This paper examines the music and career of Siti binti Saadi, a famous taarab musician who performed in Zanzibar during the 1920s and 1930s. Relying on four distinctive types of evidence: her recorded music, written documentation produced in East Africa, interviews with men and women who heard her perform and records of company executives, I compare perspectives regarding the source of power and authority attributed to her voice as well as the meaning of her music. Siti binti Saadi was the first East African to have her voice captured and reproduced on 78 rpm gramophone disks. The production of these records enhanced her status and imbued her voice with a sense of authority that it otherwise may never have attained.

Written histories of taarab, particularly those authored in the 1950s and 1960s, often memorialize her as literally, “giving voice to the voiceless,” allowing the voice of East Africa to be heard internationally. In written accounts of Siti’s music and career, her success as a published author is often highlighted as granting her the authority to speak. In oral accounts, however, Siti’s songs were said to have power because they represented a composite of local voices and past historical events. Elderly men and women used these songs, whether recorded or not, to confer authority on themselves as interpreters of the words and agents in the making of the history on which the songs were based.

According to oral sources, one can listen to Siti’s recordings yet never hear what she is remembered for having said. Siti and her band recorded over 250 songs with various companies between 1928 and 1930.1 While this voice, captured and marketed across East Africa, sold extremely well, it did not represent “the truth” as recalled by elderly Zanzibaris. As with all texts, be they oral, written or recorded, how the text was received and interpreted by an audience was just as important as the production of the text itself.2 Without comment from...
the artists and audience during the course of performance regarding the “deeper” meaning buried within the prose or the social and political context from which the songs emerged the lyrics, many contend, were meaningless. Far from seeing themselves as voiceless, these men and women often considered themselves co-authors of Siti’s work. Without the context, analysis and debate which they provided a recorded voice was only so many words.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there also appears to be somewhat of a divergence between the songs as preserved in recordings and those as preserved in memory. The former, on their own, hint at only part of the story, while the later often serve as a metaphor to which larger historical events and processes are attached. The recollection of one of Siti’s songs rarely came without commentary. Frequently a few lines from a song were accompanied by a much longer discussion of the class, gender and political struggles in which Siti and her contemporaries were enmeshed in colonial Zanzibar.

Siti as Icon

The early decades of the twentieth century were a period of large scale social, economic and political change. In 1895, it was estimated that some three-fourths of Zanzibar’s population were either slaves or recently manumitted slaves, most of whom labored on clove plantations owned by the islands’ Omani aristocracy. In 1897 an abolition decree was passed in Zanzibar and over the course of the next several decades former slaves gradually abandoned their status as social dependents and began demanding recognition of their place as independent members of island society.

Siti’s own biography parallels many of the larger transformations which occurred during this period. Siti binti Saadi was born in the countryside just outside of Zanzibar town in the 1880s. Her given name, Mtumwa, translates literally as slave or servant and reflects the subordinate status into which she was born. In 1911, fourteen years after abolition, Mtumwa binti Saadi moved to Zanzibar town in search of better economic opportunities, greater personal autonomy and a place to make a new start in life. Siti moved into an area of town known as Ng’ambo (literally “the other side”), the former residential quarter of urban slaves, which was separated by a tidal creek from Stone Town, where the elaborate stone homes of the Arab, Asian and European ruling classes were located. Between 1890 and 1930 the size of Ng’ambo more than doubled as tens of thousands of men and women like Siti abandoned the rural plantations and moved to town. However, as Mtumwa binti Saadi and

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5 See Cooper 1980 for the details of this transition.
abandoned the rural plantations and moved to town. However, as Mtumwa binti Saadi and others soon discovered, although the city certainly offered limited opportunities for enhanced autonomy, earlier systems of class, ethnic and gender oppression continued to structure their lives in fundamental ways.

During World War I, Siti’s fame as a performer began to spread throughout Ng’amo. Her popularity was rooted in her use of song to depict the joys and sorrows of daily life in Ng’amo as well as her willingness to use her performance to critique acts of injustice to which her friends and neighbors were subjected. Siti and the other members of her band lived, practiced and performed in Ng’amo and the rumors and debates taking place within the community frequently found their way into song. Poverty, the smug superiority of the ruling class and the injustices of British colonial courts filled the daily lives of Ng’amo inhabitants as well as the songs of Siti’s band.

