

# **The Use of Language in the Media: A Vehicle for Indigenous Cultural Practices in Selected SABC Television Drama Series**

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## **Abstract**

*The worth of using language to convey information is rooted in our cultural mythology. Media, through its role of teaching, can play its part in the socio-cultural empowerment of the people. It is a common belief that it is the faculty of language which has made it possible for the human race to develop diverse cultures and it is the acquisition of language which has permitted development to take place within some cultures. The power of using a language that people speak and understand resides not only in the conveyance of the cultural values and norms of the people, but also in educating them to become better people. Language embodies the history of people and carries their culture and this must eventually reflect in their image as people. The media is one of the powerful institutions that play a major role in the propagation of culture because it is the most commonly used source to communicate with people. It is on this basis that this paper explores the extent to which the media attempts to affirm the importance of each and every person within South African society by ensuring that their cultures, through the use of language, are preserved.*

## **Introduction**

A person who does not know his or her language does not have culture and a person who does not have a culture does not have roots. Indeed, such a person could be equated to a tree without roots which will never blossom. Language, as Herbert (1992:1) indicates, is one of the indispensable and universal features of the cultural system of all societies. Language is used as a medium of communication and as a vehicle to convey culture and also to express thoughts and ideas that are within one's mind. Language and culture cannot be divorced from each other since language is a vehicle that transports culture. Language remains a powerful tool to unite people, especially in multilingual and multicultural societies such as South Africa. This idea is supported strongly by Obama (2009) when he comments that „... we are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth“. Therefore, the role played by the media in the development of people's culture is fundamental. The means by which the media

spreads culture to society has far-reaching implications when considered from the perspective of language. The socio-cultural aspect of society is addressed in the very form of the media that an individual relies on. This article will endeavour to analyse how language is used in selected SABC television drama series to convey the different themes in the culture of the African people because it is also through the media that the cultural knowledge gap can be narrowed. Certain speakers of African languages benefit from the knowledge that normally would have been conveyed to them by the elderly. Thus, they come to learn about their cultural values, norms and beliefs through the media.

## **The role of the media in South Africa**

Fourie (1994:46) maintains that to talk or write about the South African media at this time in the country's history is similar to what Siefert (1991) said of the Russian media in the time of *glasnost* and *perestroika*:

... it is like trying to rebuild a ship while in full sail. Journalists on board write a daily log and we all take note of the troubled waters and high winds. But the future seems no more predictable than the weather and no easier access from the deck.

This statement has its validity considering the transformation that has taken place in the media industry since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. It would seem inappropriate at this time to discuss the role of the media in South Africa when democracy is at the end of its second decade. The assumption is that, ideally, the media is already at the centre stage of using languages for the advancement of cultural practices. However, a need arises to view critically the benefits that have been brought about by democracy in as far as the role of the media is concerned in conveying people's culture. As such, the role of the media in the socio-cultural and empowerment cannot be overemphasised.

It should be remembered that language plays a dual role. As wa Thiong'o (1981:24) states: „... any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.“ Language plays both the role of communication and of a carrier of culture, a view affirmed by Nkuna (2010:6) when he postulates that:

As a means of communication, it involves the language of real life, speech and written signs. And as a carrier of culture, it involves culture as a product of the history which it in turn reflects an image-forming agent in the mind of a child which images of the world and reality culture transmits or imparts through the spoken and written word through a specific language.

It is expected therefore, deducing from Nkuna's words, that whilst the media undertakes its role of conveying the culture of the people, language is used to facilitate this undertaking – and it is language that will ensure that speakers of that language benefit from the knowledge conveyed and become empowered culturally.

The media in South Africa, since the dawn of democracy, has had to focus on communication in a manner that is able to cater for the needs of all the country's citizens. Media had to realign its resources in order to address the social needs of the South African people as Fourie (1994: 46) claims with regard to the media at the time:

Till now South Africa's media, with its advanced communication technology, have, to a certain extent, neglected the Third World needs of the majority of its peoples. The media has catered mainly for the information and entertainment needs of a privileged black and white minority.

