

# 100% TZ FLAVA

## *Hybrid Hip Hop on the Swahili Coast*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the hybrid nature of hip hop from Tanzania and Zanzibar on the East African Coast. First, it discusses the music known as taarab to explain the long-standing tradition of hybrid genres in this region. Then it explores how, since the 1990s, hip hop has followed a similar path of cultural assimilation to taarab, and how contemporary hip hop artists draw from both local and global influences. It also considers what hip hop means for the people of the Swahili coast and how the internet has advanced the circulation of music from this region.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danny Sanders holds a BA in Jazz Music from Leeds Conservatoire and recently graduated from the MA Music in Development Programme at SOAS. His dissertation focuses on a religious festival in a rural Andalusian town and explores how residents adapted the celebration in the midst of the coronavirus health crisis. Sanders is currently working in learning support at a college in South London and plays drums in the London based band called Famous.

**KEYWORDS:** hip-hop; Tanzanian; hybridity

## INTRODUCTION

The countries that surround the Indian Ocean are bound by relationships and commonalities in music, culture and language. These were established centuries ago by traders, migrants, enslaved peoples and colonial settlers. The island of Zanzibar, located off the coast of Tanzania, is defined by an eclectic culture, characterised by the circulation of people throughout both the Indian Ocean and East Africa.<sup>231</sup> The music genre, taarab is a product of this circulation of cultures. It was born of the Egyptian urban classical music known as tarab, brought to the island by the Omani, Sultan Barghash in 1890. Zanzibari taarab can be identified by its use of Middle Eastern instrumentation, heterophonic melodies, Kiswahili lyrics and the Arabic modal system known as maqamat.<sup>232</sup>

In the 21st century, this movement of culture and music has continued throughout Zanzibar and the East African Coast as the influence of Indian Ocean culture continues to permeate into contemporary popular music. I explore how hip hop artists from Tanzania and Zanzibar are influenced by the circulation of music and culture throughout the countries of the Swahili Coast. By conducting a case study of a piece of music by the artists Ison ‘Zenj Boy’ Mistari and G. Nako, I consider how their use of language, visual aesthetics and instrumentation are symptomatic of the wider circulation of music and culture throughout this region. I draw on Catherin Appert’s<sup>233</sup> and Misa Kibona Clark’s<sup>234</sup> writing on African popular music in my exploration of how North American hip hop has fused with local Tanzanian music cultures. Jan Blommaert’s<sup>235</sup> discussion of the Kiswahili language also elucidates hip hop’s wider influence in Tanzania. I also use Homi Bhabha’s concept of “cultural hybridity”, the idea that culture is not fixed but is constantly moving and developing,<sup>236</sup> to demonstrate how Tanzanian hip hop artists align themselves with both

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<sup>231</sup> Sugata Bose. *A hundred horizons: The Indian Ocean in the age of global empire*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6–7.

<sup>232</sup> Hilda Keil, “Travel on a Song –The Roots of Zanzibar Taarab.” *African Music* 9, no 2 (2012): 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.21504/amj.v9i2.1805>.

<sup>233</sup> Catherine Appert, “On Hybridity in African Popular Music: The Case of Senegalese Hip Hop.” *Ethnomusicology*, 60, no. 2 (2016): 281, doi:10.5406/ethnomusicology.60.2.0279.

<sup>234</sup> Misa Kibona Clark, “The Role of New and Social Media in Tanzanian Hip–Hop Production.” *Cahiers d’études Africaines*, 216, no 4 (2014): 1117, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.17958>.

<sup>235</sup> Blommaert, Jan, “Redefining the Sociolinguistic ‘local’: Examples from Tanzania,” *Language and Culture on the Margins: Local/Global Interactions* (2017): 9–10.

<sup>236</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2004): 296–297.

traditional East African culture and contemporary global hip hop. Finally, using Akbar Keshodkar's<sup>237</sup> discussion of movement and identity, I explore how the internet provides new opportunities for the circulation of music and culture from the Indian Ocean and East Africa.