While Siti is widely praised by her contemporaries for never forgetting where she came from, published accounts of her life history frequently depict her as transcending her poor background—an icon representing the fulfilled dreams of an entire generation. The daughter of slaves from the countryside, Mtumwa became widely known in the 1920s by the title of “Siti” (Arabic for lady). During this period her popularity spread beyond Ng’amo as she frequently performed religious and secular tunes at the weddings and celebrations of coastal East Africa’s leading families. As one author argued, “No occasion was deemed successful, be it a wedding or the celebration of a birth, amongst Zanzibar’s elite, without Siti’s performance” (Sheikh-Hashim 1988:3). While her position at these events may have been interpreted by the elite as that of the singing slave girl, in the written folklore she is eulogized for hobnobbing with the most important members of coastal society. The financial rewards she earned for these performances were well beyond the dreams of most Ng’amo residents. She received gifts of gold jewelry, silks, embroidered cloth and the payment she received for one performance for these wealthy clients earned her more money than a typical urban laborer earned in a year (Shaaban 1991:55-59; Hilal 1990; Sheikh-Hashim 1988:3; Suleiman 1969:87-90; Jahadhmy 1966:4-5). At a time when many Ng’amo residents were only welcomed in Stone Town as

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9 Many sources argue that she was given this title by a member of the island’s landed gentry impressed by her knowledge of religious music and her pronunciation of Arabic (Sheikh-Hashim 1988:3-4; Nasra Mohammed Hilal July 28, 1991; Mwalim Idd Farahan September 24, 1991 Khatib contests this account arguing that it was in fact her fans who changed her name, arguing that she was no longer a slave, but now a lady, and the equivalent of the female members of the aristocracy (Khatib 1992:15); Mgana adds a further twist, arguing that Siti is simply a reference to any female singer. Certainly in the post-independence period this has become the case (Mgana 1991:35).
talked with the ruling family and their guests (Mgana 1991:47-48; Hilal 1990; Robert 1991:55-56; Jahadhmy 1966:69, 98) Siti's presence amongst the elite and her growing wealth epitomized the transformative potential of the era. Her power as a cultural hero was enhanced when she was chosen, in 1928, as the first artist from East Africa to produce a gramophone recording (Suleiman 1969:87; Mgana 1991:47; Robert 1991:45-48; Jahadhmy 1966:96)

The Politics of Recording the African Voice

Through the late 1920s, the only commercial recordings available in East Africa were in the languages of India, Europe and the Middle East. The Gramophone Company left the development of the East African trade to their Bombay branch. Local Asian traders were appointed to act as agents as well as sellers and promoters of both gramophones and gramophone discs. In 1928, HMV’s agent in Zanzibar, Abdulkarim Hakim Khan, persuaded the company to take a gamble on the production of records in Kiswahili and he arranged for Siti and the other members of the band, Budda Swedi, Maalim Shaaban and Mbaruik Talsam, to travel to Bombay to record. International recording companies were slowly awakening to the potential buying power of black audiences and in the next few years records directed at previously ignored audiences were marketed across the globe.

The fifty-six songs (28 records) which were released from Siti’s first session sold over 23,000 copies, by 1931 (HMV 1931:4). Overwhelmed with their initial success, especially considering the fact that a pittance Rs 64 (approximately shs 100) had been spent to advertise and promote these first recordings, HMV invited Siti and her band back to Bombay for another session in March of 1929. On this second trip the band recorded another 98 songs, which sold 40,666 copies over the next two years (HMV 1931:5). The skyrocketing sales, as well as profits, being realized by HMV in East Africa prompted other recording companies to follow suit. By 1930, HMV, Odeon, Columbia and Pathe were all recording in East Africa (Graebner 1989:3; Vernon 1995:26). Although HMV’s sales dropped considerably in 1931, as a result of both increasing competition as well as the depression, by mid 1931 they had sold over 72,000 records in East Africa, the vast majority of which were recordings of Siti binti Saadi, as well as a few other taarab performers.

From a marketing point of view the decision to produce music recorded in Kiswahili appears to have been a wise one, since Kiswahili is and was the most widely spoken language in East Africa. As Werner Graebner has argued, however, the practices of company executives were also influenced to a large extent by the ideas of colonial administrators and missionaries in East Africa, who promoted Swahili taarab because it was considered to be a more “developed” and “civilized” form of music (Graebner 1989:5). After the merger of HMV, Odeon, Pathe and Columbia, in 1931, the new company, EMI, sent a representative to East Africa to investigate the current state and future prospects of gramophone promotion. In his report the agent proposed a continued emphasis on Swahili recording, arguing that Swahili
possessed power as a lingua franca as well as prestige as a “vehicle of Arab ideas and civilization.” (HMV 1931:6) The EMI agent even went so far as to suggest that Swahili would ultimately replace the numerous other East African languages as the “natives” became “civilized” and adopted Swahili as a symbol of their advancement.

