

City Sisters navigating the Glocal Mediascapes in Dar es Salaam

by YLVA EKSTRÖM

While I did research about the changing media scene in Dar es Salaam and its relation to youth in the city and youth culture during a number of fieldwork periods between 1999 and 2005, a topic was “in the air”. The comic strip below by Tanzanian cartoonist Fred Halla serves to illustrate this topic quite well. It narrates the idea that years back, the young Tanzanian woman was expected to obey the strict conventions of society, here symbolically maintained by an older man with a stick, enforcing the performance of proper and respectable femininity. She was expected to live up to the ideals of a ‘traditional African woman’, and as such stay away from things and behaviors regarded as ‘Western’ and ‘modern’. In contemporary Tanzania however, according to Halla’s narrative, what used to be judged as Western influenced femininity is now regarded as a modern Tanzanian female identity, and the young Tanzanian woman is allowed to, and even encouraged to participate in events such as beauty pageants, and to strive to become (like) Miss Tanzania.



Comic strip by Tanzanian cartoonist Fred Halla (2001)

Frame 1: Years back... “If I hear that you have participated in this, I don’t know ‘Miss Whatever’, you’ll have to find another place to sleep!”.

Frame 2: These days... “You’re just filling up the toilet! [Swahili expression for doing nothing relevant"] You don’t do anything to earn a living! Don’t you see your age mates like Miriam, Irene, Hoyce [names of Miss Tanzania winners]... You have just been sitting there!”

An analysis of this comic strip introduced my PhD thesis (Ekström 2010), in which I argued that in the early 21st century Miss Tanzania had become a symbol of success and modern womanhood in Tanzanian urban culture. She was a role model for young women in the city striving to become what was usually referred to as a ‘city sister’ (*dada wa mjini* in Swahili). She adhered to the international standards of beauty, she was well educated, mobile, and above all, independent. These were main criteria for a city sister according to both the popular media and young people that I talked with in Dar es Salaam at the time. In Tanzanian popular culture as well as in everyday discourse, the traditional woman and the modern woman were constantly being reproduced in binary opposition to one another. In various expressions of urban youth culture, the modern woman who was ideally from the city and had been exposed to the world through education, maybe travel, and the media, and followed the winds of change, was seen as an ideal, while the traditional woman was portrayed as her hopelessly backwards and old-fashioned sister originating from the past or from the countryside (Ekström 2010).

Halla’s comic strip serves to illustrate that the analysis of popular commercial culture should be an important part of studies about communication, media and social change. It could be read as a commentary on the changing cultural rules, codes of conduct, and female ideals that have emerged with political transformation and liberalization, cultural globalization, and indeed mediatization of society and culture. But many

Tanzanians still regard phenomena such as beauty contests and internationally influenced female ideals as threats to the ‘traditional’ Tanzanian culture. Parallel to the modernists viewing the changes in society with optimism and hope, the traditionalists view the changes with scepticism and fear. In the moral discourse articulated by puritan Christians as well as faithful Muslims, and in political discourse informed by cultural imperialist thinking, and paradoxically also in some media, the Westernized sister is often accused of being indecent and morally depraved, while traditional African female ideals are supposed to be more respectable and proper to hold on to.

In this article I summarize arguments made in my PhD thesis, in which the discussion was mainly based on ethnographic studies in a group of young women from different places in Tanzania, with various backgrounds, who spent two years together at a girls’ secondary school in Dar es Salaam. Here, I introduce three of those young women and discuss their interaction with the changing Tanzanian mediascape. My aim is to show that in order to get a more holistic understanding of the relationship between mediascapes and cultural identities, communication and social change, media and popular culture need to be analyzed as part of everyday life. Alasuutari (1999) has suggested a discursive approach to audience studies, steering away from an analysis of the simple decoding of particular media content, towards an analysis of the actual role of the media discourses in the everyday, taking into account the complex network of media discourses. Or the mediascape, as Appadurai (1996) calls it referring to both “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” – such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, film-production enterprises – and “the images of the world created by these media” (Ibid:35).

