

## IF THE CAP FITS: KANGA NAMES AND WOMEN'S VOICE IN SWAHILI SOCIETY\*

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### Introduction

As with other women's garments, the *kanga* has always been closely linked with the perceptions and attitudes that the society has about women themselves. These perceptions and attitudes continue to shape and determine the place of women in their socio-cultural context. Just as women's clothes are often taken to define, if partially, the beings that occupy them, similarly, in characteristically wearing certain garments and not others, women then assign to those garments what is perceived to be their 'feminineness'. In Tanzania, the *kanga* indexes this 'femininity' in a strong way, in spite of the fact that men also wear it.<sup>1</sup> Even more so, the messages that appear on the *kanga* are viewed as a uniquely female form of communication, and women in Zanzibar, the area covered by this study, have been making increasing use of them as an additional strategy which allows them to make strong statements about their concerns, while at the same time avoiding any direct conflict which may arise from their individual actions.

### Kangas in Swahili society

**Socio-cultural background:** The Swahili society from which my data were collected is discussed in an earlier paper (Yahya-Othman 1994). It is additionally a Muslim society, with recently, two conflicting, both radical changes taking place: one involving young people who are highly influenced by dreams of 'the good life' of the West, of success measured in terms of how much they know about and manifest in their behaviour certain aspects of Western 'culture', and advancement achievable through external contacts and extensive travel. Zanzibaris blame this group for being behind the rising use of and trade in hard drugs. The second change encompasses the increasingly radical Islamisation of young people and women, externally expressed by women and girls wearing more of the *hijab*, a veil which covers everything except the face and hands, in contrast to the traditional Zanzibari *buibui*, which is more like a long shawl. Additionally, as a consequence of this radicalisation, young men are demanding that their women behave more like 'Muslim women'. These developments are both taking place in a society which has seen enormous changes in the socio-political sphere, with

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<sup>1</sup> However, men are careful to do so in the privacy of their own home, as bedroom wear, presumably to avoid the associations of the *kanga* attaching to themselves

the economic liberalization bringing an influx of tourists who come into close contact with the local people, and also the economic crisis entailing urban women making a greater contribution to the family income. In their discursive practices as well, Swahili women have to try and remain within the limits of norms of interaction set out for them by the society.<sup>2</sup> An important aspect of those norms is respect for others, particularly men, and this respect is reciprocal; those who offer it to others can for the most part expect to receive it. This is embodied in the socialisation of girls from an early age (for a discussion on reciprocal respect and politeness in Swahili society see Yahya-Othman 1994, 1995).

Women are thus torn between treading the more traditional path of conforming to the behavioural norms set by the society, on the one hand, and making greater efforts to meet the demands that the harsh economic conditions are placing on families, with the concomitant competition that they engender. Consequently, although more and more women are dressing in the *hijab*, and spending more time in Quran discussion classes and generally making efforts in becoming more educated in Islam, more of them are also looking for jobs, and in areas which previously were dominated by men, such as business, the police force, building sites, street cleaning, some of them very low paid jobs which women all over the world are condemned to do. Women are at the same time struggling to get more education, and those who succeed usually get placed in the civil service.

Being a Muslim society, it is therefore a polygamous society. The struggle for resources mentioned above includes the struggle for husbands. Marriage for women is still a very desirable objective, and another aspect of the paradoxical societal changes is that arranged marriages are now on the increase. Parents of young girls compete among each other for desirable husbands, and 'spinsterhood' is still a stigma. There are several reasons for the overriding desire for marriage. One is the undeniable fact that most Zanzibari women perceive marriage and having their own families as a major life achievement. Children in particular are a great driving force. Although children outside marriage are not rare, such children have no rights in Muslim law. But women also aspire to get married because a married woman has more respect in the society, and it is only when she is married that a woman is considered to have joined the society of womanhood. Until recently, unmarried women could not go to public social functions such as weddings, funerals, women's meetings. Now they are invited and do go to weddings, but other functions are still closed to them. More important, marriage, even if short-lived, offers a woman *carte blanche*: she is freed of many of the shackles that bind women: she is much freer to choose what she can do, where she can go; she does not need to be chaperoned, and all she needs is her husband's permission, and in some cases, just her *buibui*, to go where she wants.<sup>3</sup> All this, of course, has to be conducted within the general structural constraints imposed by the society.