Echoing European ideas of the day, which attributed the development of the Swahili language as well as the people to the civilizing influence of Arabia, he saw Swahili music as a development “on the original crude Native Music” through the influence of Arabic music. He concluded that this Arabic influence brought not only civilization to coastal East Africans, but creativity as well; Swahili music had definite commercial potential for the recording industry. What the agent neglected to recognize, however, was that Swahili speaking peoples had many musics. The taarab genre which dominated recording until the post World War Two era represented only one of many musical possibilities, yet EMI and its predecessors accorded taarab singular authority as the Swahili voice.

EMI’s conclusions regarding the quality and commercial promise of other languages and musics were not as positive as those for taarab. Though colonial and missionary informants from Mozambique to Uganda assured the agent of the commercial viability of recordings of local musical genres, they warned of the often “unhealthy,” “immoral” and “crude” associations that followed “native” music. The EMI agent took the company’s responsibility to “uplift” and “civilize” seriously, and he suggested that any future development of the recording industry in East Africa must endeavor to educate the native as well as cater to his commercial and musical appetites. Businesswise, he also noted that “primitive African tribes,” which he assumed to be culturally and musically stagnant, would “naturally” have a fairly limited repertoire of songs to record. While some peoples, like the Baganda, might be civilized enough to continually create new tunes, he did not promote investing company resources in the recording of music from small, uncivilized and static peoples (Graebner 1989:5-7; HMS 1931:7-12). It was really only after World War Two, that EMI began to experiment with the recording of a variety of East African music in languages such as Bunyore, Jaluo, Gikuyu, Luganda and Nandi (Vernon 1995:27; Graebner 1989:8-16).

**The Authority of Voice**

The astute understanding displayed by Siti’s contemporaries regarding the politics of language and music in colonial East Africa, as well as their own positionality within these battles, was something that I really only came to appreciate after recently reading the 1931 EMI report. Numerous sources, both oral and written stress the symbolic importance these Kiswahili recordings had in enhancing the self-esteem of Kiswahili speakers. Prior to Siti’s 1928...
recordings the only gramophone records available in East Africa were in the languages of the economic and political overlords of the colonies. By recording in Kiswahili, Siti managed to elevate the status of Kiswahili, and thus Kiswahili speakers, to one amongst equals. One man who spent a great deal of time in Siti’s home as a youth suggested that these recordings symbolized “The importance of Swahili as one of the most advanced African languages.” (Suleiman 1969:87). He and many other Zanzibaris interpreted the production of Siti’s recordings as evidence of European and Asian recognition of their status as civilized beings - no small feat in the colonial world of the 1930s.

While sources both oral and written praise Siti binti Saadi’s music, there are interesting differences in emphasis between the two. Written sources universally highlight the significance of her recordings, often defining the point at which she signed her contract with HMV as the apex of her career (Suleiman 1969:87; Robert 1991:45-48; Sheikh-Hashim 1988:4, Mgana 1991:47, Jahadhmy 1966:6). Shaaban Robert, the famous Swahili poet, referred to her songs as “the pride of East Africa” and to her recordings as “a great light in the darkness” left to posterity. Aware of the ephemeral nature of the spoken word, these authors identify the act of recording with the ability to preserve. Imbued with a sense of the authority of authorship that often accompanies literacy, they also attributed a power to Siti as creator that oral sources did not.

Many of these authors also applauded the ability of Siti’s recordings to act as brokers of Zanzibar cultural imperialism. The commercial sale of Siti’s voice helped to spread the dialect of Kiswahili as spoken in Zanzibar, then also being promoted as “standard” Swahili by the British, across East Africa. These recordings were heralded by some as contributing “to the growth of the Swahili language [in a way that] can never be matched.” (Sheikh-Hashim 1988:4) Others claimed that the production of these recordings also served to attune fellow East Africans to the internationally recognized importance of Zanzibar culture. Shaaban Robert’s 1956 biography proclaimed Siti’s importance, and by extension that of Zanzibar:

Her voice began to rumble like a drum in the air, praises of her spread like fire across a dry grassland. People of every age-group; men and women; in the villages and in towns; inside huts and stone homes, from the islands throughout the coast, everywhere in East Africa; they were taken by an overwhelming desire to talk about her.” (Robert 1991:15; translation mine)