The population of a country relies on the media to bring them news on issues that affect them and to comment on those issues – including news and cultural practices. „Media“ describes those forms of communication that, among other things, transmit news to the entire population of the country. The term embraces a number of forms of communication, including newspapers, television and radio. There are, of course, other forms of communicating including things such as notices, newsletters, graffiti, badges, banners, posters and billboards. This article, however, restricts itself to the electronic media (and to television in particular), viewing it critically in terms of its role in conveying the cultural aspects of the people through selected television drama series.

The issue of culture cannot be dealt with properly if the issue of language remains a stumbling block. Culture can be realised through the medium of a language. In that sense, as Patrick (2001:1) argues that language rights should be regarded as a subset of cultural rights:

The notion of culture, especially „traditional“ culture, is sometimes considered as an obstacle to the spread or realisation of (universal) human rights, since „culture“

and „tradition“ can be invoked by one group in order to uphold practices that infringe on another’s rights: e.g., head-hunting, female genital mutilation, etc. However, a focus on language makes clear that such a view is too monolithic. Traditional ways of speaking are certainly part of culture – but the same people who object to the practices above (e.g. human rights professionals, members of the international media audience) are likely to view the preservation of ancestral language ... In this way we might help to make the argument for the positive value of cultural rights as a crucial element in human rights.

Language, as Patrick suggests, is at the centre of ensuring that culture is realised even in the midst of obstacles. This can be achieved only when the rights of individuals are secured within their language rights. In that way, the preservation of the people’s culture can be realised. The electronic media becomes a primary focus in the paper as it is one of the main media forms used by the public in order to acquire culture. An individual will usually make a conscious decision to turn to certain forms of media in order to acquire information about a particular culture. However, turning to a particular media form with the aim of expanding one’s knowledge of the language in which it is delivered is an unconscious decision. It is for precisely this reason that the role played by the media in the dissemination of people’s culture becomes crucial.

English subtitling is generally used for the benefit of those who do not understand the African language concerned. Although this method assumes that all the viewers are able to read and understand English, the contrary is closer to the truth. Subtitling does, to a certain extent, assist most of the viewers who are not speakers of the language being used. This calls for the media to convey cultural aspects of the people represented in the series in a manner that will not compromise their real practices. It is precisely for this reason that Alvarado (1987:12) warned his colleagues in media circles about the provision of high quality material when he postulated that:

Alongside the need to provide high-quality material and critical base against which to judge it, broadcasters must *engage actively with educators and others in the debate about TV and radio and their role in society, providing accurate and comprehensive information on all aspects of the subject from the standpoint of the practitioners.*

What becomes clear from Alvarado’s statement is the commitment of the media to providing high-quality material to viewers and listeners – provision which takes place through the medium of a language. This is equally true of the way in which the cultural

practices of the people are presented by the media. The wider population of the country relies on the media for information and it is this reliance that calls on broadcasters to use a language that is understood by the people and to use it in a correct manner so as to accurately convey the state of affairs being described. It is against this background that Gibson (2004:7), when referring to the issue of relating information, comments that:

As soon as one individual could relate information to another, language could be misused. A hunter returning from the wilderness could give an account of his activities that was a mixture of truth, lies, exaggeration, understatement, embellishment and incompleteness. The listener, having no direct knowledge of the adventure, could accept the entire story as told or use his own experience, knowledge of the world, common sense and insights into the storyteller to evaluate the story.

The importance of the media in providing information in a language that the people are able to understand is captured well in Gibson's statement as it focuses on the possibility of the misuse of language when related to another. The ensuing discussion focuses mainly on the analysis of the use of language in television drama series with the view to emphasise the role of the media in the advancement of indigenous cultural practices.

