

**KASHA LANGU:  
A POPULAR SONG FROM MOMBASA<sup>1</sup>**

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KASHA LANGU ilianza kuimbwa Mambasa takriban myaka arbaini iliyopita, na leo nyimbo hii ikali ikipendeza tangu Mambasa mpaka Unguja, na hata Maskati pia Na kupendeza huku si kwa sababu ya maneno yake tuu, bali ni kwa sababu hayo maneno yanfukuana na mahadhi yake sawa sawa, na ndiyo ikawa haisahauliki kwa utamu wake

Sehemu ya kwanza ya makala haya inahusu ule wimbo wenyewe, yaani mtungaji, utungo wake, matini, tarjuma yake kwa Kiingereza, na maelezo ya maneno magumu; sehemu ya pili inahusu mambo yaliofungamana na hayo mahadhi

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**PART 1**

**Introduction**

The composers of Swahili songs are frequently anonymous although, in the instance of *kasha langu*, it has been possible to ascertain the composer's name. Abd al-Rahim Sa'id Muhammad BāSālim was born in I'akaungu in 1920, the son of a Ḥaḍrami father and a Swahili mother <sup>2</sup> At an early age he moved to Kisauni (Mombasa north) and commenced earning his livelihood hawking perfumes around the *mitaa* (wards) of Mombasa, trudging from door to door with his well-known *k'apu* (a large basket) and, in so doing, he became a familiar figure to the ladies of the island. In addition he acquired renown as a composer of songs, his compositions being sung at many Swahili weddings. He died in Kisauni in 1398 AH / AD 1978, survived by one son and one daughter <sup>3</sup>

It has to be said that, with the exception of *kasha langu*, Abd al-Rahim never composed what would nowadays be called 'a hit'. The truth is that *kasha langu* became a success not because of the words alone, but because of the interdependence of words and music. Whether Abd al-Rahim composed the tune and the rousing chorus as well as the lyric is not now certain, but the highly successful marriage of words and music has ensured the song's continuing popularity

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<sup>1</sup> Transcripts of archival material in the SOAS library appear by kind permission of the Librarian

<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Abd al-Rahim Sa'id's daughter for information about her father.

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Noor Shariff writes: "Abdurahim (?) wa Takaungu (?); Sauti ya Mvita, Mombasa 1958 Nimemtafuta sana mwenyewe, lakini sikufuzu." (Shariff 1988: 223, n. 76).

It is probable that before composing the words of *kasha langu* Abd al-Rahim had already heard, either in I'akaungu or Mombasa, the verses of a celebrated nineteenth century poet from Pate, Bakari wa Mwengo. The relevant stanzas, as transmitted from Muhammad Kijumwa to William Hichens, are as follows:<sup>4</sup>

4	<i>baada ya mambo haya</i>	*	<i>malenga nisikizani</i>
	<i>nina kasha la hidaya</i>	*	<i>la kazi la uzunguni</i>
	<i>funguo zimepoteya</i>	*	<i>zipotezee ndani</i>
	<i>afunguwao ni nani</i>	*	<i>k'apatiya funguoze</i>
5	<i>ambao alifunguwa</i>	*	<i>kasha langu la hidaya</i>
	<i>funguoze kazitowa</i>	*	<i>k'apata kufunguliya</i>
	<i>t'akasimu sawasawa</i>	*	<i>zilizo kashani piya</i>
	<i>simpungulizi moyo</i>	*	<i>t'ampa kama adaze</i>

A rough translation by Hichens runs:<sup>5</sup>

4	After these matters I have a casket of treasure Its keys have been lost Who is he who can open it?	Listen to me, O singers Of the workmanship of Europe They have been lost within [Let him go] to fetch his keys
5	And whoever opens it, Let him produce his keys And prepare the property, He will not be deprived	This chest of mine of treasure So that he can open it The things within, with every honour I will give him as is his due

In the Mombasa of the 1940s and 1950s there was no shortage of smart orchestras, for example *Lulu*, *Johar* and *Morning Star*. (These should not be confused with somewhat earlier musical groups such as the women's clubs and the military-style bands) On the available evidence the members of these orchestras were smart indeed. A photograph of the *Johar* orchestra taken in Mombasa in the 1950s depicts an ensemble of a score of seated instrumentalists, each dressed in a uniform of black shoes, black trousers, white shirt, white jacket, black bow tie and fez; the vocalist Nasoro Khalfan Nasoro mKilindini stands similarly attired to the right of the group.