## TAARAB AND HIP HOP

In order to discuss the influence of taarab on hip hop, it is important to, first of all, explain how taarab progressed from a form of Egyptian urban-classical music into a genre that embodies many different elements of Zanzibari culture. Originally, taarab was sung in Arabic and was intended to entertain the ruling classes of Zanzibar, exclusively. However, during the 1920s and 30s, the music migrated into the public sphere and became popularised throughout the whole of Zanzibari society.<sup>238</sup> This change was largely initiated by the Zanzibari singer, Siti Binti Saad who in 1928, travelled with her band to Bombay in India to record traditional taarab songs but sang them in Kiswahili rather than Arabic.<sup>239</sup> This Africanisation of taarab progressed into more localised forms of the genre that incorporated different elements of traditional ngoma (pan-Bantu term for music). With this, the music became “distinctly identifiable as Zanzibari and Swahili”.<sup>240</sup> An example of this progression is evident in kidumbak, a style of taarab which is sung in Kiswahili and played by a small ensemble of fiddle, drums, shakers made from coconut shells called cherewas and a washtub bass called a sanduku. By the 1960s many other forms of taarab that utilised Swahili poetry had emerged along the East African Coast. Singers replaced sentiments of love in Arabic songs with laments of social injustice, women's rights and other issues that resonated with the Swahili people.<sup>241</sup> These new forms of taarab created by artists such as Siti Binti Saad exemplify the long-standing tradition of Zanzibaris absorbing different cultures to create something that is new and entirely Swahili. Similarly,

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<sup>237</sup> Akbar Keshodkar, *Tourism and Social Change in Post-Socialist Zanzibar: Struggles for Identity, Movement, and Civilization*. (Washington: Lexington Books, 2013), 6.

<sup>238</sup> Keil, “Travel on a Song,” 83–84.

<sup>239</sup> Laura Fair, “Siti Binti Saad (c 1895–1950). ‘Giving voice to the voiceless.’ Swahili Music and the global recording industry in the 1920 and 1930s.” in *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa*, ed. Dennis Cordell. (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 62–63.

<sup>240</sup> Janet Topp-Fargion, “The Role of Women in Taarab in Zanzibar: An Historical Examination of a Process of ‘Africanisation’.” *The World of Music* 35, no 2 (1993): 124–125, [www.jstor.org/stable/43615569](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43615569).

<sup>241</sup> Topp-Fargion, “The Role of Women in Taarab”: 124–125.

the circulation of hip hop music throughout the East African Coast also embodies this process of assimilation and innovation within Swahili culture.

In his study of hip hop in Africa, Eric Charry's proposes that cassette tapes and films, that circulated with the movement of people from diasporic communities in the United States and Europe, first brought hip hop to Africa.<sup>242</sup> When this music emerged in Tanzania in the 1980s, it was listened to largely by privileged and educated youths,<sup>243</sup> and local artists were more culturally aligned with music from the United States.<sup>244</sup> However, hip hop rapidly became assimilated into Swahili culture. This was largely initiated by the rapper Saleh J who is of Arab descent. In 1990 he won a rap competition in Dar es Salaam by translating the lyrics of "Ice Ice Baby", by American rapper Vanilla Ice, into Kiswahili. Saleh J also changed some of the lyrics to align with issues that would resonate with the Tanzanian audience. In doing so, he instigated the wider assimilation of hip hop by Tanzanian artists and by the mid-1990s others started rapping in their own languages.<sup>245</sup> It is possible to compare the development of hip hop in Tanzania to that of taarab music in Zanzibar as both genres emerged through the movement of people. Also, both were originally reserved for the privileged few and gained wider popularity by incorporating the local Kiswahili language into their lyrics. I would also argue that the competitive elements of hip hop, i.e. "rap battles", aided its development as it bore similarities with other competitive music traditions from the East African Coast, for example, competitions between women's taarab groups<sup>246</sup> and Tufo choirs in Mozambique.<sup>247</sup> These similarities between elements of hip hop and localised music saw the genre become fully ingrained as a form of contemporary Tanzanian culture.

This exchange of influences between hip hop and Tanzanian culture is also symbiotic. Not only has the Kiswahili language been a major influence on hip hop but also since the 1990s

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<sup>242</sup> Eric Charry, "A Capsule History of African Rap", in *African Expressive Cultures: Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, ed Eric Charry (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2012): 11–12.

<sup>243</sup> Birgit Englert. "Kuchanganyachanganya": Topic and Language Choices in Tanzanian Youth Culture." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20, no 1 (2008): 45, [www.jstor.org/stable/25473397](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25473397).