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<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the most eagle-eyed watchers of these norms are the women themselves, and women are usually more concerned about the censure of other women than that of men.

<sup>3</sup> The *buibui* permission is used of women who do not answer to anybody. When they want to go out, all they need do is put on their *buibui* and go. Women who fall into this category would thus usually be elderly, divorcees or widows, although the membership is expanding to include women in other groups as well.

But the demographic fact (there are women 325,714 against 314,864 men (Bureau of Statistics n.d.)), and the fact that men are marrying at a later age, means that men are seen as a scarce resource. This fact has not passed men by, and they are taking advantage of it to both marry younger and younger women, but also to marry more than one wife. Whereas previously parents would turn up their nose at old men (unless there were 'mitigating' circumstances, such as wealth, or settlement abroad), now many parents accept offers from men who may be twice their daughter's ages; similarly, while previously women whose husbands were planning to marry other women would insist on divorce, many of these women are now forced to live in *ukewenza* ('two-wifeness') rather than face divorce.

I have gone into such detail on the marital context because I feel that *kanga* names play a significant role in this sphere, although all aspects of socio-cultural relations may be covered by them. I shall now attempt to relate the competition engendered by such relations to the functions of *kanga* names.

**The *kanga*:** The *kanga* is a piece of printed cotton fabric, about 1.5m by 1m, with a border along all the four sides (called *pindo* in Kiswahili), and a central part (*mji*) of a different design from the border. It is always sold in pairs, and comes in an infinite number of designs, like any other fabrics. The focus of interest in this paper is one additional feature of the *kanga*, and that is a strip at one of the longer edges of the *mji*, which contains some message, an inscription, usually in Kiswahili, but occasionally in Arabic or Comorian. This inscription is called a *jina* (in Kiswahili 'name'), and I shall therefore refer to it as a *kanga* name (KN for short). KNs are often proverbs (e.g. *Wema hauozi* [Kindness is never wasted], *Mcheza kwao hutunzwa* [A dancer among his/her own people will be rewarded], or *Kawia ufike* [Better late than never]).<sup>4</sup> Occasionally there is a connection between the *kanga* design and the name, as in special issues commemorating some national event, or raising social awareness (for instance *Tuutokomezee ujinga* [Let us eradicate ignorance] with a *mji* of an adult literacy class) but this is quite rare.

The *kanga* was in the past confined to the coastal communities, but is now worn throughout Tanzania. It offers a variety of ways of draping and covering which need not concern us here (see, for example, Hanby and Bygott 1985, Hongoke 1993). Among the significant occasions for its wear are as a wrapper round the waist as additional covering or apron when the woman is doing household chores; on social occasions such as funerals and weddings; and, for both women and men, in bed, on its own, which has given it distinct sexual overtones.<sup>5</sup>

Women buy *kangas* with the same enthusiasm that they buy other garments, often and with great care, but because *kangas* cost much less than, for instance, a dress, some women can afford to buy many more, and often do so 'for a rainy day'. *Kangas* are often exchanged as presents between women, and men may give women *kangas*, but very rarely the reverse.

<sup>4</sup> I can only give a literal translation of the KNs, for as discussed below, several interpretations may be possible in context

<sup>5</sup> For instance, a man would not appear in a *kanga* in front of his in-laws, to avoid the suggestion of his sexual relationship with their daughter, and in some communities, a woman who appears in a single *kanga* when a man is present is considered to be deliberately provocative.

Although, as mentioned, the *kanga* is now an established mode of dress by women in East and parts of Central Africa, the data on which this study is based were collected on the island of Zanzibar, in Tanzania, and henceforth the discussion will relate to this community.

