

What a Video Queen is to a Male Artist: the Social-Semiotic Analysis of Music Videos and Lyrics in Tanzania

Hyasinta Izumba and Antoni Keya***

Abstract

This paper is set to examine the representation of women by male artists in bongo flava. It aims at disclosing the discursive practices taking place between men and women in the music industry. The study used Teo van Leeuwen's social semiotics to analyze the data through exclusion, role, specific and general, and categorization. The linguistic analysis showed that a woman is subservient to man; she is permissive with her body, allowing the camera to focus on her boobs and buttocks. The dancing styles and flaunting are to attract the viewing audience. In the lyrics she is a harlot, slut, lunatic, killer, involved in commercial sex, unsettling in relationships and all she sees is money. Interviews with male artists show her as a means to the male artists' end, she is ready to do anything for money because she is a prostitute. Focused group participants, being unsophisticated viewers, do not take this woman to be a special kind of woman; she represents other women rather than the ones she is categorized with. She is a product of the habitus whose socio-cultural and economic situation needs to be interrogated.

Key words: *bongo flava, bongo movie, discursive practices, video queen, social semiotic analysis, Tanzania; wadangaji*

Introduction

This study examines the representation of women by male artists in Tanzanian rap-cum-sing music popularly known as *bongo flava* to disclose the discursive practices taking place between men and women. The representation of women has been an issue to which attention has been given in political issues (e.g., Strachan *et al.*, 2015), advertisements (e.g., Shartiely, 2005) in Kiswahili novels (e.g. Ndulute, 1996) and media (e.g., Ward, 2002). Women are considered as weak and inferior to men partly due to the favor that the social practice now gives men. For example, a Kerewe woman, be it an adult or young, is supposed to greet a man kneeling, as a sign of respect for man. Another example resides in Kiswahili language, the use of words like "oa" (marry) and "olewa" (be married) which depict that men are active while women are passive (McMillan, 1988 cited in Shartiely, 2005). The use of these two words in Kiswahili eliminates reciprocity, which accelerates the woman's helplessness in

* Assistant Lecturer, Department of Languages and Linguistics, St. Augustine University of Tanzania, P.O. Box 35040, Mwanza, Tanzania, E-mail: hyasinta_izumba@yahoo.com

** Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, P.O. Box 35040, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, E-mail: amkeya22@gmail.com

marriage, in the sense that she is seen as an object, and receiver of action. This way, she is denied agency in the question of marriage, which is a very important institution in family life. Ng'imba (forthcoming) finds that even women mainly speak unfavorably of womanhood, promoting ideals of domesticity, subordination, dependency, subservience and objectivity.

The music also portrays women in a way that reveals a gap between men and women, especially on moral aspects (Richards, 2012). It is often said to construct and perpetuate gender roles in traditional and stereotypical manners in both lyrics and videos. Subordination, domination, sexuality, and aggression in music videos are made evident by an unequal number of males and females. They predominantly display and reinforce stereotypical notions of women as sexual objects, and to a slighter degree, females are shown to be subordinate while males are aggressive (Goffman, 1976). According to Wallis, music videos represent women in a more fragile and submissive manner revealed through sexual self-touch, suggestive dancing and sultry looks prevailing in the belief that sexually suggestive behavior is normal and appropriate for women but not necessarily for men (Wallis, 2010). The presentation of women dancing suggestively creates an idea that women are sexual objects ready to be consumed by men (ibid). In most performances men are performing in suits while women appear in provocative lingerie. Omari says, "women are portrayed as dishonest, voiceless and careless individuals who have little intelligence, unfaithful, adulterous, and prostitutes who use their bodies as objects to earn their living" (Omari, 2009:91). So we have chosen to examine this relationship through *bongo flava* because it is still male-dominated (Sylvester, 2005) and through music we are likely to learn what exists in musicians' societies. Van Leeuwen (1996) holds that language used in music plays a great role in representing social actions impersonally. He adds that lyrics and videos represent different concepts, people and events. We need now to investigate how the music industry uses its semiotic resources to present women. This paper is divided into the introduction, methodology, source of images and lyrics, how the video queen is presented in images and how the video queen is presented through lyrics, the reaction of the audience on what happens in the videos, how male artists view the video queen, discussing the image of the video queen, and lastly, the conclusion.