Other authors echoed Shaaban’s sentiments arguing, “Once this voice was heard coming from a gramophone everyone started singing the songs, children, elders, women and men, everyone was singing... Even beni bands started to copy taarab songs” (Jahadhmy 1969:6). This author implies that the commercial production of Siti’s music transformed taarab into a musical lingua franca which other peoples quickly sought to adopt. However, Gramophone Company sales

records indicate that such perceptions of upcountry enthusiasm for Zanzibar culture, language and music were somewhat exaggerated (HMI 1931:2, 7) Swahili speakers, outside and even within Zanzibar, resisted company attempts to define the Swahili music for them. Taarab was fine as one form of music but other musical genres continued to be performed and widely appreciated

Yet commercial production of taarab did often serve to exaggerate local perceptions of Zanzibar’s position on the cutting edge of the regional social scene. Siti’s captured voice symbolized Zanzibar’s role as a force of modernization, argued AA Suleiman, spreading new technology - in the form of gramophones and recorded sound - as well as taarab music, from Tanganyika, to Uganda, Kenya, the Belgian Congo, Comoro, Somalia and Southern Arabia. He pointed to this as “a fine example of Swahili leadership” and even went so far as to praise Siti’s records for returning Zanzibar to its former glory, giving new meaning to the old saying, “When the pipes play in Zanzibar, they dance on the lakes” (Suleiman 1969:88)

Elderly men and women whom I interviewed also referred to Siti’s music with a great deal of pride. However, their emphasis was on the power of live performances rather than commercially produced renditions. This emphasis may reflect sour grapes, as few of the people I interviewed lived in a household capable of affording a gramophone, let alone the monthly releases of new records whose average cost was more than half the monthly salary of an unskilled urban laborer. Of course, even those who could not afford to own the recordings had ample opportunity to hear them at the homes of friends and neighbors or while sitting on the baraza of a favorite coffee shop. Having a gramophone and playing the new releases for others was a sign of status and households with the financial means used the regular release of new records to amass social capital. What enhanced the status of even those without a gramophone was the fact that “one of their own” (i.e., poor, black and Kiswahili speaking) had been recorded rather than one of the bands from Stone Town which sang in Arabic, the language of the island’s aristocracy.

While written sources highlight Siti’s significance in the arena of international cultural politics, oral sources focus almost exclusively on her role as an agent in local struggles. Similarly, while the former identify her as “giving voice to the voiceless,” the latter praise her for echoing what they were already saying. The memories of Siti which brought the most excitement to the faces of the elderly men and women whom I interviewed were of the lively debates which took place in Siti’s home during practices and performances and the impromptu

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12 Records in East Africa were priced at Sh 1.95d each, although Suleiman says that prices in Zanzibar ranged from shs 4/50 to shs 7/50 depending on popularity and public demand. Rather than release all of the records at once, the companies released ten or so each month, thereby sustaining sales over the course of the year. At this time the average monthly wage for unskilled laborers working in town was Shs 30 (EMI 1931:4-5; Vernon 1995:26; Suleiman 1969:88; Zanzibar Colony Blue Books)

way she could transform their talk into a song. Siti’s home became one of the central gathering places in Ng’ambo in the 1920 and 1930s, where she joked, exchanged gossip, analyzed local politics and absorbed new material for her songs. The band’s practices were open events. Siti and the other members of the band composed the poetry which comprised the lyrics to the songs, but they did this with feedback from the members of the community who were in attendance. Creation was not an individual act, according to oral sources, but a public and collective one. The power of her music was in the context of its creation - a process in which everyone took part - and not in the act of recording where Siti was given sole credit as author.

**Recorded v. Remembered Songs**

Siti and her band recorded well over 250 songs on various labels. Obviously, not all of these songs were memorable, nor were all of her most memorable songs recorded. An analysis of one hundred of these song texts reveals that some 60% of the band’s music centered on issues of love, 2% on religion and another 20% on a range of topics dealing with social and cultural life. The material for which Siti is most widely remembered: her trenchant criticisms of local class and gender politics comprised less than a quarter of her published repertoire. Company records which would provide greater insight into exactly what was recorded, how the material was selected and whether or not it was subject to censorship by company or colonial officials are unavailable. Existing evidence does not permit me to state conclusively how...
representative these 100 songs are of the band’s recorded or live music. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the songs which have stuck in people’s minds over the last half-century were either those which echoed important personal experiences or events of major significance to the Ng’ambo community at large.

