

## **Texts on Swahili cultural artefacts in Tanzania and the representation of women's voice**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine how women express themselves in Swahili through household cultural artefacts in Tanzania. The paper focuses on words or texts written on the cultural artefacts, especially food covers and hand fans. We analyze these two artefacts together due to the fact that in Swahili society they are mainly used by women at homes and they have some parallels in the content of their texts. Although these artefacts are found in various parts of the country, they are mostly widely available in the coastal areas. The data of this paper, therefore, were collected in three coastal areas in Tanzania, namely Kilwa, Tanga and Dar es Salaam. The paper uses the Semiotic Theory in the analysis of its data. It is generally revealed that food covers and hand fans serve as an important means of communication among Swahili women. The artefacts present issues of the women while at the same time communicating their messages to a wider audience.*

**Keywords:** Cultural artefacts, women's voice, Swahili, Tanzania

### **Introduction**

Cultural artefacts such as food covers (*makawa*) and hand fans (*vipepeo*) are devices that have been used among the Swahili people for centuries. They are most common in East African coastal places such as Zanzibar, Pemba, Tanga, Bagamoyo, Mafia, Kilwa, Dar es Salaam (in Tanzania); and Mombasa, Malindi, Lamu, and Pate (in Kenya), just to mention a few. They are home-made artefacts of plaited strip of raffia. They have many practical uses and purposes among the Swahili people in their everyday life. For instance, food covers can be used at home or restaurants to cover dishes. As an inscription from one of the food covers says, *Funika vifunikike mlaji afurahike* (Cover the food so that the one that eats

becomes happy). They are also used to cover water clay pots as well as to decorate houses when hanged on the walls. Their paintings and pictorial images such as birds, red roses and fruits together with inscription of messages serve as house decors at kitchens, bedrooms and sitting rooms. Likewise, messages inscribed on them welcome guests, as the one that says *Karibu mgeni ujisikie uko nyumbani* (Welcome guest and feel at home); or show hospitality to guests who visit home such as on this one that says *Karibuni wageni wetu mlichokikuta ndio riziki yetu* (Welcome our visitors be satisfied with what you will be served).

On other hand, a hand fan is a cultural object that is also mainly used at home. In Swahili culture the hand fan is mostly used at home rather than on the streets, despite the hot weather in some regions of Tanzania (Mkomwa, 2014, p.10). They are used to decorate a bed and also hanged on as decorations on walls. When put in bed they have important function in the love world as they convey messages of love and responsibility to husbands. An example of such a fan is the one whose saying is *Kipepeo si feni bali ni mapenzi* (A hand fan is not just a fan but it is all about love; and *Raha ya kipepeo ni kupepewa* (The pleasure of a hand fan is to be fanned).

Hand fans and food covers are also given as presents in many Swahili weddings and kitchen parties to wish the married couple a long and happy marriage. The following essages illustrate this point: *Harusi ni furaha sote tuone raha* (a wedding is a happy event let us all celebrate), *Kidogo changu pokea na dua njema nakuombea* (Accept my little gift and I pray for you), *Harusi iwe ya heri* (God bless this marriage), *Raha kuishi wawili* (It is a joy to live as married couple) and *Kukaa pamoja ni kuvumiliana* (Living together needs patience). In this way the fan and cover sayings can paly a role similar to that of congratulatory messages on wedding cards or others celebrations.

Despite the imported plastic food covers and electric fans, the traditional Swahili ones are still used by their admirers, not only due to the fact that some houses have no electricity or because of their cultural role in Swahili society, but also they are an important genre of communication by women. Both food covers and hand fans are a good platform for women to air their views in the community. Thus, apart from their practical uses their inscriptions are also used as a forum of communication. In fact, Africa is very rich in terms of traditional/local media of communication. With regard to proverbs and sayings in African, for instance, Schipper (2006:23-25) argues that “they can be found in oral and written forms such as on passenger vehicles, pot-lids, calabashes, textiles, and paintings”. In Tanzania, however, one of the areas that attract attention of many scholars with

regard to women and communication is the kanga<sup>1</sup> (see Amory, 1985; Hongoke, 1993; Yahya-Othman, 1997; Fair, 1998; Beck, 2000, 2005; Zawawi, 2005; McCurdy, 2006; Abdela, 2008). Since the hand fans and food covers and other cultural artefacts seem to have attracted less attention among scholars as compared to the kanga/khanga, it is the intention of this paper to examine them vis-à-vis women's voice in Tanzania.

