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## ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND THE GLOBAL POPULAR

Youth and popular culture in Zimbabwe

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Youth in Africa live and constitute their identities in a world increasingly shaped by the global communication networks and global consumption patterns flowing through the mass media. Yet, in Zimbabwe, there has been a conceited policy since 2000 to de-westernize the mainstream media and communication systems through various measures, including restrictions on international content in the broadcasting media, monopolisation of the airwaves and a general re-orientation of the country's cultural policies. This article explores how the Zimbabwean urban youth have responded to that paradigm shift in the country's media and communication policies. How do they negotiate the restrictions on cultural flows and consumption patterns imposed by the restrictive media environment?

In recent years, the global popular culture has become a contested site for negotiations of identities in African cities. The new technologies and globalisation are influencing every aspect of social life in cities across Africa directly or indirectly, facilitating the diffusion of popular culture across frontiers and boundaries. As a result of new technologies, 'potential sites of identification have expanded dramatically, carving out new, globally defined spaces in which ideas of self and other are imagined, produced and lived' (Mclaren,1995: 22).

This article examines how the youth in Zimbabwe negotiate an undifferentiated onslaught from the government media's Africanisation drive on the one hand and corporate-generated global popular culture accessed via alternative media i.e. satellite broadcasts, video shops and Internet cafes on the other hand. The paper argues that the alternative media provides the alternative spaces for accessing, sharing and consumption of the influential global popular culture narratives. Drawing on qualitative interviews and observations, it shows how the youth are redefining their lifestyles depending on what they can access through the parallel media spaces. This includes: western media products directly through foreign broadcasting stations; indirectly through copied programs, DVDs, CDs available for hire/sale in the blossoming video shops; sharing of music downloads; remittances of cultural artefacts from

relatives and friends who have migrated to other countries; and cross-border shopping trips.

## THE GLOBAL FLOW OF CULTURAL COMMODITIES

Youth popular culture in African societies should be understood within the context of globalisation and the transnational flow of cultural commodities, for these have a bearing, directly or indirectly, on the everyday lives of young people. In recent years, the concept of globalisation has become an entry point to vexed questions around political, economical and cultural phenomena. Globalisation must be understood as a series of new dynamics that promote new cultural and social networks and conflicts both locally and transnationally (Hjarvard, 2003: 7). Globalisation implies a great mobility of cultural impulses, signs, and messages across the world. The media and communication systems are a constituent factor directly related to the processes of globalisation of culture due to their role in mediating various aspects of popular culture -film, dance, music and other aesthetic expressions.

Recent advances in new information and communication technologies have dramatically changed the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products. Technological convergence has seen the interlinking of telecommunications, computers and the media, creating endless opportunities for the distribution and taping of cultural commodities on a global scale. These technologies are used in the internationalisation of communications, cultural productions and consumption. As McPhail correctly notes, “the world’s information and media flows have been enhanced by the widespread surge in sales of televisions, DVDs, CD players, satellite dishes, cable, and in some cases, personal computers (McPhail, 2006: 121).

African countries are generally importers of cultural commodities, propelled by the domestic desire and taste for western entertainment and media products. This makes Africa a significant part of the global cultural, albeit mainly as receivers and not contributors. The media, especially TV are main importers of western films, documentaries, and music videos. Most African countries are unable to compete with the expensive, high-quality TV and film productions from the USA. Due to this, Western cultures are much more visible to African audiences through advertising, films, television serials, magazines, news channels and music. The globalisation of Western music through MTV-like channels shows how giant music producers with corporate roots in the US, Japan and Western Europe dominate the international music market. MTV’s global TV niche for the teenage market promotes global expansion of the music industry.

An embodiment of a global youth culture, MTV's audiences are to extent viewing the same music videos. In this manner MTV promotes Western popular culture worldwide (McPhail, 2006: 135). The westernization of global youth culture is further enhanced by the fact that the main language of popular art is English. The multidimensional cultural globalisation processes have profound influences on youth cultures, and identities.