## **SABC Television dramas and indigenous cultural practices**

Television dramas contribute towards the knowledge banks of a number of people. Apart from the tribulations caused by the previous government's plans for African language as well as the role played by the missionaries, the development of African language literature still seems to be lagging behind any agenda for development. Instead of considering the inimitable case of African languages and their origin, the dominant Western approach to literature was implemented.

The approaches employed by the dominant Western and postcolonial platforms from which the critics of African languages enunciated their views operated on an assumption that did not consider the role and centrality of the broader concerns that are usually covered by the literature of these languages. The same view is echoed by Barber (1995:3) who points out that these Western and postcolonial critical approaches block a properly historical and localised understanding of any scene of colonial and post-independence literary production in Africa.

The knowledge gained on literature provided an analysis of the hegemonic views of the world offered elsewhere in texts which comprised an extrapolation of both a Western way of life and an African traditional way of life. They showed, too, how the African way of life tends to be despised in favour of the Western way of life. This is coupled by the lack of any socio-political or economic portrayal of the realities experienced by the African population, or their insufficient treatment even in those texts that were published, so that the causes of such injustices could be exposed. This critique, though, has a tentative validity in that African language literature would be made known only if it favoured a certain ideology that depicted a one-sided view. African language literature had to be analysed in terms of structural theories such as Structuralism and Russian Formalism and these became the operational modes for creative composition.

For the purposes of this article, the drama series discussed will be divided according to different themes. Whilst there are a number of television dramas that deal with different themes, the focus of this paper will be on the issues of inheritance, crime and social status. The article will endeavour to analyse how language is used to convey the different themes in the culture of the African people.

### **The Money Trajectory – Problems of Inheritance**

Inheritance refers to the act of taking or receiving property, a right, a title, etc. by succession or a will, as an heir. The problems of inheritance as a theme are highlighted and critically viewed in a television drama popular among viewers who are speakers of the Nguni languages. This drama is titled *Hlala Kwabafileyo* (Stay with the dead). It is a black South African television drama that combines the dominant Western film conventions and also captures the literature of the black elite. The conceptualisation of African literature in terms of „the elite group“ indicates that the thematic consideration of the drama echoes a class-perception that, in many instances, has marginalised the interests of lower groups. The classification of people in terms of class emerged towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This movement represented a shift from the communal way of living to the individualism that seems to have ravaged the African population. The despising of the African culture and the resultant language

divide managed to tear apart the values deeply rooted in African culture. This practice further fuelled the splintering amongst black society along class lines.

In summary, the story in *Hlala Kwabafileyo* is that of a rich businessman, Zakhe Mhlongo, and his family. The bone of contention arises when his stepson, Zuzumuzi, conspires, out of greed, to kill him. It appears that the conspiracy has succeeded as Zakhe disappears on his daughter, Babazile's wedding day. The search for him does not yield any positive results until his wife Jessie and his brother wrongly identify a corpse as being his. Zakhe's burial, an ostentatious occasion, appears to have paved the way for Zuzumuzi and his mother to inherit what rightfully belongs to the family, just as Zakhe's will prescribes. The reappearance of Zakhe after a year astonishes his family and the community. This happens after all the ceremonial practices associated with the Zulu culture have been concluded and after life has resumed for Zakhe's wife and his stepson. Zakhe's reappearance came as result of his release from a mental hospital where he had been admitted. Zakhe's rejection is compounded by the love affair his wife has had with an insolvent taxi owner, Sgwili. Zakhe finds it difficult to live as his family, except for his only daughter Babazile, has turned against him. Babazile, though, is also incapacitated as her mother is the only person who calls the shots.

*Hlala Kwabafileyo* is a mirror that boasts its own inner systems of replications and critique kept within the realities of urban lifestyles. The traditional elements displayed in this drama follow contemporary cultural practice in the townships in that it resembles certain traditional systems blended with modern influences from other cultures. Cultural practices, such as the slaughtering of a cow to pay respect to the head of the family, are an indication of the preservation of culture, even in an environment that seems to be blended with Western practices. The language used in this drama displays the writer's ability to capture accurately the feel of the language used by the characters portrayed and the set up that represents the unfolding of events in the story. The use of the term *Nomkhubulwana* (beautiful lady), which Zakhe used to call his wife, Jessie, is an indication of an outstanding skill on the part of the author in that he is able to use language in a classified manner. The author also brings authenticity to the work by choosing to represent the traditional practices followed by African families when the man of the house has passed away.

