

SIKHULUMA ISIKHETHU¹: NDEBELE RADIO, ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1983–1994

Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi

Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand
Sekibakiba.lekgoathi@wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) established nine African language radio stations ostensibly to cater for the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of the African communities in the country. In reality, however, these stations acted as a government mouthpiece and means through which a monopoly over the airwaves was asserted. Through these stations the government promoted ethnic compartmentalisation and popularised the ethnic ‘homelands’ created from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. One of these stations was Radio Ndebele, established in 1983, with a clear mandate to reinforce Ndebele ethnic nationalism. This article seeks to explore the history of this radio station, using both oral sources and documentary material, though privileging the former. The article makes a two-pronged argument: Firstly, Radio Ndebele came into existence not only because of the government’s mission but because of pressure from Ndebele-speaking people who needed radio programming in their own language. Secondly, this radio station helped turn a spoken language that was on the throes of extinction into a vibrant written language that found its way into the schooling system, particularly in areas with a large concentration of Ndebele-speaking people.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ndebele, KwaNdebele, listenership, ethnopreneurs, language

INTRODUCTION

Radio is considered to be the biggest and most popular form of communication on the African continent. In recent years this medium has begun to receive some serious scholarly analysis from media studies scholars, anthropologists as well as from historians (Gunner, Ligaga & Moyo 2011; Fardon & Furniss 2000). A number of studies in South Africa have explored public radio and African language radio in particular (Gunner 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006; Lekgoathi 2009, 2011, 2012; Gqibitole 2002; Mhlambi 2009; Theunissen, Nikitin & Pillay 1996) and even fewer have focused on the use of radio by the liberation movements in Africa (Lekgoathi 2010, 2013; Davis 2009; Mosia,

Riddle & Zaffiro 1994). Except for Lekgoathi's (2012) article, no scholarly work has been produced on Ndebele radio. This article focuses on the history of Radio Ndebele, a station that was established as part of the ethnic radio stations of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) by the National Party government just a few years before the crumbling of the apartheid system.

The Ndebele radio station was officially launched as Radio Ndebele on 29 March 1983, roughly two years after the establishment of KwaNdebele as the 'homeland' for the 'Southern Ndebele'-speaking people of South Africa. This was the last in a series of the radio stations to be established by the SABC. Today the station is known as Ikwewezi FM (*ikwewezi* means 'star'), following the renaming of all of the SABC's African language stations as a gesture to signify their repudiation of the separatist policies and overtones that characterised these stations under apartheid. Today this radio station attracts more than 1.7 million listeners per day, a figure which is significantly above the number of Ndebele-speaking people in the country. How do we explain the popularity of this radio station, which in terms of its initial conception, was unmistakably intended to convey government propaganda messages?

This article provides an historical analysis of Radio Ndebele from its inception to the eve of political transformation in 1994. It looks mainly at the underlying motives for the establishment of the station and the key agents involved in its formation. It also probes more deeply the role of the station in fomenting or building Ndebele ethnic consciousness, cultural identity and language. The article is based on a combination of archival material – mainly audio footage and the *SABC Annual Reports* stored in the SABC archives at Aucklandpark, the Corporation's headquarters – as well as on oral accounts collected through the interviews that I conducted with the presenters and other employees of the same radio station. The article foregrounds orality and makes a strong case for the utilisation of the sound archive as a crucial resource from which the voices of ordinary people can be retrieved in the process of reconstructing the past.

I have to stress that apart from fragmentary clips here and there, the radio station's old audio footage is very patchy, if not virtually non-existent today as a result of the practice, in the early years, of erasing and reusing the taped audio reels to record new programmes. Presumably, this was part of cost-cutting measures of a racially stratified public broadcaster-cum-state broadcaster. In addition, compared to the white side of the SABC, the culture of archiving had not yet been entrenched in the African radio section of the SABC until about 1986, when the consciousness about preservation of old recordings began to develop. This accounts for the paucity of audio footage on African language stations particularly in relation to their early years. Notwithstanding these difficulties, enough of these sources exist, albeit scattered, and combined with interviews conducted with some of the founding presenters and other staff members of the station, a fuller picture of the workings of Ndebele radio can be painted.