The singer originally associated with *kasha langu* was Athmani Abdullah Kajungu, so much so indeed that in Mombasa and beyond he became known as Athmani 'Kasha'. It is perhaps worth noting that in this case the *mahadhi* 'tune' is neither Arabic nor Indian but Swahili – a truly local product. In any event *kasha langu* became immensely popular – first in the Mombasa of the 1950s, largely thanks to Mombasa's own broadcasting station *Sauti ya Mvita*, then in Zanzibar, and later still in Masqat and the Gulf where, it seems, the Swahili way of life now flourishes. It is not in any way surprising, therefore, that after Athmani 'Kasha' other

<sup>4</sup> SOAS MS 53508.

<sup>5</sup> An alternative translation appears elsewhere (Mohamed H[asan] Abdulaziz 1979:55)

names were associated with the singing of *kasha langu* – in Mombasa, in Zanzibar, and in Masqat too

Finally it is appropriate to observe that in the past most collectors or editors of Swahili poetry have ignored the musical component. In one sense this is understandable since the Swahili themselves have no tradition of musical notation; and in some cases the very melody of an old Swahili song may have been forgotten, while in other cases the editor of a text may be wanting in musical knowledge. The first professional studies of Swahili words-and-music seem to have been those by Mrs Beverly Parker (1967 and 1971), and A. M. Jones (1974, 1976 and 1977); a more recent contributor in this field is Carol Campbell (1974 and 1983). We are indebted to Janet Topp Fargion, now the Curator of the British Library's International Music Collection, for contributing material about the musical background to *kasha langu* (see Part 2)

### Kasha Langu<sup>6</sup>

- |   |                                    |   |                              |     |
|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | <i>kasha langu la zamani</i>       | * | <i>kasha lisilo t'umbuu</i>  |     |
|   | <i>kasha langu la zamani</i>       | * | <i>kasha lisilo t'umbuu</i>  |     |
|   | <i>kitasa ndani kwa ndani</i>      | * | <i>na ufunguo ni huu</i>     |     |
|   | <i>alofunguwa n'nani</i>           | * | <i>amelivunda maguu</i>      |     |
|   | <i>alofunguwa n'nani</i>           | * | <i>amelivunda maguu</i>      |     |
|   |                                    |   | [Kipokeo]                    |     |
|   | <i>aa nanjiwa rero</i>             |   |                              |     |
|   | <i>aa nanjiwa rero</i>             |   |                              |     |
|   | <i>sipiki chungu hamnyima mkwe</i> |   |                              |     |
|   | <i>sendi manga nanjiwa rero</i>    |   |                              |     |
|   | <i>sipiki chungu hamnyima mkwe</i> |   |                              |     |
|   | <i>sendi manga nanjiwa rero</i>    |   |                              |     |
| 2 | <i>kasha muundo wa kale</i>        | * | <i>si muundo wa kisasa</i>   | x 2 |
|   | <i>ni kazi ya wat'u wale</i>       | * | <i>si banyani wa Mambasa</i> |     |
|   | <i>usifanye makelele</i>           | * | <i>melipa mengi mapesa</i>   | x 2 |
| 3 | <i>mafundi wot'e wa kale</i>       | * | <i>kwa hivi sasa hakuna</i>  | x 2 |
|   | <i>na walobaki wafile</i>          | * | <i>kabisa hutawaona</i>      |     |
|   | <i>ilobaki npulele</i>             | * | <i>na kazi sijaona</i>       | x 2 |
| 4 | <i>kasha langu la mkafuu</i>       | * | <i>madhubuti sawasawa</i>    | x 2 |
|   | <i>lenya harufu ya fuu</i>         | * | <i>kula ukilifunguwa</i>     |     |
|   | <i>lanukiya karafuu</i>            | * | <i>na waridi isotiwa</i>     | x 2 |
| 5 | <i>kifuwa cha kasha hilo</i>       | * | <i>zabibu t'osa na tini</i>  | x 2 |
|   | <i>mviringo ndimu zalo</i>         | * | <i>-wanda mwake kifuwani</i> |     |
|   | <i>mato johari (i)yalo</i>         | * | <i>-umbiwa mwake usoni</i>   | x 2 |

