Beyond *Bongo Fleva*: The Musical Landscape of Tanzania

When I was 16, I volunteered to represent my school on a mission trip to Tanzania. Twenty fellow students spent our winter break travelling around the country. The landscape is stunning, the people are warm, and the poverty is harsh. Words cannot capture it fully.

Besides the sights of that country, what I remember is the sounds. Our second stop for the trip was a remote village a few hours from the capital, Dodoma. The locals treated us, *Mzungu,* with so much warmth and hospitality. On our last night there, they threw a massive party at the mission we were staying at.

Music that blew my mind played through a pair of battered old speakers on rickety stands. Connected to an old DJ interface with a tangle of cables. We danced all night to a mix of syncopated drums, flowing guitars, and offbeat vocal melodies on repeat

It felt like infectious grooves and good vibes had everyone in a trance. For reasons unknown, the looped track started and ended with loud gunshots, which sounded pretty gangsta tbh.

What I heard that night was *Bongo Fleva*, the most popular music genre in Tanzania. *Bongo Fleva* started in the 1980s in Dar Es Salaam. It mixes Hip-Hop, Afrobeat, Dancehall, and Arabic influences; lyrics are sung in Swahili. Combine the Kiswahili word for ‘brains’ (*Bongo/Ubongo*) with the word for ‘flavour’ (*Fleva*); and that’s what you need to survive on the streets of Dar es Salaam.

Recently, the genre has grown a lot with South Africa’s *Amapiano*, merging into *BongoPiano*. Artists like Diamond Platinumz, Marioo, and Zuchu hit over 500 million streams in 2024. *Bongo* has even earned a place in the Grammy’s Best African Music Performance category.

So *Bongo Fleva* is the only music from Tanzania, right? Not exactly. This East African nation has a vibrant and varied music scene. It's older than both *Bongo* and the country itself. BASATA, Tanzania's Art Council, identifies five official genres: *Ngoma*, *Dansi, Kwaya,* and *Taarab,* along with *Bongo Fleva*. It also recognises other ‘unofficial’ music movements that inspire Tanzanians.

Ngoma

Ngoma isn't music; it's a tradition that spans thousands of years. It comes from the Great Lakes and Southern Africa, especially Tanzania. This Swahili term means music, dance, and important events. It's more than a performance; it's a healing process tied to violence and aggression.

Ngoma mixes drumming, dancing, and singing with spirit possession and chanting. It aims to enhance not only physical health, but also mental and spiritual well-being. These rituals turn suffering and misfortune into something positive. After a ceremony, people might feel a new purpose, sharper minds, or a boost in social status. Some even become healers themselves.

Ngoma is a particularly significant social event. Family, kin, and healers help individuals share their issues before the ceremony. Afterwards, they may receive counseling from healers and reintegrate into the community. This healing process reinforces shared commitments, leadership, and identity. *Ngoma* also strengthens societal roles and tribal politics.

A study from Duke University tested a modified *Ngoma* against Western mindfulness techniques. *Ngoma* group participants showed better levels of depression, anxiety, and emotional well-being.

Before colonisation, *Ngoma* was the main cultural practice in what is now the Great Lakes. But colonial administrators suppressed it, viewing it as 'uncivilised'. Tanzanians formed *Mganda Ngoma* to avoid censorship. They used Western instruments and wore military uniforms for their shows.

After independence, the new Tanganyika Government worked to revive *Ngoma* traditions:

"When we were at school, we were taught to sing the songs of the Europeans. How many of us learnt the songs of the Wanyamwezi or the Wahehe? Many of us can dance the 'rumba' or the 'chachacha' to 'rock'n'roll' and to 'twist.' But how many of us can dance, or have even heard of, the Gombe Sugu, the Mangala, the Konge, Nyang'umumi, Kiduo, or Lele Mama? Even though we dance and play the piano, how often does that really give us the thrill we get from dancing the mganda or the gombe sugu, even if the music is just the shaking of pebbles in a tin? It is hard for any man to get real excitement from dances and music that are not in his own blood."
— President Nyerere, Tanganyika Inaugural Address, 10 December 1962

In the years that followed, tribes resumed practising *Ngom*a and supported the art. Nyerere's ambitious cultural goals remained incomplete. Instead, music styles like *Dansi* and *Kwaya* became more popular. Economic reforms in the 1980s also diminished *Ngoma*'s importance in the community.

