

'A BLACK COUP' - INKATHA AND THE SALE OF ILANGA

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1987 *Ilanga* became the only commercial publication in South Africa to be owned directly by a political party. It was bought from the giant publishing house, Argus, by Mandla Matla, an Inkatha-owned company under the directorship of its secretary-general, Oscar Dhlomo. All 21 editorial staffers refused to work as a result, demanding a reversal of the sale or transfers to other Argus publications. They were ordered to leave the building to make way for replacements. Describing the acquisition of *Ilanga* as a 'black coup' (*Natal Mercury*, 22.04.87), president of Inkatha, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, asked why black journalists were willing to work for newspapers owned by powerful white capitalist interests which were substantially controlled by white political parties, but not for an authentic newspaper for the black nation.¹

The journalists responded with an advertisement in local English-language newspapers, after *Ilanga* refused to run it, explaining that it would be compromising to work for a single black political party in the current political situation in Natal. The need to be seen as independent in strife-torn areas of Natal is not merely a journalistic homily, but a safety-device. *Ilanga* journalists said the sale made them 'walking targets' in recurrent township violence. At the time three *Ilanga* journalists were in hiding after writing a series of articles about land transfers by Inkatha-linked town councillors (*Daily News*, 16.04.87).

This context of township dissent, reflected in the journalists' dispute with management, is the background against which the take-over of *Ilanga* by Inkatha should be understood. Its first unofficial sortee into mass media had been with *The Nation*, distributed in Inkatha's stronghold, the rural areas and which, after state harassment and financial problems, closed down 'indefinitely' in 1980 (Maré and Hamilton, 1987:175; Tomaselli et al, 1987:51). With 58% of Durban Africans sampled reading *Ilanga* and 45% of Africans sampled in Pietermaritzburg,² one might surmise that the take-over of *Ilanga* is part of Inkatha attempts to develop or secure its contested urban base.

WHY DID NATAL NEWSPAPERS SELL?

This fails to explain how Inkatha was able to acquire the largest vernacular newspaper in the country, with a small but consistent profit which serviced the only audience with growth potential - the African market. It had a solid circulation of over 105 000 and, with readership statistics of over 1.2 million, it was the third most widely read paper in the country (*Weekly Mail*, 16.04.87). Why did Natal Newspapers (NN), an Argus company formed in 1985 to incorporate the formerly Morning Group *Natal Mercury* into its Natal stable, consisting of the *Daily News* and *Ilanga*, sell to Inkatha?

In his statement to the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly about Inkatha's purchase of *Ilanga*,³ Buthelezi expressed gratitude to Natal Newspapers who he said:

we were not anxious sellers taking the best offer they could get because they needed to sell *Ilanga* or wanted to sell it. I pay tribute to Natal Newspapers for their genuine interest in the development of the Press in South Africa. They saw the tremendous advantages which had accrued to *Ilanga* once we had taken over ownership of it. And they sold *Ilanga* to us because they believed that was the right thing to do for all *Ilanga*. Natal Newspapers must go down in the history of this country as the first newspaper company to give content to the concept of the quality (sic) of opportunity in SA.

While it would be nice to think Argus had acted benevolently, its record as a highly successful publishing company has been marked by often ruthless decisions motivated by profits. David Niddrie (1987) has suggested that the sale is part of a trend by the major press groups (Argus, Times Media Ltd, Nasionale Pers and Perskor) away from newspapers, to other media (M-Net) and non-media investments and cites a rise to 32% in Argus income from non-newspaper activities from 1985 to 1986.

Certainly, since the introduction of television in the mid-1970s newspaper houses have felt the struggle for advertising to be uneven and have felt compelled to diversify. But coinciding with this trend has been the expansion of a black market with rising incomes and educational levels, which is not nearly as saturated as is its white counterpart. It has had relatively little access to television, making black newspaper advertising very viable. The introduction of the 'Extra' and 'Africa' editions of the major dailies in the 1970s and the efforts by managements in the 1980s to divert these into profitable area-specific knock-and-drops (advertising news-sheets), demonstrates a decade-long struggle to reach target black markets without having profits eroded by costly legal and state actions arising from provocative editorial content.

But advertisers prefer credible commercial publications with Audit Bureau of Circulation listings and are prepared to pay more for space in

them. The scramble for the anti-government *City Press* in 1984 when it was up for sale and the somewhat anomalous and costly purchase of it by the pro-government Nasionale Pers are testimony to the belief that black editions are where profits can be extracted, despite the risk of government action. Although the management of *City Press* has on occasion issued reprimands and policy statements on content to journalists, these have largely been ignored and management seems to tolerate the radical editorial position while circulation figures and, hence, advertising revenue rise.

