Disneyfication and the Erasure of the African Princess

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Abstract

Disney’s latest princess, Tiana, in The Princess & The Frog has fueled the long running conversation about the absence of the “black princess.” Hardly is there an attempt to locate the spaces from which the “black princess” is absent, inadvertently suggesting that this absence is a universal reality. Tiana is quickly becoming a symbol of the realization of a more empowered sense of self for little Africana girls everywhere. Much has been written within academia and in popular literature on the effect of Disney on young girls, with substantial focus being trained on the Disney princess series. The focus of these studies hardly ever extends beyond the boundaries of the Western world, propagating the assumption that children in certain geographic regions of the world, like Africa, are exempt from the Disney effect and influence. Little investment, therefore, has been made in scholarship on the pervading influence of programming delivered by such companies and channels as MTV, Nicklodeon and of course Disney, on children in/from Africa. The popularity of the Disney Princess brand among Kenyan girls, this group’s comprehension of the personality, physical and practical attributes of the princess, and how this informs their understanding, definition and appreciation of the concept “princess” and by extension, their own value is the focus of this contribution.

Key words: African Princess; Disney; African Girls; Popular Literature; Deconstruction

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Introduction

Much has been written within academia on the effect of Disney on young girls, with substantial focus being trained on the Disney princess series (Sumera 2009; Wohlwend 2009; Coyne et al. 2008; Gillam 2008; Do Rozario 2004; Ross 2004; Edgerton, et al. 1996). Often the child that receives focus in this case is the Euro-American child, because in fact for a long time, the Disney princess was synonymous with the white princess. Through the lenses of race and class, some scholarly work has since been undertaken in recent years with children of color as the focus of study (Lee 2009; Lee 2008; Hurley 2005; Berggreen 2004; Towbin et al. 2004; Edgerton et al. 1996).

The focus of these studies hardly ever extends beyond the boundaries of the Western world, propagating the assumption that children in certain geographic regions of the world, like Africa, are exempt from the Disney effect and influence. For those who can afford it, in various
parts of Africa, television programming for children, to a point, mirrors that received by children in the United States of America and other parts of the first world. This is exemplified in urban Kenya, the focus region of this study, where the Disney and Nickelodeon television channels run the same selection of shows as they do in the United States of America. Films in movie theaters are no different as the Kenyan populace enjoys much of the same Hollywood film releases as American film enthusiasts. With most cinema theaters in Kenya boasting expansive food courts with children’s activity centers in close proximity, the attraction of movie going for Kenyan children is heightened. Where the movie theatres do not provide access to certain films, video stores in most urban neighborhoods as well as within many rural areas provide opportunities to rent or buy the video of one’s choice.

Ellen and Princess Diana: Interrogating Erasure of the African Princess

“Once upon a time…” This motif is familiar to people in most cultures and it has transcended the oral and written delivery and made its way on to the small and big screen.

Once upon a time, well not so long ago… actually, not long ago at all, in the beautiful city of Nairobi, lives a little seven-year-old girl named Ellen. Now Ellen is beautiful, nay gorgeous, and she knows it because those around her do not hesitate to let her know with ever flowing and glowing compliments. So when in October 2009 Ellen let her parents know what decoration she wanted on her birthday cake, “a picture of Princess Tiana but with my face” they choked it up to her usual “mini-diva” ways. A few months later, however, when I asked Ellen in a conversation as we looked through her birthday pictures why she had picked this particular princess image, she said with unbridled pride, “Because she is the first black princess.” That was cause for pause.

Disney’s latest princess, Tiana, in the animated film The Princess & The Frog has re-energized the long running conversation on the absence of the “black princess.” Hardly is there ever an attempt to locate the spaces where the black princess is not present, inadvertently suggesting that this absence is a universal reality. In today’s world of size zero models and barbies with non-existent waists, scholars, organizers and activists alike join parents in celebrating the emergence of a black princess and Tiana is quickly becoming a symbol of the realization of a more empowered sense of self for little Africana girls everywhere.

