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Hip Hop and Bongo Flavour music in Contemporary Tanzania: Youths' Experiences, Agency, Aspirations and Contradictions¹

1 Young people, Bongo Flavour and hip-hop

The beginning of Tanzanian hip-hop along with a genre known as Bongo Flavour (also Bongo Flava, or Flewa, according to the Swahili spelling), can be traced back as early as the 1990s. This music, characterised by the use of Swahili lyrics (with a few English and slang words) is also referred to as the "music of the new generation" (*muziki wa kikazi kipya*).

Without the intention to analyse a complex and multifaceted reality, this paper aims to give a sense of this popular music as an overall phenomenon in contemporary Tanzania. Assuming that music, performance and popular culture can be instruments to innovate and produce change (see Fabian 1978; Martin 1995; Akyeampong 1998; Fair 2001), this paper argues that Bongo Flavour and hip-hop are not only music genres, but also cultural expressions necessary to understand a substantial part of contemporary Tanzanian youths. The focus here is on young male artists living in urban environments.

As far as the concept of "youth" is concerned, it can be underlined that a few years ago, Achille Mbembe questioned whether we should use the term *jeunesse* rather than *jeunesses*, or simply *jeunes*. For example, what do a young man from Bamako who carries water and a student at the University of Abidjan have in common? (Mbembe 1985, 5). Thus, in talking about young people, it would be more appropriate to 'soften' our affirmations and considerations, and diversify our approaches. Youths' attitudes, lifestyles,

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the XIX Swahili Kolloquium, Bayreuth, 26th-27th May 2006 (set for publication in *Swahili Forum* 2007).

needs, aspirations and *chances de se développer* can converge or diverge depending on historical moments, socio-economic conditions, and numerous other factors. In other words, youths are a fragmented universe (Mbembe 1985, 6).

With regard to the concept of “generations”, a number of scholars of Africa have questioned whether there is amongst African youths a generational consciousness, an awareness of the common situation in relation to preceding generations. Nevertheless, the discussion about generations in Africa seems to be still in its early days (see O’Brien 1996, 57; Burgess 2005). Although in this paper Tanzanian youths are not considered as a fixed and homogeneous category, I argue that young artists generally reflect their audiences and speak for them, expressing through songs youthful views and aspirations as well as agency, contradictions and (sometimes) common interests.

Most of the ethnographic data presented here draws on participant observation, informal conversations with fans and interviews with artists based in Dar es Salaam, the main city of Tanzania.² Regarding young people residing in small centres, from my observations in the course of my travels – i.e. speaking to young people throughout East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) and attending Bongo Flavour and hip-hop concerts and competitions in many urban areas as well as in semi-rural contexts (such as Mbinga, Ruvuma Region) - I had the impression that they have the same aspirations as their urban counterparts. Those who live in semi-rural areas try to keep well up to date on urban practices through listening to radio programmes, using internet, reading magazines and tabloids on music, attending Bongo Flavour concerts etc. At the same time, it is undeniable that they lack the same opportunities as their city ‘brothers’: for instance, the Web is profoundly urban-biased.

² Dar es Salaam was the capital city of colonial Tanganyika (renamed Tanzania - the United Republic of Tanzania - after its union with the islands of Zanzibar in 1964). Although since 1973 the new capital has been Dodoma, Dar es Salaam has remained the main political and economic centre of the country. I became interested in Bongo Flavour music while conducting my Ph.D. field research in Tanzania on leisure, popular culture, the changing identities of Tanganyikan youths and nationalist politics in British colonial Tanganyika. My research was carried out between 2004 and 2005.

In respect to its origins, the word *bongo* (the augmentative form of *ubongo*, “brain”) means “Tanzania” in Swahili slang, with an allusion to the “big brain” necessary in order to survive in the country. It should be specified that the first meaning of the word *bongo* was “Dar es Salaam” (during the economic crisis in the 1980s one needed wits to survive there).