The drama series uncovers things that other people normally wouldn't know, about the death of an unknown person. It exposes the personal experiences of the deceased, yet also shows how the dominant effects of death usually become visible in those who are still alive. Dealing with the loss of a person, according to Bonnano and Kaltman (1999), is a universal human hardship for those who remain behind. Amongst all the experiences that occur in any given culture or society, death seems to be the one that transcends them all (Littlewood, 1992; Kastenbaum, 2004).

The language highlighted in the series, and associated with the cultural practices within African traditions, includes the following:

*Ukulila noma ukuzila* (To grieve or to mourn)

It is necessary here to elucidate the terms „grief“ and „mourning“ in the context in which they are used in the series. Grief, mourning and bereavement are the reactions that typically accompany the human state of loss. The language used in this drama series, which is often used as part of a traditional practice within the African context, is common when a death occurs in a family. Though there are variances in the formal definitions of grief and mourning. Castle and Phillips (2003), Woodrow (2007); and Buglass (2010) maintain that these definitions usually overlap in meaning and are often used interchangeably both in the thanatology literature and in contemporary language. The language used in the drama series is associated with the traditional practices that take place when a death has occurred – there are prescribed behavioural patterns and rituals that are performed, such as wearing the prescribed outfit, how to talk to the bereaved, how feelings should be dealt with and what will be done to symbolise the separation of the deceased from the people who are left behind (Parkes *et al.*, 1997).

*Ukukhanyisa ikhandlela* (To light a candle)

Upon the death of a family member (a husband, in this case), as the television drama affirms, isiZulu culture dictates that the family will clear the bedroom of the deceased and light a candle in the room. The wife will sit next to the candle to mourn the death of her husband and this is exactly what Jessie in the drama series does.

### *Ukuzila kukankosikazi ohanjelwe ngumyeni* (The mourning done by a widow)

Mourning the dead (*ukuzila*), as observed in the television drama series *Hlala Kwabafileyo*, is common in African culture. Maloka (1995) describes it as a universal practice which is mediated by religious and cultural practices in different societies. This common practice, as Mbiti (1969) postulates, usually involves core beliefs and customs, spiritual practices, and certain expected behaviours that will be symbolic of mourning the death of a loved one.

The rituals of mourning – in other words, the *ukuzila* rituals – have always been a common portent throughout the African traditions. The language used in mourning the dead has been spelt out by Littlewood (1992), Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) and Kastenbaum (2004) to give an indication of why and how different cultures perform death rituals, depending on the meaning they attach to death. The preparation of the funeral ceremony in *Hlala Kwabafileyo* is engulfed with traditional practices associated with African culture.

After a funeral, the mourner wears clothes that symbolise that she has lost someone close to her. It is expected in African culture that a widow will wear outfits that easily identify her as such and this is one way to show respect and to mourn the passing away of her husband. Jessie, in the television drama series, wears black clothes (*inzilo*) as is expected of her within her culture. There are also conditions attached to the outfit. Historically, before the introduction of clothing, Africans used a curtain leaf to symbolise the loss of someone close to them. Currently, black attire is most commonly used in this role. However, because of the ever-changing times a number of people are seen wearing other colours to mourn the death of someone. Within the isiZulu culture, a woman mourning her husband is expected to wear her mourning clothes for four seasons but only for one season if it is anybody else in her family who has died.