The aim of the study is to relate the use of KNs to previous work on women's language, and also to work on indirectness as a politeness strategy, and resistance measures adopted by women. I aim to examine the significance of KNs as manifestations of both resistance and indirectness within the lives of Swahili women. *Kangas* will be examined in respect to their function as the expression of not only social norms relating to women in their daily lives, but also as an important part of the linguistic practices of women. I would suggest that the reason why women expend so much effort in choosing the appropriate KNs is that these allow them additional avenues of expression which enable them to make their feelings known to both specific individuals and the wider public, in a society where the constraints placed on them can be considerable.<sup>6</sup>

**Kanga names in communication:** The function of *kangas* as a communicative medium has been frequently noted (Beck 1995 and 1997, Hamid 1995, Hillal 1989, Hongoke 1993, Riyami 1989). In other words, KNs are recognised to possess utteranceship. A defining characteristic of utterances is that they have addressers and addressees, the latter assumed whether they are physically present or not.<sup>7</sup>

KNs are utterances in both a broad and a more specific sense. In the broad sense, they constitute utterances in the same way that graffiti does, or captions on T-shirts, or the inscriptions on buses and taxis which have become a distinctive feature of African cities. The intended addressee in those cases is very broad, that is, anyone at all who would happen to cast their eye on the inscription and interpret it in whatever way they see fit. KNs, then, may be read by any passerby, as long as the message is visible, and many women would seek to read the message of a worn *kanga* they have not seen before, and may comment on these KNs or discuss them with the wearer. The utteranceship of KNs is also demonstrated in the occasional response issuing from onlookers, as evidenced in several cases I observed where other women said (after reading the KN aloud):

|                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Na kweli!</i>      | [True indeed!]        |
| <i>Hapo umesema!</i>  | [Now you're talking!] |
| <i>Usinambie!</i>     | [Don't tell me!]      |
| <i>Wala si uongo!</i> | [You lie not!]        |

or words to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the KN is not the only communicative part of the *kanga*. The colour and design can also be used to send particular messages. For example, a red or black *kanga* worn in the bedroom may send a message to a woman's husband that she "has a headache" (Hamid 1995). Other designs are worn specially at weddings, or at funerals.

<sup>7</sup> Goffman (1978:790) points out that the assumption of an addressee is the reason why talk without an obviously present listener reflects badly on the talker. Goffman suggests that in some of those cases we can analyse those utterances as forms of "self talk", where the addresser and addressee lie in the same individual.

<sup>8</sup> In one case, a woman who was a friend of the supposed addressee shouted: "*Zimefika salamu!*" [The message has arrived!]

In their more specific utteranceship, KNs are intended for a specific person or persons, and the message is then addressed to those persons in one of two ways: First, the *kanga* with the relevant KN may actually be sent to the person as a present, and in this case there would be no ambiguity or doubt concerning who the addressee is. The receiver of the *kanga* receives both the *kanga* and its message. The KN in such cases is likely to be a well-wishing one (e.g. *Nani kama mama* [There's no one like a mother]; *Subira ufunguo wa peponi* [Heaven comes to those who wait]; *Bora kupata kuliko kukosa* [Something is better than nothing]). However, cases have been known of receivers returning the *kanga* to the sender because they object for some reason to the KN. It is the addressee's interpretation of the message that makes her reject it; in face to face interaction she would reply with an appropriate rejoinder, as she does sometimes with *kanga* as well. Having received a *kanga* with what she deems to be an insulting or derogatory message, a woman would sometimes go and search for a pair which expresses a rejoinder to the KN she has received.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as with all utterances, the interpretation of the message is conducted within a specific context of previous incidents, relations between the sender and the receiver, and the specific occasion warranting the presentation of the *kanga*, should there be one.

This is also true of the second type of specific addresseeship, when the *kanga* is worn with a particular person in mind. The wearer would wear the *kanga* knowing that she would either meet her intended addressee at the social function she is attending, or the addressee's friends, or mutual friends. What needs to be stressed is that the identification of the addressee is determined by the social networks, including the relationships between the addresser and various other members, and various sequences of events which would have preceded the wearing of the *kanga*. There is thus an additional contextual feature in this second case - the onlookers, the 'hearers' so to speak, are as significant in the effectiveness of the message as the actual addressee. In this sense, KNs are a form of 'performance discourse'<sup>10</sup>: without a third party, an audience, the message falls flat.

### Theoretical perspectives

I want to examine the use of KNs from two perspectives, both of which have been central in discussions on language and gender, perspectives which present an opposing or conflicting pull. One of these is the question of indirectness as it relates to politeness, and the other the question of attempts at resistance to the dominant position within the society. This opposing pull, I believe, neatly reflects the obviously ambiguous nature of KN use.