The second reason Niddrie suggests for the sale was a trade-off, like the probably-unspoken deal which led to the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* and the government granting the major newspaper groups a license to operate M-Net. *Ilanga* was sold to Inkatha and the state kept hands off *The Sowetan*. Such a deal suggests a degree of collusion between the state and Inkatha far beyond police turning a blind eye to vigilante activities. The disputes over editorial content before the sale were with Inkatha largely, not the state, and one would think the powers that be might find this pleasantly divisive. Also, if Argus needed to jettison problematic black publications, *The Sowetan*, one of the major victims of the emergency press regulations, would seem to be the obvious choice. *Ilanga*, which was started in 1903 as one of the first independent black publications and remained so for nearly 30 years before being taken over by *Bantu World*, which was bought out entirely by Argus in 1963, was one of Argus' publications which did bring in profits and stayed within the bounds of the ever-increasing law.

Problems with *Ilanga* were rather internally focused and in 1985 a number of editorial members went on strike to protest the *Ilanga* news editor's handling of copy which they felt would make the publication appear pro-Inkatha. But this, even together with the speculation that NN may have feared becoming a boycott victim of Inkatha/UDF rivalry, seems an unlikely explanation for the sale. Besides, given the inclusion of the *Natal Mercury* into NN, there would have been no alternative commercial news source to resort to during a boycott.

Niddrie seems to come closest to a likely explanation of why NN sold when he alludes to the rumoured low price and the depth of sympathy for Inkatha both from Natal-based capital and the media, as indicators that Argus did not just want to sell *Ilanga* but was keen to pass it on to Inkatha. But why were Natal-based capital and the press sympathetic to Inkatha? Had they always been? In numerous public addresses Buthelezi and Oscar Dhlomo have accused the local and international press of adopting 'a deliberate and sophisticated strategy of stereotyping Inkatha as a violent, authoritarian and tribal movement'.⁴

The answer, if not directly the Indaba, is, then, the climate set by the Indaba. The forerunners to the Indaba, the 1980 Buthelezi Commission and the Lombard Plan, came and went with little attention from the commercial

press but the Indaba is the issue around which the Natal press has attempted to mobilise readership. The Indaba has topped its political agenda in an unprecedented way while the other two proposals barely made their way onto it. The Indaba has cemented together senior editorial and newspaper managements and Natal capital in an indomitable band of consensus. Indeed the relationship between the Indaba and Inkatha has become so intertwined that Buthelezi explained opposition to the sale of *Ilanga* as indicative of the 'extent to which divisiveness in Black politics is fostered by those opposed to the Indaba', not Inkatha, although the implication was clearly there.⁵

This explanation of the sale also takes care of the contention by media analysts⁶ in the commercial press at the time, that the sale of *Ilanga* was determined by business interests and not political objectives and that such deals need to be understood in terms of Argus' commitment to profits. Explanations such as these fall into the liberal trap of seeing these areas as mutually exclusive. Commercial decisions are of course motivated by business interests, often long-term ones, which in turn are linked to political objectives.

WHY DID INKATHA BUY ILANGA?

The rumoured low price of between R400 000 and R800 000⁷ is not in itself an explanation for Inkatha's purchase of *Ilanga*, especially if one accepted the popular belief that it was pro-Inkatha anyway. NN managing director Ed Booth, for example, said he failed to see what was controversial about the sale because *Ilanga* had by and large supported Inkatha (*Daily News*, 16.04.87). Buthelezi, though, did not share these sentiments. He said the UDF was 'squirring' over the sale because they would not easily be able to use the newspaper for political ends, as was the case with the previous owners.⁸ A content analysis of the period prior to the takeover, together with the documented harassment and assault of *Ilanga* staffers by pro-Inkatha vigilantes, indicates the paper had not been neatly sewn up and helps explain the otherwise illogical purchase. The price is also not the give-away it might initially seem because the printing and distributing remain under NN. What Inkatha was buying, besides a dilapidated building, was 'goodwill' (readership).

