

## African Orientations to Listening: The Case of Loudspeaker Broadcasting to Zulu-speaking Audiences in the 1940s

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### Abstract

This paper tracks the development of loudspeaker broadcasting system for African listeners in South Africa, in the 1940s. The paper argues that although such development seemed to take place under the constraints of Second World War recruitments, however in the realm of listening, it was extending on previous listening techniques (related to the *inkomo*, cow, a key object in Bantu-speaking cultures of Africa); it drew on commemorative forms; etc. and the fact that it had to draw on such commemorative forms for its viability demonstrates its reliance on historical antecedents (albeit caricatured in form), that demonstrated at once the resilience of the past, as well as its incomprehensibility in relation to colonial/segregationist conditions of governance. In this way the paper is a contribution to sound theory, in terms of the elaboration of listening as a category by which we come to know the world we live in, from African perspectives.

**Keywords:** SABC, broadcasting, Zulu radio, loudspeaker, izibongo, listening

### Introduction

This paper is a contribution to sound theory, in terms of the elaboration of listening as a category by which we come to *know* the world we live in. When French physician [Rene-Theophile-Hyacinthe Laennec invented the stethoscope](#), he published an entire treatise explaining the act of listening to the body of a patient in 1819. The treatise's aim was to teach doctors how to listen but also how to think about the act of listening to patients. The stethoscope went on to become the single most influential medical invention of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe in the diagnosis of patients. Listening became a vital skill necessary in the creation of a new medical epistemology. And as Jonathan Sterne explains, by the time the preoccupation with listening entered the field of broadcasting it was not necessarily a new thing, it emerged with its own sense of “intuitive knowledge” about how to listen and how to think about listening (Sterne, 2003, pp. 89-101).

Sterne argues that techniques of listening that became widespread with the diffusion of the telephone, the phonograph, and the radio early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were themselves transposed and elaborated from techniques of listening developed elsewhere in middle-class cultures over the course of the nineteenth century. Important about this practice, as Sterne tells us, is the emergence of a skilled practice of listening to specific sounds while ignoring others. The success of the instrument was that it drew on auditory attention for medical diagnosis. It transformed diagnosis from a procedure based on the patient's account of their sickness, towards an empirically verifiable classification of disease:

Listening moved away from an incidental modality of intersubjective communication to a privileged technique of empirical examination. It offered a way of constructing knowledge of patients independent of patients' knowledge of themselves. The truth of a patient's body became audible to the listener on the other end of the stethoscope (Sterne, 2003, p.128).

The development of the stethoscope and instructions for its use involved the organizing of space (inside the body, in middle-class homes) in Europe and thus helped create and frame

sonic events. Sounds were then grouped into ‘interior’ sounds (deemed as important) and ‘exterior’ sounds which were to be ignored (Sterne, 2003, p.128). If we are to believe the assertions of Sterne, then we might say that African subjects coming to confront modern technological rituals of listening must have also come with their own intuitive sense about how to listen and how to think about listening.

[HIE Dhlomo](#), a great African thinker, journalist from South Africa became one of the first Zulu-speaking presenters on the loudspeaker broadcasting system that were set up in the 1940s during the Second World War. In thinking about this practice, Dhlomo believed that an African genealogy of listening could not simply be tracked from the technological developments that were contemporary, he felt that understanding the role of *inkomo* (cow) and its various utilities that existed prior to (and notwithstanding) colonialism could better explain early listening orientations from the Zulu-speaking African point of view. He argued that broadcasting technology was extending on this traditional practice of announcing news using cow horns. In this paper I look at Dhlomo’s argument for precisely this purpose, of understanding the social role of *inkomo*, and then look at the particular moments of acoustic clash and shifting cognitive registers that occurred when loudspeaker broadcasts were first introduced in the 1940s in South Africa. But before getting into Dhlomo, let me track the development of broadcasting for African audiences.

#### How loudspeaker broadcasting developed

The first loudspeaker broadcast for African audiences took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1941, at the mine compounds of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) gold mines. African mineworkers who had flocked the city from far regions of the continent, even up to central Africa, would have comprised the congregation of listeners on the day. [1] Many of the mineworkers spoke different languages, and would have been aware that the announcements made in Sotho and Xhosa, would exclude them. But those who could understand Zulu were addressed the following day.

