

DRAFT – Not for quotation

Violence, Magic and Memory: Zulu Radio Drama and the Politics of Identity in the Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Era

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Magic, Modernity and Radio Drama

This paper explores how the medium of radio through the emergent genre of radio drama enables the exploration of issues of power and violence in a way that is both public and intensely private. Moreover, it argues that through the airing of a topic as feared, as secret and yet as pervasively present – or potentially so - as witchcraft, radio drama can open up for debate areas of modernity around which there is often official silence.

The introduction to a recent collection of essays on modernity and magic moves the realm of the magical firmly within the ambit of modernity and away from the territory of the arcane Other (Pels 2003; and see Geschiere 2000). The magical is not written or argued away, rather its power and danger is acknowledged. In his introductory essay Peter Pels points out how easy it is to underestimate the extent to which such forces are a dangerous and violent presence to those who are not initiated in their mysteries (Pels 2003: 1). He further makes the point that ‘the ethnographic study of such phenomena still threatens to unsettle modes of translation and perception dominated by Western models’ (2003: 14). The depth of fear of practices related to witchcraft, and fear of the use of body parts for powerful medicine surfaced in two incidents in the KwaZulu-Natal region in 2005. In the first, widely reported in the regional press, the bodies of five young children discovered in a disused car in an elderly couple’s yard in the deep KwaZulu-Natal rural district of Msinga led to the couple’s instant arrest and papers showed pictures of angry members of the community demanding the release of the two so that ‘community justice’ could prevail. Their release by the police a few days later because there was no sign that the children’s bodies had been tampered with, still infuriated the families involved. Later it was discovered that the children had suffocated while playing in the car as they had somehow locked themselves in, but the elderly couple had to leave their home because of the hostility of their neighbours.² In a second example, in the semi-rural coastal district of Mthunzini in northern KwaZulu-Natal, very close to where I was

¹ My thanks to my research assistant Wiseman Masango who spent many hours at the recording studios of the SABC at old Fort Road, Durban, listening to the 100 episodes of the play which he also painstakingly transcribed. We then both discussed it, endlessly and I wrote the paper. It is very much, though, a joint effort. This paper was revised at NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences) and I am most grateful for the superb institutional support NIAS has offered. This paper is part of chapter 6 in a book I am working on called *Voicings: Radio Drama in Difficult Times*.

² Report, *Natal Witness* 2 Feb 2005.

visiting in early January 2005, a young girl's clothes were found in the sugar cane near her home. After three days there was still no knowledge of her whereabouts and the fear was expressed that she had been abducted and her body parts used for *ukuthwala* (medicine to bring prosperity). 'They've probably taken her head', my host Sono Dindi said to me, gloomily. 'Ah, she would wander, that girl!' After intense anxiety and the family eventually reporting the disappearance to the police, the girl was found alive and well. She had simply changed into her best clothes in the cane field and sneaked off to visit distant friends. What was striking was the extent of foreboding that the incident caused, and its link in people's minds with the malevolent practice of the use of body parts for the making of powerful medicine that would supposedly transform the fortunes of the person who used it.

This is the seam of anxiety and ambiguity relating to power, the anxieties and stresses of modern life, and the space of the occult that the writer – both novelist and radio playwright – the late Morris Bhengu exploited so skillfully in his two-piece radio drama, *Yiz' Uvalo* and its sequel *Inqob'Isibindi (In Spite of Fear and Courage Wins Through)*. The two linked radio dramas ran for approximately six months in the mid-1980's on what was then Radio Zulu, a section of the state run South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). A twenty-minute segment of the drama played regularly every week day with a repeat in the evenings for those who had missed it through being at work. Bhengu used a skilful combination of melodrama, elements of esoteric knowledge, a strong plotline and the range of auditory effects open to radio plus a powerful cast whose voices were already familiar to listeners. There was also the essential component of music which acted as a swift bridging device between disparate scenes and places and which could shift the site and atmosphere with speed and power. The result was a drama in two parts that gripped probably well over a million listeners for the whole of the six month period that it was on the air, which was from December 1986 to May 1987.

