“LAPHO SIKHONA KUNOKUKHANYA”

IKWEKWEZI FM IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA, 1996-2013

Sekibakiba Lekgoathi

Shortly after the first democratic elections in the country, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) went through the process of realigning with the new political dispensation. The period from 1996 witnessed the beginning of the process of re-branding the public broadcaster’s African language radios and readjusting their mandates. One of the main tasks of these stations since the mid-1990s has been to protect and promote indigenous languages within the culturally plural society, something which, ironically, is a carryover from the apartheid era.

Ikwekwezi FM, the successor to Radio Ndebele, is one of the SABC’s African language radios that went through this process. This radio has constituted a public of Ndebele-speaking listeners on the margins of power. Drawn from different social classes and regions, literate and illiterate, rural villagers and townspeople, this new public is actively drawn to the new medium in their own language. Furthermore, Ikwekwezi FM has provided this community with some cultural space for the articulation of discourses of democracy, a space where they are able to raise their voices, in their own language, on issues that are important in their daily lives.

Although radio broadcasting has been the most dominant medium of communication in Africa for well over 60 years, it was only in the last two decades that it began to receive serious scholarly attention, particularly from historians. The early studies of radio in Africa were preoccupied with larger questions of political economy, for example, the question of state monopoly over broadcasting and the governments’ use of radio to maintain ideological control over the citizenry.1

Radio in Africa, an edited volume by Ligaga, Moyo and Gunner, provides an interesting analysis of the multiple roles of radio in the lives of listeners across the continent.2 While some of the essays explore the current role of

---

1 Ligaga, Moyo and Gunner (eds.) 2014, Radio in Africa.
2 Ligaga, Moyo and Gunner (eds.) 2014, Radio in Africa.
radio and the significance of talk shows in creating communities of listeners in ways which have profoundly reshaped the nature of the public sphere, others look at the history of radio and how it has played out in different countries.³

This article draws insights from the recent literature on the role of radio in the creation of publics, especially on the capacity of programming in African languages to empower local communities to engage in democratic discourse.⁴ The article is an exploration into why Ikwekwezi FM has continued to thrive in a fast changing media environment between 1996 and 2013.

From a methodological perspective the article is based on a random sample of audio recordings of Ikwekwezi FM broadcasts and oral interviews conducted with the presenters (current and retired) and listeners of the station. Despite its popularity among the Ndebele-speaking communities today, Ikwekwezi FM has remained outside the limelight of academic research.⁵

The main argument of this article revolves around the unremitting salience of vernacular radio generally and Ikwekwezi FM in particular, in South Africa after the dawn of democracy. This radio continues to thrive in a fast changing media space because it plays a pivotal role not only as a source of entertainment but also as a carrier of information on local developments.

---


³Ligaga, Moyo and Gunner, *Radio in Africa*.

⁴See, for example, Sekibakiba P. Lekgoathi, “Bantustan Identity, Censorship and Subversion on Northern Sotho Radio under Apartheid”, in Gunner et al., *Radio in Africa*, 117-133.

This station resonates with a broad spectrum of Ndebele-speaking listeners in metropolitan centres and remote rural villages who have a strong affinity to it. As the only station that broadcasts primarily in isiNdebele in the country Ikwekwezi FM gives many of its listeners a sense of cultural belonging.

![Logo of Ikwekwezi FM](image)

Fig. 4-1. Logo of Ikwekwezi FM

Most importantly, in post-apartheid South Africa where English has become quite ubiquitous and dominant as the language of officialdom and education, African language radios such as Ikwekwezi FM continue to play a key role not only in terms of preserving African languages but also in deep-
ening democracy by enabling the non-elite people on the margins of power, schooled and unschooled, to participate in political discourse, particularly through talk shows and other forms of cultural programming.


When, at the beginning of the 1960s, the SABC launched Radio Bantu (as the SABC’s African language radio stations were collectively identified in the beginning) as a fully-fledged radio with different channels broadcasting in separate African languages, its primary mission was to reinforce the apartheid government’s ethnic separatist policies among black South Africans, to promote Bantustan identities as a buffer against rising African nationalism and to disseminate government propaganda.6

Radio Bantu was a broad spectrum radio that catered to the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of African communities in the country by providing a wide range of programmes in African languages. It was in fact as a result of the demand from audiences that the number of African language services was expanded over the years to cater for a wide range of local African languages.