Clearly not everyone and every nation welcome the globalization of the mass media (McPhail, 2006:121). A number of countries have raised concern over the increasing dominance of US and European global media exports. This has brought into focus the power of culture in this global environment. The impact of globalisation on African is glaring due to increased importation of western cultural commodities.

Even though a number of state broadcasting policies encourages programs that enhance national identity and culture, it is difficult to translate these into practice. Throughout Africa, and some other parts of the 'Third World', feature film production is largely non-existent or sporadic in nature (Reeves, 1993: 9). Cultural production often depends on individuals working under extremely difficult circumstances -lack of finance, adequate skills or facilities, as well as state suppression and indifference. Cont Mhlanga, the founder and director of Amakhosi Cultural Centre and Performing Arts Academy in Zimbabwe, observes: "there is no film or TV industry to talk about in Zimbabwe, what we can talk about are few brave individuals trying to put together an industry" <sup>[i]</sup>.

Shortcomings in the film and television industry are evidenced by the fact that since independence most film productions in Zimbabwe were made possible through donor support, including *Jit, Flame, More Time, Everyone's Child, Neria, Yellow Card*, and *Tanyaradzwa*. Expectedly, donor-funded films are not simply about human-interest stories; rather, they carry development-oriented themes such as AIDS, gender inequality and cultural practices that hamper development. Local films are therefore highly contextualised and not commercially oriented.

Television productions are still in their infancy in most African countries, and their commercialisation is hampered by poor quality. As William Nyandoro has noted in the case of Zimbabwe, "The main problem is the shooting and the final product. Most television productions are shot using digital cameras or even home videos, a boom mic, one or two red headlights as the main equipment. The crews consist of a handful of personnel usually being the director, a production assistant, cameraperson (also dealing with lights) and a sound person; for postproduction, there is usually a single editor. This lack of equipment limits the director's creativity as his shots are confined to a wide shot (master shot), close ups and their reverse shots. There are no provisions

for dollies for tracking purposes and having a crane is only but a dream for local television directors” [ii].

It is therefore not surprising that film and television productions from Africa are regarded as inferior in quality when compared to western productions. Moreover, they are so few that they cannot satisfy the 24-hour demands of television channels. Few of them make it into the European and North American markets.

On the other hand, western film and television productions continuously flow into the African households, prompting critics to sight this imbalanced flow as a form of cultural imperialism.

## DE-WESTERNISATION OF THE MEDIA

The media, especially the broadcasting media, are important means through which young people experience cultural activities such as films, drama, musical performances and advertising. Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has generally been pro-western in its consumption patterns of cultural commodities. Its sole broadcasting institutions relied mostly on imports mainly from Western countries. The cultural industry, together with the education system, generally had a strong leaning towards the promotion of Western culture.

However, this orientation has since changed, especially in the wake of controversial land reforms and the disputed elections in 2000. These two factors cut a fissure between the Zimbabwean government and the Western countries. The Western powers have condemned the violent nature in which the land reforms and elections were carried out, the demise of democracy in the country and the rise in human rights abuses. Consequently, limited sanctions were imposed on the regime, and unequivocal demands for regime change have dominated the western relations to Zimbabwe. International pressure for a regime change and the negative international media coverage of the land reforms and elections provided the government with a pretext to tighten the flow of information in the country, playing on the anti-imperialism thesis commonly shared by the African countries and their predicament with cultural domination and western hegemony.

Zimbabwe's response involved a number of measures aimed to control western media that undermine national forms of cultural expression. Among these was the introduction of an array of new media laws, which sought, besides their political aims, to assert control over cultural

production processes and the distribution of information. The new broadcasting law introduced in 2001 and the formation of governmental regulatory bodies such as the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) and the Media and Information Commission (MIC) aimed to enforce the new government policies of de-westernizing the media. These regulators were tasked with a mandate to ensure that national interests were served in the media and to foster a Zimbabwean national identity and integrity. Such national identity had to be enforced through restrictions on media ownership by foreign interests and non-residents as well as control of media content, especially in broadcasting.