While refusing to divulge the sale figure but adding that Inkatha had made an offer they could not refuse, Ed Booth, managing director of NN said that while *Ilanga* was a healthy paper, the company realised it would be vulnerable to any rival Zulu publication established by Inkatha. Dhlomo followed this up by explaining that Inkatha had chosen to buy *Ilanga* rather than start a new publication which would have crippled the existing paper, and jeopardised the work opportunities of the staff (*Natal Witness*, 16.04.87).

If the benefits of purchasing an established publication with a readership of over a million and a tradition stretching back over 80 years to Dr John

Dube, as opposed to the risks involved in the launching of a new publication in a floundering media market, were lost on others, they were not on Buthelezi. In an address announcing the take-over, pointedly entitled 'You Have Come Home *Ilanga*', he rooted the purchase in the early history of *Ilanga*, with its formation by the first president of the ANC, 'our John Dube', and the struggle over the decades against white ownership. With this insight, he challenged those opposed to the sale to start a publication in competition with *Ilanga*. 'If it is rejected in the marketplace, we will hear the voice of the people'.

If the rumoured price is correct it would have been a small price for Inkatha to develop a secure urban base or for urbanised Africans to be primed for an Indaba referendum. Inkatha has a strong rural base organised through a multiplicity of crosscutting constituencies (women, youth, teachers, farmers, inspectors, social workers) each with their own specific objectives but all with a common allegiance to Inkatha.⁹ In both his last annual addresses to the Youth Brigade and the Women's Brigade, the two largest components of his Inkatha, he called on members to 'harvest the democratic gains made by the Indaba' by making the proposals 'household words'.¹⁰ The canvassing likely to arise from this together with the costly Indaba rural information campaign launched last year¹¹ is likely to mean that the rural areas have been taken care of while in many urban areas, where Inkatha operates in opposition to other worker, community and youth organisations, they have been unable to gain control.

Whether the purchase of *Ilanga* was conceived of as directly part of the Indaba Work Group's information campaign or not, a content analysis of *Ilanga* for the six months after the sale, indicates they are fulfilling this role. Beside Indaba articles appearing nearly three times more often than in the months before the sale, the depth of coverage is far greater. Many of the articles are explanatory as opposed to news stories, including diagrams and lengthy documents produced in full and Indaba co-convenor, Dhlomo and executive director, Professor Dawid van Wyk, are given lengthy opinion space.¹²

Why Inkatha bought *Ilanga* is more clear than how it was able to do so, as Mandla Matla has refused to divulge their backers and a loan was apparently not taken out from a financial institution.¹³ It is possible the funding came from the KwaZulu government, though having already co-financed the the eight month long Indaba negotiation process, special budgets must have been somewhat depleted, or through Indaba connections.

The benefits of a relatively high-credibility, established publication such as *Ilanga*, taking a supportive line in a sustained way, as compared with the limited persuasive ability of even the best glossy information pamphlets, would have been obvious to communication experts with far less expertise that those flown in from the US to handle the promotion of the Indaba.

THE ROLE OF ILANGA

The enviable position of being in control of such a publication was expressed by PFP media spokesman Dave Dalling, who said his party would love to own a newspaper and endorsed the sale by saying it was a democratic right (*Sunday Tribune*, 19.04.87). The importance of his 'bold initiative' was clear to Buthelezi too: 'In these turbulent times in which we live in South Africa, political battle in the hearts and minds is raging, and as the intensity of this battle increases, so does the need of the people for informed reporting increase'.¹³ What these statements imply is that the media affect certain definitions of reality or determine what the Bureau of Information called, the 'battle of perceptions'.

But why these people are happy to admit their involvement in this process is because of the way they view the reality-defining role of the media. From the liberal-pluralist position they adopt, the media constitute a free marketplace of ideas, where a number of differing positions vie equally for public acceptance. A recent *Ilanga* editorial, for example, described the alternative press as 'the alternative truth', but with the rider that it had a democratic right to exist and the market place should decide on its viability (*Daily News*, 02.10.87).

More critically, *Ilanga's* role can be regarded as that of creating a definition of social reality in the interests of the class by which it is controlled. As Gurevitch et al (1977) explain:

although the media play a role in the formation of consciousness, they do so not in an abstract or mystical way but rather in a wholly concrete and discernible fashion as a set of material products which reflect the determinate processes of production in which they are manufactured.... The media are not apart from social reality, passively reflecting and giving back to the world its self-image; they are a part of social reality, contributing to its contours and to the logic and direction of its development via the socially articulated way in which they shape our perceptions of the world.