Methodology: Social-Semiotic Analysis

Since this study involves the examination of lyrics and images, van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Analysis seemed a perfect perspective. Van Leeuwen regards images as the most complete and explicit way of explaining things, while words become supplements, comments, footnotes and labels (van Leeuwen, 2008: 136). Van Leeuwen prefers the term "semiotic resources" for it avoids the impression that 'what a sign stands for' is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use (2005:3). Semiotic resources are more meaningful than speech, writing and picture making. They include gestures, music and the "less obvious ones such as food, dress and everyday objects, all of which carry cultural value and significance" (van Leeuwen, 2005: xi). These are "signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication. They have a *theoretical* semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and an *actual* semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known to and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests. Such uses take place in a social context, and this context may either have rules or best practices that regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used, or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource" (van Leeuwen, 2005:4). This theory is important because of the close link that exists between discourse and society, and that various semiotic resources are being significant in communicating and making meaning. In this theory meanings are read into the images by the viewer, rather than being set into the image by the producer (van Leeuwen, 2008) and are to be studied within a social context (Hodge & Kress, 1988:12).

This work is perfectly a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which may be defined as concerned with analyzing doubtful as well as transparent "structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak, 2001:3). Moreover, it aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use. Basing on the notion of critical analysis, language is a social fact that serves to legitimize relations of organized power (Habermas, 1975: 259). Social background, relationship and peoples' position in their society help them to create meanings in their interaction with texts. Crucially, there are three important concepts in CDA that seem to be inevitable: the concept of power, the concept of history,

and the concept of ideology (Wodak, 2001:3). Fairclough (1989:17) says that language is centrally involved in power, the struggle for power and that it is so involved through its ideological properties.

Van Leeuwen's version of Critical Discourse Analysis of visual representation deals with how people are depicted in a text. The factors to be considered are such as exclusion, roles, specific and generic, individual and groups as well as categorization. *Exclusion* includes or excludes participants to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the audiences for whom they are intended (van Leeuwen, 1996:38). Exclusion may be known or unknown to the audiences. This relies on the analysis of resources like wearing style, dancing style and the focus of the image. *Role* considers the roles which social actors are given to play in representations looking at who is the agent and who is the patient in relation to the given action in the text (van Leeuwen, 1996:42). The roles assigned to participants are analysed by considering the social relation between those participants and their effects in the text. *Specific and generic* factors consider the question of whether people are specifically or generically depicted in the text and see if their individuality can seem to disappear behind what categorizes them (van Leeuwen, 2008:143). The analysis is based on resources like hairstyles, makeup and accessories. Another factor pertains to *individuals and groups* whereby the analysis is based on the features carried by an individual in the text that represent the group. The representation of the group by an individual creates the sense that they are all the same (van Leeuwen, 2008:144). As we are going to see later, participants to the focus group discussion too take what is seen of the woman on the television to reflect the subjugation in society. They don't take it as a concern of a certain group of ladies. The last factor is *categorization*, which deals with how participants appear in the discourse together with the connotation that they stimulate. It uses standardized exaggerations of participants' features to connote the negative or positive associations, which the represented sociocultural group evokes for the sociocultural group for which the representation is chiefly formed (van Leeuwen, 2008:146).

Halliday and Hassan (1989) say that in social semiotics the concern is particularly with the relationships between language and social structure, considering the social structure as one aspect of the social system. Van Leeuwen (1996) adds that for a semiotic resource to have an impact it must make meaning among people in a particular social context. So in general social semiotics resources cannot exist

without recourse to the social situation, that is why people will assign different meanings to resources, depending on their social situation and what they wish to share with other members of the society.