Princess Tiana in the animated film, The Princess and the Frog is the first Africana Disney princess joining other Disney royal ladies in the same capacity as Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan. The Disney films documenting these royal ladies’ stories are Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas (1995), and Mulan (1998). The significance of these stories and the characters therein, particularly the princesses, is clear in the massively successful global franchising around said characters and their stories - dolls, apparel, linens, school supplies, games, toys, and even medical and health items like band aids. Disney has effectively capitalized on the obsession of young girls with these princesses to create an industry that is an institution in itself, boasting thousands of Disney princess products. Significantly, the Disney princess brand has grown exponentially over the years in popularity and in fiscal worth. Indeed, the Toy Industry Association, Inc nominated the Disney princess for the “Property of the Year” award for the Fifth Annual Toy of the Year Industry Awards.
When scholarship is focused on the Western world child, the pervading influence of programming delivered by such companies and channels as MTV, Nicklodeon and of course Disney, on children from other parts of the world, including African children goes unanalyzed and unrecorded. Indeed several people who have done such studies would be shocked at the mention of such influence. This is in part due to the fact that in the minds of some, children in a place often erroneously represented by most media and other reports as perpetually lacking in any progress technologically as Africa could not possibly have access to a Disney film. It is therefore the deliberate choice of this author to make very limited mention of studies made on the Disney effect elsewhere because most exclude the African child. Instead, I will use the children’s own voices as a basis for the arguments developed in this chapter. Overlapping observations with studies on children in other parts of the world are inevitable and necessary to include. It is important to note here that while it may be easy to misread this contribution as a clamoring for “a princess of our own” or buying into the commodification of the female body discourse, a more attentive reading should reveal that this is indeed far from the trajectory of the arguments in this chapter.

Most Euro-American little girls have their favorite Disney princess. Ellen’s statement, however, sent me on a quest to find out where little girls in Nairobi, Kenya stood on this issue and so in casual conversations with Kenyan girls, all lower to upper middle class, I registered their responses, which then led to the production of this contribution. Fourteen girls, aged between 5 and 10, all responded to my first question without missing a beat. The question was “Who is your favorite princess?” I deliberately left out the word “Disney” in structuring the question. The responses were immediate, requiring no time for consideration of options. Each of the girls identified a Disney princess as their favorite princess and clarified why they favored their princess of choice, referencing the Disney movie in which “their” princess appears. Indeed, each of the girls interviewed had at least one Disney princess item in their bedroom, from bed sheets to window panels, sneakers and T-shirts, to mention a few. Eight owned a variety of Disney princess merchandise illustrating their loyalty to the brand. Six out of the girls identified Tiana as their favorite princess. Of these, five had seen the film and one was “just dying” to watch it. The young girls’ comprehension of the personality, physical and practical attributes and how they distinguished the value of their princess has been informative in the development of the thoughts in this exploration.

While the standard mention of the word “princess” typically connotes a female of royal descent, Disney has created a space where the star character that is the princess is not necessarily of royal birth. Some characters like Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and Jasmine in *Alladin* are royal offspring, and others such as Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* and Tiana in *The Frog Princess* just need to conform to the characteristics of “the Princess mythology” as conceptualized by Disney and now widely accepted by the viewing public.

However looking at Tiana and the notoriety she now enjoys as the “first black Disney princess” and in some people’s minds, “the first black princess” begs the question, “how accurate is Tiana in representing the Africana Princess?” In questioning the message her representation sends especially to African girls, one needs to confront the question, “What research went into the creation of the character of Tiana?” This is a ponderous question considering she is an adaptation of the obviously non-Africana princess, Emeralda of Greater Greenswald in E. D. Baker's novel *The Frog Princess*, which was inspired by the Grimm brothers' fairy tale *The Frog Prince*. This, coupled with earlier controversy occasioned by the film producers’ initial plan to portray Tiana and other aspects of the films in ways that would have promoted historically racial
stereotypes of Africana women makes focus on the question of representation necessary. While production notes on Disney’s webpage devoted to the film provide an elaborate description of what research went into the creation of the location, The Big Easy, no such time and space is indicated as having been spent on researching the characters (Walt Disney Animation Studios 2006). According to Heidi Trotta, the Disney spokeswoman, "Princess Tiana will be a heroine in the great tradition of Disney’s rich animated fairy tale legacy, and all other characters and aspects of the story will be treated with the greatest respect and sensitivity” (Tibbetts 2008, 1). One would assume that such sensitivity in character creation would include not just surface political correctness but actual engagement of issues of difference across cultures, races, and classes.