The argument of this paper is twofold: firstly, the apartheid government's need for an additional outlet for its propaganda messages dovetailed neatly with the Ndebele ruling elites' and ordinary Ndebele listeners' desire for a separate radio station that

would place the Ndebele roughly on par with other language groups in the country. This happened right at the moment of heightened Ndebele ethnic consciousness shortly after the establishment of KwaNdebele as a homeland for the Ndebele speaking people in the country. Secondly, Ndebele radio played a pivotal role in promoting Ndebele culture and ethnic pride. It contributed to the development of *isiNdebele* (Ndebele language) which until then was a spoken language but soon became a written one. This was a language that was generally looked down upon (even by some of the native Ndebele speakers themselves) as it was associated with backwardness; but soon evolved into one that the Ndebele speakers could now proudly assert and speak with pride even in public spaces.

Clearly, there was something sinister about the enthusiasm with which the apartheid government pursued the idea of the establishment of a separate Ndebele radio station. However, on the part of many Ndebele-speaking people it was quite pleasing that their language, which had hitherto remained a spoken language and was in danger of dying out as its usage among the native speakers was diminishing considerably, would get a chance to flourish and develop into a fully-fledged written language. For that reason they embraced the new radio station with great enthusiasm. However, before this moment many ‘Southern Ndebele’ people strongly identified themselves with Radio Zulu, in part because of some very limited Ndebele programming on that station.

‘NGEZAMANDEBELE: RADIO ZULU AND NDEBELE PROGRAMMING, 1965–1982

When, in 1960, the SABC established four separate ethnic radio services of Radio Bantu (for the Northern Sotho/Pedi, Southern Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa), to which the Tswana, Venda and Tsonga stations were added in the following years, the Ndebele were not on the agenda of the apartheid state’s architects. The Nzunza – the largest section of the Southern Ndebele – as the remnants of one of the most wayward of the late nineteenth-century chiefdoms that had been completely shattered during the colonial wars of conquest, were initially not encouraged to regroup into a territorial authority (Delius 1989). Even as some government ethnologists (*volkekundiges*) were touting the Southern Ndebele as worthy of being given ‘a home of their own’ from as early as 1960, the government’s expectation was that the group as a whole would be accommodated within the existing ‘homelands’ of Lebowa (for the Northern Sotho/Pedi) and Bophuthatswana (for the Tswana) where they would eventually be culturally assimilated and cease to exist as a distinctive group. However, the mere establishment of the homelands for other groups, as well as the establishment of the different African language radios gave impetus to the crystallisation of Ndebele ethnicity (Lekgoathi 2003, 2006). It was as a result of agitation by the Ndebele ethnic nationalists, alongside the mechanisation of commercial farming and the concomitant need to get rid of excess Africans on white farms that the government finally put in place plans for the establishment of a Southern Ndebele ‘homeland’ in the early 1970s, a plan that came into fruition in 1981. Once this primary objective had been achieved, other symbols of

‘nationhood’ such as a radio station soon followed.

Prior to the official launching of Radio Ndebele in 1983, the Ndebele listeners, according to several of my interviewees, had had a very limited amount of programming in their language on Radio Zulu (now called *Ukhozi FM*) from around 1965. This was partly based on the fact that prior to the standardisation of their language most Southern Ndebele parents sent their children to schools and colleges that offered tuition in the Zulu language, especially in the present-day KwaZulu-Natal province. However, according to John Poki Skosana and Shorty Peter Mahlangu, veteran broadcasters of Ndebele radio, a large number of Ndebele children continued to attend school in the Transvaal where *isiZulu* was offered as a language of instruction. It was from this crop of learners that Radio Zulu selected some of its broadcasters (such as Winnie Mahlangu and Thetha Masombuka) as well as presenters for the solitary Ndebele show *NgezaMandebele* (literally meaning ‘Matters of the Ndebele’), a programme about Ndebele culture, music and language. Thus, the roots of Ndebele radio were deeply entrenched in the history of one of the most popular radio stations in the country.