A changing mediascape

The Tanzanian mediascape was strictly controlled by protectionist cultural politics in the postcolonial period. The first

president Julius Nyerere prioritized radio as the medium for development and nation building, and *Radio Tanzania* came to dominate the mediascape for nearly 30 years. From the early 1990s, it has indeed changed rapidly. In the country's urban centre, Dar es Salaam, both popular culture from around the world and locally produced media are now penetrating people's lives. Media and their symbolic forms are everywhere in the city landscape, connoting a connectedness to the outside world and participation in the current processes of cultural globalization. The media often gets the blame for threatening authentic, indigenous cultures and for influencing young people to abandon 'traditional' ways of living and behaving. The following two quotes from interviews I made in Dar es Salaam in 1998/99 summarize two common views of the role of media in Dar es Salaam at the turn of the century – opposing but related:

"People are more informed of what is happening in the US than in Morogoro! Some of the television stations broadcast 90% foreign material. This is bad. It certainly affects the audience, and the culture. Instead of developing our culture the television through this undermines it. The impact will be devastating in the long run as the young generation will be totally influenced by Western culture!" (Male registrar, Tanzania Broadcasting Commission, January 1999)

"What confined us before was lack of exposure. We need to learn from other parts of the world. The international influences within the media have brought a lot of change to our society. The private media broadcast both good and bad things, about national as well as international issues." (Female radio producer, Radio One/Channel 2, December 1998)

Although the interviewees had rather different opinions, they shared the widespread view that Tanzanian culture was changing because of the rapidly expanding and increasingly globalized media culture. Both quotes summarize quite well two broad sets of perspectives on international influences: a

pessimistic view, fearing change and cultural imperialism and propagating cultural protectionism of “our culture” – that instead of “developing our culture” the media “undermines it”; and an optimistic view, embracing change and praising international influences and cultural globalization, asserting that “what confined us before was lack of exposure”.

The opposition between the modernist and the traditionalist discourse around development and social change is by no means new in Tanzania. During colonial times, the wholesome rural ways of living stood in stark contrast to the morally corrupt ways of urban life, in particular in relation to women’s migration to town. Likewise, with the post-colonial nationalist politics of ‘re-invention of tradition’, the expressions of modern femininity were restricted in various ways: beauty contests were prohibited, along with mini-skirts, wigs, and skin-bleaching creams. One major difference between those days and the early 21st century is the media culture surrounding present-day inhabitants of Dar es Salaam.

Tanzanian culture has always been characterized by cultural processes of hybridity (cf. e.g. Askew 2002; Ekström 2010), but after the 1990s this also began to be seen in the media scene that had started to change. In 2003, a male radio DJ and TV presenter at East African Radio and TV gave me the following description of what could perhaps be termed the development of a glocal mediascape:

“There is a wind of change at the moment in East Africa, in the music and in the youth culture and lifestyles. This is what East Africa Radio and TV is promoting. Nowadays people don’t like Western music any longer. Now, it’s the local music that people like. I can tell you that if we brought any foreign or Western artist here, he would flop. People don’t like that any longer. It’s the same in Kenya and Uganda. This wind of change started in 2000/2001. Before that Western music was popular, but now with the help of media, especially radio and TV, local artists have become popular. We help them to grow big, by promoting

them, overplaying them on the station. [...] The local touch is important today. That's what's in this wind of change. [...] We [East African Radio and TV] have like a mission to promote local East African culture. In Tanzania, it's called Bongo culture." (Male radio DJ/TV presenter, East African Radio and TV, April 2003)

Like many other people in Tanzania at the time, this interviewee pointed out that the media, in addition to 'internationalizing' Tanzanian culture, serves as an arena for the articulation of 'local' culture. In urban areas people's lives are saturated by the media, and even if not everyone has direct access to the whole ensemble of media and information technologies, even in the city, one could argue that the globally distributed popular culture nowadays serves as a window to the rest of the world, and the mix of local and foreign cultural flows serves as a resource in the continuously ongoing project of identity formation. Mediated popular culture is no longer only for those privileged few who have direct access to all the modern communication technologies. Media largely is a social activity that people do together in each other's houses or in public places, and media discourses diffuse into the culture and intersect with other discourses, thus contributing to the materialization of media cultures or the mediatization of culture. In urban Tanzania, particularly in Dar es Salaam, people's lives are connected with those of people in other places of the earth through the dynamically changing and expanding glocal mediascapes (Appadurai 1996).