In terms of content, the thrust of the broadcasting institutions in the past five years has been to counter what the government conveniently calls imperialist interests and their quest for regime change in Zimbabwe <sup>[iii]</sup>, resulting in a dramatic withdrawing of western programmes and international music and an increase in local content and pan-African productions. The government has argued that content broadcasted should reflect Zimbabwean identity, history and cultural diversity. Broadcasting stations were obliged to have more than 70% Zimbabwean content, but when this figure proved to be unattainable, 100% African content in terms of music, drama, social documentary and educational programmes was introduced. Local programme obligations were introduced despite the fact that Zimbabwe has very few productions, and of inferior quality.

Quality is not an issue for Zimbabwe only. The mandatory 75% local content within a context of relatively low and poor quality of local productions have alienated the urban viewers, especially the youth. This is compounded by the fact that Zimbabwe has not yet liberalised its media system, but rather maintained a monopoly-like situation in the broadcasting media, which have thus remained largely an urban phenomenon, accessible only to a small section of the population, catering for narrow interests of the ruling party. The penetration of the broadcasting media in rural areas is still very low compared to other countries in the region where governments have liberalised the media.

The re-orientation of the country's media policy in effect removed western programming, news, music and other cultural images and symbols distributed by the media. The local content requirement for broadcasters removed the entertainment programmes that young people sought for and had grown used to. It isolated the youth from the so-called MTV global cultures shared across the world. Against the pretext of anti-globalisation, young people were bombarded with lyrics and narratives praising the country's leaders, its war of liberation heroes, its controversial land reforms, and songs castigating those perceived as enemies, such as the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. At the same time, local music considered too critical to the government was censored. As one former

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings journalist has noted, among all the policies and principles guiding the censorship of music in Zimbabwe, the political issue poses the biggest threat to the development of musical expression in the country (Nyasha, 2005). This demonstrates the government's desire to harness cultural forms and use it to entrench its political hegemony in the country.

The de-westernisation of the cultural industries is best captured by Gecau in referring to post-colonial Africa: "The leaders who emerged after independence presented themselves as the 'enlighteners' and were soon suspicious of those expressions of culture which were proof of the independent, heightened consciousness of people. Gradually 'culture' came to be presented as past forms, national symbols and emblems associated with struggles for independence, the achievement of individual leaders and so on" (Gecau, 1993: 46).

In Zimbabwe, ruling elites have similarly followed this part in their misrepresentation of culture. They have been keen to establish control over communication processes and distribution networks for cultural commodities, thereby manipulating the symbolic realm.

However, whilst the mainstream mass media are important to the everyday lives of the youth, they have a restricted cultural mediation role.

## RE-ORIENTATION OF THE YOUTH CULTURE

As part of its de-westernization plan, the government came out with a new national youth training programme<sup>[iv]</sup>, defined as a compulsory requirement for access to tertiary training institutions and employment in the civil service, especially teaching and nursing. Targeted at young people 10 to 30 years old, it emphasizes reorientation towards what is defined as African values, identity, national pride, national identity and military skills required for the defence of national security and sovereignty against imperialists and neo-colonialists. An estimated 40,000 youths have gone through this national youth training programme.

The programme is regarded by youth as an unacceptable imposition from the ruling party, ZANU-PF, and not a government project. It does not address the immediate concerns of the youth, who have suffered the brunt of years of economic decline and political violence. According to figures from the Central Statistical Office (CSO), unemployment is highest among youth with or without secondary education, most of these residing in urban areas. The youth also have a high rate of infection by HIV AIDS, are

compelled into prostitution or cheap labour, and generally have restricted access to social services and cultural commodities.

An increasing number of young people, disillusioned by the state of things in the country, are expectedly thinking of migrating to other countries in search for greener pastures. Barriers to immigration exist in the form of stringent visa requirements and lack of financial means. There is a great feeling of entrapment and hopelessness amongst the youth in Zimbabwe, whose everyday lives is a cycle of nightmares. Even children from upper class families are sent to study or live abroad. There are, however, certain sections of the youth population generally content about the state of the things in the country for one reason or another; these include black market dealers and beneficiaries of the state patronage system.

