

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# BI KIDUDE

The doyenne of Zanzibari music may be well over 100, but she is still impressing audiences across the world with her voice and bawdy delivery

WORDS ANDY JONES

**B**i Kidude's real age is uncertain. That she remains a living legend far beyond her Zanzibar home is indisputable. Her own proclamations on her age can vary between 104 and 113 – depending on the day of the week – but then winding up journalists has been one of her favourite games since she first toured Europe in 1989.

When I first saw Bi Kidude in 2002, sitting silently on the top table as a panel of experts discussed her 'influence on women's cultural practice in Zanzibar', she seemed every inch of her alleged age, a shrivelled and shrunken presence. Later that same day I saw her perform for the first time, giving her chest-high, stand-up drum a rigorous rhythmic workout, and bellowing ribald lyrics which divided the audience of Swahili speakers into either stitches of laughter or outraged frowns. I was captivated, and over the next four years, along with cameraman Aubrey Fagon, filmed what became the documentary *As Old as my Tongue*.

What I had witnessed that night in Stone Town was a *msondo* performance, the public version of a highly secret ceremony known locally as *unyago*. A genuine *unyago* is performed to women only as part of a rite of passage to prepare young brides for married life. Various sexual positions are explained in the form of dances, and lyrics embrace everything from genital hygiene to the perils of doing the washing up in improper attire.

The public performance may be watered down, but it can still be too much for some in what remains a largely conservative, small-island culture.

Alongside *msondo*, the other part of Bi Kidude's repertoire is as a *taarab* singer. The dignified musicality of *taarab* couldn't be more different from *unyago*, making Bi Kidude's mastery of both forms even more remarkable. *Taarab* lyrics are poetic and allegorical, often alluding to current scandals and stories within Zanzibar's complex society.

Bi Kidude's *taarab* repertoire for the past 20 years or so has largely consisted of songs first performed by Siti Bint Saad, arguably an even bigger star than Kidude when she rose from performing in Zanzibar's back streets to find favour in the courts of the ruling Sultans, and then international fame after her Bombay recording sessions for EMI in the late 20s. Zanzibar in those days was not only a cultural melting pot, but also a musical one, with songs being exchanged alongside the spices and cloth in the port as sailors waited for the winds to change direction to begin their voyage home. Even today, *taarab* is an intriguing blend of African, Indian and Middle Eastern rhythms and melodies.

With so much myth and mystery surrounding Bi Kidude, we can be relatively certain of only a few facts. She was born Fatma Bint Baraka in the early part of the 20th century, the daughter of a coconut creeper on the larger of Zanzibar's two islands. Her

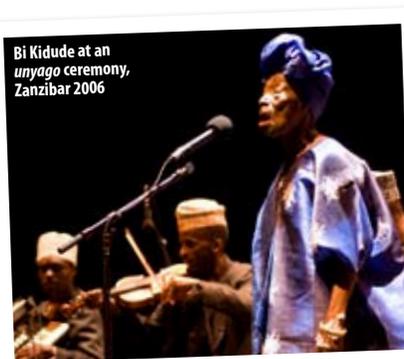
nickname, Kidude, meaning 'little thing' was given to her by an uncle after almost suffocating her when he failed to notice she was sleeping on the bed he was about to sit on.

After two failed, childless marriages Bi Kidude travelled first to Bagamoyo, on the Tanzanian mainland, then to Dar Es Salaam. Despite internet rumours to the contrary, Bi Kidude has never been to Egypt, but while in Dar, she lived and worked in what was known as the 'Egyptian Music Club.' For nine years she performed and travelled with them, even venturing as far as Congo.

Returning to Zanzibar in what we can make an educated guess to be the late 40s-early 50s, Bi Kidude retired from *taarab* performance for over 30 years. She remained in demand to lead *unyago* ceremonies. "People would delay their wedding until I was able to arrive," she has said.

Her first steps towards international fame began in 1985 when Zanzibari president Ali Hassan Mwinyi began campaigning to revive traditional musical culture. A search to find a singer capable of performing Siti Bint Saad songs led unequivocally to Bi Kidude. She was summoned and could soon be found

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**A genuine *unyago* is performed to women only as part of a rite of passage to prepare young brides for married life**



Bi Kidude at an *unyago* ceremony, Zanzibar 2006

AUBREY FAGON/CREEKS/TATON

## ZANZIBAR TRIP

*Songlines Music Travel* has a trip to Zanzibar which includes the Sauti za Busara festival in February 2011. See p26 or [www.songlines.co.uk/music-travel](http://www.songlines.co.uk/music-travel)



## BEST...

Surprisingly, Bi Kidude has never recorded a full-length, solo studio album, but there are two compilations still available. Stern's Music online store ([www.sternsmusic.com](http://www.sternsmusic.com)) is probably the best bet.