By examining various levels of media practice one can conceptualise the reality-defining role of *Ilanga*. Most obviously there is its propaganda function which serves to popularise particular political views - those of Inkatha - in the pursuit of political objectives - currently those of the Indaba. Buthelezi, Inkatha and KwaZulu have long received extensive coverage in *Ilanga*, but since the takeover stories are devoid of criticism and there is a new emphasis on Zulu royalty. In June the Inkatha Central Committee resolved to do everything in its power 'to gain massive black support for the Indaba' (*Indaba News*, July 1987:2). But the process had begun some months before on the pages of the newly acquired *Ilanga*. In the four months before the take-over there was not a single major story or editorial about the Indaba.

Out of six editions from the month after the take-over (April 20 to May 20) there were three editorials and three major stories, including one lead, promoting the Indaba.

Ilanga also has to be understood as part of a much larger propaganda machinery. The KwaZulu government's Bureau of Communication has highly experienced journalists who produce an ongoing series of press releases and two publications intended for local and international distribution.¹⁵ The slick, informative, glossy *Clarion Call* has an international mailing list of 10 000 alone and is distributed in business, diplomatic and university circles in the US, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Switzerland, Brazil, Spain, West Germany to name just a few countries. *Umxaxi*, is an in-house government publication whose function is to act as a forum for civil servants and as a training vehicle. Journalists from this bureau were responsible for bringing out *Ilanga* after the staff walked out in protest (*Daily News*, 21.04.87).

Besides the functions of this department and the promotion of Inkatha being fused, with the launch of the Indaba information campaign, which includes the monthly *Indaba News* and several glossy pamphlets, the marketing of Inkatha and the Indaba have become one, *Ilanga's* role being to secure the black urban market.

Another level of media practice is the way in which they present the behaviour and activity of various groups as the actions of outsiders. *Ilanga* seems to have implicitly adopted the Inkatha line on the African National Congress as the 'mission-in- exile' which has assumed unsanctioned leadership, while internally Inkatha, with Buthelezi at the helm, is the bearer of the true principles of the ANC. In regard to the Indaba, those who failed to join their voice in support of the venture are branded self-interested enemies of the people. The activities of many organisations, such as COSATU, appear simply to be ignored in the post-sale period.

Thirdly, we can look at the extent to which the culture of consensus politics provides the dominant framework against which *Ilanga* presents events. This is a particularly interesting aspect in the light of Buthelezi claiming to have returned the people's mouthpiece to them. Although superficially the content of *Ilanga* might differ in that it focuses more on Inkatha and 'black' news, the values it promotes are no different to the mainstay values of the English language commercial press. They are pro-capitalist, in favour of non-violence but believe in law and order by coercion if necessary, pro-federal democracy, and anti-disinvestment.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The key to *Ilanga's* success under Inkatha is that it has, as promised, not become a 'party political rag'. The changes have been subtle shifts in

emphasis, depth of coverage, introductions of comment, exclusions from the newspapers.

If circulation is any measure of credibility, those who predicted *Ilanga's* downfall under Inkatha must be smarting. Circulation figures rose to over 140 000 in November, according to Mandla Matla managing director, Arthur Konigkramer (*Daily News*, 25.11.87). He said he had received an interim Audit Bureau of Circulation certificate for July to September of 117 120. Although the ABC figures for January to June 1987 show *Ilanga* to have a circulation of 105 657 which was down -0.01 on the previous six months and -6.1 on the same period of the previous year, the latest circulation figures for July to December 1987 show a massive increase to 119 244. Any growth could be explained partially by *Ilanga* competitions with massive prizes such as a R50 000 house in Umlazi or R10 000 worth of furniture. Perhaps this is more an indictment on the old management, than the new. As Dingiswayo, a comment column which used to be written by former editor Obed Kunene and which was reintroduced anonymously after the take over, suggests: *Ilanga* never used to have these competitions because the previous owners used the company money to promote white newspapers.