The Zimbabwean youth population is fractured geographically, economically, politically, socially and culturally, which results in complex segments. This has given rise to a variety of popular lifestyles that cannot be generalised. It is my argument in this paper that the alternative media are the vehicles for adaptation to the new environment. Due to restrictions in the media market, youths are turning to alternative media outlets to access their cultural commodities. It is in the alternative media that these youth find spaces and platforms for their activities.

## ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND THE GLOBAL POPULAR

Despite the official rhetoric of de-westernization and the government's 'Look East' policy, Zimbabwean elites still look to the West as consumption style reference points <sup>[v]</sup>. The same applies to the youth, whose consumption reference points seem not to come just from Zimbabwe, but have rather been derived from the global media images in other parts of the world, particularly the US and the UK. These countries serve as points of social comparison and most young people aspire to immigrate to them. Statistics show that for many Zimbabweans fleeing the political and economic crisis, the US and the UK are popular destinations. One could argue that the youth find themselves in a cultural crossroad: forced to appreciate the national culture as narrowly defined by the leaders on the one hand, and on the other the globally inflicted patterns of consumption.

Alternative media -non-mainstream media ranging from graffiti, leaflets, cartoons, theatre, music or dramatic performances and audio-visuals to Internet-related technologies- have been crucial in the mediation of culture. The phrase 'alternative media' often evokes semantic and conceptual confusion over their delimitation, scope and position in



relation to mainstream media. Some researchers envisage alternative media as antagonistic to mainstream media because they position themselves in opposition (Couldry and Curran 2003: 7).

## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs), epitomised particularly by the Internet and mobile telephones, have brought new forms of alternative media through which manifestations of global youth culture are evident. An integral element in the mediation of popular culture in spite of their limited penetration and prohibitive costs, ICTs have brought alternative avenues for consumption and exchange of cultural commodities, especially for the urban youth.

ICTs, particularly the Internet, have facilitated the creation of new communication spaces that enable young people to adapt creatively to the restricted cultural spaces in Zimbabwe. The entry of the Internet technologies has opened up alternative spaces for communication and new forms of expression hitherto unknown for the public in Zimbabwe. Even though there is a sharp divide when it comes to access to ICTs and media in general, the influence of the new information and communication technologies to the media landscapes in Zimbabwe is evident. The Internet is in many ways transforming the way media organisation and institutions operate, changing the technological profile of media industries and setting a new scene for access, content, formats and interactivity.

Access to the Internet in Zimbabwe is mainly an urban phenomenon, as is the case in most African countries. Nevertheless, the country has registered a significant growth in Internet usage. According to recent statistics released by Internet World Stats, the number of Internet Service Providers rose from six in 2003 to 27 in 2004 <sup>[vi]</sup>. As of September 2005, there were 820,000 Internet users in the country, representing 6.7% of the population, estimated around 12.2 million. This figure is an increase of 900% from the year 2000 figures. The country has an Internet penetration of 3.6%, amongst the highest in the continent. Internet access exists mostly through corporate or shared networks as well as Internet cafes. The expansion of Internet cafes in urban centres can be attributed to the increase in the number of colleges and universities offering computer training as well as the large number of people who have immigrated to other countries.

What kinds of cultural spaces have been created by the Internet? The Internet technology as such does not determine social processes in itself,



but has become “a mediating factor in the complex matrix of interaction between social structures, social actors and their socially constructed tools (Castells, 1999:1). The Internet’s role in defining the present and future social processes is that, among other things, it offers immense opportunities for connecting and networking dispersed population segments as well as social movements and voluntary organisations. The Internet has emerged as a facilitative tool in mediating the political crisis in Zimbabwe. In a networked society (Castells 1996) lies the potential to allow for differently constructed *discursive spaces* (DeSouza & Williamson, 2002). The discursive spaces allows for conversation through either text or voice. Conversation is an important activity if the Internet and from its beginning the Internet was conceived as medium of communication. It facilitates communication, permits dialogue and provides mechanisms for immediate feedback (Ndlela, 2005: 180).