Despite appeals by Ndebele-speaking listeners for their own separate station from the 1960s, Ndebele radio was only introduced in 1983, two years after the establishment of the Bantustan of KwaNdebele.7 This radio played

---


7Radio broadcasting in African languages had some earlier roots dating back to the mid-1920s, when an African variety programme featuring the “Zulu Versatile Company” had a slot in the Durban airtime studio. From 1941, the SABC introduced the first African language broadcasts (called Bantu Programmes) in South Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa. These were mainly intended to counter possible subversion among Africans and to maintain their support of the war effort. Liz Gunner, “Wrestling with the Present, Beckoning to the Past: Contemporary Zulu Radio Drama” Journal of Southern African Studies 26, 2 (June 2000), 223; Eric Rosenthal, “You Have Been Listening…”: A History of the Early Days of Radio Transmission in South Africa (Cape Town: Purnell, 1974).
a pivotal role in developing the “Southern Ndebele” language into a written form. Until then isiNdebele had only been a spoken language and was generally looked down upon. Thanks to the establishment of Radio Ndebele, a deeper sense of cultural belonging started growing and the “Southern Ndebele” language speakers began to develop greater confidence in articulating themselves publicly in isiNdebele.⁸ In the period after 1994, Ndebele radio would continue to serve as an important medium for further development of the language.

As a public symbolism that signified formal repudiation of the ethnic separatism of the apartheid regime and the embracing of a new South Africa, the SABC’s African language radios were re-branded and given new identities and logos starting in September 1996.⁹ Govan Reddy, an ANC member who had been in exile in Harare (Zimbabwe) became the principal in charge of SABC radio at the time. Reddy’s view was that the changes to SABC radio services had to be implemented to “meet the needs of a changing society.”¹⁰

When Radio Ndebele was established in 1983, its payoff line was “Sikhuluma Isikhethu,” which means “We Speak Our Language,” the motto which reflected the ethnic separatist designs of the apartheid state. In 1986 this was changed to “Ikulethela Ubuhle Obunethabo,” meaning “It (Radio Ndebele) brings colour into your life.” This was based on the assumption that isiNdebele language broadcasting would bring about socio-economic development and improve the lives of the Ndebele-speaking listeners.

However, in 1996, when the SABC embarked on the process of renaming all of its African language radio services to signify the Corporation’s repudiation of the ethnic separatist ideology of the apartheid government and the embracing of the “rainbow nation,” Radio Ndebele was renamed Ikwekwezi FM (meaning ‘the star’) and at that point it adopted the new slogan “Lapho sikhona kunokukhanya,” which means “wherever we are there is light.” The station was rebranded one more time in 2016, with a new tagline “Kukhanya Bha!” meaning “wherever we are, it shines bright.”¹¹

---

⁸ For more on the role of Ndebele radio in helping develop the spoken language into a written language, see, for example, Lekgoathi, “Ethnic Separatism,” 59-80.


¹⁰ Louw and Milton, *New Voices over the Air.*
Ikwekwezi FM is one of the most popular channels of the SABC’s vernacular radio stations. With an average daily listenership of about 1.6 million in 2013, Ikwekwezi FM had clearly become a fairly popular station relative to the size of the Ndebele speaking population in the country, which was then about 1.4 million people. The February 2018 Radio Audience Measurement (RAM) statistics show a significant decline in the number of listeners (1,109,000 daily listenership) but Ikwekwezi FM has retained a spot in the top ten radio stations in South Africa. It should be noted, however, that in terms of listenership, Ikwekwezi FM pales in comparison with Zulu radio (now known as Ukhozi FM) which has a daily listenership of over 7 million listeners.

Even though two local community radio stations (Moutse FM and Kangala Community Radio) now exist which have incorporated isiNdebele as one of their broadcasting languages, Ikwekwezi FM remains the only channel in the country that uses isiNdebele as the principal language of broadcasting. Its broadcast areas include parts of Mpumalanga, Limpopo, as well as parts of the North West Province and Gauteng, mainly sections of Pretoria including the townships of Mamelodi, Eersterus and some of the city’s eastern suburbs.