Cities of struggle between the urban poor and the forces of colonial power were numerous, yet two particularly explosive points of contestation were the courts and jails. From the 1920s through the 1950s, crowds of angry residents brought a boisterous end to court proceedings or liberated neighbors from jail on numerous occasions. According to Ng’ambo residents, colonial “justice” was blind to the interests of the unpropertied. Only by banding together and intervening on behalf of those wrongfully convicted could the interests of the poor be protected. Although verbal appeals to the state for “fairness” frequently fell on deaf ears, community debates over the meaning of “justice” found expression not only in jail-breaks but in the songs of Siti’s band as well. Many of these songs are still widely remembered, and their performance often serves to crystallize memories of the violent struggles which pitted the African poor against Asian and Arab property owners as well as the colonial administration.

One such song, *Wala Hapana Hasara*, commemorated the conviction of Mselem bin Mohamed el-Khalasi, a wealthy and powerful civil servant based in Zanzibar town. Mselem was renowned for using his position to deceive and exploit the poor. He was also despised for his work as a government informant during a particularly tumultuous period in the late 1920s, when Ng’ambo residents organized a ground rent strike which propelled them towards numerous clashes with the state. For years Mselem had stolen the property of Zanzibar’s poor and illiterate, when he was later convicted for embezzling money from government accounts in order to finance his daughter’s wedding, many in Ng’ambo took his conviction as a vindication by God for the wrongs which he had committed against them. Mselem was sentenced to hard labor in the town’s rock quarry and Siti performed this song in honor of his fall. The song became so popular that a *kanga* (cloth worn by coastal women) was even printed, entitled “Mselem’s Rock,” which bore a picture of Mselem carrying a rock on his head.

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There is No Loss

There is no pedigree, I am the child of so and so
A word like a sudden blow which burns in the chest
The name is yours my man and the rock is on your head

And the rock is on your head

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20 AB 28/12: Demonstration by Native Hut Owners against payment of Ground Rent; Said Mohamed March 25, 1992; Adija Salum, March 23, 1992; Adija Haji Simai February 3, 1992


22 This and all other translations from Kiswahili are my own. In some cases I have strayed from the literal translation in order to more accurately convey a meaning as it might be understood in English.
Stop your oppression and stealing from the poor
Especially from those who are said to be the stupidest of the stupid
Forever their pen is ink upon the thumb

It isn't right to pinch, to embezzle from the government
Their books are all open with each and every signature
Something from years ago can always be investigated

You people should not be deceived, this is mine I should take it
A memento should be created so it doesn't leave their hearts
You clerks should be satisfied with what you are entitled to
With what you are entitled to

As one elderly woman suggested, this case evoked appreciation for the wit of the Lord's justice, which entrapped Mselem with the very forces which he had used to undermine the poor for years: affectation, literacy, theft and the colonial courts.

Mselem's sentencing to hard labor represented a rare instance in which local and colonial notions of justice happened to coincide. More typically, argued one man, "the rich man, whose parents could buy him out, got off, while the poor man went to jail." An analysis of court records from these decades indicates that women were particularly prone to having cases decided against them. In cases of rape and domestic abuse women were frequently told by European court officials that their own immoral behavior was the ultimate cause of their problems. The commentary of Ng'ambo residents on the outcome of such cases was reflected in many of Siti's songs. One such song which is widely remembered, and still occasionally performed by the women's taarab group Sahib el-Any is entitled "Kijiti." It documents the rape and murder of a women from Dar es Salaam who came to Zanzibar to visit friends in Ng'ambo. She was invited by neighbors for a night "out on the town" where she met her death at the hands of one of the men in the group, who was named Kijiti. The guilty man escaped from the police and ran to the mainland, while two women who helped to organize the outing, as well as provide the alcohol for the occasion, were found guilty of the woman's death (some sources claim they were sentenced to hang) after testifying against Kijiti in court. This song suggests that not only were Ng'ambo residents aghast at the court's ruling, but they had their own ideas of the justice that might ultimately befall Kijiti.

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23 A reference to the practice of requiring the illiterate to place their thumb print on written documents indicating their acceptance of the contract. This practice was detested by many in Ng'ambo who later learned that written documents were often quite different from what they had verbally agreed to. ZNA, AB 14/67: Moneylenders Decree, 1927-55; ZNA, AB 14/68: Native Mortgages to Moneylenders, 1930-31.