What particularly interested my research assistant Wiseman Masango and myself was the way in which the double drama captured a structure of feeling in the listening community and enabled, as mediator, the contemplation of a modernity in which magic was not a vestige of dying superstition but a real force, linked often to the desire for a better life, a way out of poverty into prosperity. In the interviews which Wiseman Masango carried out in 1999 what seemed also to hold the fascination of listeners when they remembered and talked about the play almost fifteen years after it was first aired was its presence, its 'voice', as a kind of 'aural economy' in the middle of a period of intense *political* violence and social upheaval.³ Without making any direct reference to this state of political turbulence the play seemed able through the various domains of destabilization that it presented to suggest and represent different kinds of violence with an uncanny power which listeners recalled vividly and with fear as well as fascination in later years.

The two plays, really part of a divided whole, together formed the words of a single proverb: *Yiz' uvalo, inqob' isibindi* (In spite of fear, courage wins through). Proverbs are often seen as comments containing deep social wisdom but it is in this

³ Wiseman Masango interviewed 22 radio drama listeners in 1999 and I draw on his findings in my understanding of audience responses to the drama. I borrow the term aural economy from Birgit Meyer's idea of an 'image economy' in her discussion of Ghanaian Pentecostal videos (2006). The term emergent genre is also borrowed from Meyer's early work on Ghanaian video.

case put to use with great irony and ambiguity.⁴ This is so because the man who is the ‘bravest’ is also the most destructive, namely the *inyanga*/herbalist magician. It is he who eludes the power of the state and the police – who represent a semblance of order in the play rather than repression. For all their perverse social message the plays have remained stubbornly in people’s memory and imagination., and seem in some way still to capture some important element of the social imaginary even though they were played fifteen years ago. The plays, often contracted simply to the title of the first play *Yiz’ Uvalo* (In Spite of Fear), are the ones that are most mentioned in listeners’ interviews about what plays they remember, and enjoyed, from all the ones that they have listened to. Interviewees in 1999 recalled enjoying the ‘sheer “play” of the language, the interaction of characters, and the resolution’. They enjoyed too, with fear, the praise song chanted by the *inyanga*’s assistant to his master which ran through several episodes (Gunner 2000:233).

The play also left its own public imprint on the lives of the actors involved. For the cast of *Yiz’uvalo* the play became a marker of their public personae from which they could not escape. In May 2000 Wiseman Masango and I interviewed the actor/script writer, Eric Ngcobo who played the part of the protagonist who goes in search of wealth, a character called Sigidi (Mr Million). He recalled how in the years after the play he would be hailed as ‘Sigidi’, a name by which people still know him, as he moved around the township of Lamontville, in the east coast city of Durban. Ngcobo told us that sometimes children would run screaming in fear as he approached. Not only are living radio celebrities associated with the part they played in this larger than life drama. In the public space of death as well, one’s role in such a famous play is likely to dominate your life history. Thus in an obituary in the Zulu paper *Ilanga laseNatal* (The Natal Sun) for one of the prominent actors of Zulu radio drama, Lawrence Sithole, his role in *Yiz’ Uvalo* was mentioned in the opening sentence. Its upfront mention overshadowed the rest of the long account of his acting life in radio and his wider role as a cultural producer in the mosaic of South African life.⁵ Lawrence Sithole’s part in *Yiz’ Uvalo* was that of a man called Makhas’ Omdloti (Tobacco Leaf), the carrier of the medicine bag for the powerful *inyanga*-maician, ‘Gonondo-on-whom-the-eyes-never gazed (*ongabhekwa ngamehlo*)’. The actor who played Gonondo, Welcome Nzimande, the station manager of Ukhozi FM until 2002, is still addressed as Gonondo by some listeners who write to his popular weekly programme, *Sigiya Ngenyoma* (We Dance to the Song)⁶. Other echoes of the power of the play continue. A shop that sells traditional medicines in the downtown area of Pietermaritzburg, a small city north of Durban, is called KwaGonondo (Gonondo’s place); a former student told me that in the late 1980s during the low level civil war in the Natal Midlands a pale blue combi taxi with dark windows and with the motto *Yiz’ Uvalo* painted on it that, , would come swooping down on Edendale from the Elandskop direction, and that people would be too afraid to take

⁴ See James Olkawitch, ‘Proverbs and Social History’ in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds) *The Social History of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 43-72.

