

Reflection from East Africa

Kanga: It is More Than What Meets the Eye — A Medium of Communication*

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Among the coastal Waswahili of East Africa, there is a tradition that when a man gets married for the first time, he sends his bride a gift of "Sanduku" meaning a suitcase, which comprises the bride's attire ranging from outer garments to delicate lingerie. It also includes various household items, and the well to do include even gold ornaments and modern electrical gadgets.

Nevertheless, the success of the "Sanduku" does not depend on either the number of dresses or the golden things it includes. Its success depends on the number of pairs of kangas it has. The invitees take the trouble of counting the pairs when the items are announced one after the other, one can tell you at ago how many pairs have been included.

Kanga, a simple piece of cotton cloth measuring about one and three quarters metres, by one and a quarter metre, is so strong and powerful, with such magnetic pull which has almost mesmerised the womenfolk of the Eastern coast of Africa. Its long tentacles have now spread to the hinterland of East Africa and other parts of the world like wildfire.

Kanga which embodies art, beauty, culture, and customs of coastal women, is almost mythical. Whenever the word kanga is mentioned, we straight away think of it as a normal part of a woman's attire and no more. But there is more to it than meets the eye.

To the Swahili women of the East African Coast, the kanga is an indispensable part of our wardrobe. Kangas come in pairs and is usually worn by women although men can occasionally wear a piece while inside the house, tied around

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the waist. "Many traditional uses of kanga are being ignored," says Fatma bint Baraka, popularly known as Bi Kidude, a renowned traditional drummer of 'UNYAGO.' Bi Kidude laments on how much kanga is misused by the modern generation. "Nowadays it is common to see women tie kanga around their bottoms and gyrate to the tune of *mdundiko* dance without being aware of their dignity pride and value; is that the only use of kanga they have been taught?" asks Bi Kidude.

Bi Kidude whose drum (*Msondo*) cannot be played unless tied to her middle by a kanga, says that neither a rope nor a *kitenge* can do the job. "It takes the delicacy and the grace of kanga, for the perfect tying of my drum and nothing can beat it," Bi Kidude says.

In the more cultured societies, kanga colours have a special meaning. "We used to wear kangas bearing red and black colours during menstruation," says Mtumwa Mzuri, an old woman in her eighties. "This made the husband aware that you were in red and cannot give him any favours."

Thus, without words, the wife would inform her husband of her state. White kangas were adorned during the full moon to symbolise the whiteness of the woman's heart towards her husband. Other bright coloured kangas were worn to match colourful waist beads of the woman to add to her attraction.

"When I come back from work in the evening and find that my bedroom smells of 'oud' with a pair of kanga smelling of Jasmine and rose water, I straight away know that my wife is in an expansive and compromising mood" says Mzee Mwadini Ameir of Zanzibar. "To me a message has already been relayed without having been spoken."

In Zanzibar, kangas are used as night attires by both women and men. Hence, an enticing sweet smelling kanga, acts as an aphrodisiac intensifying the intimacy and each other's need. "I live in the same house with both my wives," Ameir continues, "It boosts my ego to see the way the two women compete for my favours and attention through the medium of kanga. A kanga with a message *karibu wangu muhibu* meaning welcome my darling, can boost a man's morale and make him feel like a king."

The wearing of kanga among women differs from place to place. On the mainland coast, women wear the kanga around their waists from one piece, while the second piece is casually thrown over the shoulders. These pieces of kanga are worn over the normal dress and the woman is ready to go out, regardless of how far the journey is.

Among the Sukuma tribe of Shinyanga, kanga is also worn by men over the shirt and trousers. The kanga is worn by passing it through the armpit of one arm and then the two ends are tied above the shoulder of the other arm. "When a man is thus attired, it tells the people that he is married," says Lucas Shika, a Sukuma living in Zanzibar. In Shinyanga kanga symbolizes the prestige a man gets from being married.

The women of the Zanzibar Isles differ. To them kanga is strictly an attire to be worn inside the house. It does not matter whether she puts on *buibui* (veil) or not when going out, she would rather go out in a long dress and a head scarf. They wear their kangas by tying one piece under the armpits above the chest, while the other piece is tied around the waist, leaving the upper part bare. If it happens that a strange man comes, the lower piece is untied and used as a wrapper to cover her chest from unauthorised eyes.

Teenage girls wear the kanga differently. They pass both ends under the armpits and a not is tied on the back of the neck. Once they are married, it is prohibited to wear kanga in this childish way.

Kanga's are categorised into three groups. The bedroom pair for bedroom use, the prayer pair is solely for that use as it should be clean all the time, and the third pair is used as apron for kitchen and other casual uses.

The question is: "Does every woman understand the historical background of kanga?" Have others tried to take keen interest in understanding the kanga and its uses? It is the kanga which has and still is playing great roles in politics and various major issues by being used as a slogan for campaigns.