It is in the midst of this that the young women at the core of my PhD study were doing their final two years of upper secondary school in a central residential area of Dar es Salaam. They were, in contrast to their parents at the same age, living in an increasingly mediated world of imaginations and dreams which "creates new opportunities, new options, new arenas for self-experimentation" (Thompson 1995). Media and popular culture played a central role in these girls' everyday lives, in a variety

of ways, both positive and negative. The process of ‘becoming a woman’ turned out to be surrounded by conflicting ideas, expectations and ideals. Participation in the commercial youth culture, growing literally just outside the doors of the young women’s boarding school, could be as distant as the dream of a life in a remote country. But the imaginations and fantasies it gave rise to fed into their experiences and subjectivities as young women in early 21st century Tanzania.

Three girls

Amne – re-thinking ethnicity and difference through the glocal mediascape

Amne was from Dar es Salaam, but her parents originated from Tabora. She was Muslim, and the fourth born in a family of five children. Both her parents were at the time of this study employed in ‘formal economy’ jobs in Dar es Salaam. Her two brothers were studying in Europe, and her older sister was working as a journalist, and had her first child when Amne was in upper secondary school. Her younger sister was also in school. Amne loved beauty contests and fashion, and her friends called her the beauty queen of the school. She was also very interested in people from different parts of the world. Her dream was to work as a politician or an ambassador for Tanzania abroad.

One method I used to gather information about the role of media in the young women’s lives was media diaries that they filled out for a week. Amne’s media diary showed that she was highly involved in the mediascape. She had a little transistor radio in the dormitory where she listened to music while studying and to news at night, she sneaked into internet cafés on her way back from school almost every day, she kept herself updated about local as well as international celebrities through the popular gossip magazines and she even went home in the weekends to watch television (as television was only available in the matron’s house at the school hostel, and just to be watched at very special occasions).

In an essay entitled “Me and the media” that she wrote for my study, Amne showed how the media culture was a resource that could expand her knowledge. Both the global and the local media played important roles as she was trying to comprehend the unfair world and see how differences and inequalities surrounding her had been produced. She indicated that she learnt about local issues from the local drama, and about the world outside Tanzania from the international news. But other forms of popular culture, such as music, also played an educational role in her life.

Media has been of significance in my life because I expand my knowledge by dealing with it. For instance through the Internet I can get various news from different parts of the world, apart from communicating with the people that I know. I surf the websites of various news companies like BBC of England and CNN of USA. Also I can get both world news and local news by surfing the website of IPP Media. But truly I’m not searching much news through the Internet compared to TV and radio, as well as newspapers and magazines. Through TV I usually watch various programs, local plays like *Maisha* (Life) and *Mambo Hayo* (Those Things). These are talking about various issues happening in our society for instance the case of corruption, disadvantage of using drugs, AIDS and other issues. Also I like to watch various documentaries talking about the way that the people from different parts of the world live. Another good TV program is “Africa Journal” presented by the Reuters. One of the news that I will never forget was concerned with the people of South Africa as they were trying their level best to eradicate or remove segregation/apartheid in their country. They said that there were beaches for whites only [...] Through the radio, I usually listen to the news from various radio stations. Also I like to listen to the different types of music like hiphop, salsa, r’n’b, house, reggae, rock, Arabian, Indian, African and sometimes Chinese music. I like songs with a message, like *Different Colour* and *Together as One* by Lucky Dube from South Africa. The message of these songs is just to insist that the people from

different parts of the world should be as one in spite of differences in colour, religion and other things. Also another song, which I will never forget is *We are the world* – by USA for Africa. The message concerned is just to be aware that we are all the same. Another radio program is *Miwani ya Maisha* (Glasses of Life). This is aired by Radio One, and this program is concerned with women's lives, for instance women are encouraged to be aware of their rights and responsibilities, and also there is various news concerning women from different parts of the world. (Amne's essay, 2002)

Amne's essay supports her statements in the diary and in interviews with her, that she uses the whole ensemble of media included in the contemporary glocal mediascape; both local and foreign products from a variety of media are ingredients in her everyday life. She learns from the media, and she sees a potential in the mediascape to contribute to the deconstruction of differences between peoples of the world, between blacks and whites and between women and men.

