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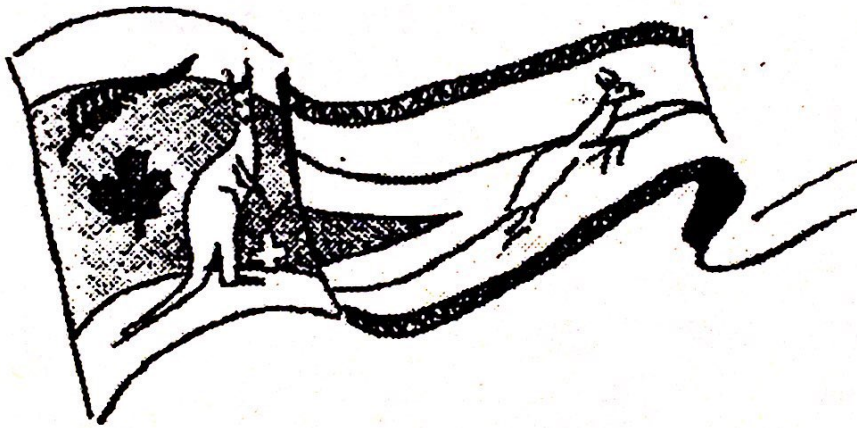
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South Africa's Black Radio: Apartheid and Ethnicity at the South African Broadcasting Corporation

Ethnicity was a cornerstone of apartheid. It weighed heavily on the shaping of the radio stations intended for the blacks which were created strictly along ethnic and linguistic lines by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South Africa's public service broadcasting institution. Apartheid was often presented as a special way of managing space at various levels: individual (petty apartheid), local (urban segregation) and national (grand apartheid) (See Christopher for further information and a bibliography on the spatial aspects of apartheid). It can be said that black radio was designed to strengthen the implementation of apartheid at the latter national level, as seven so-called "black stations" were launched in the early 1960s to serve seven of the nine major identified ethnic and linguistic groups associated with as many territories, the bantustans.

1940 was the first year the SABC ever broadcast programmes in African languages. They aimed at providing blacks living in the Orlando township near Johannesburg with information about the war. Zulu and Xhosa, two of the main languages spoken in the townships, were used. But government quickly realized that airwaves could also act effectively in the development of the black majority, particularly in the fields of education and health, and so decided to start a full black programme. Only two white-only shortwave and medium-wave services had been available thus far: one in English (Radio South Africa) and one in Afrikaans (Radio Suid Afrika). At that time, the SABC's philosophy was close to the BBC's public service ideal defined and embodied by Sir John Reith, founder and first director of the BBC, whose report on South Africa's broadcasting situation served as a basis for the creation of the SABC in 1936. "A conscious social purpose should be given to the exploitation of the medium", he explained in this report (cited in Rosenthal 152). The SABC's annual report for 1944 contained this significant observation: "The Bantu peoples, who constitute four-fifths of the population, are our gravest responsibility" (10).

In the BBC's credo, each community must be granted specific programmes, but there remained a major problem for such a service in South

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Africa: radio was not part of black life. No programmes had ever been designed specifically for black Africans and a radio set was much too expensive for poor people to afford. Furthermore, until 1940, the only Zulu or Xhosa that could be heard on the waves were traditional songs sprinkled in the white programmes. Those harmless choirs carried the appeasing image of an otherwise scary, shapeless mob. The SABC's statutes were quite clear: the programmes must pay respect to the interests of English and Afrikaans cultures and nothing else.

But the 1948 general elections changed the course of radio history as the nationalists' rose to power. The new rulers rejected the social objectives of radio which they considered a perfect illustration of the British imperialism they had been fighting for some 150 years. Black radio was going to exist but with a very different role in the new policy of the South African in two critical areas:

— social and racial peace: "die swart gevaar" ("the black scare" in Afrikaans) had been growing in white minds since the 1920s when thousands of blacks started flooding towards the big cities in search of work. Most of them lived in precarious conditions in mine compounds and were seen as a potentially dangerous mass to be controlled. Radio, it was alleged, could contribute towards the prevention of crime through the use of "propaganda". Many Afrikaners, who had openly taken sides with Nazi Germany, had observed carefully how radio had been put to use as an ideological weapon in that country between 1933 and 1945;

— ethnic fragmentation: the most basic assumption of the nationalist doctrine was that each ethnic group should be given a chance to develop independently and avoid any contact with other groups that could alter its cultural purity. In the field of radio, this conception implied the establishment of nine different stations, one for each black group.