The fantasy of being a princess is one most little girls indulge at one point or other, whatever their definition of the word “princess”. For little African girls in this globalized and westernized world, this rarely conjures up images of people that look like them. With Tiana, there is the general feeling that the Africana princess is finally becoming acceptable to the larger world and that Disney has legitimized, at least in the minds of some, the concept “black princess”. This discourse on Tiana in fact does not foreground the Africana princess but rather makes her disappear, at least historically. In the same way that reading the story of African civilizations as a post-colonial phenomenon disappears the story of ancient African civilizations, the definition of the “black princess” as a new emergent character erases the many already existing princesses in African folklore, and even the real life princesses from across Africa.

More damning ways this erasure occurs is in the representation of the character of Tiana and all other Disney princesses. The image of this Africana and other Disney princesses has the power to transform the standards and conceptualization of beauty for Africana girls globally, influencing the construction or even the re-construction of self and identity and their performance of gender, race and life in general. How do even the slightest nuanced images contribute to and play into larger gendering mechanisms and conversations of race in relation to different cultures and cultural values in an ever-changing globalized world?

Listening to the young Kenyan girls, I was compelled to consider the meanings, in terms of beauty, embedded textually and visually in the Disney princess story plots and how these girls read those meanings because, with the globalization of beauty, “body and appearance are dominant features in determinations of women's place, selfhood, and value” (Tice 2006, 148). It is important to understand this and how it informs parameters that little girls’ use to determine self-value.

The Case of Shani

Meet Shani. She is seven and a half years old, and was born and has been raised in Nairobi. Shani’s response to the question “Who is a princess?” is “A princess is a beautiful woman who lives in a castle.” Understand that “in the United States, and in many countries that are influenced by the United States (largely through the media), the current standard of beauty is a white, young, slim, tall, and upper class woman, and some take extraordinary measures in order to meet such standards” (Patton 2006, 30). This is Shani’s conceptualization of beauty. Prompted to define a beautiful woman, Shani elaborates, “a woman who can attract many people. She looks like a princess.” Asked what a princess looks like, she answers, “Long eyelashes, big eyes like a puppy, long hair, white skin, and beautiful dresses” (Shani, 2010).
Within the plot, the visual representation of the Disney princess provides a significant challenge. Wambui, Tasha, Briana, Kui, Ivy and all the girls with whom I had conversations all described the Disney princesses as pretty, beautiful, gorgeous or hot. Research “suggests that young women may consider the physical attractiveness of their favorite female media personas part and parcel of their overall affinity for that character (Greenwood et al. 2008, 392).” Asked what they found most appealing about the princesses, answers ranged from the clothing, the lighter skin color, the flattering eyes, and the small waists among others. Two standard features that the young girls all thought made the princesses desirably beautiful were the white skin and the long hair. All the princesses have “big” long or wavy hair representing brunettes, redheads and even blondes. The Africana princess, Tiana’s hair is handled no differently. One wonders how close we are to a Disney princess with an afro or any other hairstyle that favors natural “black” hair. As Tracy Owens Patton observes, “the unrealistic expectations of beauty and hairstyle reify the divisions that exist between African (American) and Euro American women” (Patton 2006, 24). In the mind of a little girl who leaves in Kenya and whose only interaction with Euro-American people is almost entirely through television and film, this difference is magnified, particularly when they fail to meet most of the standards set for a globalized one size fits all type of physical beauty.

The two areas of physical beauty and attraction have been the focus of work by scholars who seek to record the proper image and history of African women to counter the misinformed reports of earlier Western researchers on Africa (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007; Tovee et al. 2006; Holdsworth et al. 2004; Caradas et al. 2001; Oyewumi 1997). Indeed, as indicated elsewhere “the two aspects of the African female identity that occupied the gaze and narrative focus of the European anthropologists and missionaries were her body, in terms of physiology and sexuality, and her role and positioning within the domestic and social spaces of the African society” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007, 4). It is therefore important to engage issues related to representation in matters of beauty, space occupation and strength and further explore the realized and potential effects of said representational choices on African children, in this case, little African girls.

