

Raising the Veil – A Tribute to Bi Kidude (circa 1910-2013)

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We met Bi Kidude in 2003 in Zanzibar, when we were at the planning meeting for the African Feminist Congress. She liked to smoke and drink in public. She liked to sing in public. She also liked to straddle her drum and gyrate her hips as she beat that drum.

She said to the young ones in the room – Jessica Horn, Pumla Gqola and myself – then the babies of the African Feminist Congress, “You must never be afraid of taking pleasure.” Bi Kidude told us that we should never be ashamed of becoming old in public.

We honour the life of Bi Kidude, our African feminist percussionist and sexologist who did a session on sexual pleasure and drumming in Zanzibar. Her legacy continues in how the drums beat at every African Feminist Forum. Just as at every forum we discuss sexuality, pleasure and enjoyment of life.

*Bella Matambanadzo
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I met her for the first time in 2000, when I attended the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF). She referred to herself as Fatuma binti Baraka, which means “Fatuma, the daughter of Baraka”. We knew her well as Bi Kidude.

No one knows the exact date she was born. Every time you would speak to Bi Kidude, she’d give a different birthdate. In 2005, she was more than 100 years old. Three years later, she was approaching 100. Years later, she was 110.

What we do know is that Bi Kidude was born around 1910 and passed away on 17 April 2013. She performed for over 100 years on many stages, locally and internationally, beating her drum.

Bi Kidude started singing at the age of 10 and was mentored by Siti binti Saad (1880-1950), another iconic woman in Zanzibar who travelled the world with her music. Siti binti Saad was the first woman in East Africa to record an album. She sang Taraab music in Kiswahili – not Arabic, which was the customary practice. Taraab music is the national sound of Zanzibar – a coastal music with elements of Arab, Indian and Indonesian rhythms blended with Kiswahili poetry, melodies and tones. Siti binti Saad’s musical career stretched from the time of the Arab slave trade to the stirrings of the independence movement.

Following Saad, Bi Kidude became known as the “Queen of Taarab”. Although Zanzibar has a mostly Arab-Muslim population, Bi Kidude became the first woman musician to lift the veil and sing in public. This was a rare occurrence, since women were required to wear a veil to cover themselves.

“I learned all my songs from Siti binti Saad, the first woman singer from Zanzibar. We both had to cover our faces with a fine cloth. Then she passed away but her voice was still in the air.

She had a very powerful voice, like mine. There was no difference. So people, some of the highest in the land, said, ‘You must do something to show who you are’ and so I raised the veil”.

Bi Kidude

*As Old As My Tongue:
The Myth and Life of Bi Kidude*
(Directed by Andy Jones, 2006)

Bi Kidude's music was very provocative. She had a deep, wailing voice that would affect your whole body. Pleasure and sexuality were key to her music. One of her famous songs was *Muhogo wa Jang'ombe* (literally, "Cassava of Jang'ombe", a place in Zanzibar) which, as many of her songs did, described men's sexual organs and, at times, decried the violence and sexual abuse that women experienced at the hands of men.

Bi Kidude liked to sing old songs, some from her childhood; she often sang songs that were more than 80 years old. She was quite innovative, always creating different versions of her songs. You never got the same song more than once – that was the beauty of Bi Kidude.

She loved to play music known as *Kidumbak*, a more rhythmic version of Taarab music where lyrics can be improvised depending on the particular social environment. Bi Kidude's *kidumbak* was often performed with young women. Later in life, she performed with men and musicians from different genres (hip hop, reggae, and rock music, among other styles). She loved to perform with musicians outside her domain.

Bi Kidude also loved her drum, keeping it with her most of the time. She travelled and performed widely in Zanzibar (Unguja and Pemba Island) and mainland Tanzania, as well as throughout East Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe and the USA. She performed in the world's most acclaimed music and cultural festivals. Bi Kidude won the WOMEX Award (The World Music Expo) in 2005, for her invaluable contributions to the development of music and culture in Zanzibar.

Bi Kidude was regarded as the oldest woman musician known, mounting stages across the world, years after the age of 100. She was unconcerned about performing as she grew older. When she passed away in 2013, Bi Kidude received a state funeral on the same day.

We are left with many great memories of Bi Kidude. Now, the ZIFF and Sauti za Busara, the international music festival in Zanzibar, are empty without her. She seemed synonymous with these festivals.

Bi Kidude was definitely a feminist. She was very energetic, almost ageless. Unflustered and confident in male-dominated societies, she survived two divorces for not bearing children. She defeated a culture of stigmatisation by being able to stand on the front stage without a veil. Bi Kidude taught and performed with women, especially younger women. She had fun, joyously living her life with cigarettes and alcohol, until her transition.

Bi Kidude showed us what it means to be fearless. In honour of her life, we will continue beating our drums in public.

Note

This tribute to Bi Kidude was given during the 4th African Feminist Forum, convening in Harare, Zimbabwe in April 2016.

Watch Bi Kidude in action at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMkLMaHWufo&list=RDEMuUWxIE53iWW78ZP6Wh_a_A