A violent ideological earthquake hit South Africa's political life when more radical Afrikaner nationalists elbowed their way to power at the end of the 1950s. Under the guidance of doctrinaire Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966), an integral, harsher, more dogmatic form of apartheid was implemented. But Verwoerd's main legacy was the bantustans. As minister of Native Affairs, Verwoerd had written the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act which established a network of tribal authorities in the reserves. As Prime minister, he sought to give life to apartheid's ideological orientations of racial and ethnic separation and divide space along racial lines, changing the former Bantu reserves into "bantustans" (ie, "Bantu states", later known as "homelands").

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The SABC followed a parallel path: after ten years of adjusting (the 1950s), the Corporation took to a harder line, becoming a faithful ally of the state as it endorsed its policy fully and enthusiastically. This new stance can be perfectly illustrated by a move of great significance, the nomination of PJ Meyer as SABC's chairman of the Board in 1959. Meyer, a former iron-handed president of the Broederbond, was to become Verwoerd's counterpart in the field of broadcasting as he endeavoured to apply separate development to the airwaves, a scheme which could be labelled "radio's Grand Apartheid" because it followed closely the bantustans' evolution. Paradoxically, while adhering zealously to the design of geographical apartheid, Meyer made the 1960s the most active decade in the history of South African radio.

Coincidentally South African radio engineers were on the verge of mastering frequency modulation which was to become the ideal tool for the application of apartheid's geographical principles to radio. South Africa's radio waves being ravaged by electrostatic interferences, the SABC had invested enormous amounts of money in the development of FM since the end of WWII, in order to enhance the quality of listening for its predominantly white listeners. FM broadcasting became a formidable weapon in the hands of the apartheid believers. The only waves used thus far, shortwaves and medium-waves, can travel hundreds of miles without being relayed, which made it possible for anybody in South Africa to listen to a programme coming from the other end of the country, when several transmitters are necessary to rebroadcast an FM signal over a large zone because a single transmitter can only cover a small area. The limited range of FM transmission thus enables the broadcaster to control rather precisely the target areas where the signal is to be picked up. Conversely, people living outside those areas can be technically deprived of programmes not intended for them. It seemed possible to make someone living in KwaZulu listen to Radio Zulu only, while preventing him from picking up Radio Lebowa or Radio Xhosa.

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Table 1: The SABC's Black Stations

Station (year launched)	Ethnic group (language)	Number of speakers (1990)	Bantustan served
Radio Zulu (62)	Zulu	8 541 173	KwaZulu
Radio Sesotho (62)	South Sotho (Sesotho)	2 652 590	QwaQwa
Radio Lebowa (62)	North Sotho (Pedi)	3 434 971	Lebowa
Radio Setswana (62)	Tswana (Setswana)	3 601 609	BophuthaTswana
Radio Xhosa (63)	Xhosa	6 891 358	Ciskei, Transkei
Radio Tsonga (65)	Tsonga	1 349 022	Gazankulu
Radio Venda (65)	Venda	763 247	Venda
Radio Swazi (82)	Swazi (Seswati)	926 094	KaNdwane
Radio Ndebele (83)	Ndebele	799 216	KwaNdebele

Until then, the blacks could listen to their languages on Radio South Africa and Radio Suid Afrika which devoted one daily hour to Xhosa, Zulu and Sesotho programmes. It took fifteen years of preparation to launch specific black stations (grouped under the generic name of Radio Bantu), but once the gears were set in motion things went very fast: starting in January 1962, five stations were launched in a 16-month span (Radio Zulu, Radio Sesotho, Radio Setswana, Radio Lebowa and Radio Xhosa). Two more (Radio Tsonga and Radio Venda, first a joint service until 1967) started short-wave transmissions in 1965 and turned FM in 1970. FM was a costly broadcasting technique which pumped in millions of rands, a point which illustrates how crucial those stations were in the government's wider strategy of ethnic atomization. As a matter of fact, the last two stations, launched much later (in 1982 and in 1983), only aimed at the smallest groups, therefore the less dangerous ones, namely the Swazi and the Ndebele.