26 ZNA, HC 3/ High Court Civil Cases: HC 3/2895; HC 3/2955; HC 3/335; HC 3/1344; HC 4/ High Court Criminal Cases: HC 4/91; HC 4/42; HC 8/ The Sultan's Court. HC 8/67; HC 8/60; HC 8/55; HC 8/86.
Kijiti
Look you all, look at what Kijiti has done
To take a guest and play the game offoliti with her
He went with her to the bush and brought her back as a corpse

We left home, we did not ask for permission
Our alcohol in the bag, we took it with us
The dance is in Chukwani, death in Sharifmsa

Kijiti said to me, “Come on girl, let’s go!”
Oh, if only I had known I would have refused, I wouldn’t have gone
Kijiti you are killing me for a single shot of booze

The judge was mad in his chair where he sat
And said, “You bloody fools!” to the witnesses of Kijiti
We put you in jail Sumaili and K the daughter of Subeiti

These things are amazing every time we look at them
Kijiti killed someone and in her stomach was a baby
Kijiti crossed the river, the witnesses have drowned

Kijiti I warn you, don’t go to Dar es Salaam
You will meet an old man and he has warn a razor just for you
People are swearing about you, may God give you elephantias

Songs about the colonial courts are not the only topics from Siti’s repertoire which are widely recalled, but I would suggest that they do stand out in people’s memories precisely because the courts were such an important battleground during the heyday of Siti’s career. As the Ng’ambo ground rent strike gained increasing momentum between 1925 and 1928, the courts were repeatedly called upon to enforce eviction notices on Ng’ambo tenants. In the space of one year over 500 eviction notices were served by two of Ng’ambo’s more notorious landlords. By March of 1928, as Siti and her band departed for their first recording engagement in Bombay, the ground rent strike had become nearly universal. At demonstrations attended by hundreds of residents, angry crowds affirmed their commitment to protect each other from the talons of “justice.” They kept good on their promises. On at least five separate occasions in 1928 crowds of several hundred men and women freed friends and neighbors from the grip of the police, the courts and even the jail. After more than a year of marches, demonstrations and attacks on its institutions of “justice” the state finally ended up conceding to the crowds. Ground rents were reduced several hundred per cent and a moratorium was
imposed on court actions by landlords against tenants in arrears. Although songs about the colonial justice system comprise less than 10% of the sample of songs I have available, they figure very prominently in the memories of men and women who lived through this era.

Oral sources suggest that Siti binti Saadi was an important historical figure not because her voice was recorded and marketed from Zanzibar to Kinshasa, but rather because her songs reflected the lives, the ideas and the struggles of their times. Despite the written claims of Zanzibar authors regarding the popularity of Siti’s gramophone recordings across East Africa, Gramophone Company records indicate that her sales were mainly confined to the coast. Graebner has suggested that one possible explanation for this is the nuanced and elusive nature of the verse which comprised her songs (Graebner 1989:5). An additional answer can also be found in the fact that listeners in Lumbumbashi or Nakuru were most likely unaware of the local events and people who gave these songs their significance. Without the context to evaluate the lyrics the music lost much of its power to speak.

**Donkeys, Rupees and Metaphor**

On February 7 of 1936, Zanzibar was rocked by another series of violent events which one elderly man referred to “as the war between the Omani Arabs (Wamanga) and the Europeans.” By the end of this brief war, fought at the central market and lasting less than one day, the Assistant District Commissioner and the Assistant Inspector of Police had been beheaded by sword wielding Arabs and four Wamanga had been shot dead by colonial police. Memories about these events, while basically “true,” are in some instances more metaphorical than actual. Reflections about the place of Siti’s music in the struggle also reveal the way in which her songs have sometimes served as hooks on which events have been hung in the closets of memory.

In January of 1936, the East African shilling officially replaced the British Indian Rupee and the Seyyideh copper pice as the currency of Zanzibar. At the beginning of the following month the produce inspectors down at the port began imposing much more stringent standards of quality on the copra being produced in Zanzibar and shipped overseas. According to Mzee Jahare, the war all began when an Arab who was returning from the copra sheds stopped at the water trough near the market to give his donkey some water. While waiting, he made a necklace by stringing the new coins together with some cord and then adorned his animal with his creation. A “big” European saw how the man had defaced the Queen’s currency and

29 ZNA, AB 36/13: Ground Rent Restriction Decree; ZNA, AB 36/22: Ground Rents, 1926-54; ZNA, AB 36/23: Procedure Regarding Compensation Paid to Hut Owners in Ngambo in Relation to Ground Rent Due by Them; ZNA, AE 8/19: Claim over land at Kisimamajongo by Mh Tarja Topan


ordered him to remove the necklace from the donkey. Before anyone knew what happened the European had been hit with a sword.  