Sources of Images and Lyrics

The study was based on five artistic works considering content and form. Three songs were dealt with in audio forms only, and two songs were dealt with in their audio-visual forms. The three songs were: Bado Nipo Nipo (by Mwana FA), Nitakupwelepweta (by Yamoto Band) and Sina Muda (by Nay wa Mitego). The two videos were: Asanteni kwa Kuja (by Mwana FA) and Kokoro (by Rich Mavoko ft Diamond). Semi-structured discussions were conducted with 3 groups of 5 people each. Participants were chosen, both males and females, ranging from nineteen to forty five years of age because this age group is highly considered as *Bongo Flava* fans. We decided to group the participants into 3 different groups in which two groups (one for females and the other for males) were made up of people aged 19-30 years old, and one group consisted of people aged 31-45 years (for both female and males). This categorization was done in order to make participants to freely express their opinions.

Table 1: Description of Participants in Focus Group Discussion

Participant Category	Mt. Meru University Staff	Mt. Meru University Students	Total
Female 19-30 years	-	5	5
Male 19-30 years	-	5	5
Female & Male 31-45 years	5 (3 females and 2 males)	-	5
Total	5	10	15

Source: Researchers (2017)

The factors used to analyze visual representation were exclusion in which we analyzed dressing styles, dancing style and focus. The roles assigned to participants were analyzed; specific and generic references were also depicted. The last factor was individual and groups in which the analysis based on the way women were represented. Then we went for the words that artists used in their songs with or without women. According to van Leeuwen, words would become supplements, comments, footnotes and labels of the representation. Ransom (2015) too says that words provide facts and explanations while images provide interpretations, suggestions and

connotations. Therefore, people get information through words and pictures.

How the Video Queen is Presented in Images

Exclusion

According to male artists, the choice of the video queen is based on one's sexual appeal, willingness to participate and not being too rigid with instructions from directors. In short, inclusion involved only those likely to make the video a hit. Inclusion went further to include parts of the body and movements. These were like wearing style, dancing style and the focus on some parts of the body.

Women are portrayed as indecent *dressing* stylists. This excludes them from proper dressers. In plate (a) below, a woman is half naked alongside a man properly dressed.

(a)



The woman in both images is improperly dressed, excluding her from a group of decent people. What she looks like online is not what we are likely to see her offline. It is not easy to say that she represents other women, but it is possible to see how her weakened willingness to fit makes her accept such dressing styles. The gap between her and the ladies offline is too wide. A man on the chair with a woman laying her body on the floor cleaning his shoes is not what happens in society.

The woman is *dancing* seductively and provocatively. She performs different dancing styles that portray her as a sexual teaser or sexual

tool. An example is on plate (a). Men are groping sensitive and romantic parts (buttocks) of the woman (Plate b). This kind of dancing style is just for men's pleasure as it is observed in the images where men give a satisfied look after groping women's buttocks.

(a)



Source: Kokoro [video]



Source: Kokoro [video]

The *focus of the camera* is directed to particular body parts of the woman. The focus includes the backsides (buttocks), half covered breasts and seductive faces as in plates (a) and (b). So the focus is to impress viewers, mostly men.

(a)



Source: Asanteni kwa Kuja [video]

(b)



Source: Asanteni kwa Kuja [video]

Role

In this aspect, the analysis focuses on the participants' agency. We need to assume that in a study like this, van Leeuwen would not use agency in the most literal sense, to mean one who acts, and contrast it to being a *patient* (i.e., one who is acted upon). If it were just this, we would simply say that the male artist and the video queen are positioned as boss and servant. In order to understand better the roles performed in the music, we take agency to refer to the choices made by people as they take action, often as they attempt to realize specific goals (Varien & Potter, 2008). This includes choices that are non-reflexive and generated by their habitus, which are the patterns of thoughts and action that they acquire by virtue of being raised in a particular social milieu (Bourdieu, 1990). Agency is predicated on our

intentions, particularly the capacity to engage in second-order reflections on our own desires and beliefs (Jurist, 2000:127-8). Based on this aspect, we begin by looking at participation at two levels, offline and on video. What is more relevant to our definition of agency would be that what happens in real-life (readers and viewers won't see this through images, but it is a reflection of the material past, and this) promotes or makes possible what is seen on video. That is, participation on video is a culmination of other thing happening offline. So apart from what is happening on the screen we will seek recourse of what happens in the real world.