The early meaning of the term “Bongo Flavour” was “hip-hop” (i.e. a foreign genre) with a local, Tanzanian flavour (Nganyagwa 2005). Always carrying lyrics in Swahili, with a few slang and English terms, Bongo Flavour encompasses many genres which partly originated in other countries, such as rap and R&B (for the US),³ zouk (from Antilles), dancehall and raga (from Jamaica). These foreign influences are combined with local rhythms and tastes, and the result is Bongo Flavour, a new, very commercial genre, characterised by the sound of a keyboard.

However, this genre is continuously changing and the issue of which styles Bongo Flavour actually includes is still an unresolved debate in Tanzania. At the time of writing, many Tanzanian ‘pure’ hip-hop artists argue that Tanzanian hip-hop is no longer part of the Bongo Flavour genre. Some rappers have self-excluded themselves from the category “Bongo Flavour” on the grounds that hip-hop is supposedly still committed to telling the truth, thus respecting the original function of this style, while many songs in Bongo Flavour style just deal with entertainment issues.⁴ It should be added, however, that a Bongo Flavour song can contain a part in ‘pure’ hip-hop style, and Bongo Flavour artists often sing and rap in the same album. In spite of this fact, in this paper hip-hop is treated as a separate genre, in order to respect the wish of Tanzanian ‘pure’ rappers.

³ Rap originated in the ghettos of New York in the 1970s. This new form of art came to be known as hip-hop, a slang word meaning to challenge oneself through words, paint and action.

⁴ Interview with the ‘old school’ very committed rapper Sugu (which means “stubborn”), also known as “Mister II” (Joseph O. Mbilinyi), 22nd March 2005. Interview with Inspekta Haroun (nicknamed *Babu*, “grandfather”, because he started music in 1992), 10th April 2005. Cf. Anonymous author, “*Kalapina: Bongo Flewa siyo hip hop*” (Kalapina: Bongo Flavour is not hip-hop), *Baab Kubwa*, 8th-21st September 2005, p. 5. Kalapina is the name of a local rapper from Dar es Salaam.

2 Global and local changes and new opportunities for Tanzanian youths

Specific global economic and political conditions enabled foreign musics to gain popularity in Tanzania, primarily in urban areas. These circumstances were the free market and the privatisation of the media. When Julius K. Nyerere retired from the presidency in 1985,⁵ International Monetary Fund and World Bank approved the “Economic Recovery Plan”, which among other things included further devaluations, increase in produce prices, and general provision of importation of almost all goods. The Structural Adjustment Programs forced Tanzania to abandon *Ujamaa* policies (“socialism”, started in 1967). The then new President Mwinyi brought to an end the Arusha Declaration as a dominant ideological model for the country and its people in 1991. He permitted luxury goods, such as televisions, to be imported into the country. This enabled the images of Western culture to inundate the markets of Tanzania like never before.

Under the pressures of political reforms and commercialisation, hip-hop and other foreign genres started to be channeled through Tanzanian radio stations - until that moment in the country there was just one radio station, government controlled: RTD (Radio Tanzania Dar es Salaam).

Based in Dar es Salaam, Saleh Ally is a music journalist and former rapper from Mwanza. He argues that many urban youths were creating and enjoying Bongo Flavour (Tanzanian hip-hop) in the 1980s, even before the liberalisation. According to him, Tanzanian hip-hop “was started by young people with rich parents”, such as male youths from Oysterbay and Masaki in Dar es Salaam, where a long-established International School is located.⁶ These neighbourhoods are commonly referred to as the white (i.e. posh) areas of Dar es Salaam (in Swahili *Uzunguni*). Since Tanzanian rappers started rhyming in English, people who could manage to rap in this language were the most educated ones.⁷ For instance, the first rap album in Swahili, “King of Swahili rap”, was released in 1991 by Saleh Jaber. Born in Dar es

⁵ However, Nyerere remained chairman of his party, CCM (*Chama cha Mapinduzi* - The Revolutionary Party) until 1990.

⁶ Interview with Saleh Ally, 8th April 2005.

⁷ Interview with Saleh Ally, cit. See also Haas and Gesthuizen 2000, 281.

Salaam, son of a Tanzanian father and an English mother, he had a bilingual competence and had some relatives in the UK. Using the instrumental version of American rap hits as his base, Saleh Jaber produced a *bricolage* of popular tunes from the US with his own lyrics (a mix of English and Swahili).