<sup>6</sup> A slightly different version of *Kasha langu* has already been published (Shariff 1978:170 and 1988:81), but without Stanza 5 and without the chorus; one must wonder, therefore, whether these elements were part of the original song

**My Strongbox** (a rough translation)

## Stanza 1

My strongbox from the good old days, my strongbox which has no staple and hasp; it has a lock, and I have the key; who was the one who unlocked it? he has broken its legs

## Stanza 2

[My] strongbox is a product of the old school, not something modern; it is the handiwork of those [who knew what was good], not of Banyani craftsmen from Mombasa; do not make a fuss, [even 'though] I paid a lot of money for it.

## Stanza 3

The craftsmen of the old school are no more; and those who survived have died; one will not look upon their like again – not at all; what remains is worthless, and I have yet to see the workmanship.

## Stanza 4

My strongbox of camphor wood is very strong; it has an unmistakable scent; whenever it is opened it smells cloves, and rose-water need never be placed within it

## Stanza 5

On the front of this strongbox [there are] nearly-ripe grapes and figs, [and] round fat limes, [which look like] her bosom; [her] eyes are like jewels which have been created in her face.

## Chorus

Ah, [I am here] with [my] pigeon today;  
It is impossible for me to cook a pot of rice  
and not to give some of it to my in-law;  
I am not going to Arabia, [I am here] with [my] pigeon today.

**Notes:**

(1) *beti ya kwanza*

*Kasha*: a strongbox, chest or coffer, the Swahili word being derived from the Portuguese *caixa*. Strongboxes were plentiful along the East African coast until the 1970s, and are valued by their owners as a relatively safe place to deposit money and other valuables (for illustrations of chests and their fittings see, for example, Unwin 1987:34-43).

Swahili poetry sometimes makes use of *mafumbo* 'riddles', and in this song the riddle concerns *kasha*. From the context it is clear that *kasha* refers to a person and, although the Swahili language is generally indifferent to gender, it is equally clear that the person is female – in fact, the poet's wife.

*t'umbuu*: the brass staple and hasp are frequently found on traditional carved chests

*alofunga*: the one who broke it, i. e. he who seduced my wife.

*amelivunda maguu*: he has broken its legs. Why should the man who unlocked the chest (i. e. who seduced the poet's wife) also break its legs? Perhaps the poet was stuck for a rhyme in -*uu*?

(2) *beti ya pili*

*wa kale*: the old days, i.e. when wives were honest and trustworthy

*banyani*: Hindus, as opposed to *waHindi* 'Muslim Indians'

*mapesa*: money; an allusion to the dowry payment

(3) *beti ya tatu*

*wafile*: have died – i.e. the qualities found in wives of yore seem no longer to be found; from the verbal stem *-fa* 'die', an instance of the Old Swahili past tense (Taylor 1891:166; Sacleux 1909:182)

*pulele*: something of little value – the poet considers this word to be applicable to modern wives; Old *kiMvita*, now virtually obsolete, *pulele* has escaped the attention of the lexicographers, and it is not now absolutely certain whether the word is or is not aspirated

(4) *beti yane*

*mkafuu*: the camphor tree, the poet's abbreviation for *mkafuri*, the timber of which is both valuable and scented. Sacleux has *kasha la mkafuri* (1939:557). The Swahili word *mkafuri* derives from the Arabic *كافور* *kāfūr*, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit *karpūra*

*fuu*: an edible (an presumably sweet-smelling) fruit; *fufu* in *kiMvita* (Sacleux 1939:548)

*karafuu*: cloves; introduced to the East African coast in 1818; the word has entered the Swahili language from the Arabic *قرنفل* *qaranful*, but ultimately is derived from the Greek *χαρυόφυλλον* (Sacleux 1939:559).