Finally, FM broadcasting had the further advantage of keeping South Africans away from the attacks of foreign stations which had started transmitting shortwave programmes in the early 1960s to criticize South Africa's racial policy. With the arrival of transistors on the market, the sales of shortwave radio sets immediately declined to the benefit of the cheaper smaller FM-only battery-operated sets.

Apartheid's ultimate ambition was to separate completely groupings of individuals, or "peoples", defined by singular cultural characteristics and allow them to develop "in their own sphere", to use official apartheid phraseology. As primordial cultural features, the black languages were particularly taken care of by the state and by the SABC. In a multiethnic country, the linguistic question is often at the heart of the matter when it

comes to broadcasting because a channel's identity is primarily made of the language it uses. It is quite revealing that the names of the black stations refer to the languages used, while the names of the white regional stations refer to geography (Radio Zulu and Radio Port Natal, both based in Durban, serve roughly the same area but address different audiences). This was how the package was sold to the potential listeners: each individual was to be given an opportunity to listen to programmes in *his* own language about *his* customs, *his* music, *his* history, *his* literature, *his* culture as a whole. Language was to become a pillar for everyone, as school programmes tried to demonstrate: "In the lessons on the mother tongue the interest of pupils was aroused in their own language as one of a human being's most precious possessions."(SABC 1973 Report, 46).

Of course, the language used on the air had to be perfect. In that respect, the SABC's contribution to the development of African languages can not be denied as many researchers helped tremendously in the formal standardization of those languages with almost no written tradition. Each station employed linguists whose task was to coin words when they did not exist or whenever new ones came up, primarily in the technological fields. Lists of words were available for journalists and announcers to consult and to learn. By 1966, a list of flower names consisted of more than 40 000 entries. Other researchers worked on "accurate" pronunciation revealing the obsessional need for strict rules, the only way to preserve and control linguistic purity.

Yet this ambitious project raised problems of competence. Though every aspect of management was under white control, the stations still needed native language announcers, because very few Whites spoke Bantu languages and their accents would not have sounded correct. In the early days, some black announcers made themselves popular by interpreting freely some of the texts they were just supposed to read on the air and with which they did not agree. These episodes were a direct consequence of live broadcasting and led to tighter control. Until technology allowed recording and editing, whites employees fluent in the Bantu languages would remain in the booth to listen to the announcers and turn them off the air if need be.

The nine black stations were never considered as second-rate services but as pivotal tools, if ethnic separation was ever to be brought about. The SABC had been working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Native (later Bantu) Affairs which was in charge of the day-to-day enforcement of apartheid, so that the programmes' imperative mission was to carry a sense of ethnicity for each black group. For instance, the SABC recorded traditional songs in compounds of the Reef's mines "where natives from many areas are brought together (and where) authorities do their best to preserve the tribal bonds" (SABC 1952 Report 38). By maintaining the

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Bantu musical memory, the SABC hoped to strengthen ethnic pride. As key elements in the state's racial policy, the black stations must negate the existence of a single black people, thus divide the black population and impede the possible emergence of a united black front. Here are two instances to illustrate this policy: "*I like my country*, in which prominent Bantu spoke about their homelands. *Thus we have progressed*, in which Bantu speakers spoke about what had already been achieved by the Bantu in the sphere of literature, music, arts, education and agriculture" (SABC 1962 Report 29).

The Afrikaners, who held the reins of the SABC, identified their own cultural heritage with the black languages and cultures. The Afrikaans tongue built its identity out of its opposition to English when it became a political weapon designed to express Afrikaner resentment towards English imperialism at the end of the 19th century. This common language was felt as a rallying point for groups of people scattered in the South African wilderness, and it was thanks to Afrikaans that for the first time, Afrikaners were given the opportunity to think of themselves as a homogen, culturally distinct and respectable group. Writers, such as Eugene Marais, Totuis or Jan Celliers, played a considerable role in illustrating the Afrikaner struggle for identity and freedom. Thus Afrikaners expected African languages to become similar means of political emancipation for the black ethnic groups. It is no surprise either that the SABC insisted particularly on literature and took pride in acting as a leading cultural force: "For many natives, it was a revelation to see what had been achieved by their languages in this regard" (SABC 1955 Report 32). Great writers were also a guarantee for a people to have its national epic written, conserved and passed on to future generations, for they participate in the building of a national heritage.