On the other hand, the radio presenter Sebastian Maganga and the singer and rapper Inspekta Haroun, both based in Dar es Salaam, disagree about the 'elite' origins of this genre, arguing that slums such as Temeke, in Dar es Salaam, were "thirsty for hip-hop", and that "this area gave birth to many artists".⁸ In my understanding, it cannot be denied that among the first people to come into contact with foreign genres were the most educated and well-off Tanzanian youths. Besides knowing some English and being able to understand song lyrics, they were frequently sent new albums (and even stereos and T-shirts with the images of American rappers printed on them)⁹ by their relatives living abroad. Nevertheless, they were not isolated from other youths who lived in the poor urban areas. Rather, they shared music and information on the latest foreign artists and styles.

Regarding the lyrics of the first Tanzanian raps, Inspekta Haroun states that early artists did not talk about "meaningful topics".¹⁰ Sebastian Maganga confirms these comments, adding that although artists soon started to express themselves in Swahili, at that time they "did not compose lyrics", they "just imitated" their US counterparts.¹¹

The beginning of a second phase called "the official revolution" (*mapinduzi halisi*), characterised by a shift towards more serious and conscious lyrics, can be traced around 1999.¹²

In my view we have entered a new phase, in which Bongo Flavour has the monopoly on other types of Tanzanian music. Currently more than 60 percent of those who record at FM studios are Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists.¹³ Other local genres, for instance *taarab* (sung Swahili poetry), 'traditional'

⁸ Interview with Sebastian Maganga, 11th March 2005; interview with Inspekta Haroun, cit.

⁹ Saleh Ally himself received from the US a T-shirt with the face of the American rapper Tupac Shakur (or 2Pac) on it. Interview with Saleh Ally, cit.

¹⁰ Interview with Inspekta Haroun, cit.

¹¹ Interview with Sebastian Maganga, cit.

¹² Interview with Saleh Ally, cit. See also Mangesho 2003, 67.

¹³ On music production technology, cf. Mangesho 2003, 30-65.

music and dances (*ngoma*), or local jazz (in Swahili *dansi*) have never obtained such coverage in the media (Mangesho 2003, 64).

In the past few years young artists have taken advantage of the commercial potentialities and the unprecedented diffusion of their music in the whole of East Africa not only through radio and TV programmes, the selling of CDs, tapes and Video CDs, but also through live performances, movies and the participation in national and international awards. This music is continuously heard in minibuses, as well as in bars and hotels, and generally young people know the lyrics of the popular hits off by heart. It is not rare to hear even people of a certain age singing out loud the chorus of Bongo Flavour hits.

Artists have also taken advantage of the rumours and gossip about their lives, loves, their fancy new cars and expensive clothes. This information is available in local magazines and tabloids both in Swahili and English (see Suriano forthcoming). The Tanzanian scholar Peter Mangesho pointed out that the print media

have increased sales of their products through the front coverage of their magazines and newspapers with pictures of these artists, but have also played a pivotal role in spreading the Bongo Flavour music culture. This has never happened for any other kind of music culture in Dar es Salaam, and Tanzania as a whole (Mangesho 2003, 62).

Regarding the social composition of artists, they are from different social and religious backgrounds as well as diverse geographic origins. Many of them are born in Dar es Salaam - frequently in its slums - or moved there in order to gain access to recording studios and other facilities related to musical production (the possibility of keeping in touch with radio presenters, studio producers, concert organisers and audiences plays an important role in the popularity of these artists). Some of them are orphaned (sometimes due to AIDS), and have grown up with their grandparents.

They are generally very young, usually in their early twenties, with a certain degree of formal education (they have usually completed the secondary school). Therefore, their perspectives to find formal jobs are very limited, and this music represents a source of revenue for them.

Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists are using the new opportunities offered by the flourishing market to make money and guarantee an economic security for themselves. Moreover, through this music, artists are able to reach their parents' status and a certain degree of autonomy from the adults.