The paper is divided into four sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two gives a brief history of these cultural artefacts in Swahili society. This section is followed by the examination of women's voice on the inscriptions of food covers and hand fans. The last section is conclusion. The data of our study is based on field work carried out in Dar es Salaam, Tanga and Kilwa, all of which are Swahili coastal areas of Tanzania. Our data analysis was done using the Semiotic theory. Semiotics is attributed to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It is the study of linguistic and non linguistic signs and the production of meaning through sign-systems in all areas of human experience. It also treats any set of social phenomena or productions as "texts" (Abrams, 1999, pp.279-282). The theory allows one to treat the elements of a representation as a set of signs that signify something to someone. These representations are also allegorical, that is, they tell multiple stories about the culture from which they emerge. They are political, psychological and social in nature (Freccero, 1999, p. 5, p.168).

### **A Brief History and Development of Food Covers and Hand Fans in Tanzania**

Food covers and hand fans are handmade objects created by Swahili people to be used for various purposes. They are a part of their daily culture. Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and many other competences and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1920). The history of food covers and hand fans in Tanzania is disputable. On one hand, it is acknowledged by some informants that food covers were introduced by the Shirazi from Iran who arrived at the East African coast in the 12th Century as traders (Mlingi, 2013). Similarly, Omari and Mvungi (1981, p.145) reveal that weaving of food covers, hand fans and mats among communities in coastal areas was brought about by the Arab culture, whose foundation is based

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<sup>1</sup> A rectangular piece of cloth usually with texts on it, it is very popular among the Swahili women.

on Islamic religion that discouraged any work of art that is in a form of statues (cited in Mkomwa, 2014, p.1).

We argue further that the perception that food covers and hand fans were introduced by Arabs can be linked with the old theory on the origin of Swahili language and its poetry. Regarding the history of the Swahili language, some scholars like Madan, Steer and Stigand argue that it originates from Arabs and Persians who moved to the East African coast (Massamba, 2002, p. 25). For such scholars, the same is true for the origins of Kiswahili poetry. For example, Knappert (1967:9) in *Traditional Swahili Poetry*, argues that "Swahili culture is essentially Oriental, not African, in its material as well as in its spiritual aspects." Harries (1962) also argues that Swahili poetry originated in Islam and has remained largely a preoccupation of Muslim. Its epi-centre was in the northern Kenya Coast, especially Lamu. He suggests that its subject matter derives largely from Arabic (see Mulokozi and Sengo, 1995, p. 3). But later on it was discovered that their theses were erroneous and distortive (see Massamba, 2002; Mulokozi, 1974; Mulokozi & Sengo, 1995).

The second view is that food covers and hand fans, as our informants and oral traditions reveal, originated in and from Africa. That "Even if Indian Ocean networks involved people and commodities from a variety of cultures and the "Swahili Coast" has attracted traders and travellers from various destinations in the Persian Gulf, India, China, and Indonesia for at least two thousand years" (Horton & Middleton, 2000 cited in Askew, 2003, p. 611) food covers and hand fans in Tanzania and East Africa in general were made and used by the local people from time immemorial. It was a creativity of East Africans themselves; especially those living in the areas where raffia palm is available in abundance. Initially they just used raffia palms or any other type of leaves suitable for one to fan oneself. Later on, they wove them to get a durable hand fan. This also means that Africans were involved in weaving other traditional items such as food covers, baskets and mats before the arrival of the Arabs in East Africa, by using the raw materials available. Then the Arabs further developed the food covers and hand fans through the introduction of Arabic scripts as they did for Swahili poetry. As Swahili literature was initially written in the Arabic script, the script was also used on other items such food covers and hand fans in East Africa. Thus, the coastal towns flourished in food covers and hand fans not only because raffia palms were available there but also due to easy consolidation of African and Arab civilization. For instance, Zhukov says that the old Swahili script, or Swahili-Arabic alphabet (*Kiarabu*) based on the Arabic letters, seems to have been used as far back as the eleventh century. Likewise, the earliest specimens of the old Swahili script were found on coins and tombstones (Zhukov, 2004, p.1). Also,