Today, *Ngoma* serves as a dance for ceremonial purposes. It also takes cues from *Dansi* and *Bongo Fleva*. Musicians have replaced traditional instruments with electric guitars, keyboards, and drum kits. This art may have faded, but it has laid a strong foundation for other music genres in Tanzania.

Dansi

If there was a Before *Bongo Fleva*, only one genre would fit the bill: *Dansi*. *Dansi*, or *Muziki Wa Dansi*, has it's roots in other African styles like Congolese *Soukous* and *Rumba*. Some call it *Swahili Jazz* or *Tanzanian Rumba*. This shows its wider role in Africa's music scene.

In the 1930s, Congolese *Sokous* became very popular, being played in Dar es Salaam's nightclubs. Local musicians joined in, forming what became known as *Tanzanian Rumba*. Acts such as the *Dar Jazz Band*, Morogoro Jazz, and Tabora Jazz played big band-style sets to great acclaim.

Meanwhile, British label His Master's Voice distributed the GV Series in East Africa. Many Tanzanians first heard Cuban rhythms through these records, massively impacting local bands. The track *Homa Imenizidia* by the International Orchestra Safari Sound showcases this Cuban influence to a tee.

After independence, President Nyerere supported *Dansi* bands. This move aimed to shape the country's culture and identity. The National Union of Tanzania sponsored the NUTA Band, naming it after themselves. Bands functioned more like companies than Musical groups. Musicians received regular salaries, and changes in membership happened often.

Musicians often sang in Swahili, adding electric guitars and drums to the *soukous* rhythm. Close harmonies were also common amongst performers. Songs featured the *sebene* outro, which allowed for extended dance sections.

Mitindo, or style, was crucial for *Dansi* acts to thrive. Each ensemble created their own distinct style and dance to win over audiences. Bands were more known for *Mitindo* than for their members. Most musicians changed their playing style to fit the *Mitindo* of their band.

When searching for *Mitindo*, many acts opened their horizons to new influences. *Sakini Pt.1* by Juwata Jazz Band takes notes from American Soul/RnB popular at that time.

The competition was tough. Acts like DDC Milmani Park, Juwata Jazz, and Vijana Jazz battled it out for audiences. Tense rivalries began to form, especially between Orchestra Maquis and Orchestra Safari Sound. Both acts are still active today.

Dansi began to fade in the 1980s, paving the way for *Bongo Fleva*. The genre still attracts older listeners, with talk of a Future *Dansi* revival, No matter what's currently popular, the spirit of *Dansi* will never die.

Taarab

Lying 35 km off Tanzania's coast is the island of Zanzibar. Ancient buildings, soft white beaches, and incredible food make it one of Africa's Hottest Destinations. For centuries, it changed hands among

different powers, merging with Tanganyika in 1964. Unlike the Christian Mainland, the island's population is 98% Muslim. As such, Arabic and Persian influence is clear in its culture.

What's Zanzibar's Sound, but? Most would reply without delay, *taarab*. This rich musical tradition weaves its way through the streets and along the coast. One wouldn't expect less from the home of a famous Freddie (Mercury, btw). *Taarab* is an Arabic word, meaning 'make merry, sing, vocalize, or chant'.

There is no clear answer for its origin. One theory suggests that Poet Mohamed Kijumwa from Lamu, Kenya, brought it to Zanzibar. Others say Sultan Seyyid Bargash imported it from Egypt. But evidence shows *Taarab* may have its roots in Yemen or the Arab Peninsula. The famous *Ikhwan Safah taarab* Club was allegedly founded by Yemeni Zanzibaris.

Taarab is special because it allows men and women to perform together in public. Most female performers do not play instruments, instead being lead vocalists.

Instruments include:

- Strings: *Oud*, *qanûn*, double bass
- Accordion
- Percussion: Tabla, *Dumbak*, Tambourine

Taarab traditionally focused on themes of daily life and social issues. It expressed anger, joy, gratitude, and discontent; with a focus on love and romance songs. The music reinforced moral values such as honesty, faithfulness, loyalty, and wisdom. It often conveyed Islamic teachings and values.