Under what situation do women join the music industry as support artists or just dancers? Do they just 'decide' to occupy these positions because they are financially attractive opportunities? Are these positions socially appealing? Females on focus group discussion say they rarely like doing what they see happening on the video screen but they end up accepting the post of video vixen or video queen because it makes them famous and may end up leading to better gigs. Some say that if they don't accept the post someone else will take it, so they accept the invitation to participate however cheap. Lastly, they say, it is a credit to be invited to participate since it reflects superiority on facial and physic characteristics. But they need to promote themselves to get there. What this means, therefore, whatever they do on the video is likely to be the wish of the artist and the producer upon satisfying himself of some criteria. So what do we see on video?

The woman is portrayed as a sexual instrument in the music videos by displaying sexually teasing and seductive facial expression as observed in plate (a) but also portrayed as a subordinate before man by playing the subservient role alongside man as observed in plate (b). She has been assigned a role that makes her look inferior to man. For example, the man is on a chair in the middle of two women, acting like a king, and women look like sexual teasers.

(a)



Source: Kokoro [video]

Specific and Generic

There is also the question of whether people are depicted specifically or generically (van Leeuwen, 2008:141). Making the song a hit and getting money seems the only preoccupation. Image-wise, they sometimes (as the plates show below) cover their faces through hairdo, makeup and dresses. Whatever they do they want it to appear as a social practice of some kind, which erodes their individuality. Here, they are interpreted to be the adornment accessories alongside luxurious and expensive cars as observed in plate (a). They are fond of trending stylish accessories like artificial hairs, glasses, earrings and makeup, and they would like to appear in sexy poses.

(a)



Source: Asante kwa Kuja [video]



(b)

The woman portrays the generic behavior as a luxurious instrument for eye-catch and attention. She is always paired alongside lavish instruments, fond of superficial fashionable accessories such as earrings, trending hair styles, dresses or glasses as well the sexy poses for men's sexual attention. The woman has been used in these videos in a way that shows her role as nothing but decorating the video for man's pleasure. This kind of representation stimulates the connotation that all women are the same since the one in the video represents the whole group of women in society.

Categorization

This deals with how participants appear in the discourse together with the connotation that they stimulate (van Leeuwen, 2008:146). The woman through her suggestive dancing in her lingerie, plus her permissiveness with her body is negatively associated as a prostitute, and she seems to transmit these negative traits to the entire group of women. She resembles the ladies of her type one would see in non-Tanzanian videos. If one watched videos muted they would mistake

her for a foreigner. To most young Tanzanians it is 'cool' to be foreign, so it is positive. On the other hand, those familiar with nightlife would take video queens for night lifers, which is what male artists clearly categorize these ladies as. Generally, she is not categorized with other 'normal' women, she is another kind of woman, and the difference is far from just dress and hairdo. She is negatively categorized as *mdangaji* (prostitute).

How the Video Queen is Presented in the Lyrics

The choice of words and the meanings behind those words represent the woman negatively. They call her as *kuku wa kizungu* 'broilers', *demu* 'harlot' *kicheche* 'slut' and at some point call her *mwendawazimu* 'lunatic'.

Participant roles assigned to video queens show that *marafiki wanauzana* 'friends sell one another', *wanamegwa kama kawa* 'they are normally fucked as a rule of the day' or *watahongwa* 'they will always get bribed'. All these constructions might be pointing to the woman's diminished agency that make her susceptible to being 'sold' like goods, having sex and being very open to bribes. They add that *videmu wakishaolewa ndo tiketi ya kupotea* 'getting married is a ticket for these harlots to establish new relationships and damn the current one', and *hawafikirii mapenzi wanachoona ni mkwanja tu* 'they don't think about love, what they see is only money'. May be it is because of this that Mwana FA says that women are not people that should be trusted.