“Why do you like Tiana?” I ask.
“I don’t like her. I loooove her,” answers a giggling Tasha (Tasha, 2010).
“Okay, why do you loooove Tiana?” I consent.
“She is poor and boring and then the prince comes in the town and a lot of things happen and then she is pretty and they are married and they are rich,” she answers. Tasha is eight.

While it is undeniable that much happens in the film that is empowering for Tiana, Tasha’s psyche grasps onto one of the tenets of the princess story plot. She wraps all else that happens into the statement “a lot of things happen” and zeroes in on the saving nature of the prince who rescues the princess from her dismal space and marries her, turning her life around. Andy Mooney, chairman of Disney consumer products worldwide, affirms that there has been a clamor for princesses from different ethnicities explaining that he receives many calls from people of different ethnicities asking for a princess of their own. In an interview with Peggy Orenstein of The New York Times, he further defends the place of his Disney princesses as role models and not damsels in distress requiring rescuing (Orestein 2006, 3). Tasha’s young mind however does not deconstruct it that way. She sees Prince Naveen as Tiana’s way out of her misery. Despite the fact that the prince is obviously less responsible for where the two end up than Tiana is, for a girl for whom the Disney Princess tale and plot is very familiar, she sees the progression of the prince and princess’ lives only through the “rescuing prince” filter. For Tasha therefore, to a point, part of Tiana’s power of attraction lies in her neediness – if she had not
needed Naveen, he would never have showed up to rescue her and turn her into a princess. Weakness, therefore accompanies beauty.

Whose responsibility is it to help this little girl conceptualize Disney’s princess as Andy Mooney does? What Mooney and his cohorts do not allow for is what Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju captures in stating that “a discussion of cultural representation of body, beauty and sexuality must necessarily be premised on a framework of difference, that is, in terms of differences in perception and modes of cultural expression or projection of body and beauty” (3). To illustrate this, let us look to the story of Simbi and Nashikufu from the Luhya community of Kenya. It is the story of a beautiful young lady, the Chief’s daughter, Simbi, a princess who would not agree to marry anyone but the most perfect man in the land. After rejecting various credible suitors on grounds that they were not good enough for her, she marries an ogre self-transformed into the most handsome man she had ever seen, a prince from a distant mysterious land, her prince. She is however saved from the land of the ogres by her hunchbacked sister, Nashikufu who realizes that the prince is not what he appears to be. Nashikufu becomes savior after following Simbi and her beautiful bridesmaids to the land of the ogres. The power of rescue here is placed in another female and one who does not fit the typical societal definitions of “beautiful woman” based on physical appearance. Her capacity to forgive and save her sister and her sister’s friends who in the past had treated her shabbily and excluded her from all areas of community life introduces the story’s audience to a different definition of beauty and power in women – Simbi’s beauty and Nashikufu’s beauty and strength are celebrated in different ways but celebrated nonetheless. For little girl Tasha, however, a princess is not Simbi or Nashikufu, even though in versions of the story, it ends with Nashikufu marrying the chief’s daughter and becoming a princess. I asked Tasha if she thought she could be a princess and she responded that she did not have the right accessories, meaning the dress and the hair and shoes.

“Is a princess strong?” I venture.

Tasha appears mortified at my ignorance, “A princess doesn’t have to be strong.”

“But can she be strong?” I ask, hoping she grasps the nuanced implications that separate the two questions.

“No, because then Prince Naveen wouldn’t have rescued Tiana,” she answers in a matter of fact manner.

I choose not to mention to her that technically Prince Naveen did not really in an absolute way “rescue” Tiana. I however recognize that for Tasha, the Disney motif runs in a certain pattern. She likes Disney princesses and is excited about the first Africana Disney princess and so it is crucial for her that Tiana’s story fits the same plot pattern as the rest for her to qualify as a real Disney princess. I wonder for a moment if it would in fact be cruel to disabuse her of this notion.