<sup>244</sup> Charry, "African Rap", 2–4.

<sup>245</sup> Charry, "African Rap", 12–13.

<sup>246</sup> Topp-Fargion, "The Role of Women in Taarab": 118–119.

<sup>247</sup> Signe Arnfred, "Tufo Dancing: Muslim Women's Culture in Northern Mozambique" *Lusotopie*, 11 (2004): 54–55, [https://www.persee.fr/doc/luso\\_1257-0273\\_2004\\_num\\_11\\_1\\_1588](https://www.persee.fr/doc/luso_1257-0273_2004_num_11_1_1588).

hip hop has become so ingrained in Tanzanian culture that it too has left demarcations of its influence. Along with music, hip hop imported a wider culture of heterographic codes used in artists names, song titles, graffiti and slogans which were widely adopted by the Tanzanian youth.<sup>248</sup> For example, “Bongo Flava” is the term given to a style of Tanzanian hip hop that blends elements of R&B, Afro-pop and dance music. Whilst the music’s blend of local and global styles is significant in itself, the term ‘flava’ is a Kiswahili abbreviation of the English word, ‘flavour’.<sup>249</sup> This hip hop slang term has been appropriated by other aspects of Swahili society and is used commercial advertising. For example, ‘flava’ appears in the slogan of a popular Tanzanian beer brand as “100% TZ FLAVA”.<sup>250</sup> Significantly, this demonstrates how the influence of hip hop has exceeded youth counterculture and permeated into the lexicon of those who exercise the hegemonic power in Tanzania.

Despite such mainstream recognition, hip hop remains as a popular music choice for the Tanzanian youth. Much like taarab, hip hop’s popularity has been aided by its ability to address the deeper issues affecting society. It is common for tracks to contain strong political messages as well as discussing health issues such as AIDS and Malaria.<sup>251</sup> By addressing such issues, the genre has gained popularity amongst a highly political Tanzanian youth population. In his discussion of Tanzanian hip hop culture, Alex Perullo argues,

[The Tanzanian] youth have turned a foreign musical form into a critical medium of social empowerment whereby they are able to create a sense of community among other urban youth, voice their ideas and opinions to a broad listening public.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> H. Samy Alim et al., “Global Ill-Literacies: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Literacy.” *Review of Research in Education*, 35 (2011): 122–123, [www.jstor.org/stable/41349014](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349014).

<sup>249</sup> Imani Sanga, “Mzungu Kichaa and the Figuring of Identity in “Bongo Flava” Music in Tanzania.” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 42, no 1 (2011): 190–191, [www.jstor.org/stable/41228649](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41228649).

<sup>250</sup> Blommaert, Jan, “Redefining the Sociolinguistic ‘local’”. 9–10.

<sup>251</sup> Birgit Englert, ““Kuchanganyachanganya””, 47–48.

<sup>252</sup> Alex Perullo, “Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.” *Africa Today*, 51, no 4 (2005): 75, [www.jstor.org/stable/4187688](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4187688).

This demonstrates how, for Tanzanian youths, hip hop provides a sense of agency that cannot be found in other genres. Also, through association with a global hip hop culture, young people are able to relate their localised issues with those affecting youth populations in other countries. With this in mind, it is clear that many hip hop artists provide an essential link between the music of the Swahili Coast and contemporary music from around the world. An example of this follows in my study of the artists Ison “Zenj Boy” Mistari and G. Nako, who exemplify the “cultural hybridity” of contemporary Tanzanian hip hop.<sup>253</sup>