A second man who had the unfortunate luck of actually being one of the policemen called to the market that day recalled that the violence erupted when the District Commissioner went to the water trough near the market and began forcing people in the vicinity to exchange their old rupees for the new shillings. He recalled that no one wanted the new currency because of the confusion over what it was worth. This confusion was exacerbated by the fact that the official exchange rate was calculated at two cents of a shilling being the equivalent of one pice, yet two pice were exchanged for five cents of a shilling. People were no longer sure what anything was worth, but they were certain that they were being ripped-off every time they went to the market (BA 106/15). When the DC tried to force the Arabs gathered at the market to exchange their rupees and pice for shillings they resisted. When he became increasingly adamant they pulled out their swords and slaughtered him “just like a chicken.”

The official report of the Commission of Enquiry into these events makes brief mention of the changeover in currency but centers its conclusions regarding the cause of the riots on the Manga's inability to sell their inferior copra, as well as their “wild, ungoverned and turbulent nature.” In the days before the outbreak of “the war” over 100 Manga had had their copra rejected and then seized by the inspectors at the inspection sheds. While these men owned land, most of them lived fairly marginal economic lives. Their bags of sub-grade copra may have been deemed worthless by the agricultural authorities but they represented months of hard work to them. These men had also brought their produce into town not by car or lorry, but by walking five, ten or fifteen miles leading along a donkey cart. The official report indicates that the violence began at the inspection sheds and only gradually spread out to the market, not because markets and money were at the core of the dispute, but because the water trough served as a gathering place for idle Manga lazing in town before their trip back home. If only the Manga were more industrious and put a bit more effort into drying their copra they could have easily met the new standards, concluded the official report.

However, ultimately this war really was about money. New produce standards and confusing exchange rates combined to ensure decreasing standards of living for rural producers. It is thus not surprising that the memories of these two men focused more on the coins -be they adorning donkeys or forcibly exchanged- than on soggy copra. After relating how events unfolded at the market, leading up to the slaughter of the Assistant Inspector of Police, Said Mohammed continued.

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33 Said Mohammed March 25, 1992
34 Said Mohammed March 25, 1992
35 In the days preceding “the war” over 1500 bags of sub-grade copra had been seized by the inspectors at the inspection sheds. The fact that Asian producers of copra were exempt from having their copra inspected added to the resentment of poorer rural producers. ZNA, AU 2/29; BA 106/15
At that time there was an artist, a musician, named Siti binti Saadi who sang taarab. She was acclaimed throughout Zanzibar for her wonderful songs. She had a song, "Goodbye rupee, goodbye rupee, you are being sent away. These new coins have no value, they are pieces of tin stamped from metal cooking pots." The colonial government hated this song; the government was furious for having its respect broken in this way. "Goodbye rupee, goodbye rupee, you are being sent away. These new coins have no value, they are pieces of tin stamped from metal cooking pots." The government detested this song! So they gave an order, if the police heard this song coming from inside your house they should break down your door, smash your gramophone, bring you to court and sentence you to a 2,000 shilling fine. But the song continued to be played.

I had gone to Said's house to interview him neither about copra riots nor Siti binti Saadi. I left charged by his fascinating stories and amazed at the ability of this man well into his 80s to recall names, dates and wage rates with an accuracy that neither I nor any other informants could come close to. Nonetheless, I was also highly skeptical of his version of the copra riots. Could the District Commissioner and Inspector of Police really have been beheaded at the market? The next day I ordered the 1936 Annual Report at the archives and discovered that the Assistant DC and the Assistant Inspector of Police had in fact been murdered in the course of "a riot by Manga Arabs."

I was also reluctant to accept at face value the image of police breaking into people's homes and smashing their gramophones. I knew that the Zanzibar police at this time were neither that bold nor that committed. And could a song, as amusing as it was, really have been that important? It was only while writing this paper that I came to prove (I think) that this part of Marehemu Said's story was more fiction than fact. These events took place in 1936, six years after the last documented recording of Siti's music. There is a slim chance that she may have recorded with Columbia in Zanzibar, in 1937 or 1938, and that this song may have been amongst those possibly recorded, but this does not seem very likely. If there was no record, then there would be no reason for breaking down people's doors, smashing their gramophone players, hauling them off to jail and releasing them only after they paid a bail roughly the equivalent of five years' wages.