The loudspeaker broadcasts were then launched in Durban, a colonial port city on the east of South Africa, whose industrial growth attracted a significant African population from the countryside. Unlike in Johannesburg, the population in this region spoke mostly Zulu, and were therefore addressed solely in this language on the loudspeakers. In this sense, the broadcast system proved more effective here, due to the fact that most people who listened could understand what was being said. Loudspeakers were installed in the following places: beerhalls, hostels, and factories where Africans worked both in Durban and in the nearby town of Pietermaritzburg. [2] A total of 60 areas were wired-up, the broadcasts were 30 minutes and divided into three segments: First was the news, then the playing of music, and lastly a special talk of some kind. [3]

The loudspeaker system was successful in several fronts: (1) it was fairly easy to install, at a low cost; (2) it could with immediacy capture a large African urban population into the community of listeners; (3) and finally, the loudspeaker broadcasts could be easily woven into the already existing ‘entertainment system’ of music-dance competitions, theatre and outdoor film-screenings (see Peterson, 2000). Gatherings of this nature were few and far between, given the severe restrictions on Africans assembling in public areas.

Durban was the most logical step in the implementation of the loudspeaker broadcast after Johannesburg. Dhlomo described the city as that place “where one can bring the country to the city and the city to the country.” [4] Apart from the fact that it had a significantly sized African urban population, it had also witnessed a lot of militant responses to domination. Dockworkers, rickshaw pullers, industrial/commercial workers, waiters, motorcar drivers—these were the professions that comprised the majority of the African working population in the city (La

Hausse de Lalouviere, 2000, p.114). And would have most likely been the target group of listeners.

The desire to create mass listening events went hand-in-hand with the state's aim to transform itself into an acceptable political structure with wider appeal. Through technology the state could bulldoze its way into people's lives. But for it to achieve this effect it needed to recall some of the crowd gathering and commemorative forms from a bygone era; a bit of ritual, a bit of *izibongo* (praise-poetry), whatever would win the day, to secure its place in the minds of people. "Thanks to the war, the SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] has discovered the African listeners," said Dhlomo in 1945. [5]

The person in charge of the loudspeaker broadcasts from the Durban studios of the SABC was a man by the name of Hugh Tracey. Tracey apparently got the idea of the loudspeaker broadcasts to Africans in Natal when he discovered that a rumour was spreading among Africans that every Zulu speaker would earn 10 shillings a day when Hitler arrived (Couzens, 1985, p.208). These views were echoed in official records:

Representations from various quarters were made to the Corporation to set aside a portion of each day's programme for the purpose of broadcasting a special war news service to Natives, with the object of counteracting unfounded *rumours*. While fully realizing the importance of the object in view, the Corporation felt that any attempt to reach that object by the means suggested could only be of doubtful value, and therefore suggested another method of achieving the same end. [6] [my emphasis]

The authorities wanted a fluent Zulu-speaker to present the broadcasts. Charles Mpanza was asked to do the job. He was already working under the Chief Native Commissioner, as an officer in the Pietermaritzburg office. [7] But apart from his position in government, Mpanza was also the Secretary of the Zulu Society. An educated African's organization, the Society was largely viewed as a thought-leader in Zulu language matters. He then introduced the name of Dhlomo as one who he could work within the broadcasting scheme. Mpanza sourced the musicians to use on the show and also paid them. He prepared the scripts and arranged for guest speakers. All the scripts and talks given by guest speakers had to be translated into English and given to the Studio Manager of the SABC in Natal to approve beforehand. [8] So although, Mpanza presented the Pietermaritzburg broadcasts and his friend Dhlomo the Durban ones, the Studio Manager (who was Hugh Tracey at the time) was ultimately in charge.

But, as will be shown here, Dhlomo was not only doing the work of broadcasting, he was also seriously thinking about what it meant to be broadcasting to an audience who seemingly had no listening precedent. The Zulu language belongs to a cluster of languages called the Bantu language group, a category understood by linguists to designate a possible inter-relationship among those who speak it, in terms of the long past (Nurse and Phillipson, 2007). What is certainly common amongst many Bantu language speakers is the centrality of *inkomo* in figuring early social and economic formations (Mafeje, 1991: 60). Dhlomo's meditation on *inkomo* is therefore warranted from a historic and socio-cultural perspective. He outlines a series of significations of *inkomo* into seven broad categories, namely: (1) utilitarian aspects; (2) economical side; (3) military connections; (4) political influence; (5) social life; (6) religion, ritual and medicine; (7) miscellaneous. It may be worthwhile to summarize his whole perspective before honing-in on the implications in terms of listening orientations.