**Indirectness and politeness:** Indirectness has often been tied to politeness in the literature. The main claim is that utterances which constitute indirect speech acts, through, in some way,

<sup>9</sup> A case is recorded in a Tanzania paper of a woman who beat up a dear friend of hers after she had worn a new *kanga* with the KN *Tunakula sahani moja* [We eat from the same plate]. Someone had previously given her the false information that her friend was having an affair with her husband [Uhuru 11/11/94]. Hongoke also presents an extended imagined *kanga* "dialogue" (1993:60-61).

<sup>10</sup> A term I first came across used by Gunther Kress, personal communication.

violating one of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975), tend to be more polite than those which do not (Brown and Levinson 1978, Fraser 1990, Obeng 1997). This is explained in terms of the avoidance of face-threatening acts (FTAs), in which the speaker uses various strategies to avoid undermining the social positions of both himself/herself and the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1978). In turn, politeness has been linked in various works with women's speech. Women are said to use more polite language, both in terms of the use of features which are generally recognised as being 'polite', such as the expressions *please* and *thank you* in English, but also in terms of their language indicating a considerable degree of tentativeness, such as hesitation markers, tag questions (Brown 1980, Graddol and Swann 1989, Lakoff 1975), allowing others to interrupt them, not being able to hold their place in conversations (Coates 1993), using more status marking (Smith-Hefner 1988), and generally being conversationally more cooperative (Holmes 1992). Both these links have been questioned and are still the subject of intense debate. For example, Blum-Kulka (1987), in a study of requests, shows that indirectness and politeness are not necessarily related - the most indirect requests are not always judged as the most polite. Rundquist (1992) found that in indirect speech acts involving the flouting of Grice's maxims in family interactions, the women flouted the maxims less, and were therefore less indirect, than the men.

However, in relation to Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, KNs would appear to fall under the 'off-record' group, of which the authors state:

A communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an 'out' by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations; he cannot be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act (...). (1978:216)

Off-record FTAs are essentially indirect acts. Thus the politeness of KNs does not lie in the *content* of the message, which can be extremely blunt, aggressive and even obscene,<sup>11</sup> but rather in the redressive action that the addresser takes in providing herself, and consequently her addressee as well, with an out. She has always the option of denying that she intended the KN for any particular person, and thereby save embarrassment not only to herself, but to her supposed addressee as well. I would suggest that this off-record strategy is in conformity to what has been termed "group face" (Nwoye 1992: 313; Yahya-Othman 1994: 149), in which the speaker tries to behave within the cultural norms that are sanctioned by the society, thereby avoiding the communal sanctions that might befall her/him.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hongoke cites an example of a *kanga* which was banned in 1978 because its KN was deemed to be too offensive: *Ndege itatua au kiwanja kimejaa maji?* [Will the plane land or is the field flooded?] (1993:58). What is interesting about this KN is that it could be given any number of interpretations (Hongoke gives the mild translation of [Are you free for a date?]), and yet it was the offensive one which prevailed.

<sup>12</sup> We need to note, however, the marked contrast between the assertiveness and bluntness of some of the KNs and the claimed tentativeness of women's speech. Many women I talked to deplored what they thought was a drastic shift to more confrontational messages in the last 5 years or so, than was the case in the past. They noted that it is becoming more and more difficult to get *kangas* with more 'respectable' messages for present giving. The same observation is often made in relation to *taarab* lyrics. It is very rare, women say, to get songs with words of *heshima*.

**Resistance:** In public communication, women are said to be 'muted' because their secondary position in society forces them to be inarticulate. Women's talk is constrained in ways that are different from those of men, because women have to operate within discursive practices which have been constructed by men; in other words, the subject positions within which women operate are set up mostly by men (Kramarae 1981:2). It is even suggested that women may rely more on nonverbal cues in interaction because customary terms of talk do not serve the language needs of women as well as they do of men (Kramarae 1981:18).

But muted group theory assumes that because men's language is dominant and constitutes the 'norm', women's language is therefore deficit in some way. It thus does not give recognition to the fact that the strategies women use may be tailored by them to suit their particular situation, and can be viewed positively, as does some of the literature on women's conversational style (Holmes 1988:133-4).