I try once more, “Can a princess be smart and intelligent?” To this question I receive nothing but giggles in answer except from one girl, Ivy who recognizes that Mulan and Pocahantas were smart, and two, Maria and Ashley, who describe Tiana as intelligent (Maria, 2010; Ashley, 2010). With this question I was trying to evoke responses to different understandings of strength and beauty beyond the physical. To my princess obsessed little girl, strength is not something they would necessarily associate with being a princess. Wambui is quick to remind me that a princess is spoilt and does not necessarily have to be strong and smart. I am equally quick to ask whether Cinderella was spoilt. This is a debate I should have known I would not win. Wambui answers confidently, “She was when she was a princess” (Wambui, 2010), meaning, after she married the prince. I cannot argue
with that because the story leaves the audience with the sense that Cinderella and her prince lived happily ever after and this means to the little girls, as they explained to me, that she lived in absolute luxury and did not have to do anything except be beautiful and in love. To such a mindset, Tiana’s life in the *Princess and the Frog* does not acquire much value or beauty until she marries Princess Naveen and can finally enjoy the good life. The value of her earlier life, with challenging obstacles, where she struggles, working two jobs to raise start up capital for her own hotel, is lost on Wambui.

Nashikufu’s single handed battle with the world of evil and her brain power that outsmarted the ogres, by far surpasses Tiana’s struggle in the Bayou accompanied and supported by Prince Naveen, Mama Odie, the blind voodoo priestess, Ray, the Cajun firefly, and Lotus, the friendly alligator. The beauty in strength and responsibility for the freedom of her people that Nashikufu exhibits leads one to question why this is not the princess that Tasha “looooves”. This is because she does not recognize strength and smarts as contributing to beauty but even more importantly, because she has never heard the story of Simbi and Nashikufu. These characters are simply not familiar to her.

The question then is, whose responsibility is it to bring the African princess to life and into the global consciousness? Should Disney enjoy a monopoly in the responsibility to bring a black princess to life, as Andy Mooney seems to suggest is the expectation of people from different ethnicities? Briana, age 6, looks at me, her eyes mirroring absolute disbelief when I mention that I could tell her a story with African princesses. Wambui had a different reaction. Her eyes are full of challenge, as if to say to me, “I would like to see you try.” The fact that the whitewashed version of the princess is more recognizable and acceptable for African children born and raised in Kenya speaks to a failure in society to provide alternatives of the princess and beauty that represent African, specifically Kenya heritage, culture and the people physically and behaviorally.

On the question of strength, it is obvious from the little girls’ responses that exploring clear-cut binaries of the female vs male bodies physically and behaviorally in the Disney princess plot provides insight into the gender performativity encouraged by the Disney princess series. Too often in Disney princess animated films, spaces of femininity and power are separated, sending the message that these two are mutually exclusive. In *The Princess and the Frog*, we are introduced to Tiana’s hard working, simple dressing self-juxtaposed against her friends who are better dressed and more “feminine” and engaged in activities more appropriate for young ladies as conceptualized by the story’s plot. Indeed Tiana’s friends in the film make reference to this. This separation of spaces of strength and feminine beauty is illustrated in the representation of the different sides of Tiana: Tiana vs her friends; Tiana vs the sugar baron’s daughter; working Tiana vs Tiana in the princess gown. It is no wonder, therefore, that the young girls watching believe that a woman cannot be strong and powerful, and feminine and beautiful at the same.

In contrast to the above depiction, many African tales, like *Simbi and Nashikufu*, provide a space for the princess to be proactive and eventually after they achieve greatness, they may marry the chief’s son or some other great man or are honored by the villagers. The female characters therefore are operating in public and empowered spaces through the course of the folktale. This is due in part to the fact that rigid public and private space dichotomies are more a western than an African phenomenon. The relationship between the private and the public in many pre-colonial African societies was hardly static and neither did it exist in a way that completely delineated the two spaces. Tragically, little African girls, particularly those in urban
centers, have few opportunities to learn this when they get most of their self-constructing information from Disney princess movies and other media like them. African girls’ conceptualization of femininity and masculinity is therefore impacted by the representation of the Disney princesses defined above.