The SABC's second objective, political awareness, stemmed directly from an ethnic and cultural concern. Ultimately, the bantustans were to become independent from South Africa, a plan which was for Verwoerd, as Sparks suggests, "a vision of justice in which the blacks were given their rightful share, their own homelands where they could develop their nationhood just as the whites were doing" (196). But the blacks were not naturally attracted by those poor inadequate tiny areas considered, not unduly, to be nothing more than pools of cheap labour for white industrial areas. In the logic of apartheid, the territories would be given a right to exist through the control of petty administration (trade, building, driving licenses...) and the promotion of all the symbolical attributes that make a genuine nation — a capital city, a national flag, a national anthem sung in a national language, and... a national radio station. A popular slogan for Radio Bantu could have been "one nation, one station" as the programmes kept emphasizing pride in one's "fatherland" thanks to a subtle machinery. Quizzes were quite operative, as Tomaselli shows: "Very often, a question

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may be asked which assumes the independence of the homelands, for example, 'what is the capital of Transkei?' (146). Each station also carried regional news — a good way of creating an impression of proximity for remote listeners — based on a network of local correspondents who described daily life in the essentially rural homelands. However these efforts did not concern those already living in the homelands. Despite the 1951 Illegal Squatting Act by which all illegal black squatters could be forcibly resettled in their reserves, blacks kept emigrating by the thousands into the townships, where life was still easier than in the wretched homelands. So the government demanded that Radio Zulu and other programmes be broadcast towards townships where the urban blacks were to be convinced to go back to where they belonged. The authorities expected them to leave willingly to limit forced resettlements. Approximately two million people were resettled between 1960 and 1970.

Eventually the political notions of "Transkei", "Gazankulu" or "KwaZulu" were deemed to take root in the minds of Xhosas, Tsongas and Zulus as their fatherlands, and become the likes of Great Britain, the USA, France, South Africa, ie "normal" nations. Therefore Radio Bantu had a role to play not in stirring tribal traditions but in arousing genuine national consciences: "With the compilation and presentation of programme material from the rich cultural treasury of the various Bantu people, Radio Bantu performs not only an important function of conservation but also promotes love and pride in that heritage, with stimulating effect on political development" (SABC 1971 Report 7). Culture and politics were sometimes cleverly woven into the radio's programme fabric as in a Zulu version of Homer's *Iliad* which was supposed to remind the Zulus of "their own colourful history (...) The battle between the Greeks and the Trojans is similar to the mighty battles from their own history when the Zulu tribe and the many small tribes led by Shaka were in constant battle with the Ndwandwe tribe and its satellite tribes" (SABC 1963 Report 31).

However, it became quickly obvious that the system would never be able to abide strictly by the rule. First of all, frequency modulation, though adaptable it may be, was impeded by geography. Except for the Transkei, the bantustans were either small (e.g. QwaQwa's area was 902 sq. km though it was supposed to welcome more than 2 millions of South Sothos) or scattered (Lebowa was made of 19 separate pieces, KwaZulu of 70). Broadcasts could not but spill over border areas. Some bantustans shared common borders, but obviously, sound waves cannot be stopped on administrative limits. In other words, some programmes could be picked up by a minority of individuals who were not supposed to listen which ruined, at least theoretically, the efforts of cultural separation.

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The urbanization of the black population was another serious problem, probably the aspect of South Africa's postwar sociological evolution most underestimated by apartheid thinkers. Urbanization means partial and sometimes complete acculturation of exiles. Gradually, as they come into contact with people with different backgrounds — whether “urbanites” or people from other ethnical groups — individuals tend to lose their traditional ethnic references — precisely those which Radio Bantu intended to cultivate. The SABC's policy of language purity, for instance, ignored this urban reality. Blacks of all origins had been mingling in the townships and in the mine pits since the 1920s to the extent that ethnic, as well as linguistic purity, was less and less the rule, while various creoles of Zulu, Xhosa, English etc. thrived. Creolization seems to be a general urban socio-linguistic rule, for people who need to communicate in their new environment must often drop their usual language, especially if it is not the majority language.