### *Ukuhlatshwa kwenkomo ukuphelezela inhloko yekhaya*

This refers to the slaughtering of a cow when the head of the family has passed away as a symbol of paying last respects. In most African cultures, the slaughtering of a cow serves as an affirmation that the deceased head of the household is being given the

respect he deserves. Indeed, it has always been standard practice amongst African families that if the head of the household has passed away, his passing should be marked by the ritual slaughtering of a cow. Radzilani (2010) explains this ritual as a specific activity that gives symbolic expression to certain feelings or thoughts of groups and individuals. In the same vein, Taylor (1980) states that rituals represent a symbolic affirmation of values by means of culturally standardised utterances and actions.

Traditionally, it is offensive and is condemned in the strongest possible terms if the head of a family is laid to rest without a cow being slaughtered. This traditional practice serves as a sign of respect to him and to the ancestral spirit that he has become so that he can always protect his family from the ancestral land. This cultural practice is evident when it is believed that Zakhe has passed away. His wife is obliged to ensure that her husband is given the send-off that he deserves and that this is done in a traditional way that befits his standing as head of the family.

#### *Ukugeza kanye nokubuyisa* (Cleansing ceremony)

There are also cleansing ceremonies and rituals such as „ukubuyisa“ which Gumede (1990) and Mkhize (2004) describe as an isiZulu word that implies the return of the deceased’s spirit home. In other words, this means the return of his spirit to his earthly home. The word also refers to a memorial service performed to complete the process of accepting the status of the deceased among the remaining members of the family. This custom is universal in South Africa (Gumede, 1990). Before the mourners remove their mourning clothes they must undergo a cleansing process and a goat is slaughtered as part of the cleansing process.

#### *Ukuphiswa kotshwala besintu* (Brewing of African beer)

It is an old African tradition that when a ritual is performed African beer is brewed before the day of the ceremony. This beer is believed to connect the spirits of the living and the dead. In African culture, according to Mbiti (1975), death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its condition. The deceased member of the family becomes an important extension of the living. Hence they are called the „living dead“ or ancestors (Mbiti, 1969; Ngubane, 1977).

*Ukungena umfazi kamfowenu* (To take (marry) the wife of your late brother)

It has been part of traditional practice within African culture that if a deceased man has brothers, one of the brothers should take his widow as his own wife. The reason advanced here is that the surviving brother will take care of the family and ensure that the family name is upheld. This is illustrated in *Hlala Kwabafileyo* when Bheseni (Zakhe's brother) proposes to Jessie and tells her that he is there to ensure that the family is well taken care of.

The use of language in the provenance of these traditional practices is well intermingled with other practices that reflect a superficial functionary aspect during the preparation of the Western wedding of Zakhe's daughter, Babazile. The Western wedding celebration is postured by open convertible cars, a helicopter that takes the bride and groom to the church and a brass band accompanying the people during the wedding celebration. This combination of traditional and Western outlooks in *Hlala Kwabafileyo* takes centre stage and also provides a base for the categorisation of events taking place in the township's culture.

Both traditional practices and the naming technique used in the television drama series display an outstanding skill on the part of the author to use language that fits the environment in which it is used. The author gives Zakhe the surname „Mhlongo“. The disappearance and reappearance of Zakhe is captured in the surname though not as part of the clan praises as revealed when the clan praises are recited during the wedding celebration:

*Mhlongo kaNdaba  
Njomane kaMgabi  
Eyaduka iminyakanyaka  
Yatholakala kowesine*

(Mhlongo, son of Ndaba  
Njomane of Mgabi  
Who disappeared many years  
And was found on the fourth one)

The praises of the Mhlongo clan symbolise a practice that is suggestive of the conflicts that are caused by the politics of inheritance. It has always been a belief in the African

culture that a person will act in accordance with his or her name. These praises indicate the important aspects that emerge in the ancillary plane of the drama brought into line with the necessities and signifiers underpinning the events. The disappearance and reappearance of both Zakhe and his brother, Bheseni, took place long after their father's death and after Zakhe had been given all the assets as the only surviving son. The money which was used to establish his „empire“ through business enterprise is the reason Bheseni felt obligatory to fight. He does this by planning to marry the wife of his „dead“ brother as part of the isiZulu culture. The representative implication of the praises projects a traditional cultural philosophy that has been stamped with several effects of the isiZulu culture.

