Understanding the Media Representation of Culture in Zimbabwe: A Gendered Approach

Hilde Arntsen

Betwixt and Between: Case Studies in Gender, Culture and the Media in Zimbabwe in the 1990s

The main focus of this enlightening thesis is on how gender and culture were represented in select Zimbabwean media during the 1990s, and how these issues influenced, and were understood by, young women and men enrolled in secondary schools in Harare. Arntsen’s thesis is based on a wealth of theory and media material, prior research in the area and two case studies: various issues of a women’s magazine (Mahogany) and a controversial film in Zimbabwe (Flame).

Intriguing from the very first page, the thesis begins with an incident of gender discrimination: a young woman wearing a mini-skirt harassed by men as she walks across a university campus in Zimbabwe. The reason: she is not in traditional apparel and so does not conform to their notions of appropriate dress. It is through this event that bigger issues of culture in modern societies are introduced, and how these are understood by different people at different times. Of course, what gives this study more impetus is the fact that Zimbabwean society has felt and continues to feel the seductive drawing power of global influences, while at the same time experiencing a political milieu that inflames, and often distorts, notions of what is ‘traditional’, ‘acceptable’ and ‘decent’.

Arntsen introduces her study by outlining the political, legal and social imperatives that influence gender issues in Zimbabwe. Her compact and concise discussion highlights some of the central issues and contradictions of modern legislation and social discourse. This discussion on gender studies in relation to Zimbabwean women is impressive. It is refreshing to see that there has been a concerted effort to provide literature on gender studies from an African, or developing states, perspective (cf. Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Mohanty, 2003; Lewis, 2004). All too frequently we come across such studies from a purely Western perspective, and so this is certainly a notable exception that definitely strengthens the study.

What is also novel in this thesis is the amount of self-reflection of the candidate in regard to her role as a foreign researcher, and the impact this is likely to have on her research. These reflections are packaged in the academic literature (Haraway 1991; Harding 1987; 1991; Mudimbe 1988; and Masolo 1994) that reinforces the need to be aware and to acknowledge subjectivity of self, which Arntsen does to great effect.

The research is based on discussion and audience analysis of two case studies. The first is Mahogany, which is a magazine created by Zimbabwean women for Zimbabwean women and that deals with issues of interest to these women directly, as opposed to the more ‘glocalised’ editions of Cosmo, etc. Stories of specific pertinence to those readers are featured that would not necessarily be relevant
to others living outside the catchment area. *Mahogany* makes no apologies for being blatantly ‘pro-female’ or for carrying articles in support of that perspective, as illustrated by its editorial comments and snippets provided by the researcher. The magazine provides a context for the discussion of gender, liberation and dependency.

The second case study is *Flame*, a controversial film questioning the role of women in Zimbabwe today, given their sacrifices during the Liberation War in the 1970s. The film presents the belief that what promised to be an opportunity for women to gain more political rights after the War and to improve their position in Zimbabwean society has not been secured. This case could have informed a thesis on its own, and in some way it is a pity that it must ‘share the stage’. It is obviously rife with meaning, and positions itself provocatively in contemporary Zimbabwean society. It raises concerns and arguments that are uncomfortable for that population, and in doing so encourages the audience to reflect on their own position on gender and culture issues, as well as the relevant government’s policies and regulations.

Arntsen has produced a thought-provoking work, a thesis that should definitely be recommended reading for anyone interested in this field. It would certainly benefit scholars engaged in gender and cultural studies, especially if partnered with notions of Appadurai’s (1990) ‘mediascapes’ and Anderson’s (1983) ‘imagined communities’.

**Nathalie Hyde-Clarke**, professor
Communication and Media Studies, University of Johannesburg
Email: nhyde-clarke@uj.ac.za

---

**Norsk film i utvalg**

Gunnar Iversen & Ove Solum
_Den norske filmbølgen. Fra Orions belte til Max Manus_
Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010