---

12After 1994, as a result of the new reconfigurations which were intended to indicate a turning point away from the separatist ethnic politics propounded by the apartheid government and realignment with the new values of a unitary South Africa, vernacular radio stations came up with new names and logos. Radio Ndebele was re-christened “Ikwekwezi FM”; Radio Zulu became “Ukhozi FM”; Radio Xhosa adopted the name “Umhlobo Wenene”; Radio Sesotho was re-launched as “Lesedi FM”; Radio Tswana was renamed “Motsweding FM”; Radio Venda changed to “Phalaphala FM”; Radio Tsonga identified itself as “Munghana Lo’nene”; and finally Radio Swazi was given the name “LiGwalagwala FM.”
15Moutse FM which is situated at Dennilton and Kangala Community Radio based at Bronkhorstspruit are the two local radios that have isiNdebele as one of several languages of broadcast.
It can be accessed on the Frequency Modulation (FM) 91.8 to 107 and it broadcasts 24 hours a day. Its primary target audiences are urban and rural listeners between 25 and 49 years of age in The Living Standards Measure (LSM) 4 to 8, as well as the 16-24 year-olds. Presently the station reaches more people who speak and understand isiNdebele than any other station in Mpumalanga Province.  

By October 1995 the station had over 900,000 listeners tuned in daily and its time of broadcasting was increased to 18 hours per day—from 05h00 to 23h00. By April 2009 daily listenership had risen to over 1.5 million. During the period of my fieldwork research in 2011 there were about 1.6 million listeners tuned into Ikwekwezi FM daily. The Radio Audience Measurement Survey (RAMS) reveals some fluctuation in the numbers. The survey estimates a figure of 1,734,000 listeners for June 2012; 1,663,000 in August; 1,603,000 in October; and 1,604,000 in December of the same year.

By February 2013 these figures had declined to 1,501,000, rising slightly to 1,560,000 in May 2013. In an interview in May 2013 with Shorty Peter Mahlangu (now late), a loyal servant of Ikwekwezi FM who joined Radio Ndebele as a presenter during its early days and rose through the ranks to become the executive producer of language and culture, he gave the figure of approximately 1.7 million listeners. This exceeds the official figure of

---

17SABC. About Ikwekwezi FM. Station Profile [online resource].
19According to the Radio Audience Measurement Survey (RAMS) of April 2009, the station had a daily listenership of 1,534,000. Refer to Ikwekwezi FM Brochure, 2009 cited in Lekgoathi, “Ethnic Separatism or Cultural Preservation?”
20According to Juliet Nombulelo Skosana, the first female Programme Manager of Ikwekwezi FM who started her career on the station in 1995 as a full-time presenter, listenership figures had risen to about 1.6 million a day at time of interview. Interview with Juliet Nombulelo Skosana by Sekbakiba P. Lekgoathi, at Hatfield, Pretoria, 11 March 2010.
21Interview with Shorty Peter Mahlangu, Hatfield, Pretoria, 30 July 2013.
isiNdebele-speaking population in the country. However, the survey for Febru-
ary 2018 shows a significant decline in the number of listeners—
1,109,000. Therefore, while ethnic loyalty cannot be totally discounted,
other forces are probably now at play in determining the popularity of this
radio both within and outside the confines of the native speakers of the lan-
guage.

As a broad spectrum radio station Ikwekwezi FM’s programming is wide-
ranging but here the focus is talk shows, which are largely a new feature on
the SABC intended to promote citizenry empowerment. These talk shows
cover a wide variety of subjects from health, hygiene, cultural matters,
divorce, domestic violence, political intolerance and others. Listeners phone
in, send email or text messages or ask question in their mother tongue, and
many freely comment on various issues including service delivery challenges.
The strong emphasis placed on talk shows on the SABC’s African language
stations in general is unprecedented, though some limited talk shows on
non-political topics were permitted in the twilight years of apartheid.22 By
providing radio users with space for democratic discourse, talk shows have
given vernacular radios a new lease on life and increased their popularity
among audiences.