Another naming technique as employed by the author is his choice of the name Zuzumuzi, the stepson of Zakhe. Even though Zuzumuzi is an illegitimate son of Mhlongo he ends up inheriting from Zakhe's estate anyway. The name Zuzumuzi means „the one who inherits from the estate“ and this is indicative of the context in which the character appears in the story.

Another television drama series which reflects the theme of a money trail bearing problems of inheritance is *Ifa LakwaMthethwa*. It makes astute observations of society's reactions to the social and cultural dynamism associated with the inheritance patterns common in African society. The intertextuality in this television drama series highlights a contemporary feud – one that has arisen as a result of a few black elite groups having gained power in post-apartheid South Africa. Another highlighted phenomenon is that of the newfound financial independence amongst black females and of the environment that affords them opportunities to climb the social ladder. These changes in fortune are shown to have come as a result of the laws enacted in light of South Africa's new Constitution in terms of which the genders have equality and new opportunities afforded to blacks.

The activities taking place in the drama series normally happens in stories that are intended for a large audience. Lindfors (1991:2) qualifies the statement by specifying that „popular literature is any work that seeks to communicate an African perspective to a large audience in a style that can be readily apprehended and appreciated“. Lindfors

(1991) also observes that popular literature reveals a will to speak directly to as many people as possible. The language that the author employs is unambiguous as he aims to make his meaning instantly clear.

Presented in isiZulu, the story exploits issues of inheritance and gender politics and deals with how traditions are brought into play in dealing with these emergent phenomena. It deals with the struggle for succession in the chieftaincy of the Mthethwa clan and in their business empire. This is a very rich family with businesses listed on the stock market. The Mthethwa empire is run by two rival brothers from divergent backgrounds. Nzobo is retrograde and attached to the traditional method of operating a business. Sizwe, on the other hand, is an elite businessman who believes in operating his business the Western way. The feud in the family business is clearly illustrated in the interactions between Nana, who is presented as an ambitious woman, and Bafana, Sizwe's son, who is presented as an arrogant business tycoon. The struggle for financial power is further fuelled by the acquisition of shares. The shares lead to backstabbing, sabotage, blackmail and conspiracy.

The author tries to present the story from both a traditional and modern point of views. The conflict of interests over the shares brings with it jealousy and power struggles and the problems between the rivals are further exacerbated. The terminology used in the business situations presented, when combined with the traditional conceptualisation of business, brings a high level of sophistication to the language. The issue of succession to the throne which is associated with the traditional way of doing things seems to be in conflict with the Western way of running a business.

Analysing *Ifa LakwaMthethwa* from this perspective could lead to an assumption that the drama gives the idea of being engulfed by the supremacy of a different racial and cultural crew. However, the story is structured to illustrate the situation of black people in the context of the changing political situation in the country. It traces them in their own domain – that of high profile business undertakings in a company that competes in international markets and outclasses its local counterparts with its listing on the stock exchange.

The story symbolises the collocation of African traditional and Western signifiers and makes a persuasive call for employing African knowledge as part of the practice of contemporary prudence. There is advancement in the manner in which the story questions the past of Africa with a view to redirecting both the present and the future. This represents a position where the knowledge systems of Africans are not analytically judged as the Africans concerned enact Western values which are thought to be more sophisticated. This represents a reversal of past conceptualisations of traditions where their significance and values under Western tutelage and African views of modernity, were often rejected as obstacles to progress (Barlet, 1996:10).

In the story, the royal house represents a model that displays both the traditional and modern economies. This is a combination of both the precolonial economic system where royalty seems to be superseding property and asset. The conflict which prevails in the storyline is a result of a clash between the ideologies and the interests of the people and a capitalist monopoly supported by the interests of individualism.