Taarab first emerged in the Sultan's Palace as a form of patronage. Artists had to pledge loyalty and praise the royal family, creating an artist/audience divide. Most singers sang in Swahili, as many didn't know Arabic. *Taarab* moved from praising the hated Sultan to the British colonists in the19th century.

Taarab spread from the palace, becoming central to weddings and community events. The genre reached new heights in 1928. That year, Siti Bint Saad recorded *Taarab* at His Master's Voice Studios in Bombay (now Mumbai). She was the first *Taarab* and East African to make commercial recordings, becoming the Genre's leading force

After Siti, artists like Bi Kidude, Mzee Yusuph, and Culture Musical Club became famous worldwide. Kidumbak Ensembles, usually smaller groups, exploded amongst Zanzibar's impoverished neighbourhoods. People regarded women-only *Taarab* bands as being of equal importance to male groups.

The 1960s saw *Black Star Musical Club* expand *Taarab*'s reach to Burundi and Kenya. After Zanzibar's 1964 Revolution, *Taarab* groups became state-sponsored for educational purposes. Over time, private funding became necessary for artists as government support lessened.

Today, *Taarab* has evolved to address contemporary issues. These include Gender Equality, Domestic Violence, Women's Education, and Sugar Daddies/Mummies. Modern *Taraab* introduced

amplified sound, faster rhythms, and provocative lyrics (*mipasho*) sparking debate. Performances are often very interactive, increasing *taarab*'s popularity amongst younger audiences.

Purists think modern *taarab* is losing its charm, believing poetic subtlety is being traded for commercial gains. But on the Island; *taarab* is, was, and will always play. We only have to listen.

Kwaya

The genres we've discussed share one thing: instruments that need training and skills. But how do most Tanzanians engage with music if they don't have said skills? *Kwaya*

Of all the genres in this article, *Kwaya* has the largest participation. *Kwaya* is a key part of life in Tanzania. You can find it in schools, churches, and even at political rallies. Colonialism gave rise to its origins, using European languages and instruments.

This Colonial *Kwaya* represented Cultural Domination over the Tanganyika people. Following Independence, *Kwaya* promoted National Identity, Education, and *ujamaa* (Socialism). Schools introduced *Kwaya*, helping Tanzania's literacy rate rise to 80% in 18 years.

Kwaya and *ngonjera*, a poetic dialogue for political praise, became essential to Tanzania's culture. After 1985, *Kwaya* declined in political use and existed mainly in religious contexts. Many Tanzanians first learned to sing through *Kwaya*, including many *Bongo Fleva* stars.

Kwaya choirs are like European choirs in structure and performance. But local cultures balance these traditions to make *Kwaya*, well, *Kwaya*. Male choir directors usually teach female parts using falsetto. Regular singing causes 'sonic gendering'. This happens when vocal timbre, range, and style enforce gender roles.

Unlike European choirs, *Kwaya* doesn't have strict rules for how to compose or perform. Nor is it the same across locations. *Kwaya* in Dar es Salaam includes other genres, such as *taarab*, *Bongo Fleva*, and *Rumba*. *Muziki wa Injili*, or Tanzanian Gospel, is changing due to the influence of women artists.

Kwaya is a community where members come together to sing, pray, and support each other. Performances articulate not just faith, but a critique of colonial legacies. The music reshapes culture by adopting, changing, or rejecting parts of past practices.

Not a bad way to spend Sunday morning.

Other Genres:

Singeli:

To say *Singeli* is high energy is a criminal understatement. *Singeli* blends DIY electronic beats, hitting around 200-300 BPM, drawing inspiration from local *Vanga* rhythms (*Zaramo*). Many artists sample other genres such as *taarab, kwaito*, and hip-hop. Combined with fast-paced rapping from MCs, and female dancers, it becomes a full-body experience.

Singeli can be traced back to the 80's, when *mchiriku* producers synthesised taarab and *Zaramo* Music. In the 2000s, Dar's Mhurbati neighbourhood became the heart of *Singeli*. It then spread throughout the city. *Kigodoro* and *vigodoro* (women only) parties lasted all night in Manzeze and Tandale. *Kigodoro* means 'foam mattress', as exhausted ravers slept on foam after parties.

The genre was seen as reacting to *Bongo Fleva*, many feeling it was becoming too commercialised. *Singeli* was 'real' Tanzanian music, owing to its traditional roots. MCs rapped about everyday challenges, social issues, and their communities. But, mainstream society saw *Singeli* as 'ghetto music'. Law enforcement frequently shut down shows and block parties.