Yamoto Band reminds the woman that she has a *rambo* 'a big inelastic vagina' likening the woman's parts with a plastic bag which in Tanzania goes famously as Rambo. And what Yamoto Band says is that women are not fit for love, after all, most of them carry *dumu la petroli*, which is a metaphoric expression for being HIV positive.

Reactions from the Audience on what Happens in the Video

Female participants to the focus group discussion said they are hurt by the choice of words by these male artists but they don't know what to do to stop them. They are pained to see that women have been represented negatively, especially through their dressing and dancing style, and being so permissive with their bodies. They said that women's appearances in the videos are mainly the idea of the owner of the music but society tends to judge a woman without a second thought on the woman's lack of agency in the movies. Finally, these participants say that the image of a woman created in the video is exaggeratingly a reflection of the inequality between men

and women in society. For example, whereas men are superior to women, men do not sit with their shoes on while women lay their bodies on the floor to clean men's shoes. It is hard to see, outside the performance industry, men fully and neatly dressed while women accompanying them are half-naked.

On the other hand, male participants in the focus group discussion don't believe a woman can either buy a car or erect a building without a man's hand. Men say the root of women's negative representation begins from religious writings. The Bible and Quran show that men are valued more than women. Genesis 2:21-22, for example, has a woman created from man's rib, a thing that marks dependency. Men say that women are thus treated as sexual tools because they assent to it. It is not an accident that the focus of the camera is very selective on the most attractive parts and eye-catching breasts and buttocks. The focus of the camera is meant to impress male viewers.

How Male Artists View the Video Queen

From the analysis of images and lyrics above, we went further to engage in conversation some male artists themselves. This helped to check the strength of our analysis of images and lyrics. It helped to see the gap between a linguistic analysis and the situation on the ground. MS, a male artist, calls these women morally 'dirty beings', "we call them *wadangaji*, which is a trending Kiswahili term for prostitutes who grab various platforms in town to get attention." These would post their nasty dancing clips on say instagram in their near-nudity to a newly released song which hasn't yet been video recorded. When the followership on social media soars, they are likely to be picked to participate in the same song when the video is prepared. He says artists want women for the promotion of their music business, and sometimes sex as a bonus, and the ladies want the artists to promote themselves on a video shoot.

Wadangaji come into three groups, namely the bongo movie groupies "the Madam type". The demand for these is higher. They would mention 3,000,000/= to 500,000 Tanzanian shillings but because they are jobless, even 400,000/= works in many situations. The second group has those who only use social media to promote themselves. Once they win more followers and their value goes up they graduate into the top class, to rub shoulders with bongo movie groupies. JJ says, "for example, that lady [name withheld] was a nobody before the video shoot with Belle Nine. After that single video shoot in

which she flaunted hard with scanty dressing, she became a superstar, and went from video to video. From then on, she caught better fish in her body market". These would take 300,000/= to 200,000 Tanzanian shillings for a video shoot. The third group has those who want to 'show faces' hoping to reach bigger audiences. Sometimes they would ask only for liquor, food, dresses and fare to the location. They seek liquor to "kill the shame", and sometimes they benefit from a little sex. Scant dressing is an agreement, and sometimes it is the ladies that suggest these in order to attract the viewing audience. The more the attraction, the better the deal. We touch them as we want because it is part of the deal, it is all agreed". JJ concludes, "so these women are a means to our success, just like we are a means to their short-lived pleasure. Sometimes, though, they get better gigs after our videos". Artists were unanimous that anybody who does not want to go near nude on the camera does not enter this contract. They conclude by saying that "this is a win-win party for the willing". The male artists were very careful to draw a line between the video queens and other women. They say their kind of women are shameless and ghettofied in every sense.

Discussing the Overall Image of the Video Queen

This study set out to analyze the representation of women in *Bongo Flava* in order to see the view the male artists have on women. Through video images, women have been drawn as sexual tools supposed to be used for men's pleasure. The camera focus has been on the buttocks and breasts, parts that highly stimulate men sexually. Also women's dancing styles show that they are for eye-catch and decorations of the videos. They are even used in videos that do not carry themes about women, e.g. *Asanteni kwa Kuja*.