Moreover, the “pure” languages designed by the SABC did not sound right to the ears of the listeners so that, for instance, SABC Zulu started moving away from street Zulu. Many words, forged scientifically within laboratory walls by white researchers, were a source of incomprehension, sometimes of laughter, for original speakers of the languages because they did not correspond to their experience of daily life. Words were generally coined from the pre-existing corpuses of words, prefixes and suffixes in an artificial attempt to protect the stainlessness of the various languages. Unfortunately, word borrowing is a national sport in South Africa as languages keep feeding one another — in Sesotho, a teacher is “titchara”.

Furthermore, many blacks can speak several languages. Most of South Africa's black languages belong to two families which account for 80% of the population: the Nguni languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Seswati, Ndebele); and the Sotho languages (Sesotho, Pedi, Setswana). People can understand one another easily across each group, while the larger Nguni and Sotho groups share numerous characteristics which make it possible for a Zulu to speak with a Tswana. Their common roots lie underground and unite people more than they separate them. The SABC tried to erect formal lines of demarcation between languages by stressing differences and offering a separate channel for each of them to express itself and reinforce ethnic segregation as it relied on the assumption that an individual tends to listen more naturally to a programme in his native tongue. But it understated the linguistic centrifugal forces at work.

Living in the townships also implied habits that had nothing to do with rural life, an evolution which the SABC could not ignore to stay in touch with its listeners. “Initially a programme policy of traditional culture

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was followed, but this changed to include a more urban-based consumer culture." (Tomaselli 16). Commercials were also introduced very quickly because of the astronomical functioning costs and added to the SABC's woes. However blending urban life into the programmes contributed strongly to sedentariness and hindered all the efforts to advertise the bantustans.

At the end of the 1970s, it became clear that the townships were here to stay while the bantustans would never develop as expected. Prime Ministers Vorster and Botha were forced to settle for a simple control over the growing urban black mass. The SABC's answer to these changes was a station for the urban blacks, Radio Metro, launched in 1986. In a way, this decision tolled the knell of the SABC's plan and of the state's geographical apartheid because it meant the acception of the *de facto* situation. Furthermore, Radio Metro's identity did not refer to a specific ethnic community but, as its name indicates, to "metropolitan" blacks as opposed to rural — and homeland — blacks. Adding insult to injury, the language used was English — the last straw for Afrikaner nationalists.

Today, the SABC manages 23 radio stations, 9 of which broadcast in black African languages. Until 1991, when the SABC started changing its ideological stance for good, each of them was an efficient brick in the wall of apartheid so that their actual legacy is fairly ambiguous. While South African broadcasting benefited tremendously from the efforts put into the development of black radio, the justification for doing so was clearly ideologically biased. On the one hand, forty years of bleak history can not be wiped off the minds in a few months. But on the other, stations have always been carefully maintained and fit with the newest technology and have started to be efficient tools in the building of the New South Africa. For instance, they performed a very important civic role in the 1994 election campaign in explaining in African languages what franchise was all about, how one was suppose to vote concretely, etc.

In spite of ideological constraints, black cultures have been preserved, sometimes developed, during all those years and most stations have enjoyed a very faithful following. It is important to know that listeners, though they were aware of the wider ideological context, found genuine interest in many of the programmes. Radio Zulu has rapidly grown into South Africa's most popular programme with more than 4 million daily listeners, and more than 11 million tuned in to the SABC'S black stations every day in 1993 (SABC Radio & TV October-November 1993: 34).

Provided they can stay away from any political interference (an Independent Broadcasting Authority was set up before the elections to see to that), they will be able to preserve ethnic differences *within* a wider South African identity. South Africa's black radio gets a chance to be a platform for

the building of a multi-racial society, not by exalting each group *per se* but by bringing individuals from every possible background into "South Africanness".

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