Using communication forms like email, chat or discussion forums, Zimbabweans have formed thousands of groups focusing on a range of topics and issues. The social effect of virtual networks is that they generate alternative ways for knowing, opportunities for participation and spaces of expression in an environment less affected by the government. The Internet provides an alternative medium for freedom of expression on a range of issues normally not published in the print versions of the state controlled newspapers or even in independent newspapers.

However, since access to the alternative media, particularly the new technologies, is not guaranteed for everyone, there is a certain degree of exclusion and marginalisation of those youth without access.

## THE PHENOMENON OF FOREIGN TELEVISION STATIONS

The monopolistic-like situation prevailing in the country has compelled viewers to go out of their way to procure technologies that enable them to access content of their choice. A survey conducted by the Herald newspaper in 2005 showed an increased flight of viewers from the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings’ TV and radio stations to foreign networks distributed by the South African-based Multichoice, or through special decoders to access South Africa and Botswana’s TV channels (Herald, 21.09.2005). The flight of viewers shows a strong discontentment with programming at ZBH.

Ordinary families invest huge amounts of their income to buy special decoders that will give them free access to foreign television stations, mainly from neighbouring countries. The most popular are the Botswana Television (Btv) and South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)

channels, and the South African commercial channel Etv. They can be accessed with the aid of decoders such as Vivid, Pace and Fortec Star, imported mainly from South Africa and Dubai. There is a booming trade in selling and installing decoders in the country, as advertised in the newspapers.

Affluent Zimbabweans opt to pay huge monthly subscriptions for accessing satellite broadcasts through Dstv, a product of Multichoice - a multi-channel digital satellite television provider for South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The philosophy of Dstv is “to combine the best entertainment programming available from across the world” [vii]. Its menu includes the major icons of global communications providing international news, music, films, documentaries, and other entertainment. The content of these channels is predominantly western-oriented.

Foreign television channels and satellite broadcasts have an ambivalent role in youth popular culture in Zimbabwe. Through a diffusion process, the lifestyles mediated in these channels filter into society, touching even those remotely connected to modern communication systems, such as for example the urban slums and rural outposts. Even though a great majority of the youth have no direct access to foreign television channels, they know what they want and how to get it. Through the ingenuity of those with access, popular programs are recorded and distributed through video clubs or individual exchange, often for a fee. An informant in Bulawayo explained how he makes a living by selling recorded programmes at flea markets, and some to his friends, who in turn make their own copies. An informal network enables young people to access those western programmes they cannot watch and listen to in the local television and radio channels. The informal market is the provider of global cultural artefacts, including those banned by the authorities.

## VIDEO CLUBS AND 'FLEA MARKETS'

The demand for global cultural commodities is evident through the proliferation of video and DVD clubs in the cities and an increase in informal traders' markets (called flea markets by the locals). Although it is difficult to give a detailed statistical picture of the number of DVD/video players and consumption of the youth in Zimbabwe due to the informal nature of the economy, it is evident that there has been an increase in the availability of these items. The relatively low price of DVD and VHS players mean that they are no longer reserved for the rich, but rather items that ordinary urban residents can possess. The brisk business enjoyed by video clubs bears testimony of the increasing demand for their services. Several factors account for the popularity of video shops.

The past years have seen a number of Asian traders - mostly Chinese - opening up retail shops across major cities in Zimbabwe as a response to the government's policies to promote trade with Asian countries. These shops offer a wide variety of products, including electrical goods at prices much lower than those of upmarket departmental stores do. Although these gadgets, derisively referred to as 'Zhing Zhongs,' are of questionable quality, they are nevertheless popular with the consumers in the lower brackets, including the youth, who cannot afford prices in departmental stores. For example, a modest television set which costs about US\$450 in departmental stores costs approximately US\$56 in Chinese retail shops [viii].