Hichens notes that in early times writing was done on papyrus, made of the split leaves of palms.

History also reveals that originally food covers and hand fans had no messages inscribed on them, and that it was until the arrival and introduction of Arabic script in East Africa that the messages were introduced. These cultural artefacts, therefore, have been developed over time. For instance, apart from texts, pictures of flowers were also added. Today, most of their texts are in Swahili language although one can also find very few of them in Arabic or English. The history also shows that initially, the texts on them adhered to rhyme and metres. However, due to the aesthetic changes in Swahili poetry in the late 1960s (see Kezilahabi, 1974; Kahigi & Mulokozi, 1984) and trade liberalization and free market economy that swept the country in the 1980s, this tradition has not been strictly followed. Gradually, food covers and hand fans also became a commodity on sale in the market for economic income. To attract buyers, designers of these artefacts are very creative in their decorations and text inscriptions. Hence, several messages emerged, most of them given by women themselves, depending on what they wanted to convey.

Traditionally women are the main weavers of hand fans, mats and food covers (see also Ali et al., 2004; Katoke, 1980; Mkomwa, 2014; Mlingi, 2013) because in any given community, men and women are likely to produce different kinds of artistic work (Teilhet, 1978; Ottenberg, 1983 cited in Adams, 1989). The production of these artefacts involves weavers, flower designers or painters, text printers and text contributors. Painting, pictorial images and inscriptions are mainly done by men while plaiting and sayings (texts) are largely done and provided by women themselves as they are the main users of the items. It is not our intention in this paper to delve much into the origins of these artefacts. However, it should be noted that since there is scarce literature on them the debate is open for further discussion regarding their origins.

It should be noted that even if our paper intends to talk about women's voices, frankly speaking there are many voices of different members of the community in the artefacts. In this paper, women's voice/s refers to inscriptions that seem to be "spoken by women" in their daily lives. It is interesting to study women's voice in these two cultural artefacts together, because these devices are mainly made and used by women at home. Also in reality, "every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses" (Irvine, 2007, p. 5 cited in Hussein, 2009). It is worth studying them as they are a good platform for women to express their views and roles in society. Since the main users of these artefacts are women, the use has given them a good opportunity to air their views pertaining to their daily lives. This paper demonstrates the way in which the two cultural objects

through their text inscriptions interact in conveying women's voices; and their significance to Swahili women and culture.

### **Women's Voices in Texts on the Food Covers and Hand Fans**

Texts on these cultural artefacts can be in the form of a saying or a proverb. The language of the inscriptions is highly figurative; and the most common figures of speech used are imagery, metaphors, similes and innuendos. Sometimes, in order to understand them one has to have knowledge of Swahili society and culture because those texts reflect the society concerned. They include a broad spectrum of topics such as God and religion, thanksgiving to parents or God, love, poverty, co-wifery, family conflicts, marital affairs, witchcraft, childbearing, respect and tolerance. They are intended to be conveyed to husband or love partner, relatives, neighbours, friends, guests or the entire community. The messages inscribed on food covers and hand fans are created to fulfil personal (mostly psychological), social and cultural purposes in a respective community, as they reflect on the lives and culture of the users as well as comments on various issues in society. The women's voice, content, purposes and addressees of the messages are discussed hereunder.