Thus, although women have less power than men, and have greater constraints in the expression of their feelings, they still find ways of dealing with their powerlessness. It has been noted that no one is entirely powerless, that power lies within relationships between individuals and groups, rather than in individuals (Fairclough 1989, Kress 1989). Fairclough (1989) and Lakoff (1990) suggest that even in the worst situation, those who are generally powerless still have means of negotiating for some power in particular situations, within the confines of their powerlessness. In relation to the unequal power between men and women, Rosaldo (1974:21) states that:

It is necessary to remember that while authority legitimates the use of power, it does not exhaust it, and actual methods of giving rewards, controlling information, *exerting pressure, & shaping events may be available to women as well as to men.* (Emphasis mine)

Scott (1985) talks of "everyday forms of resistance" by women within the social structure they live in, exemplified by very 'ordinary' actions such as gossip, slander, impoliteness. Kingfisher (1996:539) points out the structure-agency dilemma. When are acts acts of accommodation, and when are they acts of resistance? She concedes that although structure and agency are always separate, they are often mutually influential (1996:540).

I would suggest that KNs constitute some of the 'methods' that Rosaldo talks about, and also Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance', as we will see in the discussion below.

With the exception of Beck (1995, 1997), the view of KNs generally has been as a defamatory and demeaning form of communication, which for the most part is to be deplored. Hongoke (1993:11) for example, suggests that women need to be educated in order to avoid the use of derogatory KNs, and makes a connection between low education and higher incidence of such KNs, without considering that women with low education precisely must find ways of communicating which are most effective for them, and these are likely to differ from those of educated women. The literature on *kangas* has predominantly focused on the negative role of KNs, as a source of conflict and the degradation of women (Hongoke 1993, Hamid 1995). My concern in this paper is to examine the extent to which KNs can be viewed as part

of the empowering venues for women, offering them space to voice their concerns in a manner which is sanctioned by the society.

### Zanzibari women's use of kanga names

This is an ethnographic study, in which the use of *kanga* is viewed as social praxis, and in which a combination of methods were used to arrive at comprehensive data, including questionnaires, ethnographic field notes, participant observation, reports on *kanga* use in the newspapers, and discussion with Zanzibari women. The questionnaires were administered to 36 women in Zanzibar town. The age of the respondents varied from 16 years to 50. The occupational concerns of the women also varied, as follows:

|                   |    |                  |   |
|-------------------|----|------------------|---|
| civil servant     | 2  | doctor           | 1 |
| education officer | 1  | housewife        | 5 |
| nurse             | 2  | planning officer | 1 |
| salesperson       | 1  | seamstress       | 2 |
| secretary         | 1  | student          | 6 |
| teacher           | 11 | unemployed       | 3 |

20 of the women were married, 4 of them having co-wives. 12 were single, 3 had been divorced, and 2 were widows. About half of the respondents said that they bought less than 5 pairs of *kanga* a year, while 11 claimed purchases of more than 10 pairs a year. The majority (27) bought *kangas* to keep for a 'rainy day', and not for any special occasion. There were thus very few (8) who said that they wear their new *kangas* the first chance they get. Again, the majority stated their criteria for choosing *kangas* as being a combination of the colours, the *mji* design, as well as the KN.

While data were requested on the frequency of *kanga* buying and the frequency of present giving and receiving, the aim of most of the questions was to elicit information on how women themselves perceive the function of KNs, both as particular instances directed to particular addressees, but also as a 'collective' means used by women to articulate their concerns. In this connection, the questions relating to the use of the *kangas* yielded interesting responses.

One of the questions asked the respondents to grade *kangas* within a scale of 1 to 6 (1 being the most important) according to their importance in '*kupashana*', that is ways of letting others know what rankles with the 'speakers'. The other methods included were face-to-face, sending messages through other people (*salamu*), *taarab*, and spoken innuendoes or riddles. Of the 27 respondents who answered this question, (4 of whom were of the opinion that it is not the function of *kangas* to 'sound off'), 13 placed *kangas* at the top of the scale, on 1. Strangely, face-to-face interaction came second, with 4 on 1. But generally this latter strategy tended to bunch towards the lower end of the scale, between 4 and 6. *Taarab* came a close second to *kangas*, bunching towards the top of the scale, between 1 and 3, followed closely by *mafumbo*. It would thus seem that, in strategies for 'sounding off' on others' behaviour, women tend to avoid face-to face confrontation, and instead prefer the most indirect methods, those which provide them with protection from direct challenges. In face-to-face communication responsibility for the message cannot be avoided, and in the sending of *salamu* as well, both



the addresser and the addressee are clearly identified. In KNs, *taarab* and *mafumbo*, on the other hand, the onus of interpretation rests on the addressee, as Beck (1997) points out; she or he has to self-identify, which forms the prop for my title.<sup>13</sup>

