visible even if the text itself is unreadable – solely refers to whether the wearer communicates, wants to communicate, or not. Script and proverb/its content are perceived as separate aspects of the communicative interaction. Women strategically exploit this double function of script: Script as part of the sign *kanga* that contains the material manifestation of the proverbial text or script as part of the communicative sign *kanga* that is used as a reference to the communicative frame.

To indicate that one cannot read and therefore does not know what the inscription says – apart from the fact that everybody knows that this is an outright lie – refers to the communicative frame. To say *usitizame jina, haina [sic] maana* – 'don't look at the inscription, there is no meaning' draws attention to the content of the inscription and at the same time does not

¹² The parallel between the use of the basic sign (pattern – inscription) and communicative frame and communicative sign (the memorized allocation of pattern and inscription) and communication is structurally determined. Its consequences remain to be analyzed.

touch on the communicative frame. Therefore, in the first case, by denying the frame in an implausible way the content is focused. In the second case, the explicit mention of the inscription draws attention to the fact that the status of the communicative frame remains undefined.¹³ Subsequently one gets the impression that in the first case the implicit focus is on the content, in the second case it is on the un-denied and thus relevant frame. Women exploit this double function of script in the sense that they create double messages: In their (surface) argumentation they toggle from one function to the other, both avoiding and focusing on what they really want to do or say. Because only one function is explicitly treated, the other remains relevant and valid within the process of interpretation.

However, never ever the content, the saying or proverbial text itself are explicitly verbalized. One may argue that this is part of the overall structure of avoidance that is at the same time an implicit focus.

We may say that in *kanga*-communication the frame, which is usually perceived to be outside the negotiations on the content of an interaction (see footnote 7) or in other words, usually is part of meta-communicative interaction, has become part of these negotiations themselves. By including meta-communication into the primary communicative process, namely the negotiation of social meaning, it is no longer possible to keep out of it or make one's position clear on a (meta-)communicative level. Women argue that they know exactly what a *kanga* says, irrespective of whether a *kanga* is worn inside-out or upside-down, because they have memorized a pattern and an inscription, thus constituted a communicative sign *kanga*. If a woman feels it to be necessary to wear a *kanga* inside-out, she will have a reason to do so. In the best case she wants to prevent a conflict. However, by using this avoidance strategy, she draws attention both to the conflict and her awareness of the conflict. Many women insinuate that to wear a *kanga* inside-out solely equals a strategy of the addressing person to protect herself, i.e. she would always be able to say that she didn't want to communicate, although the addressed person would know exactly! that the addressing person in truth wanted to communicate. Because, if she would have really wanted to prevent communication, she could have put on an other *kanga* altogether, a *kanga* without a potentially meaningful saying, even if she had to borrow a 'harmless' *kanga*. This argument leaves no possibility not to communicate,¹⁴ an experience that can be very humiliating, as in the example of Ms. Hafswa.

¹³ "Less direct communication is equivocal communication, and it is characterized by what it *avoids saying* as much as by what it does say." (Bavelas et al. 1990:57, her emphasis)

¹⁴ This strongly reminds us of Watzlawick's first axiom: "One cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick et al. 1996:53), which has been frequently discussed. Burkart insists that not every behaviour can be understood to be communicative interaction (to yawn may indicate that there is too little oxygen in the air, or being bored). However, any behaviour may acquire meaning if one of the people present interprets the behaviour of his partner as meaningful (Burkart 1995:453, Fn. 356). Equivocal communication that directs attention towards the unsaid/the implicit, provokes the addressed person to interpret the interaction, sometimes up to the point of speculation and beyond. To the same degree that interpretation has become a necessity and is indispensable, it is no longer possible not to communicate.

Conclusion

Did Ms. Yasmin communicate or not? Yes, she did. Using the hedge of analphabetism she at the same time indicated that she knew exactly what *kanga*-communication is about. She explicitly referred to the communicative frame, implicitly pointing to the content of the inscription and its social meaning. But, finally, what are the consequences for Ms. Yasmin and Ms. Hafswa that the communicative frame has been included into to the communicative process, the negotiation of social meaning?

It should be added that communicating by means of *kanga* is socially not appreciated, quite the contrary. The women who do so lose integrity and social standing. At the same time this communicative genre allows for avoidance of socially even less accepted topics, such as love and sexuality, insinuation and quarrels of any kind (Beck 2001:229). By using the *kanga*, in a way, women accept and accord to norms of speech that inhibit these topics. However, communication by means of *kanga*, just as other kinds of quarrel and badtalk, is from the perspective of dominant ideology considered to be a strategy of weakness, of social inadequacy (Swartz 1988-89).

From the point of view of Ms. Hafswa she has to deal with the interpretation of the event and its semantic core by herself, i.e. there are no negotiations about its meanings. Because of the high degree of ambiguity, she has at her disposal only few clues, she is forced to speculate. Therefore her standpoint is weak, she has no sound arguments to confront Ms. Yasmin, and if she does so, she may easily be refuted (which actually happened). The moment she confronts Ms. Yasmin the difference between them increases: Ms. Yasmin washes her hands off any involvement while Ms. Hafswa confesses that she felt hurt. Also Ms. Hafswa openly admits that she felt party to this kind of communication – which equals her outing as a person of low social standing.¹⁵ In addition, by accusing Ms. Yasmin of slander and insinuation, which Ms. Yasmin coolly refuses to accept, Ms. Hafswa puts herself in the wrong: All over sudden she has become the slanderer and insinuator, the person that does act in disaccord with society.

At this point relations of power have been inversed, if only momentarily: Ms. Yasmin, who actually did communicate from a relatively more powerless situation has lead Ms. Hafswa in a socially and individually powerless situation.

We may observe that the *kanga* allows for the communication of the unspeakable, whereby the interactants cannot be held responsible for their interaction. It remains to speculate about the socially relevant source of this communicative genre which, probably, is to discuss power relations in society. By observing the *kanga* in its communicative setting I have come to the conclusion that the *kanga* may be an expression of the difficulties of a society that feels threatened from within by the power of the powerless. With reference to the *kanga* there is no possibility to step out of these power-relations onto a meta-level, on the one hand because the

¹⁵ Women of all kinds of social standing in fact do communicate. However, nobody openly admits it, because to do so would imply low social standing from the perspective of dominant ideologies

communication in autopoietic fashion refers and re-refers to itself, on the other hand, because on the surface there was no communication. Provocatively one may say that it is a specific feature of this society that it cannot resolve this threat, but rather 'invents' a communicative genre that establishes and enacts the conflict between social power and powerlessness.

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