Sidemba Semini, which is a midday Current Affairs programme, is one talk
show that will suffice as an example. In November 2011 this show was
hosted by Hleziphi Sibanyoni, a very popular female presenter admired by
many Ikwekwezi FM listeners for asking direct and penetrating questions of
her respondents. This live programme runs for about an hour between
13h00 and 14h00 on weekdays. It takes various forms, including outside
broadcasts which are aired live in different localities.

This is one form of taking radio to the people, allowing them to air their
pleasures or displeasures in their own language. One episode of an outside
broadcast took place in the form of a town hall-type debate convened at
Matjhiding community hall in the Dr J. S. Moroka Municipality, Mpuma-
langa. It was then broadcast on 24 November 2011. Hleziphi facilitates the
discussion while her colleagues in the technical department do the recording.

22This point was articulated quite strongly by a long-serving presenter and for-
mer manager of Thobela FM, Thamagana Max Mojapelo. Interview at Lebowak-
gomo, December 2006.
The programme starts with the host’s introduction of the topic and the government officials, after which she opens up the floor for community members to make comments and to ask questions. The first set of questions directed at the local government officials revolve around the community’s frustration with government’s failure to bring development and to supply the rural communities with water; the issue of malfunctioning water machines; as well as a suggestion that a manager be appointed whose responsibility
would be to deal with water and sanitation issues. With a tinge of nostalgia for “the good old days” one resident asks: “We used to get water under apartheid; why is this present government failing to provide such a basic service?”

After an animated session of questions Hleziphi allows the local government officials to give comprehensive responses. The programme goes on like that with residents directly confronting their political leaders and the latter being given an opportunity to reply. Besides moderating the discussion, the host throws in a few of her own questions. Ultimately, radio programmes of this nature provide the public with the space for democratic discourse with the political elites.

Through the airwaves more than 1.6 million listeners get to take part in such discussions. As an employee of Ikwekwezi FM, Hleziphi urges those participating in the debate to express their ideas or concerns in the main language of the station (isiNdebele), though other African languages are also accommodated.

It is not uncommon for the radio station to give a platform to members of the public who are very critical of the government. Sometime on a Sunday morning early in February 2011 Ikwekwezi FM conducted a live interview with the recently installed Nzunza Ndebele king, Mabhoko III (born Mbusi Mahlangu). The young king publicly lashed out against the government for side-lining his subjects, stating in isiNdebele that the Mpumalanga provincial government, the Thembisile Hani and Dr J. S. Moroka municipalities in particular gave preference to tender bidders from outside the former KwaNdebele homeland over the locals.

He slated the provincial government for allegedly planning to establish the province’s first university in the capital Mbombela (Nelspruit). He further condemned the two local municipalities for unilaterally changing the names of streets and towns named after Ndebele heroes in favour of politicians without consulting with the Ndebele traditional leaders.

In response, Lebona Mosia, the Mpumalanga provincial government spokesperson rubbished King Mabhoko III’s allegations, accusing him of deceiving the public. Mosia continued: “The king’s utterances are totally invalid and misleading to the community at large. The provincial govern-
ment cannot side line the amaNdebele nation. Service delivery and community development are part of our mandate in all the provincial regions.”

Mosia stated that the provincial ANC had deployed some comrades from the former KwaNdebele to the provincial legislature, in particular human settlement MEC Siphosezwe Masango and health and social development MEC Dikeledi Mahlangu.

That the government spokesperson had to provide such a detailed rebuttal of the Nzunza king’s utterances is indicative of the power of African language radio as an important source of information. It also shows that despite the cynicism in some quarters about the diminishing of space for free political expression on the SABC in general, dissenting voices are still accommodated on African language radios such as Ikwekwezi FM.

“It talks about familiar places... in isiNdebele”: Listeners’ views of Ikwekwezi FM

On 20 July 2013 I conducted a group interview at Vlaklaagte No 2 (a village in the former KwaNdebele), with a cohort of eleven Ndebele amasokana, new graduates from initiation school. Dressed in loin skins, colourful beaded rings around their arms and legs and carrying knobkerries, these young men had just returned home nine days previously after spending over two months at engomeni or initiation lodges in the bush undergoing a series of rituals, including circumcision which marked their transition from boyhood to manhood. Their ages ranged from 17 to 25 years and most of them were still at school.