#### **Texts Intended for a Male Partner**

Most of the texts on food covers and hand fans are intended for the male partner or husband. They aim at welcoming, soothing or just pleasing such a partner or husband. For instance, on food covers there are inscriptions such as *Funua kwa tabasamu vilivyofunikwa ni vitamu* (Open with a smile for what is covered is delicious), *Tuliza moyo wako kilichofunikwa ni chako* (Calm down, what is covered is yours) and *Njoo tule mpenzi peke yangu siwezi* (Come, let's eat together, my love, I can't eat alone). Similarly, on the hand fans we encounter phrases such as *Karibu wangu mahabubu/muhibu* (Welcome my beloved one), *Karibu mpenzi tule enzi* (Welcome darling and let's enjoy our time) and *Bila wewe sipati usingizi mpenzi* (Without you dear I can't fall asleep). In these messages a woman seems to talk to her lover or husband, welcoming him home, and wishing to be close to him in bed, to dine and enjoy the meal, because his absence renders her helpless. Traditionally, it is usually a wife or a woman who is supposed to be at home waiting for her husband to return home from work. She, thus, cannot eat alone, she has to wait for her husband in order to eat and sleep with him. It is the woman's expectation that when the man sees such kind of messages addressed to him he becomes happy and relaxed after a hard day's

work. Soft language like the one used on food covers and hand fans strengthens love and the relationship between husband and wife. The inscription is also symbolic, for example “the covered food is delicious and it’s all yours” may also refer to the female sexual parts.

After the welcoming remarks contained in the artefact texts, a wife has to assure her husband that she is there to please him in love and sex. The following inscriptions on food covers revealed this: *Ni zako zabibu kula taratibu* (These grapes are yours eat them gently) and *Kula polepole nanasi hili ni lako* (Eat gently! This pineapple is all yours). With regard to hand fans there is a message that says *Usitafute video mimi ndio kipoozeo* (Don’t go out watching video in bars, I am your comfort i.e. ‘cooler’). Many metaphors used in these inscriptions, especially when referring to love are either **sweet in taste** or have **nice scent**. For instance, a woman compares herself with fruits such as pineapple and grape to be ‘eaten’ by men. That signifies their eagerness to satisfy a man sexually. Presently, as there is a tendency for men to go out to a friend’s place or to a bar to watch television (video), in this message on a hand fan, a wife advises the husband not to waste his time going out to bars or to a friend’s, because she as a wife is able to comfort him; she is the only ‘cooler’ for him.

Gower et al. (1996, p. 255). Have stated the following which is of relevance to our discussion:

From the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries the coast of east Africa served as the cultural, social, and economic link among Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. As a result of this trade, the coast received people from diverse areas and cultures, including Muslims and Hindus from India, Arabs from Oman and Hadhramaut, and Africans.

The East African coast has a considerable Arabic and Islamic influence. Most dwellers in these areas are Muslims. The role of a Swahili woman to comfort her husband is also underscored by other Swahili authors from the region. For instance, with reference to Islamic religion and its teachings, Mwanakupona bint Mshamu, one of the most popular Swahili poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, also advises her daughter to stay at home and attend to her husband by caressing and fanning him. In her epic *Utenzi wa Mwanakupona*, Mwanakupona bint Mshamu says:

|                         |                                   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Kilala siikukuse</i> | When he sleeps do not disturb him |
| <i>Mwegeme umpapase</i> | Be close to him and caress him    |
| <i>Na upepo asikose</i> | Fan him all the time              |

*Mtu wa kumpepea* (ubeti wa 31)      You are the one to do it (stanza 31)

Figure 1: An Example of a Food Cover and a Hand Fan

Food cover

Hand fan



*A wife is a fruit that needs to be cared for*



*Don't go out watching videos  
(in bars) (stay with me)  
I am your comfort*

For some women today to continue using these food covers and hand fans with such kind of messages such as *Usitafute video mimi ndio kipoozeo* (Don't go out watching video I am your 'cooler') not only shows woman's passion/role to her husband but also indicates how women in this society continue to be subservient to men. Likewise, through these messages a woman depicts herself as a pleasurable and sweet object for man's sexual satisfaction. This is also a common image in many Kiswahili literary works, even in those written by women. This portrayal is due to patriarchal system in society, culture, religion (see Khamis, 2012; Khatib 1985, 2011; Momanyi, 2001; Ramadhani, 2013; Senkoro, 1988); and the wishes of women themselves. Traditionally, from her childhood to adulthood a Swahili woman is reared in such a way that her major role is to please her husband. This kind of outlook impacts on her and her worldview in general.