Pinkie Mabona, a male presenter, and Meriam Nofanezile Mashiane were both native Ndebele speakers who were among the path-breakers for Radio Ndebele. Both initially presented the Ndebele programme on Radio Zulu at Broadcast House in central Johannesburg, from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. During this early phase the Ndebele programme was allocated a paltry 30-minute Sunday midday slot that was enormously appealing to Ndebele listeners (Skosana, Interview 8 December 2011; Mahlangu, Interview July 2013). Other interviewees maintain that the programme was about an hour long, which suggests that the time allocated to it may have been increased over time (Mothers of *amasokana* (initiates) of Vlaklaagte village no. 2, Interview 20 July 2013). Shorty Peter Mahlangu, who started off as a junior announcer on Radio Ndebele in 1983 and now serves as the executive producer of culture and language on *Ikwekwezi FM*, recalls the level of excitement that accompanied the introduction of this programme on Radio Zulu: ‘The Ndebele listeners used to turn the volume of their radio receivers very high when they were listening to the programme *NgezaMandebele*’ (Mahlangu, Interview 5 July 2011).

The pride with which the Ndebele audiences listened to the programme in their own language was confirmed in a group interview with rural Ndebele women at the village of Vlaklaagte No. 2 in Mpumalanga Province (the area of former KwaNdebele). These women had very fond memories of this weekly programme, and they reminisced about the contentment derived from listening to programme content that included music, culture and news in their own language. They also had recollections about how they used their ‘Eveready’ radio batteries sparingly in order to make sure that they would not run flat before the commencement of the programme (Mothers of *amasokana* (initiates) of Vlaklaagte village no. 2, Interview 20 July 2013).

Rhobongo Petrus Mahlangu was about 15 years of age when he became aware of the Ndebele programme on Radio Zulu around 1979. His grandfather possessed a small FM-only ‘wireless’ which he almost unfailingly listened to on Sundays. Mahlangu still

has vivid memories of his grandfather instructing him to place the ‘wireless’ on top of the front courtyard wall (*emthangaleni*) so that they could all have better reception of the programme *NgezaMandebele* which at that time featured Nofanezile Meriam Mashiane, Thetha Masombuka, Pinkie Mabona and others (Mahlangu, Interview July 2013). The popularity of the Ndebele programme on Radio Zulu among the Ndebele-speaking people in the years prior to Radio Ndebele thus shows that vernacular radio did fulfil a role that defies the notion of it simply being a government propaganda tool.

Elijah Thetha Masombuka and Mduduzi Hlophe are also included in the list of Radio Ndebele’s pioneers who presented this initial Ndebele programme. Thetha Masombuka very quickly established himself as a very successful and popular Zulu sports presenter and commentator. He had a following not only among the Ndebele and Zulu radio audiences but also among multitudes of admirers across the ethnic spectrum in different areas with adequate reception of Zulu broadcasts. He was very energetic and his lively sports commentaries, particularly the live soccer matches, endeared him to many listeners. Liz Gunner (2000) aptly captures the power of radio and the enormous capacity to create an ‘imagined community’ in which the listeners were bound together ‘beyond the reach of any ethnic programmer’. The appeal of Thetha’s sports broadcasts on Radio Zulu transcended the kind of ethnic particularism that the SABC was trying to cultivate. In Gunner’s own words,

One did not need a pass, or money for travel through apartheid mapped cities, to move in the mind to that pitch, spurred on by the fevered eloquence and soaring voice of Thetha Masombuka as he created verbal pictures of skill, daring energy, spectacular tries, near misses, penalties, fouls, offsides... (Dlamini 2009: 30)

Through their effective use of their voices broadcasters like Thetha became instant celebrities not only in an economic sense of higher salaries but also in the sense of being cultural innovators using a modern medium. Thetha’s skilful use of language and lively voice were enthralling, enabling his audiences to develop vivid images of sports events happening far away from their homes or workplaces. He made it possible for his listeners to connect with one another and to be transported into the stadiums and other arenas where the games were being played. He brought the dramas of soccer matches played out in the stadiums into his audiences’ living rooms, in shebeens or any other places where they might have been listening to their radio sets. Thus, at a time when television had not yet been introduced in South Africa, radio served as ‘theatre of the mind’, to adopt a phrase from media scholars Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Coenie de Villiers (1998). According to them,

[Radio] can stimulate the imagination as the listener attempts to visualise what he or she hears and to create the owner of the voice in the mind’s eye. The pictures which are created carry emotional content – a crowd at a national celebration, the commentator at a soccer match, a disc jockey linking music selections, or a character in a radio play intoning joy, sorrow or pathos (Teer-Tomaselli & De Villiers 1998: 147).