As far as listeners are concerned, Bongo Flavour and hip-hop music target a mostly youthful audience, of both sexes.¹⁴ In *Darubini Kali* (Sharp binoculars), the popular rapper Afande Sele featuring Ghetto Boys complains about the use of many English terms made by artists, because they are not understood in poor areas, where this music seems to be more popular. In his words: "What is the point of foreign languages in local music when *Bongo Flava* is best liked in poor areas [*Uswahilin*]?!"¹⁵ *Uswahilini* literally means "African areas", i.e. poor areas (as opposed to *Uzunguni*). By highlighting that this genre is widespread particularly in these neighborhoods, Afande Sele seems to articulate an important social factor: especially poor and marginalised youths listen to this music, and they do so as a means to acquiring a voice in their society.

In other words Bongo Flavour and hip-hop allow the articulation of contemporary youth identities. Borrowing a statement made for the case of contemporary Kenya, this music, along with "the discursive spaces opened by the media", "do not have the barriers which elsewhere" prevent "poor people from taking part in debates on key social and moral questions." (Frederiksen 2000, 209). Generally speaking, this music along with new recording technologies is contributing in my view to the establishment of a democratic public sphere.

Concerning the potentialities of the Internet as an opportunity for young people to make money and have their voices heard, Mangesho has this to say:

¹⁴ Although the audience contains both sexes, it should not be forgotten that most artists are men. Women singers, especially rappers, are still few, for reasons which I intend to explore in another project.

¹⁵ Afande Sele. 2004. *Darubini Kali*. GMC: Dar es Salaam. Original in Swahili: "*Lugha ngeni za nini kwenye muziki wa nyumbani, wakati Bongo Flava inapendwa zaidi uswahilini*". All lyrics quoted in this paper are in Swahili and were translated into English by the author.

not only has the internet facilitated the acquisition of special programs, but it has also enabled local artists to receive deals abroad and even record with foreign artists (...) without having to meet physically. According to OCG (a local rapper), whose famous song about AIDS/HIV called “Kazeze” was hitting the charts, an American recording firm (which heard the track via the websites) contacted him and wanted to compose a song with him. They sent them back to the United States for their artists to rap or sing in it. This implies that local BF [Bongo Flavour] artists apart from being heard worldwide through their websites, (...) can also interact and make money through it (Mangesho 2003, 61).

New techniques of music diffusion mean that even youths from urban slums can use quite cheap recording technologies to express themselves. In other words, the popularity of Bongo Flavour has made music making more democratised. However, it should not be ignored that these young artists experience common problems in payment transactions, due to the fact that they are not well protected by the copyright laws.

3 Diverse styles, lyrics and aspirations

Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists do not play any musical instrument. Rather, producers record their voices to a pre-recorded backing track. The display of musical skills, essential in local jazz bands, or *taarab* and *ngoma* groups, does not feature here, just like in American hip-hop or R&B. Most Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists have been criticised for their inability to play any musical instrument and for their reliance on playback. Jazz musicians and middle-aged people commonly define this music as the “music of chaos” (*muziki wa fujo*). Others call it the music of layabouts (*muziki wa kihuni*). Usually old generations have a negative attitude toward this music.¹⁶ This parental resistance can also be found elsewhere in Africa (Collins 2002, 64). Hassani Bitchuka from a popular jazz band says that the way the new generation sings is flat, similar to the sound of a train (*gari moshi*). Other

¹⁶ This is the general opinion expressed by my elderly interviewees during my fieldwork on popular culture during British colonialism.

times the voice modulation is so unpleasant that it seems that “the singer’s hand got crushed by a door”.¹⁷

However, it is worth noting that Mustafa Ally from Mwanza, who was in his twenties during the 1950s, told me that at that time even local jazz, which is now widely accepted as part of the ‘authentic’ Tanzanian musical culture, was seen by elders as “the music of the new generation”, which was corrupting young people. Jazz musicians themselves were seen as drunkards and womanizers – precisely as Bongo Flavour artists nowadays.¹⁸

Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists (and their fans) frequently blend hair styles taken from American rappers as well as from Jamaican legends such as Bob Marley. They combine accessories in hip-hop style with Rastafarian ones, ‘cannibalising’ and reinterpreting American and Jamaican culture (for the reasons - “intensely local” - which make especially poor and disenfranchised youths fascinated with Bob Marley and Rastafarian culture, see Moyer 2005). As with popular paintings in the DRC (ex-Zaire) which are the result of many cultural borrowings (Jewsiewicki 1988), Bongo Flavour and hip-hop are new and original outcomes of a blend between foreign genres and local styles. It must be underlined that although Haas and Gesthuizen (2000, 279) wrote that “the influence of the transnational ‘commodified’” music in East Africa “goes back to at least the 1950s”, the birth of these genres can be traced back much earlier, at least to the early 1920s.¹⁹

Foreign styles and musical cultures are not appropriated in an uncritical way. Rather, they meet Tanzanian artists’ own needs,²⁰ and artists play an active role in this process. Foreign influences Bongo Flavour and hip-hop lyrics can be seen as an example of how foreign aesthetics are “Africanised” and “Swahilised”, as they were appropriated and integrated into various local practices (cf. Askew 2002, 66-67).

¹⁷ Nathan Chiwango. 2005. *Bitchuka – Kushuka na Kupanda kwa Muziki wa Tanzania*. *Bang!* Issue 04, March-May 2005, p. 26. Original in Swahili: “*Anaimba utadhani mkono wake umebanwa na mlango*”.

¹⁸ Interview with the former guitarist and peasant Mustafa Ally, 7th September 2005.

¹⁹ Interview with the former musician and businessman Ally K. Sykes, 3rd March 2005.

²⁰ On this point cf. Moyer 2005, 36.

Lyrics generally express contemporary local problems, such as unemployment and poverty, as well as hopes and expectations about family life. For instance, in *Je, Utanipenda* (Will you love me?), Mike T affirms: “My best man [representative in the bride price negotiations] and I [came] to your parents’ house”.²¹ In *Wife*, Daz Baba sings: “I have become a grown-up man, now I need a gorgeous woman to live with me, to have children with and to bring them up with, to cope with bad and good times with me”.²²

Here Daz Baba seems to promote a nuclear family ideal and an image of marital life in which both husband and wife equally share domestic duties. These lyrics are not simply ‘aping’ Western (Christian) values, but represent in my view new aspirations of Tanzanian youths. At the same time through these lyrics he tries to teach fellow young people how to deal with marital life - which after all is the final aspiration of the younger generation. As observed by O’Brien (1996, 58), to get “economic independence, to have enough resources to marry and set up one’s own family, is the fundamental aspiration” of the average youth, in Africa as well as “elsewhere in the world”. These lyrics might also represent a challenge to old fashioned ideas about gender relations based on authority and hierarchy – which are not necessarily positive for contemporary youths just because they are ‘traditional’.

Other songs provide a commentary on love and sexual relations in the era of AIDS, such as “*Alikufa kwa ngoma*” (He died for AIDS), in which the singer Mwana FA tells us about a man who apparently conducted a very sober life, but eventually died because of AIDS.²³ Some songs and raps carry references to God. In *Cheka Kidogo* (Laugh a little), the former ‘rough’ rapper Dudu Baya declares: “I thank the maker, God the Father”.²⁴

²¹ Mike T. 2004. *Je, Utanipenda?*. Bongo Flava (compilation). Pirated CD, Dar es Salaam. Original in Swahili: “*Mimi na mshenga mpaka kwenu*”.

²² Daz Baba. 2005. *Wife*. Elimu Dunia. GMC: Dar es Salaam. Original in Swahili: “*Daz Baba nishakuwa mtu mzima mi, sasa nahitaji mrembo wa kuishi nami, kuzaa na kulea watoto nami, kwenye shida na raha avumilie nami*”.

²³ Mwana FA featuring Lady Jay Dee. 2004. *Alikufa kwa ngoma*. Bingwa za Bongo (compilation). GMC: Dar es Salaam. It is worth noting that HIV/AIDS in street Swahili is *ngoma* (drum), or *mgeni* (guest/stranger), while *-kanyaga miwaya* (crushing the electricity wires) means “to get AIDS”.