She explains that she particularly likes "songs with a message", and exemplifies with Lucky Dube, who was one of South Africa's most famous musicians ever, and a big name on the global reggae scene, known for his socio-political and anti-Apartheid lyrics. From the US, she mentions "We Are the World" from 1985, which served as the American response to the UK/Irish Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?" in 1984, and as a charity project aimed at supporting people in Africa, through famine relief to Ethiopia. Critics have claimed that the money never reached the people in need, and others have argued that the projects contributed to the re-production of the colonial stereotypes: "African subjects were represented as the passive recipients of aid – objects of development – who had no voice, no identity and no contribution to make during the crisis. The West, in contrast, was constituted as being full of active subjects, development workers, fund raisers, journalists or world citizens" (Lidchi 1999:92f). Nevertheless, Amne appropriates the message as saying "that we are all the same"

when she is negotiating her position as a black African woman in the contemporary world.

Amne's story also serves as an example that the global media embraced by young people in Tanzania does not necessarily need to be equal to Western media. It could be "Arabian, Indian, African and sometimes Chinese". Young people pick up those parts of the media ensemble that might be of particular significance for their lives. The front artists in the "We Are the World" project were famous black Americans, serving as symbols of the global black popular culture for African youth around the world. Hylland Eriksen (2007) emphasizes that globalization is a dual process in a variety of ways; it shrinks and expands the world, it leads to homogenization and heterogenization, it connects people at the same time as it inspires people to articulate uniqueness, and it creates cosmopolitanism yet encourages fundamentalism. According to him, the term glocalization is important to understand and discuss the processes of simultaneous homogenization and differentiation.

Amne's engagement with the media contributes to re-thinking ethnicities, colours, and other differentiating positions of people. Her story illustrates how the narratives and texts of the *glocal* mediascape are used by the young women in my study to reflect upon and negotiate their positions as young African women in relation to people in other parts of the world, as well as in their local context.

Linda – negotiating gender, sex and relationships through television

Linda was from Moshi, a middle-sized town in the northeast of Tanzania, close to Mount Kilimanjaro, where her mother and stepfather, who was a Muslim, lived (her father was a Christian in Dar es Salaam, but had recently passed away). Linda had a very close relationship with her mother and missed her when she

was in school in Dar es Salaam. She went home every holiday, since the family could afford to support travels, and her mother gave her a mobile phone to keep better in touch. She was open about having a boyfriend in her hometown, with whom she broke up, and a got a new one during my field studies. She was often seen outside the hostel gate flirting and making friends with the boys in the school next door or with young men selling sodas in the street.

All the young women in my study tended to prefer international content on television, so also Linda. The South African soap opera *Isidingo – the Need* was mentioned as a favourite by her like among those of her friends who were habitual television viewers (mainly the girls originating from urban areas). Her “Me and the Media” essay, just like Amne’s, illustrates that foreign influences do not necessarily have to be equal to Western influences, and reinforces the fact already brought up in Amne’s story that media serve as a resource in the everyday lives of young people as they negotiate the subject positions of themselves and others (cf. e.g. Fuglesang 1994, Frederiksen 2000, Arntsen 2010 for similar discussions).

The piece of media output that has been of certain significance in my life is a TV show called *Isidingo the Need* acted in South Africa. [...] I’ve learned many things from it. Firstly I like the way the drama is, its characters and things they do. From this, I’ve learned that a black man or woman can be married to a white woman or man without any problem. People think that it’s difficult, but through this TV show we’ve seen it’s possible. [...] Also in this show there’s the way young ladies live, there are students and others that are not students and they live in a friendly way. This makes me feel happy b’coz I dislike those who see that those who are not educated can not be their friends. In this TV show also there’re characters who are HIV positive. The ways they got HIV and their lives after being affected we see they are still friends with those who are not affected and they get advice from others and they live in no difference with those who are not affected. In this TV show I’ve also learned

that a true love cannot be hindered or stopped by anything and when you love someone truly you can be hurt when you see him/her having a love relationship with another man/woman. I learn this from Derrick, Philipa and Seipati. (Linda's essay, 2002)