*Inkomo* in the kraal of the household were the pride of the home. While the king was the symbol of the authority, glory and essence of that life, the *inkomo* was more than that—it was life itself. Besides providing the traditional person with food, *inkomo* stood as a symbol invested with spiritual, political and economic significance. To settle political disputes between clans *cattle* were exchanged, with the understanding that once 'your cows were now in my

kraal' we have become basically families, we can therefore no longer be at war. Excellence in military intelligence and agricultural production were rewarded with cattle, the number of cattle you owned was linked to your labour activity, and thus your economic status. Cattle were also seen as a link between the visible and the invisible worlds. To purify both yourself and those you have defiled you would use *inkomo*. The cow was therefore imbued with spiritual significance. The loss of one's cows was equivalent to losing one's child. [9]

For our purpose, it is to the utilitarian aspects of *inkomo* we must now turn our attention towards. The first, that "The horns were used as loudspeakers to summon the people to the tribal assemblies or to carry one's voice across hill and vale". The second, that "Many are the uses of the skin of the *inkomo*...there is the drum. It should be remembered that the drum played no small role in tribal life, as it was used as a kind of radio to broadcast news and secret codes besides being a musical instrument." [10] In both these instances, Dhlomo paints the picture of early elaborations of listening culture before broadcasting. By bringing these to bear in so systematic an essay, he was invariably providing an observable genealogy of broadcasting outside of the Western encounter. The implications are in this instant very vital, as blacks were often excluded from full participation in the broadcasting technologies based on the assumption that they were under-developed, both in terms of mental capacities (cognition) and historical precedents.

### Technophobia of Segregation

In the 1940s, during the Second World War, the South African state had a technophobia over what Africans might do with technology. There was a lingering fear that Africans might possibly insurrect at the end of the Second World War, with the possibility of civil war; the fear that the war might expose Africans to new ideas:

1. That the African man might discover himself the military equal of the white man.
2. According to the Job Reservation Act of 1924, the 'advanced' employment market (of which broadcasting was considered a part of) was restricted to the white minority only (Khumalo, 1996, p.6). This exhibited the fear that African man might discover himself the scientific equal of the white man.

The outcome of the government's tiptoeing around race was a ludicrous situation where Africans were used for certain war duties, in order to free whites for actual combat. But now because African soldiers were not allowed to carry firearms, white soldiers had to be used to protect black soldiers. The exercise was self-defeating. This technophobia was accompanied with the suppression of information on the success of the military units from other African countries (such as the King's African Rifles, which incorporated soldiers from East and West African British territories), motivated by the "fear that public recognition of the part played by African troops might give material for political criticism here in the Union, or might perhaps seem to detract from the glory of the white South African troops." (Alfred Hoernle cited in Grundlingh, 1986).

In 1940, the Director of the Non-European Army services refused to send the assistance of a band to recruitment troops for Africans in Northern Transvaal. He felt that the means of recruiting Africans ought to be "unostentatious" (Grundlingh, 1986, p.19). So sound was suppressed out of fear. Although sound was used to attract attention in the case of white Afrikaner recruitment rituals, sound could also be controlled to detract attention in the recruitment of African troops (Grundlingh, 1999, p.355). It shows how sound and ritual cooperated to order social reality (i.e. of racial superiority) as well as to command national loyalty (i.e. by instructing people to enlist in the army). This is an important illustration of the significance of the sonic dimension in configuring exclusion. "Sound is suited to the task of establishing presence," we are told by Carolyn Birdsall in her study of German Nazi

soundscapes, it “can appear in the auditory imagination, even if their source cannot be seen” (Birdsall, 2012, p.36). However, it can also eliminate presence, for those who must be seen but should not be heard. 76 000 African men, mostly from the Northern Transvaal, enlisted in the Defence Force during the Second World War. Foreign African troops were prevented from staging public processions in the country, just in case their parades discouraged local Africans from fighting without weapons. In cases where the rhythms of warfare in North Africa proved impossible to overcome with colour-bar policies, Africans *were* given rifles. This was however kept from public knowledge (Grundlingh, 1986, pp. 27-29).