The issue of understanding each other and faithfulness among love partners is also insisted by women through the texts of these cultural artefacts. For instance, on food covers there are texts such as *Raha ya mapenzi ni kusikilizana* (The joy of love is in understanding each other), *Nipende kiuhakika upate kuburudika* (Love me truly so that you get entertained) and *Mapenzi ni ngao kwa wapendanao* (Love is a shield to those that love each other). The same operates with hand fans whose inscriptions include *Raha ya mapenzi ni maelewano* (The

joy of love is understanding), *Nipende kwa nia nipate kutulia* (Love me wholeheartedly so that I live with you) and *Mpenzi nipakate kama ulimi na mate* (Dear, hold me tight as the tongue and saliva do). It is obvious that the texts on these artefacts are largely dominated by love issues and women's voices. The artefacts have become the women's arena for telling their husbands about various issues that will ensure the survival of their marriages. Instead of verbally telling the husband that "I am sweet like grape, I am your cooler or entertainer" a woman will just weave a food cover or hand fan and take it to an artist who will then inscribe the messages that the woman wants to be inscribed. A woman may also just buy the artefacts with the readymade messages of her preference.

Furthermore, a woman uses these inscriptions to remind her husband of his family obligations, especially taking care of the wife. A sample of the texts on the food covers include: *Mke ni tunda anahitaji kutunzwa* (A wife is a fruit that needs to be cared for), *Nitunze nipendeze waigao wasiweze* (Take care of me so that I become so pretty that no one can replicate my beauty) and *Usione utamu wa ndizi mgomba wataka palizi* (For bananas to be sweet the banana tree needs weeding). Similar texts also appear on the hand fans such as *Mke ni tunda wajibu kumtunza* (A wife is a fruit she should be taken care for), *Kupamba mke ni sifa ya mume* (To adorn a wife is the responsibility of a husband) and *Mke ni nguo mgomba kupalilia* (Clothing is important to one's wife as is weeding to a banana tree OR Give clothes to your wife for, like a banana tree, she needs care). In the last saying, the woman compares herself with a banana tree which, in order to yield plenty of fruits, needs to be taken care of by being watered, fertilized and so forth. These inscriptions draw on a rich oral repertoire of figurative language and Swahili proverbs.

With regards to the role of women in African traditional religion, Mbiti (1988, p. 73) also notes that "The mother or wife is probably the most important member of the family, the centre of familyhood". She therefore needs to be well-fed, well-clothed and well-housed; and the husband is responsible for the caring. Even if a woman can take care of herself, this concept of a man taking care of his wife still persists and is considered as a norm. Saadani Kandoro, a popular Swahili poet, in his poem "Ukitaka Upendeze Uhisabiwe ni Mume" (1972) also reveals this tradition in Swahili society. He insists that if a man wants to be considered to be a good husband he has to buy a lot of clothes for the wife, such as *kangas* and shoes, regardless of her age. In this stanza Kandoro writes:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>Ukitaka Upendeze Uhisabiwe ni Mume</i>    | If you want to be good and considered as a husband                    |
| <i>Ununue na viatu, gaguro na shimizize,</i> | You have to buy her shoes, underskirts and chemises                   |
| <i>Aoneshe penye watu, shoga awasimulie,</i> | So she may show off to others, and tell friends                       |
| <i>Amuone kila mtu, amjue fakharize,</i>     | To be seen by everyone, to show her pride                             |
| <i>Ukitaka upendeze, uhisabiwe ni mume.</i>  | (Do all these) If you want to be good and be considered as a husband. |

