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Namibian Radio History and Selective Sound Archiving 1979–2009**

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Tools of the Regime. Namibian Radio History and Selective Sound Archiving 1979–2009

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The history of the Sound Archives of the NBC (Namibian Broadcasting Corporation) mirrors, of course, the history not only of the country's broadcasting corporation, but the country itself.

The uniqueness of our history includes that of colonial occupation and repression, under first Germany and then South Africa, the unique policies of apartheid (or separate development) instituted by the South African occupying regime (which had ramifications for broadcasting policy as well), plus the history of the country's liberation struggle, leading to the implementation of UN Resolution 435, and the country's first democratic elections in 1989, preparing for independence on 21 March 1990.

Since independence the country has been stable and generally peaceful and has conducted several successful democratic elections, with the dominant ruling party Swapo, increasing its majority at each election.

However, the country also lives with the baggage of our unique history, and the implications for the national broadcaster, including the NBC Sound Archives, are what I will focus on in this paper.

The occupation of the German colonial regime in the early part of the last century has led to a unique German heritage being quite marked in Namibia. A visitor to Windhoek or Swakopmund will not help to notice not only those rather unique and German sounding names, but also the buildings in the towns are very much influenced by German architectural styles.

But that influence has also been felt in other spheres, including cultural and linguistic. The German speaking community, although small, remains economically powerful, to the extent that there is a daily newspaper in the German language, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, certainly quite unique on the continent of Africa, and a full-time, 24 hour a day, 7 day a week German language station on the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, broadcasting a selection of news and information, as well as minority musical content such as Classics and Operetta. Recently, a regular television news broadcast in German has also been introduced by the NBC.

That said, however, it is an observation that many German speakers in the country remain linked to their erstwhile fatherland, even though many are second or third generation Namibians. Thus, they will be regular subscribers of *Deukom*, giving them a number of German channels via satellite such as RTL and Sat 1. And their passion, as reflected in the *Allgemeine Zeitung's* daily content will often be for Bundesliga matches, or political developments in Germany, rather than an active interest in Namibian sport or politics.

The South African occupation, originally under a League of Nations mandate, also left its mark on the country's media environment, with, for instance, the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of education and of governance being predominant. Even today, Afrikaans is common as a “lingua franca” in the country, and is often used by different language groups as a medium of communication, especially in smaller towns and rural areas. Also, the Afrikaans speaking community is also fairly economically powerful, and thus there is not only a daily Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Republikein*, but also numerous commercial radio stations catering for this language.

However, along with the German speaking community, there remains a strong alliance with the colonial past, and in the case of Afrikaners, a linkage to South Africa. Thus, many will have satellite bouquets (DSTV) including Afrikaans channels, and, in particular, coverage of major South African sporting matches, especially rugby. Again, the interest in Namibian politics or sport is often second to interest in South African events. One local Afrikaans radio station will regularly carry news bulletins about events in South Africa, without even mentioning Namibian news!

In terms of public broadcasting, the SWABC (South West African Broadcasting Corporation) was established in 1979, essentially as part of a response by South Africa to ever-increasing international pressure to grant the territory independence. Thus, before this date, the SABC was responsible for the broadcasting of services (mainly Afrikaans and English) into South West Africa. But, come 1979, there began a process of the establishment of language radio services, essentially following the South African model of “separate development”.

This meant that each “tribal” or “ethnic” group in the country would be catered for with their own exclusive language service. The heritage today is that the NBC has 10 radio services, including a National Radio service in the official language, English, plus, the latest development, a small community style radio station broadcasting from Tsumkwe in one of the San languages.

When we look at the sound archives, we will see that this aspect of language remains a great challenge. Material is stored in its original language, and must therefore be archived by specialists who are eloquent in the language, and are able to transcribe the material correctly into bibliographical records accessible in that language. Multiply this by ten, and one can see the challenges faced in terms of manpower.

Another quirk of history however is that this policy of separate development also led to a dedicated team of music producers travelling throughout the country in search of musical material from each language group. Even today, the NBC record library has a valuable collection of “transcription recordings” from this time – a process that, ironically, after independence, has not taken place with the same amount of fervour.