During colonial times, the British printed kangas bearing Winston Churchill's slogans to win the support of women. But when the British-made kangas flooded the market, the then Tanganyika women chose to import their kangas, imprinted with their messages from India and China, a thing which has continued to date. They preferred to do that rather than wear the colonisers deceptions knowing very well on how much the Independence struggle was symbolised in the cloth they wore.

The government and many institutions use kangas to campaign for various causes like *malaria ni' nirhatari* alerting the public on the dangers of malaria. Likewise they are used in other campaigns like politics. In other campaigns like politics, health, education and agriculture.

Until the introduction of kanga on the coast, *kaniki* (a black cotton cloth almost of the same measurements as the kanga) was used as a form of attire. The essence of kanga was brought by Portuguese when they introduced two pieces of cloth worn as a head scarf and a wrapper. These pieces were called *Peso* or *Leso* the word *Leso* is still being used in Kenya instead of kanga.

Slowly these lesos filled the market and finally joined to form a four-sided pattern. Six square pieces made a kanga. With the introduction of calico cloth known as *Marekani*, kangas were printed on this cloth using dye. Special pieces of wood were curve with designs and dipped in dye to be printed on the cloth, thus forming a crude form of the first kanga. This was done by the Waswahili of East Africa in the early 18th century.

The shape of kanga as it is seen today exceeds one hundred years. The prestige, emotions and traditions which go together with the message on the kanga, have

an interesting background. The word kanga was derived from the guinea fowl which in Swahili is called kanga. This is because at a certain stage, handkerchiefs were brought bearing a design similar to that of a guinea fowl. Slowly the word *leso* disappeared and the word kanga stuck.

Kanga saw many forms before reaching the present stage. Formerly the kanga did not bear any borders, "In the Isles these were known as "*Mkunuto*" and in Tabora they were known as "*Mohamed Abeid*" says Mariam Dachi a resident of Tabora married to a Zanzibari. Then two borders were introduced on the shorter sides, leaving the main theme (*mji*) in the centre and the other two sides. Later on, the kanga was modified to its present form with borders on all four sides.

East Coast of Africa with its Islamic and Arabic influence saw many of its people mastering the art of reading and writing Swahili language in the Arabic scripts. Therefore, the first kangas had messages in Swahili using Arabic script. This was necessary because kanga was already used as a form of communication. At one time when kangas with messages in Arabic text were scarce, people imported them from the Comoro Isles where they still print kangas with Arabic script. Kanga was formerly designed and printed in two colours. With modern technology, multi-coloured kangas are the order of the day. Types of kanga can be identified through the close relationship between the main theme, colour, words and drawings, which people can identify with.

It is considered a source of embarrassment to the husband if he does not buy his wife a pair of kanga every now and then. "I wouldn't have minded if my husband had not bought me a chicken to revamp my lost energy after a difficult child birth" says Hadija Mohammed a recently delivered young woman."

But I would have minded like hell had he not bought me a pair of kanga as a gift after my delivery."

The messages on the kangas play an important role in the value of the kanga. The value is not only financial, but also emotional. A message in a kanga can make or break a friendship.

"The first thing I did when I received the gift of kanga from my husband was to read the message," I was really amused to see that the message read *Titi la mama ni tamu*, meaning the mother's milk is the best, this straight away made me realize that Hamisi my husband wanted me to breast feed our baby'.

Mwatumu was running around with Mtumwa's husband. At a wedding occasion, Mtumwa put on a pair with a warning message to her rival saying '*Nyuki mkali kwa asali yake*' meaning the bee fiercely guards its honey. On the same occasion coincidentally, Mwatumu was clad in a pair saying *Natule asaii tumwache nyuki na ukali wake* a reply to Mtumwa meaning let's enjoy the honey and leave the bee with its sting.

The irony of the whole issue is that neither of the two women could directly accuse the other of having picked a quarrel. It is an unwritten law that to adorn

a kanga with appropriate messages, is the right of every woman; interpretations are left for the affected ones who cannot give out a challenge.

If a woman is not on good terms with her mother-in-law, for instance, but feels she cannot confront the older woman directly, she can walk around with a kanga that says '*Sema usemayo mitaani ni wangu ninea ndani*' literally meaning you can do and say what you like but I have him in my bed. Or an open message saying *Mama mume nimemkuta baoni na kuku mweupe mkononi* implying that the mother-in-law resorts to witchcraft to separate her son from her.

During weddings, women from both the bride and groom's families choose a design as an informal uniform to be worn during the celebrations, to solidify the unity of the two families. A young girl who has started menstruation or a woman who has just delivered will be given a red and black coloured kanga, while a bride will be given a special designed kanga of small crosses and rosettes called '*kisutu*' as a symbol of her entering adulthood.

The '*kisutu*' kanga bears three colours, white, black and bloodred known as *Damu ya mzee*. These colours bear a great message to the bride and are significant. The red colour bear witness to her virginity, the black colour is the pain of being deflowered, and the white colour is the colour of the male seed which she is going to see for the first time. Kanga with special messages for the newlyweds are chosen as a good omen. An example is a message reading *Nitunze nipendeze waigao wasiweze* meaning cherish me that I nourish. There are messages for straying partners like *Utamaliza mabucha nyama ni ile ile* meaning you will exhaust all the butchers, while the meat tastes the same. A less crude one could read *Tukae tuishi wazuri haweshi* implying that the couple should live in harmony as beauties are born every day. *Mke wa nyumbanini mwangaza wa chumbani* meaning the wife is the bedroom's light, is a pleasant one for such a partner.