### **Murder Mysteries**

Another television drama that became extremely trendy among viewers because of the nature of its theme is *Mtunzini.com*. *Mtunzini.com* is a series of murder mysteries based on an internet magazine which operates from Mtunzini, a small town in northern KwaZulu-Natal and televised on SABC television. With the story set against the backdrop of the World Wide Web, the people who run the magazine become involved in trying to solve captivating murder mysteries. The drama series establishes itself in both the isiZulu culture and the lifestyle of South Africans. There is a murder investigation every two weeks with many of them taking place around Mtunzini and others in places far from the town. Each episode of this drama series stands alone with a self-contained, overarching story.

The investigations are undertaken by a persistent journalist, Bongani Thwala, who is also co-owner of *Mtunzini.com*. The drama probes unresolved murder cases abandoned by the police due to a lack of evidence or to missing dockets. The journalist's work is also commended by the police and he takes risks that could put his life and the lives of his family at risk. He makes use of investigative dexterity that combines both traditional

and modern approaches in order to get to the bottom of the case under investigation. He acclimatises well to situations that require him to suppress his beliefs and lifestyle so that he can be accepted and thus lays the foundations for the truth to come out. In each and every case, he employs language that can easily be understood by the people with whom he is working.

The combination of Bongani's journalistic skills and his skilful use of language can be observed in his investigation of the death of a businessman, Sifiso Ntuli. Ntuli's wife, Sylvie (a white female), was a suspect in the death of her husband. The death of Sifiso was a mystery that the police could not solve and therefore decided to close the docket. As a journalist, Bongani pries into every corner where he thinks he might find a lead. A conversation between two domestic workers, overheard by Bongani, gives him a clue that Sylvie might really be implicated in the murder:

Rachel: *Siyazi sonke ukuthi bekungeyona ingozi. Ubatshela ukuthi ubemthanda kangakanani nokuthi bebejabule kanjani.*

(We all know it was not an accident. She is telling them how she loved him and how happy they were.)

Worker 1: *Rachel, ungakhulumeli phezulu.*

(Rachel! not so loud)

The journalistic skill and the language used during the investigation can be seen in the following dialogue when Bongani interviews Sifiso's parents:

Father: *USylvie akazange ahloniphe isikhathi senzilo kaSifiso. Akazange avume nokugeza njengesiko ukuthi umoya wakhe ulale ngoxolo.*

(Sylvie didn't respect the period of mourning for Sifiso and wouldn't undergo the cleansing ritual for his spirit to find peace.)

The time of mourning and the cleansing ceremony are both very important in the culture of the amaZulu and of many other Africans. The language used in the drama series explains clearly the rituals that have to be performed when a member of a family has passed away. Though Sylvie is from a white background, she is expected to adhere to the rituals and culture of her in-laws. The fact that she did not mourn the death of her

husband – as revealed during the conversation between Bongani and Sifiso’s family – paves the way for the journalist to investigate her further.

It would be difficult for an investigator from a background different to that of Sifiso’s family to perceive Sylvie’s failure to observe the mourning period and the cleansing ceremony as being a problem and, perhaps, a clue to her guilt. Bongani, however, is empowered by his knowledge of the culture of the deceased. Coupled with his journalistic skill, this knowledge comes in handy in investigating this murder mystery.

The following conversation between the journalist, Bongani and the farmworker, Rachel, bears testimony:

- Rachel: *UMiss Sylvie! Uthe uma nje ngike ngakhulumana nani uzongisa ejele.*  
(Miss Sylvie! She said if I spoke to you, she would send me to jail.)
- Bongani: *Wena? Ejele? Umbhedo lowo. Siyakwazi ukuthi wena uzilungele kabi.*  
(You? In jail? That’s crazy. We know that you are a good person.)
- Rachel: *UFerdi wase Mooiplaas, la e next door...*  
(Ferdi from Mooiplaas, the next farm...)
- Bongani: *Kwenzekeni ngaye?*  
(What about him?)
- Rachel: *Ngibabone bebonke, uBass Ferdi noSylvie*  
(I saw them together, boss Ferdi and Sylvie.)
- Phaphama: *Rachel! Usho ukuthi uFerdi uthandana noSylvie? Futhi wayelapha ngalobo busuku.*  
(Rachel, do you mean that Ferdi is Sylvie’s lover? And he was here on that night?)
- Rachel: *Umyeni wami uMandla uthe wezwa imoto kaFerdi ngalobo busuku.*  
(Mandla, my husband heard Ferdi’s car that night.)
- Bongani: *Umzwe kanjani ngoba izulu beliduma?*  
(How did he hear him because there was thunderstorm?)