Another question clearly brings out some of the reasons why women prefer these indirect routes. Almost all the women who answered the question (asking them why they thought women sound off using the method that they have identified as being the first on the scale) pointed to the avoidance of conflict as the reason. They mention the avoidance of physical contact, the upholding of *heshima* (respect), and the fact that the addressee would have no basis for accusing the wearer of insulting her, because she has no way of proving that the KN was addressed to her. She cannot for that reason come and pick a quarrel with the wearer. There is also the interesting mention that it allows women to release their '*dukuduku*', let off steam, and that it is the 'civilised' way. One respondent, supporting the point I make above about KNs allowing women to operate within social constraints, says that this is the method that is 'available to women'.

I shall now discuss three cases of the use of KNs, which I discussed extensively with the women concerned. I will call two of the women Hawa and Salama (not their real names). Hawa's case involved *ukewenza*, and Salama's a fall-out with a friend. The third related to a whole group.

Hawa was her husband's 'second wife', she herself having been previously married to someone else, and getting into her second marriage fairly late in her life. There is no relationship of any sort between her and her co-wife, who is 15 years older. The latter is not much of a 'goer' (*mwendaji*) to social functions, and is viewed in the community as a quiet, respectable, very religious woman. Hawa is a great socialiser, and is also seen as a bit of a comedienne, often having a group of other women surrounding her while she makes them peal with laughter. Hawa admits to expending a great deal of energy and money to get *kangas* with the right KNs to throw as 'missiles', as she put it, at her co-wife, and often orders them from Kenya and the Emirates. She gave me some of the KNs that she obtained through these efforts, and which she wore as soon as she got them, and these included:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Nilijua roho itawauma</i>                    | I knew it'll hurt them                     |
| <i>Si mizizi si hirizi bali ni bahati yangu</i> | It's not witchcraft, I'm just lucky        |
| <i>Ukijua huu, huu huujuu</i>                   | If you know some ways, some ways you don't |
| <i>Kikulacho kiungoni mwako</i>                 | The enemy is within                        |
| <i>Apewae hapokonyeki</i>                       | What is (God) given cannot be taken away   |
| <i>Bahati haina kwao hupata wajaliwao</i>       | Luck goes where it will                    |
| <i>Mla mla leo mla jana kala nini</i>           | Today's is the winner, not yesterday's     |
| <i>Mti hawendi ila kwa nyenzo</i>               | A tree cannot survive without inputs       |
| <i>Perzi lake kwangu dawa</i>                   | His love is my medicine                    |

<sup>13</sup> *Taarab* messages offer another interesting use of indirect communication by women which deserves more extended study. As with KNs, this use has been on the rise recently, and in this case the message is sent when the addresser gets up to reward (*kutunza*) the singer when a particular part of the lyric is being sung. The addressee has also to self-select, and may get up and do the same thing. *Taarab* can at times be confrontational though, as the adversaries may actually brush against each other on the floor, and consequently have a "brush"

For one of these messages, which seemed to me particularly ambiguous, Hawa gave a detailed explanation. This was *Mti hawendi ila kwa nyenzo*. I suggested that this could be intended to apply to Hawa herself, or to the husband, or to the marriage. Hawa said she had only one thing in mind, the husband, because it was she who really looked after him. He ate better at her house, was looked after better, spent more time there. She was the one who supplied the *nyenzo*. Did she mean she looked after him materially as well? Not so, she said. He supplied the stuff, but she looked after his needs, his comforts. So could she also have meant to imply that the husband brought most of his earnings to her? She had not meant that, she said, but she *liked* that interpretation.