The point is that, contrary to expectations, or threats, *Ilanga* has growing support. Konigkramer has drawn attention to the insatiable rural demand for the publication that cannot be met because distribution costs make it unfeasible.¹⁶ In response to an advertisement in the paper calling for recruits, following the protest-resignation of staffers, the paper claimed to have been inundated by hundreds of applications, many of whom were taken in for training (*Daily News*, 30.07.87). (This was followed up with an editorial pointing out that besides the paper's popularity this was a statement on the effect of disinvestment). The threatened advertising boycott did also not materialise and instead an advertising drive launched in July has brought in a flood of colour advertising from national advertisers such as South African Breweries, Mills Tobacco and OK Bazaars. Advertisers were assured that the board of directors of Mandla Matla had 'taken specific steps to combat activism or advocacy in journalism'.¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

The purchase of *Ilanga* is part of an effort by Inkatha to establish regional hegemony. Buthelezi's statements of intent regarding the media alone suggest this is only one step towards a much longer term aim of national hegemony. At present Inkatha seems to have incorporated insufficient national-popular elements for this to be feasible. Even if one uses *Ilanga* readership distribution as a small indicator, only 2% of Africans on the Reef read it and even fewer do in Pretoria, Vaal, and Cape.¹⁸ Hence the need for an extensive news network. Explaining Inkatha's purchase of *Ilanga*, Buthelezi said: 'We will produce great newspapers in this country,

newspapers which will become known across the length and breadth of the face of Africa and beyond. ...and true journalistic professionalism roots newspapers in the hearts and minds of the people'.¹⁹

But this objective is probably not new in Inkatha. What is significant is how it has been possible to set it in motion now. The sale of *Ilanga* has to be seen as a product of a process of regional reorganisation by the state and capital in the wake of the hegemonic crisis expressed in the states of emergency. Changes in state perception have made feasible Inkatha's ownership of a major publication, whereas less than a decade ago *The Nation*, Inkatha's rurally-based commercial mouthpiece and the *Inkatha Bulletin* were banned often enough for them to become unviable (Maré and Hamilton, 1987:175). The sale of *Ilanga* to Inkatha, as far as capital is concerned, needs to be seen as a regional outcome of ongoing attempts nationally, such as now out of vogue visits to the ANC and the development of massive social responsibility programmes, to secure a strategic place in a future South Africa.

NOTES

1. Buthelezi, Statement to the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly about the Opposition of Black Journalists to Inkatha's Purchase of *Ilanga*. April 21, 1987. Inkatha Institute.
2. All Media and Products Survey, May 1985 to March 1986. Although the samples claim to be representative of the populations, they would be working on the underestimated official population figures. It is also not made clear if the sample is of the literate or adult population only.
3. Buthelezi, op cit. p8.
4. Dhlomo, Why is Inkatha's Public Image Always Deliberately Distorted. Inkatha Institute. p8.
See also: Buthelezi, SABA conference, October 15, 1982.
New York Times Luncheon, February 13, 1985.
Newspaper Union of SA Congress, October 4, 1983.
Financial Mail International Conference, October 13, 1987. Inkatha Institute. (References from Shireen Hassim.)
5. Buthelezi, Statement to KwaZulu Legislative Assembly, op cit. p1.
6. *Sunday Tribune*, April 19, 1987 interview with Prof Gavin Stewart, head of Journalism at Rhodes University.
7. Niddrie suggests this is a bargain-price as the market price of a publication can usually be worked out through a formula of R10 per copy sold. Using this formula, he says *Ilanga* was worth over R1-million. However such a price per copy would usually include the printing and distribution assets that were absent from this sale agreement.
8. Buthelezi, op cit p9.

9. See Dhlomo, *Multinational Corporations and Rural Development in SA*, p4. Inkatha Institute.
10. Buthelezi, Address to Annual General Conference of the Women's Brigade, October 10, 1987.
11. Dhlomo, KwaZulu Natal Indaba - Prospects and Challenges. Address to the German Chamber of Industries, p4. August 28, 1987. Inkatha Institute.
12. Content analysis by Cyril Madlala of available issues of *Ilanga* from January 1987 to November 1987.
13. In an interview with Arthur Konigkramer on January 15, 1988 he said the price was a confidential matter and would not have to be revealed in either Argus nor Mandla Matla's annual financial statements at the end of February.
14. Buthelezi, Statement to KwaZulu Legislative Assembly, op cit. p5.
15. Interview with Suzanne Vos, editor of *Clarion Call*, January 12, 1987.
16. Interview with Konigkramer, op cit.
17. AMPS op cit.
18. AMPS ibid.
19. Buthelezi, Statement to KwaZulu Legislative Assembly, op cit p5.

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- Maré, G & G Hamilton (1987) - *An Appetite for Power* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press)
- Niddrie, D (1987) - 'Selling Up or Selling Out', in *Work in Progress* 48
- Tomaselli, K et al (1987) - *Narrating the Crisis* (Johannesburg: Richard Lyon and Co)