The stories, as they unfold, display the socio-cultural and empowerment roles of the media in conveying the culture of the African people. Here, African people as the target audience for the show gain in two ways. Firstly, they are empowered in terms of learning about isiZulu culture – and especially about the rituals that are performed when someone in a family has passed away. Secondly, the language used by the journalist in his investigative task makes a contribution in the understanding of investigative language. Part of the relevance of these stories lies in the manner in which they are

presented without compromising the languages spoken by the characters. Not having to compromise on their language means that the characters are empowered.

### **Family Feud**

One story that carries the theme of family feud is the television drama *Muvhango* which, of late, has been characterised by actors from different language backgrounds. This TV series – which started predominantly as a Tshivenda drama – portrays how the Tshivenda culture should be maintained amidst family feuds.

This theme, as portrayed in a number of literary works and in different languages, adds to the role that the media plays as the conveyance of culture. The theme tackles the harbouring of anger and hostility that occurs in some families. „Muvhango“ is a Tshivenda term which refers to feud – in this case, a feud within the family. Family members are in a feud over who should be the sole heir of the family business. Interference by various members of the family who claim to be entitled to inherit from the business brings the theme to its climax. The drama, which is played out mainly in Tshivenda, incorporates other languages such as Sepedi and isiZulu, thus using the language associated with the cultures of the characters involved. The socio-cultural aspects of the characters are dealt with in a manner that reflects the lifestyle of the African people. This issue helps to create a hegemonic sanctuary through which black South Africans come to know the society in which they live. In a way, it also fosters common understanding and justifications of how people become successful, even in situations that do not favour them.

Communication amongst the different characters in these soapies is portrayed across all the fields that people have to communicate in. Thus, as the characters interact, viewers may witness a measure of development taking place in the language being used.

What seems interesting in *Muvhango* is the common way of dealing with cultural issues amongst the characters, even though they are from different cultural backgrounds. The drama, which uses subtitles to convey the conversations of the characters, incorporates a social milieu that represents both rural and township lifestyles. Driven by the succession issue, resentment and hostility are ripe in the drama. The synergy that arises in the

manner in which township people are shown as getting along with people from rural areas illustrates how powerful a tool culture can be in uniting people, even those from different language backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The issue of the socio-cultural and empowerment roles of the media in conveying cultural practices in Africa came about as a result of the mobility of people and the consequent cross-linguistic and cross-cultural relationships amongst Africans. From the foregoing argument, it becomes evident that language plays a central role as the conveyor of culture and traditional practices. The focus in this article has been on how the media puts its resources together towards conveying the culture of the people. It could be said that, based on evidence from the television drama series used as examples in this article, the media has, to a certain extent and in spite of the many challenges of transformation, endeavoured to play its role as the conveyance of culture.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the focus should be on the promotion of a multilingual approach to convey cultural practices rather than on concentrating on one language that would benefit individual cultural groups. This, therefore, implies a paradigm shift in the approach to cultural issues by the media in its role as a carrier of culture. Of major importance is to acknowledge that different people have different cultures and that language can benefit them through the cultural practices conveyed by the media.

The article reveals that the media is an influential force in the regulation of linguistic identities. Whilst there are many potential societal, cultural and language benefits emanating from the role that the media plays in conveying culture and traditional practices, there seems to be a lot that needs to be done to improve the situation in the media.

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