⁵ See the KwaZulu-Natal Zulu language paper, *Ilanga laseNatal* (The Natal Sun) August 22-24, 2002).

⁶ Sibiyi 2001: 141

it.⁷ There were also songs made up about the play, such as 'No Truth in the World' by the reggae singer, the late Lucky Dube;

Narrative, Longing and Violence

The two plays *Yiz'uvalo* and *Inqob'isibindi* which together form the text of the proverb 'In spite of fear courage wins through' cover the story of an ordinary man called Sigidi from the rural area of Ndwedwe, whose desire to make a living for his family by selling fruit and vegetables after he has returned from working in the city was constantly thwarted. In frustration, unable to provide for his family – and this is carefully and poignantly shown - he turns for help to the *inyanga*-magician figure, Gonondo. Thus in his aspirations for a better life he becomes involved with forces beyond his control. The play(s) as I have said, ran for an almost uninterrupted period of six months, daily, (excluding weekends) in the crucible period of low level civil war that raged in the Natal Midlands and in the other more visible sites such as the Rand and Cape Town.⁸ This was the period when the apartheid state and its surrogates fought for ground before the inevitable change of power. From the end of 1986, the radio drama *Yiz'Uvalo* (In Spite of fear) caught, reflected and interacted with, the intense violence and danger of the times. We argue that listening to the plays became a means of working through, and consciously marking, the violence of the time, and possibly also transcending it through the symbolic language that the plays offered. The aural experience of the plays mediated a return – through the imaginative terrain to which the drama gave access - to the terror of the political killings and violence that dominated the Natal Midlands in the six-month period of the plays' airing.

There is another possibility as well. In some way, the intense, prolonged, semi-public engagement through radio with the feared and fascinating topic of the secret and powerful world of the *inyanga*, and the fearful area of the occult, that the plays offered, became a means of viewing a domain of which one normally had only the tiniest of glimpses. The drama was both private – because listening to radio is on one level a very private act - and public because it became a site of shared knowledge for public consumption. In the plays, listeners engaged in the frightening intimacy offered by the medium of radio with the *inyanga*-magician Gonondo, his almost equally dangerous assistant and bag carrier, Makhas' omdloti (Tobacco Leaf), the doomed Sigidi, the corrupted policeman, Makhekhe and the cast of ordinary people who struggled against, in some instances loved, and were in many cases destroyed by these men. Through these figures – tragic in the case of Sigidi, mysterious and terrifying in the case of Gonondo, and something like a good cop turned rotten in the

⁷ Elandskop was under the control of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) warlord Ntombela and Edendale was largely supportive of the still banned African National Congress (ANC). Mhlengi Khumalo who told me this was then a young boy living in Edendale.

⁸ Now consolidated as the province of KwaZulu-Natal. On the violence see for instance John Aitchison, *Numbering the dead: the course and pattern of political violence in the Natal Midlands 1987-1987*, MA Thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1993; Debby Bonnin, 'Understanding Legacies of Political Violence: an examination of Political conflict in Mpumalanga Township, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa', Development Research Centre, London School of Economics, Working Paper No. 44, 2004.

case of the former detective turned *inyanga's* accomplice, Makhekhe (Cakes) - listeners contemplated powers that represented the violence, and the violent men who they or their families confronted on an almost daily basis. And yet, at the same time, on another level these powers represented forces beyond the violent men whose names read like a litany of the decade, forces both beyond yet within modernity. Thus, at the end of the *second* play, (and the very end of both dramas) titled with the second part of the proverb *Inqob'isibindi* (Courage wins through), as the helicopters stutter above Gonondo's homestead and heavily armed police encircle it, the policemen who break into his home find in the last rondavel, only a heap of bones and a laughing voice addresses the single, stunned policeman who remains, 'You will never do anything to me, Mbokazi, 'Courage wins through!' (*Inqob' isibindi*)'.