## ...ALBUMS



*Zanzibara 4, Bi Kidude: The Diva of Zanzibari Music* (Buda Musique, 2006)

This has the most recent recordings, along with some live recordings from the 80s, and though patchy, is probably the best bet, thanks to its inclusion of two tracks from the 1988 GlobeStyle sessions. Reviewed in #42.



*Zanzibar* (RetroAfric, 1998)

Slightly rougher around the edges, and features more authentic 80s synthesizers than the Buda collection, but the *unyago* tracks in particular are full of energy.

**D** *Songlines Digital subscribers can download 'Unyago (B)' from this album. See p61 for details*

## ...COLLABORATIONS



*Mkutano, Taj Mahal meets Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar (Tradition & Moderne, 2005)*

Taj Mahal visited Zanzibar with his trio, and this enchanting album is the result. Bi Kidude guests on two tracks, most notably scatting along an octave below Taj on 'Done Changed my Way of Living'. Reviewed in #30.



ANDY JONES

Bi Kidude relaxes backstage at WOMAD, in 2004

performing regular guest spots at the sprawling Eastern Bloc style Bwawani Hotel on the edge of Stone Town.

In 1988 GlobeStyle Records pioneering duo Roger Armstrong and Ben Mandelson visited Zanzibar for a two-week recording session with Zanzibari orchestras and among them were women's group Sahib el Arry, featuring Bi Kidude alongside group leader Bi Nasra Hillal. Bi Nasra told us during filming that the group's early performances had seen them jeered, and even stoned off stage, with Bi Kidude the prime target.

Somewhere between laughing stock and

national embarrassment doesn't seem like the best place from which to launch an international career in world music. But from the moment Bi Kidude first set foot on a European stage, in Hamburg in 1989, a pattern seemed to emerge, her growing international fame matched by increased indignation at home that this ageing, smoking, drinking loudmouth was representing Zanzibar abroad.

Things began to change in 2004, when rumours of Bi Kidude's death began to circulate in Zanzibar while she toured overseas. As Yusuf Mahmoud of the Sauti za Busara festival says, "only then did people

begin to wake up to the treasure that Bi Kidude was." On her return to Zanzibar, Kidude received a hero's welcome, and a year later, she was honoured with a prestigious WOMEX award. Her international trips may be slowing down now, but there's always the chance to catch her on home turf in Zanzibar, at least for as long as she heeds her own advice on ageing: "Don't smoke too much, or drink to excess, eat plenty of fish, and only wear shoes when absolutely necessary." ●

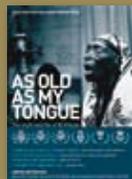
**PODCAST** Hear a track by Bi Kidude from Zanzibara 4 on this issue's podcast

### ...DVD



**Taarab 3: The Music of Zanzibar** (GlobeStyle, 1989) It may only include one Bi Kidude

track, but offers the opportunity to size up the opposition, and appreciate the context of smaller 80s taarab ensembles from which she flourished. Exemplary sleeve notes and translations make this a fine addition to any Zanzibar collection.



**As Old as my Tongue: The Myth and Life of Bi Kidude** (Screen Station, 2009)

The award-winning documentary is now available in an eco-friendly, limited edition package and features a video soundtrack including ten full-length tunes by Bi Kidude and local artists, plus a 20-page full colour booklet.

### ...AVOIDED

If you're lucky enough to make it to Zanzibar for the Sauti za Busara festival you'll find some local recordings in the market. Save your shillings, or rather cut out the middleman and give them directly to Bi Kidude when you see her perform, it's customary in Zanzibar to tip the performers during concerts.

### IF YOU LIKE BI KIDUDE, THEN TRY

#### MOHAMED ILYAS



**Taarab** (Chiku Taku, 2009) Unquestionably the finest taarab recording in years – the modern

essence of Zanzibar style. Mohamed Ilyas and his wife Maryam Hamdani were also responsible for taking Bi Kidude to Europe with Twinkling Stars in 1989. A Top of the World review in #62.