'SIKHULUMA ISIKHETHU' (WE SPEAK OUR OWN LANGUAGE): THE BIRTH OF RADIO NDEBELE, 1983

When in 1960 the SABC established four separate ethnic radio services of Radio Bantu (for the Northern Sotho/Pedi, Southern Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa), to which was added a service for the Tswana, Venda and Tsonga a few years later in the same decade, the Ndebele did not feature anywhere in the apartheid state's plans. It is quite ironic that just as the colourful Southern Ndebele wall paintings were growing in salience and being increasingly appropriated in the marketing of South Africa to international tourists visiting the country, the people and the culture behind the art were not seen as worthy of being granted a territorial enclave. The state was at first not enthusiastic about abetting their regrouping because of their rebelliousness in the 1880s. These were remnants of a late nineteenth-century African polity that was systematically dismantled during the wars of conquest. Their inhabitants were divided up among white farmers as indentured servants and their rulers incarcerated in prison in Pretoria for many years (Delius 1989; McCaul 1987). The expectation in the early 1960s, in fact, was that they would be integrated into the existing 'homelands' of Lebowa (for the Northern Sotho) and Bophuthatswana (for the Tswana) where they would eventually be culturally assimilated. However, the very act of establishing 'homelands' for other groups triggered Ndebele ethnic consciousness and the desire to be like other recognised groups (Lekgoathi 2003; 2006). It was partly as a result of the mobilisation of ethnic consciousness by the Ndebele elites – which had its roots in the 1920s but was actually intensified in the 1960s and early 1970s – that the Southern Ndebele ethnic brokers, ethnic nationalists or '*ethnopreneurs*' were finally granted their wish for a 'homeland' named KwaNdebele in 1981. Once that primary goal had been achieved, the Southern Ndebele were now a step closer towards acquiring their own separate radio station.

Radio Ndebele as a distinct station only hit the airwaves for the first time on 29 March 1983 at 6.30 p.m.² It was officially opened with an *igwabo*, an Ndebele war song that used to be sung by warriors to celebrate their victory in battle. Today this song is commonly performed when young men come back home after spending about two months in seclusion at *engomeni* (male initiation) in the bush. The song is also performed during the installations of traditional leaders as well as during heritage commemoration events such as the King Nyabela Day (for the Nzunza Ndebele) or King Silamba Day (for the Manala Ndebele).

Early on the day of the station's inauguration a bull was slaughtered as an offering to the ancestors and the meat was cooked and served as part of the meal prepared for those who had turned up to celebrate the occasion. This bull was contributed by the KwaNdebele homeland administration (Skosana, Interview 8 December 2009). Immediately after opening with the *igwabo* the two presenters of the very first programme, namely Shorty Peter Mahlangu and John Poki Skosana, followed with the greetings. Mahlangu said jubilantly in *isiNdebele*, 'Greetings to you, Ndebele people! This is the moment you have all been waiting for...Radio Ndebele, the last born baby

of the SABC's vernacular radio stations has finally been delivered.' Then he went on to explain to his listeners what was in store for them and hoped that they would enjoy the first evening of the broadcast. The radio had been established to cater for the needs of a particular ethnic group, for this reason the presenter made it clear that he was specifically addressing Ndebele-speaking listeners. By specifying the Ndebele as his audience the presenter was excluding, consciously or unconsciously, non-Ndebele speaking listeners as possible listeners, something which fed directly into the apartheid state's policy of ethnic separatism.