Radio Drama: Coupling the Ordinary and the Spectacular

By the mid-1980s, radio drama in isiZulu was firmly established no longer as an emergent genre, but one that had defined its own knowledgeable community, and a broadly based listenership that stretched from the urban areas of the Rand, around Johannesburg, through the rural areas of northern KwaZulu and down to the urban townships of Durban and the rural and semi-rural areas of the south coast, south of Durban and adjoining the then Transkei. Its focus was generally on the family, on exploring some aspect of the continuing dialectic of the urban and the rural, and of tradition and modernity in their various manifestations. It had a stable of writers which included those who moved between print literature and radio drama scripts, writers such as D.B.Z. Ntuli and Morris Bhengu, as well as those who moved from radio scripts to musicals, such as Welcome Msomi, best known for his direction and part in *uMabatha*, the Zulu adaptation of *Macbeth*, which was first performed in the early 1970s, and performed again in London in 2001 as part of the focus on South African culture sponsored by the South African Embassy in the British capital.

Zulu radio drama in the 1970s and 1980s, might well have fallen into the domain of what the writer and critic Njabulo Ndebele has disapprovingly called, 'the representation of spectacle' (37). In his article, great swathes of South African fiction from R.R.R.Dhlomo to Alex La Guma are lambasted as 'spectacular'; Ndebele lashes out at other cultural forms such as *umbaqanga* music (an urban-traditional musical form), freestyle township dance, and even football, where, he says, a 'spectacular display of individual talent is often more memorable and ultimately more desirable than the final score.' Zulu radio drama was, also though close to the stories Ndebele turns to as opposing examples of what a South African literary tradition might be, stories representing 'the ordinary', that point to 'the active social consciousness of most people' (53). 'The ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct forms of political interest', Ndebele argues, 'because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions (55). He elides Zulu radio drama from his opposition of the spectacular and the ordinary, possibly because as a somewhat hidden genre of popular culture it had never seemed important to him, but many of the plays would have fulfilled his call for a focus on 'the ordinary lives of people' (55). They also allowed a space for what Ndebele calls (in discussing Bheki Maseko's story, 'Mamlambo'), 'that aspect of the folk tradition that concerns luck to push one towards success and the achievement of one's goals. Thus, says Ndebele:

‘One can turn to an *inyanga* or *isangoma*, to a faithhealer or to similar people who are believed to have control over the forces of nature’ (54).

Yiz’ Uvalo in its insistence on the importance of the daily struggle for a better life, which it outlined so carefully and lovingly in its earlier episodes was very much about the lives of ordinary people. Yet it was also about the spectacular. It covered a series of horrendous murders, and showed the world of one man, Sigidi, and his formerly close and loving family, wrenched from their axis of normality into seemingly inexplicable and unstoppable violence. There was, however, throughout the 100 episodes that comprised the double play, a dialectic between the ordinary and the spectacular. Moments of terrifying excess were counterpointed by the humane and the simple. Family scenes of great tenderness were juxtaposed – through the bridging devices offered by the music and sound effects - with murders, and with the esoteric in the *inyanga* scenes involving the fearsome Gonondo and his accomplices. In this way the pull of the normative in terms of a possible social order, lingering in the memory in the midst of terror, could be pointed up.