It appears as though Said's memory of *Kwahe l Rupia* (Goodbye Rupee) conflates the role of Siti's music as a vehicle for reflecting the events of the time and the effect of the recordings themselves in preserving her songs. In Said's memory, and I would suggest in the memories of many others, Siti's music becomes a metaphor for the times. The lyrics themselves do not

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36 According to the Annual Report, island residents were much more reluctant to accept the copper coins being issued than the paper notes or silver coins.
37 Mr. IHD Rolleston, Assistant District Commissioner and Assistant Inspector Camur-un-deen of the Zanzibar Police were the officials who lost their lives on 7 February, 1936.
38 Werner Graebner interviewed the former agent for Columbia who indicated that the company did do some recording in Zanzibar at this time, but he was uncertain who they recorded. Numerous sources, both written and oral, mention the recordings from 1928-1930, and I would be very surprised if she recorded in 1937 and none of them mentioned this. I am also highly skeptical that this song would have been recorded, as by this date there is clear evidence that Hayes, the central office for EMI, was censoring East African recordings. Werner Graebner, personal communication, April 3, 1995; Vernon 1995:27; Graebner 1989:10.
invoke the violence which accompanied the difficulty of meeting the new standards for copra or the change in currency, but that violence gets projected onto the song through Said’s memory of police recklessly smashing gramophones which were playing her tune. The improved copra standards were also as impossible to meet as the exorbitant bail fines imposed on those playing the tune. The record, whether it existed or not, embodies all that the song implied. At the same time, however, the focus on recorded versions of the song decenters Siti as a subject in this violence and more accurately reflects the widespread involvement of hundreds of people who took part in these events. Police weren’t beating up Siti, they were directing their violence against the numerous people who played Kwaheri Rupia.

Comparing Said’s memory of events at the market, in February of 1936, with those of Mohammed Ali, more commonly known as Mzee Jahare, drew me to reconsider other aspects of their accounts as well. Following orders from their European superior, the Zanzibar police opened fire on the men at the market, killing four and seriously wounding three others, resulting in one of the single largest uses of deadly force by the police in the history of twentieth-century colonial Zanzibar. According to Jahare, Zanzibar men who were members of the police force were later so afraid to walk the streets, that they borrowed buibui (veils worn by coastal East African women, which cover them from head to ankle) from female friends and relatives near the market so that they could safely make their ways back home. For a period after the riots, local policemen left their homes to report for duty only under the cover of buibui, and once assigned they quickly went off to hide until their shift was over. There are several accounts of earlier points in Zanzibar’s history when men were reported to have used the cover of buibui to safely escape from danger, so again while I found this anecdote both amusing and somewhat odd, I did not completely dismiss it as “untrue.” I don’t really “know” if policemen covered themselves with buibui, but my interview with Said suggests that Jahare’s larger point for which the buibui becomes a literal cover is, in at least some instances, quite accurate. While Said made no mention of either himself or his fellow officers donning veils, in the course of a rather long and embellished discussion of events that day he completely avoided any reference to his own involvement either in the shootings or the violence which followed.

Conclusion

This examination of the recorded music of Siti binti Saadi as well as the memories surrounding her songs and histories of her career suggests that the “capture” and production of her music did in fact grant her an authority, at least in the minds of some, that she might otherwise never have attained. I hope I have illustrated, however, that interpretations regarding the ultimate source of this authority as well as its meaning were highly contested. Texts— even if erroneously produced and marketed internationally as the authentic “civilized” voice— have

39 Mohammed Ali (Mzee Jahare) June 9, 1992
did in fact grant her an authority, at least in the minds of some, that she might otherwise never have attained. I hope I have illustrated, however, that interpretations regarding the ultimate source of this authority as well as its meaning were highly contested. Texts— even if erroneously produced and marketed internationally as the authentic “civilized” voice—have value as sources to argue with and against. As metaphors for the past Siti’s songs continue to serve as important tools for local agents as they recall and construct their own versions of Zanzibar’s pasts. Elderly men and women who lived through these times frequently draw on Siti’s music as mnemonics of memory, triggers which allow them too see and hear the struggles and debates of the times. While aspects of that which is revealed about the past might seem rather far-fetched at first glance, these strange and grandiose stories can perhaps provide rare insights into discourses of power which might otherwise be left to history.

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