²⁴ Dudu Baya. 2005. *Cheka Kidogo*. Zote Bomba (compilation). Pirated CD, Dar es Salaam. Original in Swahili: “*Namshukuru Muumba Mungu Baba*”

In some way, artists are expected by their audiences to express something about the living conditions of urban youths, as can be seen in the popular motto: "You cannot say: 'I have a big car' while you do not even have a bicycle!"²⁵

There are also songs and raps which deal with political issues such as bribery (in slang *chai*, "tea"). Generally speaking, the attitude towards state politics is ambivalent, as young artists prefer not to criticise the system. An exception to this is the case of the popular *Ndiyo mzee* (Yes, sir), and its follow up *Siyo mzee* (No, sir), in which the rapper Professor Jay complains about local politicians who fail to keep their promises made during electoral campaigns.²⁶

It is more common that during electoral campaigns artists accompany politicians in their tours throughout the country, or are pushed by political leaders to compose songs which aim to encourage people to vote for a certain party (usually *Chama cha Mapinduzi*, CCM, the ruling party, or Civic United Front, CUF), as happened both in 2000 and in October 2005 (for this issue cf. Suriano 2005-2006; Suriano forthcoming). Hezronie Ndonho, an old man from Mwanza who participated in the struggle for independence in the 1950s, commented that the main problem lies in the fact that "modern youths are no longer interested in politics".²⁷

On the other hand, recent hits with catchy tunes, but without educational aims, have proved to be very successful. This is partly due to the fact that by 2002 there was pretty much a new album being recorded every week. As a result, the issues cannot be predominantly socially conscious. Non-committed lyrics depict the lifestyle of a part of Tanzanian urban youths, who celebrate 'disco-life', drunkenness, marijuana and sex. However, Afande Sele blames those artists who focus of entertainment, rapping: "People do want the message, not only to boast about themselves and admire sex and alcohol."²⁸

²⁵ Interview with Saleh Ally, cit. Original in Swahili: "*Huwezi kusema 'Mimi nina benzi' wakati hata baiskeli huna!*"

²⁶ Professor Jay. 2002. *Machozi Jasho na Damu*. GMC: Dar es Salaam; Professor Jay. 2003. *Mapinduzi Halisi*. GMC: Dar es Salaam.

²⁷ Interview with Hezronie Ndonho, 5th October 2005.

²⁸ Afande Sele, cit. Original in Swahili: "*Watu wanataka ujumbe, si majigambo tu na sifu ngono na pombe*" (see Suriano forthcoming).

Apart from what I call the “entertainment wing”, very popular at the moment, I would like to focus here on socially committed lyrics. I would say that the emphasis on learning and education resonates well with post-colonial State policies in Tanzania. First of all, it should be emphasised that even before colonialism in many East African cultural-linguistic groups songs contained socio-political comments. After independence in Tanzania, as in other African countries, educated leaders promoted popular arts, considering them as educational. For this reason, they were concerned with controlling them.

In search of a national identity, in 1962, the neo President Julius Nyerere established the Ministry of Culture and Youth, which “conceived literature and art ... as means of educating the masses” (Songoyi 1988, 10). Nyerere saw ‘traditional’ African culture and imported Western culture as opposed and irreconcilable (tradition was seen as a fixed legacy from the past, not as a social construct.²⁹

Very recently some Bongo Flavour and hip-hop hits “have to some extent captured the feelings of people of a certain age”.³⁰ This might be due to their social message. At the same time, by listening to catchy tracks with committed lyrics, some adults are beginning to pay attention and take interest in the stories youths have to tell.

Let me take as an example the hit *Ishi* (Live), released in 2004, sponsored by TACAIDS (Tanzania Commission on AIDS), and performed by various artists, both singers and rappers, which is part of a trend towards the HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. Its chorus is “Do not be shy, talk to her/him, about waiting, being trustworthy, or using the condom”.³¹ Afterwards, the former President Benjamin Mkapa demonstrated disapproval of the content of this song, more or less on the grounds that, as a Bongo Flavour fan states, “it ruins people. It tells them to use condoms so it encourages them to have

²⁹ Tradition was embodied by *ngoma* (traditional dances with drums). Nonetheless, it should be said that *ngoma* dress and steps have been subject to continuous innovations, and that modifications sometimes corresponded to the requirements of better accommodating official state ideology and rhetoric (for this issue, see Askew 2002).