The music and sound effects also contributed to this interplay of the implied normative and the domain of terrifying destructive metaphysical power. The theme tune of the dramas was Tina Turner’s ‘You don’t need another hero’. Yet interspersed with this pull to the world of American popular music were sounds of a slow drum and eerie whistles and echoes which would often accompany the disembodied voice of the *inyanga*-magician Gonondo commanding his underlings, ‘*Amthathe Sigidi/ Amthathe Makhekhe!*’ (Take him/her out Sigidi!/Finish him off Cakes!). Listeners tracked the course of a man who was good, Sigidi, but who was completely corrupted and destroyed. The sound effects underscored the power of the explicitly described world of non-material, non-visible forces. The author of the double drama, Morris Bhengu may well have done careful research for his texts – and the explicitness of some moments of the text suggest this.⁹ There were also very powerful and famous men who may have served as models for the character of the *inyanga*-magician Gonondo. The best known was called Khotso Sethuntsa, a man of great wealth who practised as a kind of herbalist-fortune-teller in the districts of Mount Frere and then Lusiksiki in the eastern Cape and who died in 1972. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, arch architect of scientific apartheid, was among those reputed to have visited him.¹⁰ Like the character of Gonondo in the dramas, Khotso Sethuntsa was feared, hugely wealthy, mysterious, reputed to control other-worldly powers and beings and was rarely seen by clients, preferring to conduct his actual consultations unseen with a skin barrier separating him from his customers.

The Context of the Times - Violence and its Helpers

Besides the aural economy of radio drama which allowed for a particularly powerful private-public mediation of the feared occult, there was the way in which the double drama with its weighty proverb-title caught the structure of feeling of the times, the

⁹ Such as the visit by Makhekhe (Cakes) the policeman who later ‘goes rotten’ to a famous *inyanga* who lives near Durban, Mathanazana, who instructs him – and hence the radio audience – in the workings of the occult.

¹⁰ See the biography of Khotso Sethuntsa by Felicity Wood and Michael Lewis, *The Extraordinary Khotso: Millionaire Medicine Man*, Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2008.

political violence to which I have already referred.¹¹ The province now known as KwaZulu-Natal was in some ways the epicenter of this although wider media coverage particularly in the international media tended to focus on Johannesburg and the Rand.¹²

The end of 1986 and the early months of 1987 – the period when the plays were on the airwaves - shimmered with violence, and it was often the kind of destruction that most affected the family. Hammarsdale, the industrial and residential area between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, was affected by violence immediately after the assassination of Victoria Mxenge, the lawyer wife of Griffiths Mxenge, in Umlazi, Durban, in July 1986. In the crowded freehold area of Clermont in north Durban, one of the events that sparked violence was the assassination of the wife of the United Democratic Front (UDF) leader, Vuka Shabalala in 1984; powerful men were often targeted through their wives, hence the Shabalala murder, and also that of Zazi Khuzwayo, wife of an influential businessman in Clermont who opposed the influence of KwaZulu politicians in the area. And in Hammarsdale, even for ordinary people far from positions of wealth or leadership, no-one felt safe; if a member of your family was an activist (either for the UDF or for Inkatha), you were vulnerable and liable to be attacked and killed or to have your house burnt. Thus the family, already deeply affected by the long-term ravages of apartheid, was newly vulnerable in the urban and peri-urban areas where violence reigned. In these times of crisis resort to powers considered beyond the human was widespread. In some cases the power of the *inyanga* and of the politician resided in the same individual. Thus Jamile Mlotshwa was not only an *inyanga* and president of the KwaZulu and Natal Traditional Healers Association, he was also a senior executive figure of the political party, Inkatha, and was from Clermont. Jamile had a *muthi* (protective medicine) chemist shop at KwaDabeka, a part of Clermont, and the shop itself was in KwaDabeka hostel in Clermont. Jamile also had his own *amabutho* (regiments) made up of young men aged from 18-25 who were responsible for his safety and guarded him at all times. Jamile, politician and *inyanga* was eventually charged and convicted of the murder of Zazi Khuzwayo's wife and spent several years in jail before earning parole.

Inkatha leaders were not the only ones who kept 'regiments' of youth as bodyguards. The UDF leader, Archie Gumede, also from Clermont, had his own bodyguard of youth. As we have said, the intense danger of the times heightened the belief in *muthi* and its efficacy and it was the warlords who were particularly careful in their use of it and who encouraged its use among their informal regiments. Certainly in Clermont there was a strong belief in it, and this was fostered by other warlord figures such as Shabalala from Emathendeni in Inanda (on the northern outskirts of Durban), by Siphso Mlaba in Hammarsdale and by Ntombela in the peri-urban/rural districts clustering around Elandskop, north-west of Pietermaritzburg. All these were powerful people who used *muthi*, they themselves – and others - believed, with success.