Even today's world, although many women are not wholly dependent on their husbands, some messages from food covers and hand fans insist on the same role of a husband to his wife. The woman perpetuates the role of the man as a breadwinner and in charge of the family. Mohammed (2015, p. 98) in his study on Kiswahili proverbs also reveals the same as he says:

In Swahili society men are encouraged to clothe their wives. Clothes have three characteristics: to conceal, decorate and honour a woman" as well as to attract and beautify a woman because, as this inscription from hand fan says, *Mke ni pambo la nyumba* (A wife is a house decor). Metaphoric words such as a decor, flower and fruit that denote a woman "intend to marvel, please, comfort and soothe a man. These linguistic metaphors are instilled in a woman to create her artificial self. As a result a woman considers herself as a decoration to please a man instead of considering herself as a complete being who can perform various duties in her life.

It is important to note the negative impact that these inscriptions could have on a woman. A saying such as *Mke ni tunda wajibu kumtunza* (A wife is a fruit that must be taken care of) and others of a similar inclination have possibilities of encouraging a woman to be passive and utterly submissive to man.

### **Texts Intended for the General Public and on God**

Apart from the husband, the texts on these cultural artefacts are also addressed to the general public as well as to God. Starting with texts on snoopy and envious people, the inscriptions on the food covers warn: *Ulionalo liache hapahapa*

(Whatever you see in here leave it here), *Karibuni kaeni umbea acheni* (You are welcome but stop gossiping) and *Sikumroga sikumchawia kanipenda mwenyewe* (I didn't bewitch him he just loves me). With regard to hand fans there are texts such as *Karibu ukae umbea baadae* (You are welcome, have a seat, but gossiping is for later), *Semeni mnayoyajua msikae mkazua* (Say what you know don't fabricate issues) and *Sikumchawia kanipenda kwa yangu tabia* (I didn't bewitch him, he loves me because of my good behaviour). While both men and women do gossip, it is women who are often in the position to observe other women and girls doing so. There is a general belief that women are the ones who gossip (Gardner, 2005; Hegland, 2005, p. 211). It would seem, therefore, that the messages about gossip on food covers and hand fans are conveyed by women to their fellow women (friends, neighbours, relatives etc). Some neighbours or guests can be snoopers as they like to pry one's life and then spread the information to other people. Since Swahili/coastal women to a large extent stay at home (as mothers or wives) compared to men, and/or visit each other often, it is possible that these food cover and hand fan messages easily reach the addressees. The voice in these messages does not want the information concerning a woman's home or family to be disclosed to the public. Fear and effect of gossip make her be cautious. Hegland (2005, pp. 211-212) says that "women are more at risk than men of harm from gossip. Females fear the potential of gossip to provoke disrespect, rupture of relationships, or cause ostracism or perhaps the need to leave a setting".

Messages on sorcery and witchcraft are also intended for such people like relatives, neighbours, friends and in-laws. Among the Swahili in Tanzania it is believed by some people that some women use love charms/portions (*limbwata*) in order to keep their lovers close to them (see Reuster-Jahn, 2014, among others). It is assumed that signs of *limbwata* include a husband who helps his wife to do house chores, a husband who stays at home after work, a husband who does 'female' errands, a man who is submissive to his wife, and one who does not have extra marital affairs, and so on. It is usually women who administer *limbwata* to their husbands or partners in consultation with some *waganga* (traditional medicine people). There is no scientifically proven fact on this but some people believe that it is true. *Limbwata* can be taken through a meal or bathing water. In an inscription on the food cover *Sikumroga sikumchawia kanipenda mwenyewe* (I didn't bewitch him he just loves me) a woman seems to defend herself against those people who think that her love is caused by a charm. Mbiti (2011, p. 9) also notes that "African society has both magic and religion. Magic belongs to the religious mentality of the African peoples."