The interview was conducted in the middle of umnyanya wa masokana, the initiation graduates’ party. When I asked them about their favourite radio station the overwhelming majority (eight out of eleven) enthusiastically cited Ikwekwezi FM.\(^\text{23}\) The choice of Ikwekwezi FM by most was based on the fact that this radio provided programming in isiNdebele and promoted Ndebele culture. Nineteen-year old Thokozani Mahlangu, a Grade 12 student at Vumabesala FET College mainly tunes in to this radio station because,

\(^{23}\)One member of the group preferred YFM “because it is a station for the youth”; the other followed 5FM as it plays the type of popular music he liked; and the last one mentioned Ukhozi FM, the SABC’s Zulu radio, particularly the motivational programme by Pastor Zondo.
…it is popular and everybody is in favour of it. It is the best in terms of delivering things... things such as news, stories (meaning radio drama) especially for the bulk of our people here who don’t have TVs. And so many people can get access to a lot of entertainment programmes by listening to Ikwekwezi FM. It can help them when it comes to such things. Besides, there are many other things that we get from Ikwekwezi [...] I like their stories. I also like news and the music that they like playing [...] House music as well as Ndebele traditional music. These are the different types of music that I like.24

For 24-year old Bongani Sithole from Witbank who works as a security guard, Ikwekwezi FM appeals to him because,

…it talks about the places that you know and are familiar with; not about places that you don’t know. For example, when they say Tweefontein (an area of former KwaNdebele), I know that place and that is why I like it... As for my most popular programmes, I like Sidemba Semini, which is where they talk a lot about our local areas and what has happened there. It is about local or regional news.25

The fact that the station features the places that are familiar to most Ndebele-speaking listeners is critical in reinforcing their sense of cultural belonging, something which both the youth and older generations have in common. Twenty-five year old Johannes Sithole, the oldest member of the cohort responded in this way:

I like Ikwekwezi FM: wherever we are there is light! That is because it gives us plenty of information that is useful especially for the older generations. There are programmes such as Isidemba Semini through which you get to know what is taking place in other local places. And you access this information still fresh, just as the events are still unfolding now or shortly after it has happened. Programmes such as

---

24Group Interview with Amasokana, Vlaklaagte No. 2, Mpumalanga, 20 July 2013.
25Group Interview with Amasokana.
Amahlaya Amakhulu (now called Ithungele Ebandla) teach us about our heritage; they teach us about all things to do with our culture. You can ask questions directly and they (the broadcasters as well as the experts on Ndebele culture) will respond to you instantly.²⁶

Another member of this group of young men also specified *Ithungele Ebandla* as his most favourite programme. This is broadcast every Sunday around 18h00.

It inducts the listeners into Ndebele norms and values as well as taboos, for example “about avoiding marrying within the same clan (endogamy); in case of divorce, which family practices and clan names the children must use, the father’s or the mother’s, and the like.” He emphasised that he liked this programme the most because “it informs the Ndebele people how to live their lives and not throw away their cultural ways.”

Yet there is more to this radio that listeners like than simply cultural programming. Another member of the contingent of amasokana contributed the following:

> For me, most of the time when I get back home from school I listen to Ikwekwezi, around 16h00… Mavusana’s Afternoon Drive. I like the various segments that form part of this show, such as Fulela Wanethwa. This is about football and that is the sport I like.²⁷

“*Afternoon Drive*” is an eclectic, fast-paced and “hip” show which provides a mix of entertainment, sports news, traffic reports and the like. Whereas entertainment is without doubt the life force of the radio station, for Johannes Sithole, as well as for other members of the group, this radio is valuable as a source of information especially for the older generations. Through Ikwekwezi FM, he proceeded,

> … they (the older listeners) can be informed about things that are going to happen in the community which they would have never been able to know about if they did not

²⁶Group Interview with Amasokana.
²⁷Group Interview with Amasokana.
have the radio… they can get this information in their own language.\textsuperscript{28}

Esther Nostokana Mahlangu, a very popular 84-year old (she was 79 in 2013) Ndebele mural painter and ethnopreneur from Mthambothini, is quite lyrical about the radio station and the value of her language:

I like all the programmes [of Ikwekwezi FM] but what I like the most is the isiNdebele language itself; the fact that virtually all the programmes are in isiNdebele language… When they broadcast about things that happened around the world (news) in isiNdebele I do listen to the radio… It provides us with information about the things that we would otherwise not have known about, in the language that we understand, which is isiNdebele… When they broadcast traditional music I sit down here and listen, you see… until the programme comes to the end.\textsuperscript{29}

Nevertheless, Esther expressed some misgivings about the Sunday evening programme \textit{Ithungele Ebandla} (discussed earlier), as she felt it allowed young people to phone in and ask questions which, in “isiNdebele culture,” were not appropriate for their age group to talk about. For her generation, she was concerned that certain subjects were too sensitive to be discussed publicly, such as issues of sexual intimacy, especially among youngsters who had actually not reached the appropriate age to be enquiring about those things. But nevertheless, she liked the programme for its focus on heritage matters.\textsuperscript{30}

In an interview with the mothers of the \textit{amasokana} at the same welcoming ceremony in Vlaklaagte No 2, they expressed great anxiety and unhappiness about the growing usage of English on the radio station. This, for them, tends to exacerbate the exclusion and marginalisation of large numbers of older listeners from public discourse.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{28}Group Interview with \textit{Amasokana}.
\textsuperscript{29}Interview with Esther Nostokana Mahlangu, Mthambothini, Mpumalanga Province, 26 January 2013.
\textsuperscript{30}Interview with Esther Nostokana Mahlangu.
\textsuperscript{31}Group Interview with Ndebele women, Vlaklaagte No 2, Mpumalanga, 20 July 2013.
The main reason why Ndebele radio continues to have such wide appeal in mostly isiNdebele-speaking areas is because of the high rate of illiteracy more especially among the elderly people in the region of former KwaNdebele. Many cannot understand English—though some (like Esther herself) are quite proficient in Afrikaans.

Most were deprived of the opportunity of getting an education as they grew up on white farms where schooling was not permitted. Thus the use of isiNdebele in broadcasting makes Ikwekwezi FM almost universally appreciated among predominantly isiNdebele-speaking communities in the region. Furthermore, radio is immediate, and it speaks to them more directly.

Conclusion

One of the main factors that accounts for the popularity of Ikwekwezi FM today is the enormous variety of its programmes, including talk shows. As an integral part of programming, talk shows have brought some vibrancy to Ikwekwezi FM and other African language radio stations of the SABC. Talk shows have created particular listening publics and empowered them to articulate their views about important social and political issues in their native languages.

Questions about whether the SABC has successfully made a transition from being a state broadcaster to a public broadcaster, about whether the Corporation has space to act independently of the ANC government, or whether it has slid back to being a state broadcaster, are very much at the centre of public discourse in South Africa today. While we cannot discount attempts by the ruling party to influence decision making at the SABC by, for example, loading the SABC’s Board of Governors with the ANC’s own appointees, the interactive nature of radio today, especially the use of talk shows, has allowed for some measure of democratic debates to occur on public radio.

While entertainment in general and music in particular have been the lifeblood of the SABC’s African language radio stations including Ikwekwezi FM since their inception, the increased use of a more interactive approach to programming since the mid-1990s has allowed these stations to flourish despite the fast changing media environment they find themselves in. The
The democratisation process in the country has in fact given listeners greater latitude to express their views on radio without any fear of victimisation.

Finally, in post-apartheid South Africa English has become more dominant than ever before, despite the recognition of eleven official languages. The apparent devaluing of African languages is perhaps the main reason why there is cynicism particularly among older listeners about the growing tendency among younger presenters to mix isiNdebele with English. Nevertheless, the continued existence and popularity of African language radio stations such as Ikwekwezi FM plays a critical role in counterbalancing the hegemony of the English language and giving voice to the people—particularly the poor and least schooled masses in the cities as well as in the countryside—who would otherwise be rendered voiceless and inaudible in current political debates.\(^{32}\)

\(^{32}\)The broader research upon which this article is based was made possible by financial support provided by the African Humanities Program, an initiative of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in 2010. The University of Michigan African Presidential Scholarship (UMAPS) programme awarded me a fellowship in 2013-2014 which afforded me the opportunity to spend about six months in Ann Arbor processing and writing up my research findings.
Copyright of Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa is the property of National Library of South Africa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.