After a very sombre religious song, an opening prayer and the reading of Biblical scriptures (Luke 4: 20–25), the second presenter, Shorty Peter Mahlangu, announced the next item on the programme, namely the broadcasting of a pre-recorded speech given earlier in the day by Steven de Villiers, Director General of the SABC who had also been in charge of African language radio service for seventeen years. Delivering his address entirely in Afrikaans, De Villiers started off by giving a bit of a background about the decision taken in the early 1960s to establish a radio station for each of the African language groups in the country (an explanation which was only partly true as the Ndebele were not really under consideration in the initial framework). It was only 23 years after the initial decision was taken that Radio Ndebele was introduced. Yet De Villiers presented this development as the culmination of a grand plan to ensure the growth of African language radio in the country. From only four ethnic language stations broadcasting for a total maximum six hours per day on 1 June 1960, by 1983 these had gone up to nine stations broadcasting a total of 174 hours per day. Radio Ndebele started with a modest 3 hours a day.

Central to De Villiers' speech was the explanation of the core business of the SABC's vernacular radio service, namely to satisfy the listeners' needs by providing information, education and entertainment. The Director General was quite blunt in stating that a sense of cultural belonging was to be promoted on the new radio station (certainly similar to what other ethnic stations were doing), and that it should also serve as a platform to expose Ndebele youths' talents. There was nothing novel about this point. In his position as Director General of the SABC, De Villiers was simply echoing the policy framework of the National Party government when it came to using vernacular radio to promote and reinforce ethnic identification. Lekgoathi (2009) in his article on the establishment of Northern Sotho radio argues that the SABC created the ethnic radio stations to serve as a tool of government propaganda, even though a tiny minority of presenters found creative ways of subverting this underlying political agenda. As the previous Director General of Radio Bantu, Carl Fuchs, had said at one point in 1969, the programme policy of the SABC was 'linked to national policy, based on the recognition of the diversity of language groups', which was really about 'encouraging language consciousness among each of the Bantu peoples, to encourage national consciousness' (Fuchs quoted in Lekgoathi 2009).

There was hardly any subtlety or any hidden intentions about what was going on, as reflected in what De Villiers said in conclusion of his speech at the opening of the new station: '*Radio Ndebele is 'n radio diens deur die Ndebele, vir die Ndebele*' (Radio Ndebele is a radio service by the Ndebele for the Ndebele).³ To that effect, he reiterated that the African personnel employed as presenters on the station had to be native Ndebele speakers so that they could naturally connect with their Ndebele audiences and effectively discharge their responsibilities at the level of communication. In stating that he hoped Radio Ndebele would find its place in the heartland of the Ndebele in the same way that the idea of an Ndebele homeland had done, the director general was simply highlighting the clear connection between vernacular radio and the apartheid government's Bantustan policy. He was merely restating a longstanding policy that had existed from the beginning of vernacular radio in the country.

The other speakers to go over the mission and vision of the SABC's African language stations were Advocate J. H. Mills, a white Commissioner General of KwaNdebele, and N. J. Louw, a white Programme Director of the SABC Black Radio Services. The first Chief Minister of KwaNdebele, Mr. S. S. Skosana was also in attendance and he was obviously elated with the establishment of Radio Ndebele as an indication of yet another accomplishment on the long and arduous struggle towards the full realisation of his dream of Ndebele nationhood. In his speech Skosana had this to say:

Greetings to you, the Ndebele people! Today I greet you and inform you of the great news. There is now a Ndebele language on radio. Accept this with both hands. This is not a minor development. This radio station will help us in the process of creating one Ndebele nation. You are now the owners of this radio service. I am now informing you officially that Radio Ndebele is open. *Kusile AmaNdebele. Asiyephambili kabili kahlanu. Phambili!* (It is now crack of dawn, the Ndebele people. Let us step forward twice, five times over. Forward!).⁴

At the core of his speech the Chief Minister stressed the link between radio broadcasting and the forging of Ndebele ethnic nationalism. Chief Minister Skosana and other Ndebele ethnic nationalists saw the potential in using the new technology to foster a sense of collective consciousness around Ndebele identity, something which they had been struggling to forge from the 1960s right until that moment in the early 1980s. In that sense their interests and motives coalesced with those of the ruling apartheid government who sought to promote Bantustan identities or ethnic balkanisation through the medium of vernacular radio. The development of a common language was certainly at the centre of this exercise.