Isidingo is set in a fictive South African mining town, Horizon Deep, and the characters represent people of different classes and ethnicities who were formerly separated by Apartheid but now coexist in an imagined 'new South African' community (Wildermuth 2006). By mixing current South African issues such as HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and inter-racial relationships with intrigues that are typical for soap operas in general, it serves as an unintentional 'edutainment' program. Wildermuth (2006) has pointed out that while successful in destigmatizing people living with HIV/AIDS, "regrettably *Isidingo* is characterized by a non-holistic approach in its narrative address of the deeper causes of the HIV/AIDS pandemic". He argues for instance that there is too little emphasis on how to protect oneself from HIV, that the young woman in the series living with HIV/AIDS is represented as a victim, and that "the bulk of sexual relations in *Isidingo* is portrayed as a question of negotiation between equal partners, no matter their age, sex and race" (Ibid).

Isidingo, like most soap operas, presents a glorified representation of reality, in this case a rather optimistic vision of how the post-Apartheid South Africa could possibly look. Nevertheless, it is just one of many media products dealing with issues of relationships between people of different sexes, races and classes in the Tanzanian mediascape, and certainly not the only one that addresses the HIV/AIDS issue. But it might be the only one that deals with these issues the way it does. Linda and her friends have grown up with ABC campaigns (propagating Abstinence, Being faithful or using Condoms), and know very well how to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. But, in the Tanzanian mediascape there are very few representations of sexual relations that young women really can relate to, as locally produced dramas have been very restrictive

in representing sexual relationships at all, and American soap operas portray relationships between people who are far too imaginary for young women in Tanzania.

In her essay, Linda is fascinated with the fact that people living with HIV/AIDS “are still friends with those who are not affected”. However, this does not mean that she automatically believes that this is the case in South Africa, but rather that she imagines that this is a possible scenario. When she further says “I’ve learned that a black man or woman can be married to a white woman or man without any problem”, this does not mean that she isn’t aware of the fact that inter-racial marriages are uncommon, but the fictive narrative allows her to imagine that this could be possible, contrary to what she has learned from other media representations where black and white people are still portrayed as segregated. Her perceptions of relationships between classes, ethnicities and sexes serve as imagination resources that she can resort to when negotiating her own subject position in an urban African reality. The conclusions about love that Linda makes from *Isidingo* might be romanticized and unrealistic, but as Fuglesang (1994:283) wrote in her analysis of young women and their engagement with romantic fiction in Kenya, “[t]hese romantic fantasies are much more than trivial escapism [...]. The fantasies are tools, steps on the way to self-fulfillment. Instead of removing them from reality, they are helping the women to embrace it”.

Victoria – media as an arena and tool for development

As opposed to Amne and Linda, Victoria was a countryside girl, originating from the rural area of Kigoma in western Tanzania at the shores of Lake Tanganyika. She stayed with an uncle and his family in Dar es Salaam when she was not at the school hostel, since the journey back home was too long and expensive. She was – as all the other girls in my study – a devoted student, and nurtured the dream to become a lawyer and to work with women’s issues and gender equality. Victoria’s main experience

of life and of the mediascape was from Kigoma, where she grew up. Her family lived in a village without electricity, and thus did not have access to any media and communication technologies except for battery-run radio during her childhood. Even after television broadcasting started in Tanzania in 1994, access in the remote rural areas was very limited. Also very few of the tabloids and newspapers ever reached people in Kigoma.

When she arrived to Dar es Salaam for the two years of secondary schooling, Victoria was overwhelmed by the technologies of communication available. Her media diary suggests that the expanding mediascape, growing outside the gates and high walls of the girls' hostel, was not accessible for everyone. Victoria did not have a transistor radio of her own – occasionally she listened to someone else's radio. She did not have the habit of reading newspapers, tabloids or magazines every day, as for instance Amne did. And she did not have the possibility to go home to her parents in the weekend to watch television. She did, however, begin to visit Internet cafés during the time of my research.