Another factor has to do with the rise of informal traders in the country due to economic hardships. Cross-border traders bring their merchandise - DVD/Video players, music systems, home cinemas, blank video cassettes, music and film videos (also pirate copies and censored local music), clothing (used or new), games, etc. - from neighbouring countries, mainly Botswana, South Africa and Zambia. These markets are not only doing a brisk business: they are the most important places where youth experience cultural products. They offer not only cultural products but also a source of livelihood for many urban youths and their families. The booming informal sector in Zimbabwe is central in the configurations of youth popular culture.

## LINKS WITH DIASPORA

With an estimated three million Zimbabweans now living in foreign countries, it is no longer possible to ignore the impact of the diaspora communities on the youth popular culture in Zimbabwe. The large number of Zimbabwean in the diaspora has undoubtedly influenced the young people's lifestyles either through financial remittances, which give the youth spending power, or through transference of cultural commodities. Amongst the list of items sent or brought home are DVD players and other electronic gadgets and clothing. Items that are increasingly beyond the reach of most of the youth can thus be accessed through alternative means. In other words, the diaspora provides a route to the consumption of cultural commodities - MP3s with downloaded popular music, mobile telephones with entertainment functions, and designer labels. Technology provides an exquisite link between the youth in the diaspora and those in Zimbabwe.

## EXPRESSIONS OF THE GLOBAL POPULAR

The interconnectedness of the local and the global is evident in the rising phenomenon of the urban grooves. Roughly grouped under the urban grooves genre, the youth in Zimbabwe are ingeniously replicating the international popular music, the same music genre that the government, through its restrictive media laws, have been keen to silence. Since the introduction of restrictions on western popular music in the airwaves in 2001, an upsurge of youth bands have responded creatively, reproducing international music such as R'nB, ragger and rap using local languages. The popularity of urban grooves amongst the youth clearly indicates the type of music they identify with, in spite of criticism that this kind of music is a cheap imitation of the western culture. The advent of urban grooves is microcosmic of the dynamism of the youth popular culture obtaining in Zimbabwe at the moment.

## CONCLUSION

Fiske has argued that 'popular culture is always a culture of conflict; it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology' (Fiske, 1989: 2). Expressions of culture amongst the youth in Zimbabwe reflect this latent conflict infused by the government media policies, which run contra the global popular culture that the urban youth clearly identify with. The visible absence of western culture in the mainstream media does not limit their influence on the youth in any way. Despite attempts by the government to control the cultural consumption patterns, consumption of contemporary global culture and expressions of transnational popular culture are evident across the cities in Zimbabwe. Popular culture in Zimbabwe is a product of and a response to the twin processes of de-westernization and global popular.

A tentative conclusion in this paper is that recognition should be given to the role played by the alternative media in the cultural activities of the urban youth in Africa within the context of global popular culture. Young people's cultural experiences and consumption patterns are aided by the alternative media, which have become a major outlet through which the youth can redefine themselves. The alternative media, represented in this case by satellite broadcasts, video and Internet technologies, have emerged as cultural mediums that transgress authoritarian media policies which characterise the electronic media in Zimbabwe.

[i] Editor's Note, 'Zimbabwean Artists should unite to lobby government', 2006, in [www.amakhosi.org](http://www.amakhosi.org)

[ii] "Director's Chair", 11.04.2006, in [www.amakhosi.org](http://www.amakhosi.org)

[iii] Even though the law in Zimbabwe provides for private and community broadcasters, in practice there is a government monopoly in the airwaves. All broadcasters transmitting from Zimbabwe are state-controlled. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings operates the country's only TV and radio stations.

[iv] To date, the need for national service has never been formally debated in Parliament. There is no legislation controlling its implementation. The programme has been mired with controversies, with opposition forces and NGOs arguing that the national service leads to abuse of young people by the ruling party. Graduates of these training camps, referred to as "youth militias", are notorious for terrorising ordinary citizens, especially those who do not support the ruling party. [v] This government policy seeks to de-link the country from western influences and increase trade and agreements with Asian countries.

[vi] <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/af/zw.htm>

[vii] <http://www.dstv.com/>

[viii] See for example a MISANET/ IRIN Report 29 July, "Zimbabwe 'Look East' to avoid economic collapse" in <http://www.afrol.com/articles/16876>

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