For some African leaders inclusion in the military squad would confirm their claims to full citizenship, government was very aware of this. So while the state was embarking on a campaign to have loudspeakers connected for Africans to listen, another effort was also underway to de-signify the presence of African soldiers in the war. The spatial process of increasing state pronouncement by installing loudspeakers in visible public areas, earmarked sound as a disciplinary practice of control. It obviously heightened the aural and spatial awareness of the state and its own imperative. But the sonic dimension of the loudspeaker system was transgressive, for it could be heard in the soundscape even when the source could not be seen. Because sound blasts whether you want to listen or not, it insists on its presence in the auditory imagination, as people walked by coming from work, or sat for a quick drink with friends they would unavoidably hear what was being said. In this sense the success of the loudspeaker broadcasting system drew on both visual presence and acoustic strategies.

The beer hall on Victoria Street was one of the most popular venues for Africans to gather in the city of Durban in the early 1940s. It was municipal owned and provided a permitted environment for entertainment purposes and the sale of alcohol. The sounds coming out of the loudspeaker provided background accompaniment to those mingling with friends, they were also a reminder of the fact that this was a government controlled environment. [11] The news delivered by government representatives on loudspeakers were thus part of the audio-markers of regulation.

The Victoria Street beer hall was also an *isicathamiya* performance venue. Some of the African middle-classes patronised these venues, as they were more orderly than the illicit entertainment venues in the slums. But Victoria Street beer hall was more than just a recreational centre, it was a gateway to other venues that were less government controlled. The ‘real’ *isicathamiya* took place at the shebeens (make-shift pubs) in the Samseni area, which were conveniently located by a direct bus line from Victoria Street. Here, people could purchase stronger concoctions of liquor and things other than the low alcohol-content beer sold at the municipal-operated venues (Maloka, 2004: 126). They could also dance for much longer into the night, although this would have to be done quietly so as to not provoke the Indian landlords. It is in this context that *isicathamiya* (a type of music genre, pioneered by the likes of Ladysmith Black [Mambazo](#) acquired its delicate gestures and hushed voices that have become the most distinctive features of the style (Erlmann, 1991, pp. 83-84 & Gunner, 2008).

The movements of African men between regulated city spaces and less controlled fringe areas, between urban areas and rural homelands, as they sought to bring to life the realities of migrant existence provided some of the most vexing challenges for white rule in the 1920s to 1940s (see Couzens, 1985 & Erlmann, 1989, pp. 259-273). Urgent disavowals of war rumour, as those undertaken in the loudspeaker broadcasts, have to be considered in light of the sense of ambivalence many Africans had towards the segregated country and its consequent involvement in the war. Resolutions taken by the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) [12], the Transvaal Non-European People’s Conference and similar organizations emphasized that Africans should not take part only as labourers, but that they too should be armed in battle. The ANC noted that, “the territorial integrity of the Union of South Africa can only be effectively defended if all sections of the population were included in the Defence System of the country on equal terms” (see Grundlingh, 1986, pp. 14,17).

From Dhlomo's theorizing, African men and women who congregated around these broadcast venues were not engaging in entirely new techniques of listening; rather such listening contexts were progressive development of old technologies related to *inkomo*. It must be remembered that loudspeaker broadcasts, unlike perhaps domestic radio broadcasts, were rooted in the notion of crowd-gathering that were the hallmark in the development of colonial governance in Africa. 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonial administrator, Theophilus Shepstone, chose to resolve the challenge of native governance using caricatures of African indigenous models. He placed a lot of emphasis on ceremonials of assembling and gathering of crowds. The strategies paid rigorous attention to detail, they were also imaginative and included the acting out of the role of the then deceased Zulu king, [Shaka kaSenzangakhona](#), in public ceremony. Transposing the indigenous elements, Shepstone himself would play the role of Shaka. Modes of public address, including heralding, *izibongo* (praise poetry) would be invoked: People were called forth to assemble. And then later "The majority of assembled people dispersed back to their homes". Processions were made with Shepstone at the head, "followed by the brass band, the two field pieces, and the column of mounted Volunteers." Even the voice was exploited for its capacities. He would address in fluent Zulu, "pausing throughout to obtain vocal assent" in the instructions he was giving (Hamilton, 1998, p. 78).