Perhaps as a result of the absence of media in her life, and also influenced by the post-independence development discourse, Victoria had developed a strong conviction that communication technologies were important for the development of society, and in particular for marginalized groups in society. Her “Me and the Media” essay serves as an illustration of this common view among the young women:

Media declares much about women. Women are regarded as weak creatures, but the mass media helps much to reach the goal intended by the worldwide programmes about women's rights. Therefore media such as radio and television kind of explain how women can also do things that for a long time they couldn't because they were regarded as housekeepers, and not able to do things like technical works and so on. Therefore the above point is the most important for me as a young woman in Tanzania; I really appreciate the mass media. Also I can recollect a piece of

media from Radio Tanzania which is called *Sauti ya Wanawake* (Women's Voice), this is to justify the above explanation that women today are given more opportunities in media to express their problems and what they do. When I was a child [...] I preferred to listen to the program for children called *Mama na Mwana* (Mother and Child) and I couldn't be happy without it. It had some stories, songs and other teachings to children. By now it is no longer present but I still remember it since I was 5 years old. This shows how mass media is real important for entertainment and also society shaping. Urban areas enjoy much more mass media than the village areas. But it is important that the government is trying to reach the rural areas with this media since they need more technology. Media help to expand development through different announcements in radio and TV. I can talk about radio only because where I lived some years ago we hadn't things like television and computers. But when technology is expanding I hope we can get them because they are important to our daily life. They play the role of educating, entertaining and shaping the society. (Victoria's essay, 2002)

Victoria is emphasizing a topic that came up again and again in discussions with her and her friends throughout my research: the role that the media play in disseminating information and knowledge about women's rights and its connection to development – something we saw in Amne's essay above too. There is a generally accepted discourse about women and development in contemporary Tanzania, popularly called *wanawake na maendeleo*, encouraging women to “develop” through education, employment and self-reliance, and the media play an important role in strengthening this discourse. *Wanawake na maendeleo* was the title of a radio program dealing with women and development that the young women in this study used to listen to as children, parallel to the programs Victoria is mentioning above. At the same time as this discourse – sometimes referred to as the Gender and Development (GAD) discourse – is encouraging women to develop, it could be criticized for cementing the binary pair

tradition/modernity. In “GAD lines of thinking, ‘tradition’ and ‘African culture’ are detrimental to women, being posed in opposition to gender equity and modernity,” as Signe Arnfred (2004:13) writes. In everyday discourse in Tanzania, in the streets of Dar es Salaam, in the media, and in the dormitories of the girls’ hostel where the women in this study were staying, the idea of *Wanawake na maendeleo* was seen as the formula for becoming a modern woman, and Victoria’s engagement with the mediascape strongly emphasized this perspective. In talks with her she referred to a song with the title *Wanawake na maendeleo*, which was a women’s movements’ praising song that was popular during the time for my research, that in short summarizes those criteria for a modern woman mentioned in the beginning of this article; that education is the key and independence is the goal (cf. Ekström 2010).

Conclusions

The young women that were at the core of my PhD studies, and of whom I have introduced three in this article, were constructing their Tanzanian female selves at the intersection of the urban culture of the imagined centre of Tanzania and its various rural peripheries, between notions of the global and the local, different experiences of the traditional and the modern or competing ideas of modernity and lived and mediated experiences. Among other findings, my study shows that the glocal mediascape in Tanzania plays an important role in the making of modern Tanzanians. Media as technology – the television sets that some of the girls’ families have in their homes (to the big delight of the entire neighbourhood), the tiny transistor radios through which the girls sing along to church music or dance to *Bongo Flava* hits at the hostel, the rare mobile phones, and the myriad of little Internet cafés that they can sneak into on their way from school – and the symbolic imageries and interaction that the technology mediates, play a crucial role in the formation of the expanding Tanzanian popular youth culture, and the young women use the mediascape to negotiate their subject positions in the world. Media and

communication technologies are symbols of wealth, education and status. Knowledge of the discourses of the media – everything from the latest news about women in a different part of the world on CNN to the new boyfriend of the most recent Miss Tanzania – proves that one is up-to-date. The possibility and ability to navigate through the glocal mediascape is an important ingredient in the making of a modern Tanzanian city sister.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ylva Ekström has conducted research in Tanzania about the changing media, youth and gender during a number of field trips during the last decade. She defended her PhD thesis *“We are like Chameleons” Changing Mediascapes, Cultural Identities and City Sisters in Dar es Salaam* at the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, and is currently a lecturer in Communication for Development at the School of Arts and Communication (K3), Malmö University College. E-mail: Ylva.Ekstrom(at)mah.se

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