¹¹ The section on the violence in Clermont draws heavily Wiseman Masango's personal experience of the period. My deep thanks to him.

¹² This has to be substantiated. At present it is simply a 'hunch'.

Nor was *muthi* only used in Natal and KwaZulu; it was also used on the Rand, particularly in the mine compounds and hostels; an August 1986 issue of *City Press* announced that in an attempt to find the murderers of two white policemen after a mass meeting of mine workers, police had sealed off part of the relevant township and were searching the occupants of every house looking for razor marks used by *izinyanga* for medicine that would turn bullets to water. The Rand, and in particular Soweto, was at this time also the site of violent rent boycotts. In a spectacular front page headline which scooped up American popular culture and the politics of resistance into a neat whole, an article in *City Press* likened the scene in White City Jabavu to being ‘like living in the spectre of “The Guns of Navarone:”’.¹³ On this occasion, as residents resisted attempts by municipal police, ‘blackjacks’ to evict them, the death toll rose to more than 20, with ‘the number of injured galloping towards the 100 mark’.

All the above, was taking place in the context of a general State of Emergency, with widespread detentions under the Internal Security Act, and ‘over 460 detainees’ hospitalized between mid June and the end of August of 1986.¹⁴ There were also continuing executions by the beleaguered apartheid state, such as that of Andrew Zondo, the Amanzimtoti bomber.¹⁵ This was the spectacle of public violence which the drama(s) mediated and from which they created the private-public space to which I have already referred.

The Play and its Resonances: the Allegory of Family and Nation

Perhaps, though, what is most shocking about the double play is the way it publicly yoked the dilemmas of family with the occult and linked this to the still uncertain fate of the nation yet to be born. The double play, through all its one hundred episodes is at one level a prolonged and publicly shared study of a family struggling against disintegration; Sigidi has to kill his wife if he is to successfully fulfil his contract with the powerful Gonondo, but we are shown in great detail how he struggles to bring himself to do this (Episode 20); and his wife, although badly injured by Sigidi, hesitates to reveal the identity of her would-be killer to the police. The family destroyed becomes the microcosm of the wider social fabric, the imagined community of the nation battered into pieces. The shattered lives of the families of Sigidi and the policeman turned corrupt helpmate of the figure of evil, Gonondo, become part of an allegory of the potential demise of the wider society. Gonondo, with his echoing voice, ‘*Amthathe Sigidi*’ (Finish her off Sigidi), ‘*Amthathe Makhekhe*’ (Get him Makhekhe) heard on the airwaves, in the heads of Sigidi and the one-time policeman, Makhekhe, works in the allegory as the lawless figure of the warlord giving commands to those over whom he wields enormous power. As allegory, heard constantly, listened to in huddled family groups, discussed in the streets and bars of the suffering communities, it allowed a particular kind of reflexivity in the domain of art that was difficult to achieve in the chaos and lawlessness of the violent days. It can be said to have truly provided a national allegory in the sense meant by Frederic

¹³ *City Press*, August 31, 1986.

¹⁴ *City Press* September 14, 1986.

¹⁵ *City Press* September 14, 1986.

Jameson when he claimed that all third world texts 'are to be read...as...national allegories' (1986: 69). In its sustained presentation of the possibilities of sorcery and witchcraft, not as part of the 'folk tradition' as Ndebele puts it, but as part of modernity, it shows people 'trying to empower themselves in a modern world that is often out of their control'. I argue that one should see this scripting of violence as part national allegory and part the voicing of what John and Jean Comaroff have called 'the enchantment of modernity' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993 xiv; Behrend 2002: 105).

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Radio Dramas

Yiz' Uvalo and Inqob' Isibindi [In Spite of Fear and Courage Can Win] author Morris Bhengu, produced Durban Studio of SABC, serialized December 1986-May 1987. Episodes 1-40 and 1-60.

Interviews

Eric Ngcobo with Liz Gunner and Wiseman Masango, Durban, May 24, 2000.