Loudspeaker broadcasts in public venues should be considered in relation to this history of gathering and dispersing African crowds for the purpose of colonial governance. It must be kept in mind, that in instances where African themselves initiated gatherings, these were legally restricted in urban context. Most African self-initiated listening 'entertainment' was restricted to the church and private spaces within the urban environment. [12] In the 1920s, for example, as Durban city officials enforced strict restrictions on natives and the use of the City hall (and other public premises), the church hall and school room were transformed into vibrant music performance centres. They became distinct public spaces in the cultural geography of Africans in the city. Petros Lamula, a pastor of the Norwegian Missionary Society, developed a reputation among Durban's movers-and-shakers due to his promotion of musical concerts at his inner-city church in the 1910s and 1920s. Cultural anxieties and racial tensions were so rife that he was, like other black clergy, "at pains to distance himself from gambling, sheebens, *ingoma* and other activities viewed as 'dangerous' by city officials and the police (La Hausse de Lalouviere, 2000, pp. 48-49, 52 & 143-144). Crowd-gathering of African audiences became the exclusive instrument of the state. Africans therefore had become suspicious of any attempt to introduce them to loudspeaker broadcasting technology. Dhlomo's assertion that broadcasting technology therefore was contributing to the transformation of Zulu culture rather than eroding it, should be considered in this regard. It was an intervention intended to dissociate listening technique from the apparatus of the state. And it was crucial in re-shaping the instructive element of colonial governance and the kind of psychology of crowd-gathering which it promoted.

Dhlomo's argument stands in contradistinction to Sterne's starting point of the medical device, which seems to designate the genealogy of listening as the field of European middle classes. If the stethoscope, and subsequent inventions of telegraphy and radio are instances tracking the genealogy of listening in the Western sense, then it is the *inkomo* horn and skin-drum that marks instances of listening in the African Zulu sense.

South Africa's wartime soundscape, was not of emergency sirens and bomb explosions, but of public announcements and radio crackle—these really exhibited the usefulness of loudspeakers. But the loudspeakers were also empowering in the sensorial dimensions of African bodies in the country, whose listening orientations were affirmed in that moment. The entrance of loudspeaker broadcasting may have declared 'hush!' to the rumour mongering, and conversations that were happening in African social spaces, but it also did so much more. The real innovation was in the extension of iterations of listening, that Africans were well attuned to, which is what made the medium attractive to African audiences in South Africa.

## Biography

Dr Thokozani Mhlambi is the NRF Postdoctoral Fellow in Innovation, at the Archive & Public Culture Research Initiative at the University of Cape Town. An internationally recognized South African-born cellist & composer, Mhlambi's style of music draws from the rich Zulu-speaking heritage, while still asserting global standards of quality music-making. Mhlambi was also one of the featured artists in the World Summit on Arts & Culture. His piece “Ukuxhentsa kwa Miriam: Inspired by the life of Miriam Makeba” was proudly published by the Miriam Makeba Foundation on their online platforms. He is a winner of the African Studies Prize 2009. He has published on numerous music related topics including kwaito, house music and early radio broadcasting.

## Footnotes

- [1] “Broadcast to Natives”, Department of Native Affairs (1942). TAB NTS .9655/520/400/13(1) and TAB NTS .9653/520/400(9), National Archives Repository, Pretoria.
- [2] “Letter to the Town Clerk,” Pietermaritzburg Municipal Native Administration Minutes (1940). 4/4/2/299, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository.
- [3] “Broadcast of Information to Natives”, Pietermaritzburg Municipal Native Administration Minutes (1940), 4/4/2/299, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository.
- [4] This he said after having spent some time away in Johannesburg and seen the conditions of overcrowding, drunkenness and urban decay there. ‘X’ [H.I.E. Dhlomo], “On Durban,” *Ilanga*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1947.
- [5] “Busy Bee”, *Ilanga* 16<sup>th</sup> June 1945.
- [6] SABC *Annual Report*.
- [7] Papers re. Chief Native Commissioner (1939), A1381, IV/2/2, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository.
- [8] Hugh Tracey, Letter the Secretary of the Zulu Society, “Broadcast Performances,” 6<sup>th</sup> May 1941, A1381, IV/8, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository.
- [9] ‘Inkomo in Zulu Life’, *Ilanga* 6<sup>th</sup> December 1947; continued ‘Inkomo in Zulu life, *Ilanga* 13<sup>th</sup> December 1947.
- [10] *ibid*.
- [11] Municipal owned beer halls were established in 1938 in order to control the sale of liquor in the cities of South Africa. (see Maloka, 2004).
- [12] This is the political party that eventually lead the road to democracy, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela in 1994.
- [13] In addition, under the Slums Act (1934) people could be removed for whatever reasons, including for re-zoning from residential to industrial area, to upgrade area before re-accomodating. In the most extreme cases, settlements could be demolished even prior to municipal authorities establishing what the land was going to be used for. (Beavon, 2004 also see Parnell, 1988).

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