But that establishment of a local broadcaster, the SWABC, also led to the establishment, in 1981, of a Namibian sound archives, housed in the radio building in Windhoek West. That is

the sound archives that still exists today, containing an extensive collection of material, mainly from 1981 onwards, but also including a few items dating back to 1938.

However, because of the South African political agenda at the time, which tried to entrench a seemingly independent government in the territory, and vilified Swapo as terrorists and communists, the collection mainly focusses on what, in hindsight, are minority political figures (such as the South African appointed “Administrator General” for South West Africa) rather than the important historical role players in Namibia's independence – figures such as the Founding Father Sam Nujoma, or Andimba Toivo ya Toivo.

And whereas the video archive received some material from the SWAPO exile movement when they returned to the country (material of PLAN fighters on missions to liberate the country for example), the sound archives have not received similar valuable material from, for instance, SWAPO's radio station in exile, the *Voice of Namibia*.

Another quirk of history meant that the South African regime had a heavy hand in censoring material that went out on the air. In particular, a small committee at the record library would make decisions on what was suitable for broadcast and what was not. And what was not suitable was any material that might provoke “dissension” in the country. In a broadcaster whose aim was to entrench South African occupation, the last thing that was needed was dissenting voices calling for the independence of Namibia.

Thus, records mentioning human rights, or equality for all, or democracy now – would be banned, along with any records with strong sexual language. The instructions of this committee were then relayed to the person responsible for, literally, the damage – whose job it was to use a nail to physically scratch the tracks in question so that they could not be played! However, some of the dissenting more liberal members of staff nevertheless defied such physical damage and, using some heavy coins on the pickup arm, nevertheless managed to play these tracks on the air – much to the annoyance of management.

With the independence of Namibia, and the establishment of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, a more normalised approach to sound archiving has taken place, with copies of all important speeches and talks being archived, along with interviews, news reports, documentaries and features. Criteria for the collection include its importance as:

- An historical resource (including oral history)
- A record of Namibian creative achievement; and
- A record of Namibian orature and oral tradition

The question of what “Namibian” material is arises, and the Sound Archives have defined this as material either produced by Namibians, or material about Namibia or Namibians.

The current challenges facing the Sound Archives, however, are more to do with ongoing technological innovation, which has led to the collection having a variety of formats – from

ATR (audio tape recordings) to compact cassette, to Magnetic Optical Discs (MOD), to Mini Discs (MD) to, currently, CD-R and flash disks being used to store material.

Unfortunately, especially with the older taped material, there also remains the challenge of preservation, and, with no temperature or humidity control for storage, the lifespan of some of the older tapes in the collection (material from independence is now 19 years old) is being stretched to the limit.

And whereas a programme for the restoration of all the older material is in place, it is not yet effectively operating, due, in main, to a lack of manpower. Physically dubbing older material from cassettes to a newer format has to be done in real time and this is a long and laborious process.

And still the formats keep changing. As of this presentation, NBC Radio is currently undergoing perhaps its biggest transformation since independence, with all language services now being joined together through digital technology and the Dalet software, meaning that any presenter on any service will be able to access material (mainly music) when and where they need it. With 10 language services, the record library, often with only one or two copies of a CD, was often under extreme pressure to provide all language services with the latest music – something which currently, with Namibia undergoing something of a boom in local music production, they were unable to do.

Another challenge is the lack of online access to the database of material available at the NBC Sound archives. These are also placed at the disposal of the National Archives of Namibia in terms of the Archives Act, Act 12 of 1992, but gaining access through the internet to this material is still not possible.

Some final footnotes to this presentation that may be of interest:

1. All producers at the NBC are compelled, as part of their job description, to submit all archive-worthy material to the NBC sound Archives. However, copyright in the material subsists in the NBC.
2. There is currently an agreement on the sharing of material between the NBC and the SABC Sound Archives in Johannesburg, South Africa.
3. All scripts of television and English news bulletins are preserved for four years, whereafter they are transferred to the National Archives of Namibia.
4. Material is made available to NBC staff without restriction. However, other requests, from researchers, local and foreign students and learners, educational institutions, and the public are channelled through Radio Operations.

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