I asked her why she took such pains over her KNs when her co-wife was hardly ever there to see them, and when she hardly ever retaliated. Hawa said that it gives her pleasure to wear a *kanga* with a new *mpasho* every time; she enjoys the performance aspect of it, with her friends responding and egging her on. And she knows that her co-wife, though not present, would nevertheless get the message. Her 'stooges', as she called them, were always there, and they were just as good. When I asked her whether she did not think that her co-wife should be the one to consider herself the injured party, and not Hawa herself, she burst into laughter, and said that her husband came to *her* to ask for her hand in marriage, not the other way round. Where was the injury? But since she had no other socially sanctioned way to communicate with her co-wife, she chose the *kanga* way. Interestingly, she thought it served not only to cow her co-wife, but also to keep her husband in check, just in case he had thoughts of getting a third wife!

Salama's 'case' was with someone who was a neighbour, had been a very close friend, and with whom she fell out over their children. Salama felt that her friend's child had behaved badly towards her child, but her mother did not take any corrective measures. The two of them exchanged words, and the friendship ended. Now they barely said hello.

Asked why she used KNs against someone who had recently been her friend, she says that she had no wish to continue the verbal quarrel, because she found that demeaning. At the same time, the incident leading to their break-up still rankled; her friend had hurt her, and she had to have a way to show this, without leading to an escalation of the misunderstanding. Some of the KNs she wore with this friend in mind included:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Si haya tu mengi mtayasema</i>             | You will have much more cause to gossip than this                     |
| <i>Maneno yako yaishe wala usiyazidishe</i>   | Not another word!   |
| <i>Ni bure zenu fitina tawi haliwi shina;</i> | No matter what you say, a branch can never be a trunk                 |
| <i>Umechezea tufali limekutoa kiburi</i>      | You have played with a brick which has stripped you of your arrogance |
| <i>Halahala dunia ina meno</i>                | Careful the world has teeth   |
| <i>Hapa umefika</i>                           | Here you have arrived   |
| <i>Hunilishi hunivishi wala hunibabaishi</i>  | You neither feed me nor clothe me and you don't scare me              |
| <i>Kibaya changu si chema cha mwenzangu</i>   | Better my own, no matter how poor, than someone else's                |
| <i>Kibiriti chako katingishie kwengine</i>    | Go shake your matchbox somewhere else                                 |

*Mpanda hila huvuna majuto*  
*Paka wa jirani usimkaribishe ndani*

She who sows wiles will reap regrets  
 Don't let the neighbour's cat into your house

Salama reported that her neighbour occasionally wore *kangas* with KNs which Salama read as intended for her, but she was not eager to talk about these.

The third example has to do with a *kanga* used as a *sare* for a wedding.<sup>14</sup> The KN for the *sare* was *Asubuhi na mapema wameshaanza* kusema [You've already started gossiping so early in the morning]. This was the *sare* for the bride's side. In discussing this potentially provocative KN with the bride's family, they informed me that the wedding arrangements had been problematic from the start. Although the prospective wedding couple had known each other for years, and there was always an understanding between them that they would get married, when the marriage proposal was about to be extended, the man's family objected. So there had to be a lot of negotiations and mediation. In that context, then, the KN was provocative. The bride's family maintained, however, that although they intended the message for the groom's family, it could equally well apply to other people, that other people could have been talking about the marriage as well. In the event, the wedding (which I attended), turned out well enough, although the bridegroom's family (who came in later) entered with greatly exaggerated dancing and singing with the bridegroom, and made a great show of the bridegroom, swamping the stage where he was sitting, and showering kisses on him, as if to warn the bride of the competition she was going to have to deal with. Their *sare* had the KN *Usilolijua litakusumbua* [What you don't know will nag at you] which did not help matters. But the important thing, as the women themselves said, was that everyone kept their physical distance, and they could all pretend that the KNs were directed not to the other side, but to the general public.

### Discussion and conclusion

Of the social constraints placed on women, one is involvement in public fights or quarrels. Certainly for a married woman, it is considered very bad taste to quarrel either with her co-wife, or with her husband's lover. Silence and forbearance on her part is assumed to maintain her dignity and respect within the community. She is thus placed in a powerless situation, not only in terms of her action, but also in terms of what she can say. Composure will win her praise from most other women in the community; fights in public will invite censure and blame, quite apart from the possibility of sanctions from her husband as well. However, such constraints seem to operate more strongly in face-to-face interaction. The discussion above has shown that women still have available other means to get back at adversaries which are approved of by the community because of their indirectness, and they are making greater and greater uses of these. KNs allow them to 'utter' words which they would not be able to say directly to their chosen addressee. As one woman said, "the message gets home without