So, who is the African Princess and who should be defining her? It is obvious that whether it is deliberate or not, Disney is defining for all girls across the world the concept “princess”. Let us revisit the question raised earlier in the article on what research was invested in the creation of Tiana, and so the princess that Disney is helping define for little African girls. The trend Disney is following is nothing new. It has been observed in other areas as with the development of the African American Barbie.

“Colored Francie” released in 1967 and sometimes referenced as the first African American Barbie was in fact just a darker version of the same mold used to create the white Francie Barbie. Consequently, except for the dark skin, the doll was devoid of any physical features typically representative of African American women. The “black” Barbies that followed Francie did no better job at representing Africana features until 2009 when Mattel released the “So In Style” line expected to provide a more realistic depiction of Africana people than previous Barbies. As evidenced in preceding discussion, physical appearance and beauty are obviously on the radar of young girls. Patton observes that through the language and images of the media women are cuckolded into believing that feminine beauty in embodied in one’s outer appearance rather than in her intelligence (Patton 2006, 39). The nuances embedded in the creation of characters that look in many ways like black versions of white standards, transmits messages about what is beautiful in the global sphere. Unfortunately for many African girls, these standards are not achievable because the nature of their physical features cannot allow for it. The Disney princess line has not done much better with Tiana’s princess appearance, a situation that then keeps the young African girls focused on Eurocentric standards of beauty and ultimately on a specific idea of what a princess, which translates into “a beautiful woman” looks like. As observed elsewhere, African beauty cannot be mono-directionally defined in this way (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007; Oyewumi 1997). Further, as Patton reminds us, “What or who is considered beautiful varies among cultures. What remains consistent is that many notions of beauty are rooted in hegemonically defined expectations” (Patton 2006, 24). This is more so now with what seems to be universal definition of a standard beauty for women.

Little Wambui says of the princess that, “She is gorgeous and has long beautiful hair and she wears princess dresses”. Simbi in all versions of the Simbi and Nashikufu story is described as the most beautiful girl that had walked those lands in the recent memory of the time. Tiana, alternatively, is presented as attractive by normal standards but plain and unexciting until her rich white girlfriend dresses her up in a princess outfit and then the frog prince suddenly mistakes her for a princess and kisses her, triggering the main events of the plot in the 1920s New Orleans world of the story. She then is transformed into a not so beautiful, often disagreeable frog and again only at the end of the story when the prince kisses her and she becomes a bona fide princess does she become beautiful and dazzling. What version of beauty would Tasha and Wambui buy into if they were equally exposed to both princesses: Simbi or Tiana? This is a point to ponder.

Because Disney’s animated work is primarily a visual media and because it is targeted at a very impressionable and vulnerable audience, it is important to provide balanced and culturally inclusive images recognizing that “Where body is universal, body image is racial, social or cultural and hegemonic; it is imposing and imposed” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007, 12). In the absence
of such consideration, however, on the part of Disney and other media establishments, who after all are businesses and therefore will tend to make choices that are fiscally lucrative over those that are educationally or ethically sound, people socializing the children have to undertake the responsibility of providing these alternative visual images and the history and the folktales of Africa are a rich resource for these.

So in the face of globalization, how do little girls, watching MTV and Disney in Kenya, with no exposure to what is valuable by the standards of their African culture find a space of self-definition that is empowered in terms of beauty and strength? It is especially hard for African children when in the introduction of an Africana princess, the industry seems to be at once reminding them, “you are different” and yet seeking to represent them using standard motifs and forms. Tiana is in fact, just another Disney Princess albeit a “black” one. In Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter, Omofolabo Ajayi asks: “Who really is this archetype African woman who must be dignified and knowing but uncorrupted and uninfluenced by her knowledge?”(Ajayi 1997, 40) I submit that this image is in fact more that of the Disney princess than the “African woman”. African societies abound with strong agency filled princesses in fiction and real life and it behooves scholars and parents to keep these alive in the memory of their communities.