### CASE STUDY: ISON “ZENJ BOY” MISTARI FT. G NAKO – MAZABE

The rapper known as Ison “Zenj Boy” Mistari is from Stone Town on Zanzibar and is a member of a small group of musicians associated with the label Stone Town Records. Mistari’s sound has been dubbed as a hybrid between contemporary, urban sounds and traditional Zanzibari music.<sup>254</sup> Catherine Appert argues that “to talk about African popular musics [sic]... as hybrid is often to work from and between dichotomies of rural/urban, local/global, and traditional/modern”.<sup>255</sup> Mistari embodies this hybridity in his music as he exemplifies aspects of both contemporary global hip hop and traditional Zanzibari music. On many of his tracks he both raps and plays the violin, an instrument that is common in taarab music, whilst also featuring a collection of instruments from both Western music as well as other countries from Swahili Coast. For example, the track “Mazabe”, featuring the artist G Nako from Dar es Salaam, includes Western synthesisers, acoustic drums and layered backing vocals which align the track with a contemporary global hip hop sound.<sup>256</sup> However, this song also features a taarab style violin solo, by Mistari himself, and the main melody throughout is played on a synthesised lamellaphone. Lamellaphones are a family of instruments played throughout the East African Coast, for example, the mbira (thumb piano) from Zimbabwe.<sup>257</sup> The use of a lamellaphone on this track locates the music within wider East African traditions and signifies Mistari’s recognition of the circulation of culture

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<sup>253</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 296–297.

<sup>254</sup> Salome Gregory. “Hip hop from Zanzibar to the world.” *The Citizen Online*, (June 2019).

<sup>255</sup> Catherine Appert, “On Hybridity in African Popular Music” 281–282.

<sup>256</sup> Ison Mistari featuring G Nako. “Mazabe”. Single. Stone Town Records. 2019, Digital.

<sup>257</sup> David McNamee,. “Hey, what’s that sound: Thumb piano.” *The Guardian Online*, November 1, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/nov/01/whats-that-sound-thumb-piano>.

and music throughout Southern and East Africa. However, the synthesised and quantised sound of the instrument further demonstrates wider contemporary influences on this music.

The music video for “Mazabe” also shows this hybridity between the local and the global. It features people in traditional Bantu dress, Maasai robes with Mistari and G Nako both wearing the clothing of an Omani trader. The video takes place on an idyllic Zanzibari beach with traditional dhows sailing on the Indian Ocean.<sup>258</sup> Whilst such images are typical of Zanzibari culture, the visuals used in this video evoke the same sense of ‘home’ that is prominent within global hip hop culture. For example, the American hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar also uses images of his hometown of Compton in the music video for his song “Alright”.<sup>259</sup>

Another way that Mazabe demonstrates hybridity is through the use of language. Jan Blommaert argues that “language is easily seen as one of the key ingredients of the construction of group identities”.<sup>260</sup> In “Mazabe”, Mistari raps in a combination of both Swahili and English and in doing so he is aligning himself with two identities: one of the national culture of Tanzania and the other with other global hip hop artists. Lyrically, “Mazabe” maintains the strong political sentiment that is prevalent within Tanzanian hip hop as Mistari sings in Kiswahili to address the social and political issues which are affecting many East African countries. Significantly, Mistari changes to English to sing a lyric that refers to colonialism, slavery and to quote directly from the words of Martin Luther King. He sings, “stop rising, colonising, slave-trade, black man. I have a dream.”<sup>261</sup> In referencing the experiences of black people during the civil rights movement in America, he is connecting with a global hip hop culture as this lyrical theme is also common within US hip hop. For example, the albums, “To Pimp a Butterfly” by Kendrick Lamar, “Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black” by Public Enemy and “Black on Both Sides” by Mos Def, are just a few American hip hop albums which address these issues. By choosing to sing this

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<sup>258</sup> Zenj Boy. “Ison “Zenj Boy” Mistari ft. G Nako – Mazabe (Official Video).” YouTube Video, June 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZJRdzkiDDc>.

<sup>259</sup> Kendrick Lamar. “Kendrick Lamar – Alright.” YouTube Video, 6.54, June 30, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u\\_uWMHY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY).

<sup>260</sup> Blommaert, “Redefining the Sociolinguistic ‘local’ .”, 7–8.

<sup>261</sup> Mistari, “Mazabe”.

part in English, Mistari is directing his words towards the global hip hop community. By aligning these North American civil rights issues with the colonialism and slave-trade that have been experienced by people from the Swahili Coast, Mistari is showing solidarity with the struggles of many African Americans.

By displaying attributes of both global hip hop and traditional Zanzibari music Ison Mistari and G. Nako uphold Homi Bhabha's theory of "cultural hybridity". Through incorporating different styles, they create something that is completely unique, occupying a "third space" between tradition and modernity.<sup>262</sup> I would also argue that Ison Mistari continues the longstanding tradition of hybridity in Indian Ocean music culture. His contemporary incarnation of Zanzibari music is, in fact, indicative of the Swahili ability to combine local traditions with foreign influences. Furthermore, Mistari's music provides evidence that culture is not something that is fixed; rather, it is constantly in motion, creating an amalgamation of influences which can transform cultural identity. Moreover, I would argue that the "hybridity" displayed by Ison Mistari goes even further than previous Indian Ocean traditions as it combines culture, language and music of the Indian Ocean with influences from across the globe.