The relationship between broadcasting and ethnic nationalism found clear expression in Radio Ndebele's adoption of the ethnic nationalist movement's slogan '*Kuvuswa esivusako*' (One who tries to lift himself or herself up should be given a helping hand). For a long time this saying was maintained as the station's signature tune and deployed when opening or closing the station. But it was changed slightly to '*Vusa esivusako*' (Lift up only those that attempt to uplift themselves).

The KwaNdebele Commissioner General, Advocate Mills also delivered his address which revealed something significant about the relationship between vernacular broadcasting and state policy. He expressed some words of appreciation that the Ndebele were getting their own radio service on the day, which he viewed as a major milestone in the development of their culture and history. He hoped that the station would use the opportunity to develop interesting cultural programmes, such as actuality programmes or documentaries, and to celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the Ndebele, as well as using the outside broadcasts to provide ‘correct information about the developments’.⁵

For his part Louw in his position as programme director gave his entire address in Zulu, the language that was familiar to Ndebele-speaking people. In his speech Louw showed off his fluency and deep understanding of the Zulu language by invoking some idiomatic expressions. It was perhaps because of his language abilities that he occupied the position of programme director, a role that involved the monitoring or surveillance of what was being said by the African presenters, especially on Nguni services (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Tsonga and Ndebele). One of the expressions he used was, ‘*Ingani engakhali ifela embelekweni*’, literally translated as ‘A child that does not cry dies in its mother’s cradle’; which means that your grievances will never be addressed unless you express them loudly and clearly.⁶

Louw revealed quite a lot not only about his thorough knowledge of the most widely spoken vernacular language in the country but also about the apartheid state’s conceptualisation of African ethnic groups as ‘nations’, this within the context of the policy of ethnic compartmentalisation and the creation of homelands as ‘national states’. These issues are so well captured in his speech that it is worth quoting it at length:

It has been quite a long time that you [the Ndebele] have been crying wanting to have your own station. You have been complaining that you are tired of being carried by Zulu Radio. You wanted to stand on your own two feet and now we are very proud of this step that you have taken. You will now be able to listen to your own presenters who were carefully selected... The station’s progress will depend mainly on the extent to which you support it through listening to it. The Ndebele nation is the smallest of all national groups in South Africa. But you have shown that you have great tenacity and that you are really determined to build yourself as a nation. Parallels can be drawn between you (the Ndebele) and old Boers who had to read and write Dutch before they could develop their own language. The old Boers who spoke Afrikaans, had to learn and read in Dutch in the same vein as you read and write in Zulu today. The Boers triumphed and you will also become victorious with the support of this radio station. There will be books in this language (*IsiNdebele*) as a result of this station. The Ndebele Language Board, which has been formed already, will play an important role in this enterprise. Without language you will not be a nation. The Ndebele are a very small nation, but the numbers are not of primary significance when it comes to nation building. The Ndebele radio station will work with you to create big things... We want your own music, which reflects your identity. It must come out from within your communities... *Umtwana ukhunyuliwe embelekweni...ukuze akhule kumele ancelekunina* (The baby has now been untied and released from the cradle...for it to grow it now has to suckle from its mother). The Ndebele nation must embrace it (the baby). It will help you in promoting your culture and identity.⁷

What this quotation is telling us is that the apartheid government was fully committed to supporting the development of Ndebele language by the 1980s (for its own political reasons, i.e. to reinforce ethnic consciousness). This was a ploy to counter growing African nationalism in the country, even at this late hour, as well as to mollify the Ndebele *ethnopreneurs* who wanted to reap the material benefits of embracing the homeland system. The Ndebele nationalists had been pleading for the establishment of a separate Ndebele station and they had the support of many ordinary Ndebele people since the mid-1960s. Thus the interests of the apartheid government and Ndebele elites coalesced around the establishment of this radio station.

The establishment of Radio Ndebele caused great excitement among the Ndebele in general, particularly among members of the elite with some measure of higher education some of whom took up employment as broadcasters. These people made a living from broadcasting cultural products to their audiences and made a huge contribution in turning a marginal spoken language into a written and fairly popular language. Shorty Peter Mahlangu, for example, was one of the first presenters of Radio Ndebele who soon established himself as an author of Ndebele literature that became prescribed reading in primary schools in KwaNdebele. This provided an additional stream of income for him (Mahlangu, Interview 5 July 2011). Opportunities became available for some with creative abilities to be involved in the production of radio dramas that became part of the radio station's staple diet.