So again, who is the 21st century African princess? Ellen, Briana, Shani, Tasha and Wambui each indicated that they were “daddy’s princess” because that is what their fathers call them. To the question “What does he mean when he calls you princess?” Shani has a ready answer. “That I’m beautifully made,” she says with a smile. In spite of this, she still insists that she could not be a real princess because she lacks the “requisite” characteristics and accessories. It is however obviously of value to her that her father calls her “Princess”. This, of course, only further fuels her already existing obsession with princess characters and the only ones she really is familiar with exist on the Disney screen, in European and American fairy tale books or in the Bible.

Shani’s father does not fare quite as well as his daughter in answering the question. I asked him what he meant every time he called his daughter “My Princess”. His response was that he meant what everyone else means when they say it.

“What do they mean?” I push.

“Ah… ah… ah, honestly, that is a hard question,” is his comeback.

“Well, what do you mean when you say it?” I am unwilling to let him off the hook.

“This is a hard question,” he repeats, “I have never really thought about it. I guess it must mean something. I know it means I love her.”

“Couldn’t you just say, ‘I love you’?” I ask.

“It is not quite as dramatic,” he says.

He is probably right. The Disney princess tales hold a certain appeal for young girls everywhere in the world including Africa. The seduction of the Disney princess story is its promise of a beautiful ending and so a beautiful life. This version of princess appeals to most little girls across cultures. The question to ask is, understanding the place of the princess as an iconic figure in many young girls’ minds and the influence this has on them in the process of self-definition in terms of beauty and strength, how do we define an African princess, her strength and beauty within and beyond the fiction in a global context? This is important because as Patton observes, in studying body and beauty,
First, women were subjected to hegemonically defined standards of beauty. Second, history, and our knowledge of history and women, in general, privileges and largely traces Euro American body-image issues. Third, women currently continue to be held to hegemonically defined standards of beauty” (2006, 31).

Such a quest for the designing of more universally inclusive definitions of the princess, and so beauty and strength would be, for African girls, against a background of a global culture that derogates their natural looks and puts them at a disadvantage in the global beauty defining spaces. Unfortunately this is already very ingrained in the mind of some, because it is not a new phenomenon. Patton explains,

Historically and into modern times African [American] beauty has been disparaged. As much of the literature on African [American] women and beauty has pointed out, African [American] women have either been the subject of erasure in the various mediated forms or their beauty has been wrought with racist stereotypes (2006, 25-6).

In considering the way forward, the two opposing views of post-coloniality and globalization that Oloruntoba-Oju projects are instructive: “on the one hand that cultural hybridity places the postcolonial state in a culturally beneficial position to navigate a new global world, and on the other hand that cultural hybridity or globalization only sounds the death knell of cherished elements of indigenous cultures” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007, 24). Advocating for the placement of iconic images from African histories and folklore in popular culture is key to retaining what is of value out of the continent’s heritage. “The contest of culture is also contest of identities at individual and collective levels” (Oloruntoba-Oju 2007, 25). Embracing afrocentricity in multi and new media production would go a long way in supporting this initiative. Patton’s conceptualization of Afrocentricity in relation to beauty and other issues allows for the management of challenges highlighted by Oloruntoba-Oju above. According to Patton,

Afrocentricity is not to be placed above other perspectives but equally beside other cultural theories and historical contexts. Afrocentric theory challenges hegemony by moving the Euro standard from a hierarchical norm to a horizontal equalizer. Afrocentricity also allows for a performative nature of beauty (Patton 2006, 33).

This, along with a womanist black beauty liberation campaign as conceptualized by the same author would bring to the center, in multimedia productions and other media, significant discourses on beauty, strength and power and of African girls and women whose values and issues have continually been marginalized or reviled. It is the responsibility of people with a stake in the matter to push for such representation in the media.
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Interviews/conversions
Conversations with Shani, Nairobi, June 14, 2010.
Conversations with Tasha, Nairobi, June 12, 2010.
Conversations with Wambui, Utawala, Nairobi on 21st June 2010.
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Conversations with Ashley Utawala, Nairobi on 21st June 2010.
Conversations with Maria happen in Utawala, Nairobi on 21st June 2010.