## THE INTERNET AND ZANZIBARI CULTURE

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, access to the wealth of information on the internet has accelerated the circulation of music and culture from the East African Coast. In his discussion of movement and identity in Zanzibar, Akbar Keshodkar states, "as Zanzibaris strive to move through the post-socialist landscape they are pursuing new 'routes' to establish their 'roots'".<sup>263</sup> Whilst this is referring to the Zanzibari revolution of 1964, I would argue that this point remains pertinent within contemporary Zanzibari society as one of the new 'routes' for Zanzibaris to establish their 'roots' is found through the internet. With the increasing usage of social media throughout Tanzania, new methods of file sharing have provided artists with access to a wider audience and further opportunities for engagement from their fan base.<sup>264</sup> As a result, artists have newfound opportunities to display their affiliation

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<sup>262</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 296–297.

<sup>263</sup> Akbar Keshodkar, *Tourism and Social Change in Post-Socialist Zanzibar*: 6–7

<sup>264</sup> Msia Kibona Clark, "The Role of New and Social Media." 1117–1118.

in traditional Zanzibari culture. For example, in an Instagram post, Ison Mistari is shown to be playing the violin with a Qanun, also a traditional taarab instrument.<sup>265</sup> Undoubtedly, this is a display of Mistari's 'roots' in Zanzibari music culture but is done so via the 'route' of contemporary social media.

Furthermore, it is through social media that it is possible for the music and culture of the Indian Ocean to circulate beyond the geographical boundaries to which it was once confined. Georgina Born argues that "[it is] the double mutability, the flux-form-of-existence of digitized music, that gives it a special capacity in spinning social connectedness".<sup>266</sup> The "social connectedness" discussed here is apparent in the comments on YouTube video for 'Mazabe'. This contemporary 'route' provides a platform for fans from Europe and America to interact with Mistari and G. Nako, and for the people of the East African diaspora to connect with the culture of their 'homeland'. For instance, one user writes, "Ndgyagu beautiful job message from baharia. [sic] USA".<sup>267</sup> 'Ndgyagu', is Kiswahili for "my brother", highlighting how a Kiswahili speaker from America is able to connect with their East African culture via the internet.

## CONCLUSION

As I have discussed, the assimilation of hip hop into Swahili culture was largely enabled through artists rapping the Kiswahili language and rap battles which resonated with a long-standing culture of musical competitions in this region. Moreover, the tradition of other hybrid music genres on the Swahili coast are also key to hip hop's success in the region. I also argue that the early work of the taarab pioneer Siti Binti Saad, has been influential in this incorporation of hip hop. When she recorded taarab in Kiswahili rather than Arabic, a century ago, she paved the way for contemporary artists to follow.

Today, the magnitude of hip hop's success in Tanzania is evident in its influence on commercial advertising whilst still providing an essential form of agency for a highly

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<sup>265</sup> ZenjBoy\_tz. "I Have a Dream" Instagram Video, December 26 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6iaEbcJjQh/>.

<sup>266</sup> Georgina Born. "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity." *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2 (2005), 29. DOI: 10.1017/S147857220500023X.

<sup>267</sup> Khamis Juma. Comment on: Zenj Boy, "Ison "Zenj Boy" Mistari ft. G Nako – Mazabe (Official Video)." YouTube Video, 3.31, June 23, 2019.

politicised youth population. Contemporary artists like Ison Mistari and G Nako are now able to use visual aesthetics, instrumentation and lyrics from both East African traditions and global hip hop, to create music that is a hybrid of traditional Swahili and global hip hop influences. However, it is to be considered that the most significant influence on Tanzanian hip hop over the years has been the ability of the Swahili to adopt foreign cultures into something that is entirely its own. As the circulation of people and music from this region is accelerated through the internet, it will be interesting to observe how this dictates the future of music from the region. I do not doubt that whatever this music sounds like, it will be entirely Swahili.

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