The apartheid state viewed language very seriously as a means through which 'national' consciousness could be cemented; hence it supported the initiative to develop *IsiNdebele* into a written language. The *SABC Annual Report* of 1983 pretty much captured that spirit when it noted that,

So far South Ndebele exists only in the spoken form. Radio Ndebele is thus faced with its greatest challenge in taking part in the creation and expansion of the Ndebele language (SABC Annual Report 1983: 86).

Radio Ndebele made it possible for the expansion of the vocabulary and this occurred through the involvement of broadcasters in the government-sponsored language boards. In the sphere of sports, notably soccer, new Ndebele words were invented which replaced commonly used Zulu words. A new word '*usofengwane*' (whistle man or referee) replaced the Zulu word '*unompempe*'; '*umsizikasofengwane*' (assistant-referee), '*somutha*' (linesman) and others became popular at this time (Mahlangu, Interview July 2013). In this way Radio Ndebele presenters profoundly shaped the making of *IsiNdebele* into a written language. For Rhobongo Petrus Mahlangu, one of my main interviewees, the establishment of Radio Ndebele

...helped revive *IsiNdebele* which almost became extinct. It brought back the Ndebele who were being swallowed up by the Zulu, Tswana and Pedi language groups through schooling before *IsiNdebele* became a written language. The radio helped in making the language respectable (Mahlangu, Interview July 2013).

RADIO NDEBELE PROGRAMMING

Once Radio Ndebele was established, a broad variety of entertaining, informative and educational programmes were introduced on the station. As seen earlier, Ndebele programmes were initially allocated 30 minutes to one hour only per week on Radio Zulu between 1965 and early 1983. After the establishment of the new station broadcasting could now last for three hours every day, which was steadily increased over the next few years. The new programmes ranged from informative and educational to entertaining ones. *Asiphumele ngaphandle* (Let us go outside), for example, was a programme about the social and political developments in the broadcasting region of the station, mainly in KwaNdebele, parts of Pretoria and surrounding areas with a higher concentration of Ndebele-speaking communities. There were also others such as *Ezolimo*, a programme about farming generally; *Asithuthuke* (Let us progress/develop); *Asishuke isikhumba* (Let us soften the leather/hide together); *Asikhumbule abagulako* (let us remember those who are sick); *Ezempilo* (Health matters); and *Iphasi lekhenu* (Your own surroundings). These, among others, provided educational information to the audiences of the radio station.

There were also entertainment programmes that provided sports (*Ezemidlalo*), especially soccer, and a broad mixture of music genres, such as traditional Ndebele music. *Ingoma zesikhethu* (Our traditional songs) actually exposed and helped develop neo-traditional Ndebele music, and contemporary popular music also got a fair amount of airplay, for example the popular music show 'Radio Ndebele Top 10'. *Zidhobhele* (Make your own picking or choice); *Emgidini* (At the festival); *Ngihlelinani, nihlelinami* (I am seated with you, you are seated with me) and other programmes provided good entertainment to the listeners. There were also greetings and postcard reading programmes, even phone-in programmes where the listeners could send their greetings to family members and friends; *Asiyakhe* (Let us build) and *Ngikhumbule* (Remember me). *Ezabondanga* (Matters of friends) and *Ezabatjha* (Matters of youths) were some of the programmes targeted more specifically at the youth category.

