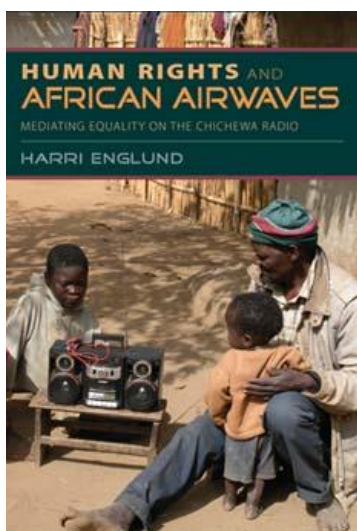

Human Rights and African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio

Harri Englund, 2011

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In reaction to the news that Dr. Harri Englund had published a study that concluded that *Nkhani zam'maboma* gave a voice to the voiceless or an opportunity for the average Malawian to question authorities on human rights, one journalist asked:

“Does Nkhani Zam'maboma (News about districts) take authorities to task? If so, in what way? Each time I listen to NKhani Zam'maboma, all I get are stories about scandals, witchcraft, sex and other weird

happenings in villages. So far I have found nothing about Nkhani Za M'maboma that tackles human rights. Can I be corrected perhaps?"

It is to such questions that Englund provides answers in his recent book, *African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio* published in the USA by the Indiana University Press. To collect material for the book, Englund used such ethnomethodological techniques as key informant interviews, societal embedment, note taking and participant observation. He visited and had long sojourns in Malawi where he worked with the zam'maboma (about the districts) news editors at the Malawi Broadcasting Headquarters in Blantyre, visited a number of zam'maboma "correspondents," and radio listeners in Dedza and Chinsapo, near Lilongwe. Through his societal embedment, Englund learned that in rural as well as urban areas of Malawi *Nkhani zam'maboma* is "widely known and influential even if not always endorsed" (p. 227).

His analysis is based on a sample of 566 stories broadcast in 2003 and 2008. Sixty-five percent were sent from and were about the southern region, while 29% and 6% came from the central and northern regions respectively. Seventy-four percent of the stories came from rural areas while 26% from urban area. Thus, the distribution of the stories broadcast parallels the national population distribution because, for reasons of intra-country migration and a high birthrate, the majority of Malawians live in the southern region. Englund explains that the editors of *nkhani zam'maboma* are passionate about their work and found some catharsis in this genre of news as they are able to do what they cannot do in formal news bulletins, which, April 2012, were biased towards the "government of the day, every day".

Through the book one learns that zam'maboma stories are sent to the MBC by trusted "correspondents" who include teachers, extensions officers, and religious leaders such (pp 162-170). These "correspondents" have cultivated a personal relationship with editors to the extent they even loan each other money. The author informs us further that the editors prefer stories about the common or average people and reject those that are overtly political. The commitment of the editors is clearly brought when the reader is told that editors redraft and add Chewa idioms and proverbs to make the news items palatable to the "Chewa" ear. Thus, the MBC news editors become co-authors and co-owners of zam'maboma news items (pp 125-129).

We also learn that the major themes in Nkhani za m'maboma revolve around exposing and disgracing witches and wizards, crooked healers, unfair chiefs and wayward pastors. Economic grievances, too, are broadcast. By not naming the culprits and protagonists, Englund writes, Nkhani za M'maboma is interested in addressing issues, reforming the culpriests rather than individual actors. To ensure that the stories broadcast are correct the editors rely on the knowledge their "correspondents" have of their communities. However, MBC editors validate potentially controversial events with other members of the same society from time to time. The

“correspondents” verify the stories by asking members of the community if they were aware of the events the correspondents had heard.

Human Rights and African Airwaves makes an important contribution to understanding the tribulations journalists at MBC go through. Through the book, we learn that the journalists try to be professional public broadcasters but the system fails them. They circumvent this and find solace in Nkhani za m’aboma where they look for stories that are true and concern the majority of Malawians. By taking headmasters, teachers, pastors, chiefs, etc to ask without naming, zam’aboma give voices to the voiceless and empowers them to participate in democracy. Also, Englund’s book contributes towards the demystification of journalism as a fortress profession which only trained people can practice. Through Nkhani zam’aboma, MBC pioneered a form of citizen journalism on state broadcasting since its “correspondents” have not been to any college of journalism and do not observe normative ethics but know what makes news in their localities without breaching social norms. *Human Rights and African Airwaves* challenges the Malawian academic and journalist to go beyond the textbook definition of news. Nkhani zam’aboma’s success and popularity with the local people should be a lesson to journalists on the importance of localizing news content.

The book’s main weakness lies in the translation of Chichewa expressions into English. For example *nsima* is translated as porridge. In truth, no one in Malawi would treat *nsima* as porridge because *phala*, which means porridge, is clearly different from *nsima*. The English language needs to borrow the word **nsima**. The second weakness is the cursory treatment of issues of cultural expression. The dominance of Chewa (ethnic grouping) cultural idioms, proverbs and other figures of speech in nkhani za m’aboma, has the potential of turning off some people who use Chichewa (the language) for communication purposes rather than for cultural display as the editors show. The third weakness is the superficial or total lack of problematization of choice of targets, victims or objects of zam’aboma stories. It is not clear from the book if the MBC ever received stories critical of the conduct of senior chiefs like the Group Village Heads, Traditional Authorities, and Paramount Chiefs. Further, while Christian leaders, such as pastors are ridiculed and exposed, there is nothing in *Human Rights and African Airwaves* about Muslim leaders. The book does not give an explanation for this selectivity.

This picking of soft targets for “grilling”, the rejection of rejoinders (such as the headmaster’s refutation of alleged abuse of school porridge by teachers (p. 140 and appendix 6, pp. 239 – 242) and the changing of news angles (such as in a court story about a man who demanded divorce but the woman refused to budge unless her virginity was restored (pp.134–137) are far from being signs of journalistic professionalism. Religious and political sensitivities may play a part in influencing the editors’ choice of stories for embellishment and broadcast. The editors of *nkhani zam’aboma* may expose notoriety and social inequality but they still remain players in or possibly victims of one-sided journalism. By refusing to give a chance of reply to the “victims” of the stories, the editors of *nkhani zam’aboma* actually deny others the right to be heard. The elements of

fairness and balance are very important in news journalism. Further, the author should have examined and interpreted what motivated the “correspondents” to keep sending letters and stories to MBC using their own resources. Would a correspondent like Imran Umar, whose mission in Mchinji was to buy support for the United Democratic Party (p.166) and to propagate Islam (p.167), say anything positive about a Christian pastor?

The above shortcomings notwithstanding, in *Human Rights and African Airwaves* Dr Englund demonstrates how to conduct an ethnographic study. The literature review is wide and deep and justifies why *Nkhani Zam'maboma* qualifies as a parallel public sphere. *Human Rights and African Airwaves* is recommended for social anthropologists, media researchers, students of journalism development studies and media practitioners.

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