Through lyrics the woman is an unbecoming person, a harlot and/or sometimes a lunatic of sorts. She is easily duped by friends and is sold from one relationship to another, and having sex is the easiest thing she can partake in. She is generally someone people should not trust, and what she sees, according to artists, is money. Even when she is too old, she would go for someone too young just for the money. She will stop at nothing, even if it means infecting men with sexually transmitted diseases.

The woman is used as a means through which man should reach an end. She is a cheap impoverished decorator for the man's business. On the other side, it seems like the male artist cannot see the woman before seeing himself as the ameliorator. He is echoing Phyllis

Whitley's "Remember, *Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, may be refin'd, and join th' angelic train*" (Jackson, 1989: 45). In the performance the women's 'natural' lack of agency makes them echo the same, begging man to better their socio-economic situation. This seems to justify men's limitless abusive body survey. In other words, it is the poverty of the woman (and the entire society offline) that makes it possible for man to do what he does online. All these start with the erasure of the woman's agency in society.

We are now in a position to intrude their social space to interrogate why the woman we see on the TV screen and the subjugator behind her should be hastily condemned. There are some questions we ask ourselves about why the woman is needed even in a song that has nothing to say about women. Suppose we did not have an audience so interested in seeing what a woman exposes on the video, would we see any of the flaunting we are seeing on the video screens? The video queen is *mdangaji, anamegwa kama kawa, hafikirii mapenzi anachooa ni mkwanja tu* most probably because it is the only choice for her to live for the moment. Peter Bourdieu says that some choices that are generated by our habitus are patterns of thoughts and action that we acquire by virtue of being raised in a particular social milieu (Bourdieu, 1990:80–97). If we are to go by Bourdieu's view, and we must, the problem is much bigger and we won't have to be heard screaming feminism instead of seeing the bigger picture. Wanting cash so bad wouldn't be *amdangaji* thing without first being part of a Tanzanian reality. In this Machiavellian world, everybody needs some money, more money, and *vixen-ship* is just one of the many businesses for the willing. We all need to rectify our own socio-cultural economic situation. We should all, however, be wary of rituals of artists as video kings and queens and the representations that follow on the media that contribute to the ceaseless reconstruction of what we have come to call gender inequality. Men and women in focus group discussions reflect this. They take things for real (even though the artists draw lines between good women and their kind of women) and men still believe the woman cannot succeed without a man's support. In a sense, the inequalities we see and perceive on the video (from whichever angle we see them), become machines for producing the real inequality in society. Even though most of what we see on the video screens is not common in society today, this might be telling us that what we see is still at its infant stage in Tanzania and would soon get its ugly head up. But more importantly, what all this is telling is that we are piously watching as our decadence is shifting posts at a speed of light.

Conclusion

The paper succeeded to disclose the discursive practices taking place between men and women *bongo flava music* by examining the representation of women by male artists in music industry. This paper began with the assumption that what is seen on the screen is a result of women subjugation by man, as some studies had led us to see inequalities in other social-cultural aspects, in political, advertisements and in the media. We therefore went ahead to see if we could see a similar thing in *bongo flava*. We followed Theo van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics Analysis to examine videos and lyrics. We went further to engage the viewing audiences and some male artists who had used women in their video performances. This data triangulation was meant to see whether our linguistic analysis was in line with what is happening in the social space. The linguistic analysis showed that a woman was ready to do all to make men happy. She was too permissive with her body and allowing the camera to focus on her boobs and buttocks. She danced suggestively to attract a male viewing audience. In the lyrics she was slut, lunatic, involved in commercial sex, unsettling in relationships, and all she saw was money. Finally, she was a killer. Male artists said she was a means to some beneficial end, but most of all, she was a prostitute. Male and female participants do not take this woman to be a special kind of woman; to them she represents other women rather than the ones she is categorized with. This study sees this kind of woman as a product of her habitus whose socio-cultural and economic situation needs to be rectified.

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