Thus kangas can portray love, jealousy, hatred, rivalry and a host of other things. A nosy neighbour can be accurately informed *Nilidhani jirani kumbe fisadi mtaani*. I thought you were a good neighbour while you are nothing but a destroyer. Or *jirani mbaya usimuonee haya* meaning never respect a nasty neighbour.

However, care is always taken to see that regardless of how much one likes the design, if the message is not the correct one, then a sacrifice to the design is made.

The use of kanga begins from the day a new baby is born. It was a tradition to wrap a new baby born with a new pair of kanga which has neither been cut nor binded, as soon as the baby is born. This reflects prosperity, strength and aesthetic value to the child.

It is also a symbol which reflects that the baby is loved. Unfortunately this tradition has died out as have a host of others.

Kangas are not only used on happy and festive occasions. Among the Muslims when death occurs, the corpse is washed while covered with kangas. Up to six pairs or more are needed for such a function. The occasion is given the highest respect it warrants, as such the best pairs are used for the ritual. After their use normally the pairs are sent to the mosque for female worshipers to use while praying. These pairs become a sort of alms from the deceased and the blessings for their use go to her (deceased).

Kangas are also used to identify whether the deceased is a male or a female. In the case of males, their hearses are covered with *kikoi*, a loin cloth used by men. In the case of female, the hearses are tied in the centre with kanga to show that the deceased is a female.

When a woman is divorced the pair of kanga is given to her by her in-laws so that she can be washed in them to mark the end of their marital relationship. Similarly, a divorced woman leaves behind a pair for her ex-husband, which is an omen for him for another marriage.

Apart from its functional use as a wrapper, for carrying babies on the back, as an apron, nightgown and shawl, the kanga tells you immediately whether the wearer is in a happy or sad occasion. Widows, during and after the funeral, cover their heads and whole body leaving only the face and hands open. A mother who has lost a child has her stomach tied tightly with the kanga showing that at the particular moment she is experiencing the same pangs of labour as experienced in labour pain.

The kanga acts as a corset for a just delivered woman. It is tightly clad around her midriff so that the enlarged uterus quickly shrinks back to its normal size, making the woman retain her figure. The kanga is tied for forty days after which the woman is considered fit to resume her normal duties. The old kangas are used as the first napkins to safeguard the white napkins from the meconium stool which is black and leaves stains when used on napkins.

During the ceremonies the women easily tie the kanga across their waists and make a turban of the other piece for practical comfort.

This is the only occasion where Zanzibari women use kangas outside their homes. Here they use them as shawls to cover themselves at religious or traditional ceremonies. Kangas are used by very young girls attending Quran classes, to observe chastity while sitting cross legged on mats at the classes.

Modern culture has not denounced kanga, but has worn it in different styles and forms. Sometimes they are made into dresses, trousers and coats, sometimes they are made into 'Boubous' the West African style which can be very attractive. It all depends upon the wishes of the wearer.

Due to its everlasting prestige and value, kanga is famous all over the world, especially where there is a Mswahili. When a woman is invited for a visit in a house of a Mswahili living in the Middle East, it is a custom to be given a pair of

kanga by her hostess. This clearly shows how much kanga is valued even by those who have left East Africa for more than thirty years ago.

"Wish the kanga tradition was in my place," says Mapuleng Torela, from Lesotho who is a finalist at the Tanzania School of Journalism. "They are like an answer to my wishes, especially when I am frustrated and cannot be vocal, if I had kangas, they would have said it all for me." Mapuleng says that she has bought a few pairs to take home where she is going to mobilise some businessmen into printing some with messages in SeSotho.

There is a common saying by men that there is no such thing as bad kanga to women, neither is there a woman who can be said to be satisfied with the number of kangas she has. She will keep on demanding more and more. However, the more the demand, value, prestige and lust for kanga, the more the women struggle to keep up with the fast pace. "Kangas have become so commercialised nowadays to the extent of their losing the quality they had in the past," says Masma Shaaban of Amani Street in Dar es Salaam.

They have brought a great demand in business. Many textile industries have used kangas in their advertisements to lure customers into buying their products knowing very well that they acted as bait attracting customers. A famous kanga dealer in Kariakoo area in Dar es Salaam, Chandrakant Godandas, says that they as agents cannot do anything as far as quality is concerned. "We import them from India, and it is true that sometimes, we get torn or misprinted ones. Even the fibre used is not as strong as was in the past days", says Godandas.

In whatever quality, kanga has brought a great demand in business as well as acting as a major form of communication medium especially among women. East Africa is regarded as the womb of kanga. Foreigners, be they white or black, Africans or Non-Africans, all leave with a pair or two after visiting East Africa.