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<sup>14</sup> *Sare* is an issue of a *kanga* or a dress fabric which the family holding a wedding ask their friends and well-wishers to buy and wear to the wedding. The bride's and bridegroom's families would usually issue different *sare*.

physical entanglement". The fact that women group KNs together with *taarab* and *mafumbo* as being the more effective means supports the claim I make that women view these as forms of resistance. If they cannot say what they want directly, then they will say it indirectly, but just as effectively. Nelson (1990) shows that African-American women who find that the hegemonic form, the standard, does not allow them to communicate their depth of feeling and spirituality, but only the denotative meaning, tend to switch over to the Black vernacular, although fully aware that it is not the public language of power.

There is no doubt about the indirectness of KNs as messages. This quality of KNs came up over and over in my conversations with Zanzibari women. Beck (1997) in her study of the *leso* in Mombasa makes a similar observation. KNs are indirect in at least three ways. First, the addressee is socially determined rather than physically determined. The wearer may be surrounded by dozens of people, and among those may be the intended addressee, but there would be no direct communication between the wearer and that addressee. Secondly, and following from the first, on being challenged, the wearer may deny that she has any particular addressee in mind, may state that the addressee has wrongly claimed her address, or may even claim that she had forgotten what KN the *kanga* had. Thirdly, the KN is often deliberately ambiguous, and can be given several interpretations. This is because KNs are often in the form of proverbs or riddles (*mafumbo*), which Beck (1997) notes are inherently ambiguous. The "length of inferential path" (Blum-Kulka 1987:133) would be more extended, making the interpretive demands on the addressee more taxing. Obeng discusses the use of such indirect strategies as innuendoes and others in political discourse, and explains their use in terms of face-saving, and gaining political and interactional advantage (1997:49). The wearer may thus disclaim any interpretation that may be attributed to the KN, although it may indeed be the interpretation that she had in mind.<sup>15</sup>

As can be seen in the examples above, most of the KNs tended to be in the form of riddles or proverbs, and the reasons given by the users are similar to those discussed by Obeng (1997). The fact that most of the women questioned preferred this form for sounding off also indicates their concern for maintaining group face: an off-record act allowed everyone to save face.

From the explanations provided by the women, KNs are also obviously a form of resistance. Women use KNs as a voice which allows them to vent their feelings while avoiding direct confrontation with their addressees, and thus remain within the boundaries of propriety which are set for them by the society. Although this form of resistance is in part structurally determined for women, in that in its use women help to reinforce the dominant view that as mothers and wives they should always comport themselves with dignity and should not engage in open confrontation (Yahya-Othman 1994:150), they nevertheless can act as independent agents, in terms of the KNs they choose, and where and for whom they wear them. This is particularly true of the recent issues of extremely outspoken and blunt KNs. Women can now have their own input into *kanga* messages, by ordering *kangas* with the message and design of their choice. They have thus transformed this discursive practice to suit their own needs, and in

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<sup>15</sup> Schottman (1993) quoted in Obeng makes a similar classification of indirectness

the process have rejected the traditional view of the *kanga* as a staid, 'respectable', almost sacrosanct form of dress and communication.

KNs thus demonstrate some of the ways in which the conflicting demands made on women get resolved. While maintaining their place in the society and its concomitant respect, women find means of resistance, no matter how mundane, either on particular occasions or on a regular basis. For instance, Hanak (1996), in discussing the strategies used by women in Zanzibar Muslim family law courts during divorce hearings, notes that;

they make extensive use of speech strategies that do not conform to notions of powerless and submissive speech. (1996:40).

However, those who do break away from the mould have to weigh the gains of so doing against the losses they may suffer. Women who try to do things in ways which are perceived to be entirely counter to the boundaries carved out for them would have to be prepared to meet whatever opposition and ostracisation on the way, and there are some who succeed in carrying this off. But the majority prefer resistance measures which are more conformist. As Abu-Lughod (1990) (quoted in Kingfisher 1996:536) notes, the forms of resistance that people engage in tend generally to be those which are culturally understandable. Thus, a challenge to the linguistic hegemony which requires women to comply to certain received notions of propriety is offered through the use of the most established form of dress in the society. Through the use of KNs, women challenge while still conforming, they are impolite while still remaining polite.

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