Inscriptions on food covers and hand fans are not only an indirect way to talk to people and avoid unnecessary arguments or quarrels with other people, but also

they are an illustration of some forms of Swahili culture. For example, polygynous life and extra marital affairs that are part of that culture are also popular subjects of the messages on these cultural artefacts. The texts gathered also reveal that there are also constant arguments among co-wives or concubines; and some of the messages are directed to the husband as well. Such texts on food covers include *Japokuwa wa kwanza sitokuachia uwanja* (Even if I am the first wife I will not leave you a house), *Mimi ni shina sibabaishwi na matawi* (I am the tree trunk I cannot be swayed by the branches) and *Utamaliza mabucha nyama ni ileile* (The beef tastes the same so no need to go to different butcheries). With reference to the hand fans the texts include *Siujali ukwenza mapenzi nayaweza* (I am not worried about co-wifeness because I am competent in love), *Tutabanana hapahapa* (We will both share the same husband, come what may), *Wote ni matawi mimi ndie shina* (You are all branches I am the tree trunk), *Sote tu abiria kelele za nini?* (Why shout while we are both the passengers?), *Usitupe tende kwa harufu ya halua* (Don't discard dates for the scent of quincy) and *Shika shina matawi yatakushinda* (Hold onto a tree trunk, branches will disarray you).

In these inscriptions, the language used is metaphorical. The first wife compares herself with a tree trunk (strong) or dates (whose sweetness is natural) and the other wives or concubines are compared as sweetmeat/quincy (whose sweetness is artificial) or the tree branches (not strong). Also a woman likens herself to meat in butchery or a passenger whose driver and controller is a man. In general, these texts show dialogue between two women who share the same husband or man. The first wife belittles the co-wife saying that her position cannot allow the second wife to enter a house, and that she is the tree trunk that cannot be easily swayed by the branches (i.e. other women who have sexual affairs with her husband). She also boasts that she is skillful in lovemaking so she is not worried about co-wifeness. On the other hand, the second wife or concubine seems to respond to the first wife that it is necessary that they share the same husband/man and that there is no need to lament while they are both the passengers as they are taken care of (driven) by that same man. Even if co-wifeness is allowed in traditional religion (Mbiti, pp.110-111) and Muslim society, many women do not prefer it. Mbiti argues that "one of the weaknesses of African women is jealousy, especially when several wives live in a polygamous family" (Mbiti, 1988, p. 29). Co-wives always do not live in a friendly manner (Mohammed, 2015: 150) and polygamy invites quarrels (Falen, 2008, p. 62). These texts show that "not all women are happy to be in polygynous marriage but (they) are forced by the environment and culture" (Ssemanda, 2008, p.110).

Although multi-partnered sexual relationships and behaviour seem to strengthen male identity and a sense of masculinity in rural and urban East Africa (Silberschmidt, 2001), the eldest wife seems to rebuke his husband that in terms

of sexuality all women are equal, and that there is no need to keep on changing them. This is well-captured in the saying that “The beef always tastes the same, there is no need of going to different butcheries”. As there are also men who abandon their first wives because of the concubines or new wives, a woman advises thus: “Don’t discard dates for the scent of sweetmeat”, as well as “Hold onto a tree trunk, branches will disarray you”. Thus, through these texts women try to safeguard their marriages or discourage extra marital relationship. They argue, advise and censure inappropriate behaviours of men although, in the process, by comparing themselves with dates, sweetmeat and meat, among other items, the women inferiorize themselves as they see their kind as “sweet” objects whose sole purpose is to satisfy men.

Dialogic composition is very popular in Kiswahili literature and art such as poetry, music, texts on kanga and *daladala*<sup>2</sup> - just to mention a few (Biersteker, 1996; Beck, 2000; Omari, 2011, Shariff, 1988). The dialogic texts on food covers and hand fans perpetuate this Swahili tradition while attracting people to buy and use these cultural artefacts. Although these messages are not like those in kanga, which a woman/wife can wear and pass near her co-wife so as to make the latter read the message/s, as for food covers and hand fans (which are mostly found at home) their messages can be read when the co-wives visit each other.