Religious programmes featured very prominently on the radio station, most notably on Sundays. These included programmes like *Lala mphefumulo wami* (Rest my soul) and *Ngeezemthonjeni* (Those that come from deep down the pool [or well]). The latter was broadcast every fifth Sunday of the month. These programmes featured on different days, some on a daily basis while others featured once a month. On top of these there were regular news, current affairs and news editorials programmes that proffered the apartheid government's perspective (Lekgoathi 2009). As the SABC Annual Report of 1983 suggests, the government's viewpoint on political developments had to be given prominence. In reporting on the events such as the bomb explosions in Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Warmbad and elsewhere, the riots in the African townships and constitutional reforms, including the consolidation of KwaNdebele, as well as on treason trials of the captured cadres of the liberation movement (called 'terrorists' on the SABC's radio stations), the continued defence of the national borders and a proposal to

conclude non-aggression pacts with neighbouring countries, Radio Ndebele (like other vernacular stations) was required to reinforce the government's point of view (SABC Annual Report 1983: 80). The stations were expected to counter what the SABC Board perceived as multi-dimensional 'Marxist-socialist inspired attempts against South Africa', which had intensified in the 1980s. Radio Ndebele and all other ethnic stations were expected to act 'as a voice of moderation and reason in a fast-changing South Africa...to anticipate and interpret the situation for the black population' (SABC Annual Report 1986: 46). Despite the budget cutbacks which adversely affected smaller services such as Radio Ndebele (as well as Tsonga, Venda and Swazi stations), 'these services had to continue in the midst of the intensified anti-South African propaganda campaign by hostile stations broadcasting from outside the country's borders' (SABC Annual Report 1986: 46). The latter was a veiled allusion to the African National Congress's Radio Freedom, which was headquartered in Lusaka, Zambia, but broadcasting illegally into South Africa (Davis 2009; Lekgoathi 2010).

Drama serials were played virtually every day and these drew thousands of listeners to their radio receivers in the evenings and created listening communities, as Liz Gunner (2000) has argued so persuasively for Zulu radio. These are the programmes which were introduced immediately upon the opening of the station in March 1983.

The station had six full-time presenters (all males), namely Mandlakayise Sonnyboy Masanabo, Peter Mahlangu, David Micky Malatsi ka Sibanyoni, Paulus Oupa Mandlakayise Mahlangu, Raymond S'mangaliso ka Ntuli, and John Poki Skosana. In addition, there were other employees on the station such as translators or interpreters, technicians, music compilers and others. Each of the presenters was responsible for presenting a number of programmes. There were few female presenters who were mainly in charge of women's programmes about domestic matters, cooking, cleaning, child care, as well as religious matters. The SABC Annual Report (1983) openly declared this latest trend in hiring:

As part of a concentrated drive at listener participation, radio endeavoured to involve women more and more in modern society. This was done by means of profile programmes, discussion programmes, interviews and documentary series (SABC Annual Report 1983: 86).

Radio Ndebele continued with the SABC's long established practice of hiring few female presenters as freelancers or on a part-time basis, a practice which only changed in the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

By the early 1980s when Radio Ndebele hit the airwaves for the first time, the apartheid state's social engineers had effectively turned the public broadcaster into a government mouthpiece. Through stations such as Radio Ndebele they tried to herd African listeners into ethnic communities and to normalise ethnic separatism. However, the establishment

of this station was not only determined by forces from above but also by pressure from below. Ndebele *ethnopreneurs* such as the Bantustan administrators sought ‘ownership’ of the radio station in order to mobilise an ethnic base. For educated elites, the station provided opportunities for employment and developments of cultural products such as *IsiNdebele* books, drama serials and ‘traditional’ music that could be marketed to ethnic audiences and popularise the language. This radio station effectively rescued IsiNdebele from extinction by popularising its usage and helping to turn it into a written language.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This is an Ndebele phrase meaning ‘We speak our own language.’ This was adopted by Radio Ndebele as its motto when it was launched in early 1983.
- 2 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Accession Number 67212, Programme ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’ – Official Opening of Radio Ndebele Station, 23 March 1983.
- 3 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Accession Number 67212, Programme ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’: Official Opening of Radio Ndebele Station, 23 March 1983.
- 4 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Acc. No. 67212, ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’: Official Opening of Radio Ndebele, 29 March 1983.
- 5 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Acc. No. 67212, ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’: Official Opening of Radio Ndebele, 29 March 1983.
- 6 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Acc. No. 67212, ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’: Official Opening of Radio Ndebele, 29 March 1983.
- 7 SABC Sound Archives, Auckland Park, Acc. No. 67212, ‘*Asiphumele Ngaphandle*’: Official Opening of Radio Ndebele, 29 March 1983.

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