*waridi*: literally 'a rose', but here employed to mean rose-water (*marashi*) – i.e. the wife's natural smell is so pleasant that she has no need of perfumes.

(5) *beti ya tano*

This stanza and the *kipokeo* 'chorus' have been omitted from the text in Ibrahim Noor Shariff's doctoral dissertation (1983:17-22), and from his *T'ungo zetu* (1988:81-82)

*tini*: figs (as opposed to *t'ini* 'below'); in Swahili phonology [t̪] and [t̪ʰ] are phonemes, while in English phonology [t̪ʰ] is an allophone of [t̪].

*zalo-wanda*: this is one word but split, as it were, by the hemistich

(i)*yalo-umbiwa*: as with *zalowanda* above, this is one word; the initial otiose 'i' has been inserted for the sake of the syllable

*Kipokeo*

In a good many Swahili songs the first line of the stanza is usually taken up as the chorus. Here, in *kasha langu*, the words of the chorus are independent of the verses, and one may speculate as to whether or not these rousing lines (and possibly stanza five also) are the work of a second composer.

*Aa*: an exclamation of regret

*njiwa*: literally, a pigeon – (*kiMvita* has *ndiwa*)

*lero*: ‘today’, in *kiMrima* and in *Giryama*; *kiMvita* and *kiUnguja* have *leo*. If this is indeed an instance of a *Giryama* word, as has been suggested, that would be in no way remarkable in so far as verses from *Mombasa* are concerned.

*sipiki chungu*: in its ethnic setting the phrase suggests that what is boiling in the *chungu* ‘pot’ is rice, which is the Swahili staple food – the composer is saying that being well brought up and well mannered he must offer hospitality to his in-laws [his wife’s infidelity notwithstanding]

*hamnyima*: i. e. *nikanyima* ‘and I withhold’; this old negative form is now virtually obsolete (Taylor 1891:1; Burt 1910:85).

*mkwe*: an in-law (either male or female)

*Manga*: Arabia (formerly *Manga* was the Swahili word for Asia); *njiwa manga* – literally, the ‘dove of Arabia’, i. e. a beautiful woman, used as an honorific for a bride (Hichens, SOAS MS 52509 and Harries 1959:56)

## PART 2

*Kasha langu* is a *taarab* song. The word *taarab* derives from the Arabic, primarily abstract, noun *tarab* (from the root *ṭ r b*) meaning ‘joy, pleasure, delight, entertainment, music’ (Wehr 1976:555). Rouget describes it as a “musical emotion of which no sign ... is externally visible” but one which can also ‘lead to the worst extremes of madness’ (Rouget 1985:281). This ‘emotion’ is associated with secular entertainment music, and primarily, but not exclusively, with vocal music, where instruments may have little to do with its evocation apart from that they provide accompaniment. “*ṭarab* comes ... mainly from what the man [singer] says and the way he performs it” (Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Professor of Islamic Studies in the University of London, personal communication 19:v:1988). The Arabic term *ṭarab*, therefore, does not denote a specific style of music, but rather a mood or emotion brought about through music. When Egyptian entertainment music was brought to the East African coast in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the music became known there as *taarab*, or *tarabu*, the form usually used in *Mombasa* (see Saleh 1980 & 1988; Khatib 1984; Topp Fargion 1993).

*Taarab* was popularised in the first decades of this century but perhaps most significantly in the 1930s once the widespread effect of the legendary Zanzibari singer, Siti binti Saad, had

taken root. She was the first to disseminate *taarab* songs in Swahili, highlighting local themes rather than as they had been, largely in Arabic. At the time, instrumentation centred around a core of Arabic instruments, namely *qānūn* (trapezoidal zither), *'ūd* (short-necked, plucked lute), violin, *riqq* (round frame drum with metal jingles), and *darabukka* (y-shaped hand drum). Hundreds of *taarab* orchestras rose to fame from this time. The Johar Musical Club was one orchestra that emerged in the early years, and is one of the most long-standing such ensembles in Mombasa. *Kasha Langu* is attributed to this group.