The texts on food covers and hand fans are also intended to reach a larger audience. For instance, these inscriptions *Mke ni mshauri usimtenge shauri* (Wife is an advisor don’t exclude her in decision making) and *Mwanamke anaweza* (A woman is able to do wonders) that are found in both food covers and hand fans do not target cowives only as they may as well address all girls and women. Previously, women were seen as having no leadership skills relevant to nation-building or decision making at family and national level. Therefore such messages, few as they may be, acknowledge that woman has the power and skill to do and participate in various activities in society, including holding high leadership positions. These few texts fighting for women’s rights are catalysed by the increasing discourse on the rights of women in the world. The political pluralism introduced in Africa in the 1990s and the Beijing Women’s conference in 1995 emphasised on such issues like gender equality and women’s empowerment and participation in various spheres of life in society. The texts on food covers and hand fans emphasize on the involvement of woman in social, political and economic activities such as decision making from which she had been alienated for a long time due to the fact that Swahili society is mainly patriarchal. With these few inscriptions, it is evident that “The notions of gender

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<sup>2</sup> Commuter buses in Tanzania.

equity, democracy and human rights are indeed some of the features of modernity” (Engineer, 2005, p. 195 cited in Wafula, 2011, p.152). It is our expectation that messages on women empowerment will dominate these Swahili artefacts in the near future.

Another important topic treated by the texts on these cultural artefacts is the role of God in human life. In Tanzania, like in many African countries, three religions: African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity coexist. These religions perpetuate the notion that God is supreme. African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. God is the creator and provider of everything; he is also the protector, saviour, comforter etc (Mbiti, 2011, p.29, p. 43). Having children among married couples is also by a will of God. The inscription *Kuolewa ni sheria kuzaa ni majaliwa* (To be married is a rule but to have children is by the grace of God) is found on food covers as well as on hand fans. This is a longstanding Swahili saying, whereby both getting married and having children are highly valued in society. However whenever a couple have problems of getting children, it is woman who is mainly assumed to be infertile. In this inscription, knowing that one of the biggest reasons of divorce is infertility and especially for woman - and it is common for a man to divorce a wife and to marry another in case of childless marriage, through this text a woman is telling her surrounding relatives that just in case their marriage produces no child she should not be blamed since childbearing is a blessing from the Supreme God.

Apart from childbearing, there are several inscriptions referring to God for mercy. For instance, on food covers and hand fans are found messages such as *Yailah Mola wangu isitiri ndoa yangu* (Oh my God protect my marriage) that are against witches, jealous people etc; and *Ee Mola nisitiri* (Please God protect me) and *Ee Mungu nipe uvumilivu* (I beseech you God to give me endurance). Apart from the actual praying to God for assistance, from these examples of inscriptions, women or people in general also request God for good health, protection from evil eyes and danger, prosperity and endurance/perseverance in a marriage life, among other requests. As Belton (2002) also explains, religion is a powerful institution in life and especially in African societies.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to study how a Swahili woman in Tanzania uses food covers and hand fans to air her views. Our data reveal that these objects are mainly used at home; hence the messages are relatively confined to the domestic space, marital and extramarital relationship, polygamy, childbearing, culture and

daily life. Through the inscriptions, a woman reminds her husband of the responsibility of clothing and feeding his wife. Through these messages a woman is seen to position herself as an economically dependent being and her domain is mainly to comfort her husband sexually. She compares herself with fruits (such as pineapple and date), flowers, and so forth. A woman also addresses her concerns to neighbours, guests and in-laws regarding the issues that affect her, such as gossip, jealousy and childbearing. It is also an arena for woman's struggles and empowerment, as she conveys her thoughts and feelings regarding her rights and equal treatment between man and woman in society in various spheres such as in politics and in decision making. Indeed as Somjee (200, p 97) states, the texts on food covers and hand fans are "active and living modes of communication in Africa."

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