Today, the *Singeli* landscape has undergone significant change. Female MCs (e.g. MC Card Reader, Young Duda, Anti Virus) have become prominent voices. The genre is gaining widespread recognition as radio stations and festivals feature it. There's even government recognition of the genre. Artists are being supported and *Singeli* plays at political rallies. UNESCO has even added *Singeli* to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Singeli has gone global, with artists performing at festivals around the world. The album *Sounds of Sisso* from Uganda's Nyege Nyege Tapes introduced *Singeli* to a global audience. A motley crew of producers and MCs have turned *Singeli* from ragged to respectable. Maybe it will become After *Bongo Fleva*?

Beni

Beni, or *Mbeni*, is Brass Band Music native to East Africa. *Beni* translates from Swahili to mean 'Band'. During colonisation, the region saw the introduction of German and British brass bands. Their traditions, like drill, uniforms, and hierarchy, influenced *Beni*'s style. Rather than adhere to European customs, *Beni* incorporated local music styles and instruments.

Beni originated on Kenya's coast c.1890, where bands competed in parades and performances. Membership of bands became a status symbol, affirming roles for many in a tough colonial environment. *Beni* helped East Africans transform their oppression into something special and meaningful. There was also a dance, *Beni Ngoma*, that coexisted with the music.

By 1914, *Beni* had spread to Dar es Salaam, and even as far as Nyasaland (now Malawi). Askari troops popularised *Beni* during WW1, even performing it in POW camps. Later, *Beni* became a powerful tool for resistance against colonialism. *Beni Ngoma* dancers joined protests, such as the 1935 Copperbelt strike in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia).

During decolonisation, other genres started to take over *Beni*, causing its decline. Today, people regard *Beni* as a historical relic from colonial times. But it still features in Zanzibar during parades and at weddings.

Hip-Hop

There is much debate on whether Tanzanian Hip-Hop (*Kizazi Kipya*) is part of *Bongo Fleva*. Many feel that since *Bongo Fleva*'s becoming 'pop' music has separated it from Hip Hop.

In 1991, Saleh Ajabry won the *Yo Rap Bonanza* competition. He included original Swahili lyrics to *Ice Ice Baby* instead of rapping American songs verbatim. Kwanza Unit was Tanzania's first hip-hop crew, but technical problems hindered their success. In 1996, Mr II's *Ni Mimi* became Tanzanian hip hop's first hit.

The scene burst to life with artists like Juma Nature and groups like X Plastaz, rapping in Maasai. *Kizazi Kipya* stood apart from their US peers. They rapped about economic and social issues, not drugs and violence. The country's youth embraced Hip-Hop in the 90s through music, fashion, dance, and sports.

Older Tanzanians viewed *Kizazi Kipya* as rebellious and dangerous. But in 2002, Professor Jay released *Machozi, Jasho na Damu*, gaining multi-generational appeal. Jay is also seen as the architect of *Bongo Fleva*'s rise.

Today, people consider the Safari Hub of Arusha East Africa's Hip-Hop Capital. Labels such as Grandmaster Records and International support bolster the scene. Community groups, such as the Okoa Mtaa Foundation, organise festivals and youth programmes. Artists such as Fido Vato, Weusi, and Nahreel have put Arusha on the map.

Dar es Salaam artists like Fid Q, Nikki Mbishi, and Roma call themselves *Baba wa Rap* (Fathers of Rap). They focus on preserving hip-hop's originality. Freestyle events such as Msasani Club's *Kilingeni* are central to Dar's hip-hop scene.

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If I had the time (and money), I would try to form a complete picture of Tanzania's Music. What this article has outlined is just scratching the surface. Beyond Dar and *Bongo Fleva* is a proud musical nation, intertwining cultures, religions, and time itself. One could easily set their time machine to the days of *Ngoma*, only to discover identical rhythms in the *Dansi* Dancehalls. Or, a *Kwaya* could jam with a *Taarab* Orchestra, with *Singeli* Turntables cutting in between?

The possibilities are endless, and who knows what the future holds for their Music? What are the kids in Dar, Dodoma, Arusha, and Zanzibar cooking up? I guess we'll hear it in time.

Asante na kwaheri