By the 1940s and 1950s *taarab* orchestras had incorporated a range of instruments and influences from various sources, and the style began to be more representative of the social make-up of the East African coast. In Mombasa *taarab* developed into three broad styles: *kiArabu*, led by artists such as the *'ūd* virtuoso Zein al-Abdin Ahmad, *kiHindi* led by, for example, Juma Bhalo, Yaseen Mohamad and Maulidi Juma and centering on the use of harmonious and/or accordians, and *kiSwahili*, a dance form of *taarab* drawing on the local *ngoma* (music/dance events), led by musicians such as Matano Juma.

The essentials of the original Arabic term were carried through, for *taarab* is basically sung poetry. A great deal of its popularity rests in the content and delivery of the songs. While some songs deal with political issues, the vast majority are concerned with romantic love and interpersonal relationships in the Swahili context. They are characterised, and this is the basis of their appeal, by their use of double meanings employing riddles and metaphors. As such they serve as a social document. The metaphor of a locked chest in *Kasha Langu* reflects a common *taarab* theme – guarding one's loved one from adulterers and/or philanderers.

At the same time the structure of the poem is also important. This is formulaic, adhering to the *wimbo* (pl. *nyimbo*) structure used in most Swahili *ngoma*. Songs have between 3 and 5 verses of 3 or 4 lines each. Lines have either 12 or 16 syllables with a caesura after 6 or 8 respectively, and a rhyme scheme of ab in each line. Separating the verses is a refrain (*kipokeo* in Mombasa) which may break the mould structurally, and frequently consists of only two lines.<sup>7</sup> *Kasha Langu* has 5 verses of 3 poetic lines, each with sixteen syllables and a caesura after eight. The 2-line chorus has 10-syllable lines. The song adheres strictly to the formula, another merit often cited by *taarab* critics. On first hearing there may be little to identify *taarab* as distinctly African. Rather it may sound Arabic or Indian. It is to a great extent this poetic complexity that distinguishes the style as particularly Swahili.

Musically *taarab* songs are strophic, as in *Kasha Langu*, that is, each verse is sung to the same melody. The first, and sometimes the last lines (as in this case) may be repeated. The refrain is sung by the soloist and chorus. Each verse and refrain is followed by an instrumental interlude of various lengths led by the melody instruments.

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion on Swahili poetic structure see Shariff (1988)

The main element drawn from local *ngoma*, apart from poetic form, is rhythm, usually from an event popularly called *chakacha*, but which may more accurately relate to the girls' initiation and pre-nuptial event, in Mombasa known as *msondo*. The characteristic feature of the rhythm is the use of a 6/8 triplet lilt.

This pattern is used in the original *Kasha Langu* and may be another factor contributing to its popularity. *Taarab* is primarily performed at weddings which are organised and attended mainly by women. Bringing to it the dance and some of the connotations of *chakacha*, heightens the appeal of *taarab*. Elements of performance practice are also brought to the form. Songs with this rhythm are more conducive to dancing, contrary to the more 'traditional' context where members of the audience remain in their chairs through the songs. While dancing and the use of *chakacha* rhythms is commonplace in *taarab* today, at the time *Kasha Langu* was written it was something of a novelty. Musicians in Mombasa were among the first to make these innovations but their lead was taken up fairly soon in other areas.

Like some *taarab* songs *Kasha Langu* has stood the test of time. One indicator of a song's endurance is how well people of its generation remember it, and this song is well remembered certainly in Mombasa and Zanzibar, where I was recently able to inquire. But another indicator is whether or not it is covered later by other groups. In 1985 the group Mombasa Roots did a version<sup>8</sup> which put the song back into the popular circuit.

In the 1970s John Storm Roberts commented in the sleeve notes of his Original Music publication, "Songs the Swahili Sing", that "taarabu, like so many complex and living things, refuses to be thrust into neat bags. It's an extremely lively art form sprung from a classical culture, still immensely popular, drawing all the time from old and new sources, a major part of the social life of the Swahili people" (Roberts n.d.). Some 30 years later the statement is as pertinent as ever.

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<sup>8</sup> Polydor POLP 592, and Deutsche Grammophon CPOLP 319. Thanks to Mwenda Ntarangwi for this information. The latter recording can be consulted at the British Library National Sound Archive.



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