³⁰ Innocent Nganyagwa, “*Dira ya muziki*”, *Zeze*, 24th February- 2nd March 2005, p. 10.

³¹ Various artists. 2004. *Ishi* (VCD version). I wish to thank Ruquiesh Sharda, production director of the company Benchmark Productions Ltd, Dar es Salaam, for having provided me with the Video CD of this song. Original in Swahili: “*Usione soo, sema nae, kuhusu kusubiri, kuwa mwaminifu, au kutumia condom*”.

sex.”³² Although there was not a formal censorship, at a certain point the song was not broadcasted by local radios. However, in August 2004 I was in Tongoni, a small fishing village near Tanga (a coastal town), guest in the house of a Muslim family. There was a radio switched on and when the song *Ishi* reached the chorus, women of various ages started singing in front of the head of the family. Even when songs contain issues which are ‘sensitive’ for the Swahili culture, they are able to reach various social strata and environments.

With regard to the ways in which young artists refer to the old generations, they are very ambivalent. For example, during my fieldwork I noticed that many artists, even the ‘toughest’ ones, celebrate the figure of the late Nyerere, and consider him a role-model. When in August 2005 the Ugandan artist Chameleon visited Dar es Salaam for a MTV show, he displayed a T-shirt with the image of Nyerere printed on it, while in the outskirts of Mwanza (on the shore of Lake Victoria) I found a painting which represents a contemporary rapper and Nyerere by his side.

My impression is that praising Nyerere can be read as a way to reconstruct bonds between the younger and the older generations. More interestingly, by acknowledging the legacy of Nyerere, these artists seem to say that even youths can be wise, that is wisdom does not belong only to elders. This sounds like an affirmation of generational autonomy, and an aspiration to redefine their relationship with older people. Even artists’ nicknames tell us about this desire: Professor Jay or Mwana FA (FA is the diminutive of *falsafa*. *Mwana falsafa* means the philosopher) are some of the names chosen by artists. Emblematic is the case of Daz Baba, whose previous name was Daz Mwalimu: both are inspired by Nyerere’s nicknames *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation) and *Mwalimu* (Teacher).

On the other hand, the very fact that some artists have decided not to address social issues, but instead focus on fun and entertainment, might indicate that ignoring the dictates of the former educational cultural politics, some of them

³² Informal conversation with Simon Clement, 2nd February 2005.

are trying to detach themselves from the old generations and from their fathers, who failed to be “real revolutionaries”.³³

4 Conclusion

By paying attention to Swahili lyrics and listening to comments made by fans, we find out that through this post-socialist music Tanzanian youths are opening a new space to express themselves. The new generation of Tanzanian artists is using Bongo Flavour and hip-hop to affirm their autonomy, articulate their agency, and express a plurality of meanings. This music is utilised by young artists and their audiences as a medium for communication amongst themselves, and also to leave a message to adults. It is also a tool to address broader cultural, social and political issues.

Songs and raps are clearly addressed to a local audience: first because their lyrics are in Swahili, and secondly because most of the time conventionally accepted values in Tanzanian society are substantially reaffirmed, in compliance with a culturally well-established conception of art as educational. Other times, non-committed lyrics depict the insubordinate and defiant lifestyle of certain young people, who in this way might want to be recognised as children of the globalised world.

By reaffirming or rejecting values from the past, young Tanzanian artists show themselves to be complex figures. They embody many ambiguities and contradictions, which are an integral part of contemporary youths in Tanzania, as well as all over the world. If music can be an instrument of innovation and self affirmation, thus Bongo Flavour and hip-hop artists are trying to take part in the re-configuration of public space in Tanzania.

For Tanzanian youths, this music is also a means to become economically independent, reaching the adult status and getting the opportunity to build a family and a future. Most of the time from a disadvantaged social and economic background, these young artists – especially those who became superstars (*masupastaa*) – represent role models for all the poor and

³³ For the expression “real revolutionaries” see Moyer 2005, 37.

marginalised youths, especially in urban areas. Therefore, they have a big responsibility to their own society.

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