

“We Fall and We Rise”:

The Impact of *Makgabaneng* on HIV/AIDS Preventive Education in Botswana

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Introduction

In today's age of AIDS, radio serial dramas are one of the newly emerging means of HIV/AIDS preventive education.¹ As communications scholar Tim Crook notes, radio serial dramas have “developed with sophistication and explosive energy; [they] now [occupy] a significant position in the cultural lives of societies throughout the globe” (Crook 1999:3). Radio serial dramas are especially useful for widespread HIV/AIDS education initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, a region with some 25 million people currently infected with HIV (UNAIDS 2004a:2). Radio is cited as one of the most effective modes of media for such educational endeavors because it is widely accessible. Countries across the African continent including the Gambia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe have already established radio serial dramas to transmit vital information on HIV and AIDS to the public (See Valente et al. 1994; Rogers et al. 1999; and Population Services International 2003).

This paper will explore the development of *Makgabaneng*, an HIV/AIDS radio serial drama broadcast in another African nation, Botswana, where HIV/AIDS prevalence rates have reached an estimated 37 percent of the population (UNAIDS 2004b). I will discuss the ways in which *Makgabaneng* promotes behavioral change through broadcasts of the serial drama and activities such as letter writing, listening discussion groups, listening spots, and road shows. My preliminary study will draw upon data accumulated through interviews, results from *Makgabaneng* surveys, and promotional materials gathered from staff members at the *Makgabaneng* studios. I will also integrate personal observations from listening to select episodes of the drama and in-studio research.

¹ Preventive education refers to the life skills and behavior modification strategies used in HIV/AIDS awareness programming (See Fidzani 2004 and UNESCO 2004).

Through this examination of *Makgabaneng*, I will demonstrate the positive impact of the serial drama in promoting preventive education in Botswana.

The Radio Serial Drama Makgabaneng

Makgabaneng is one of Botswana's most popular HIV/AIDS arts based programs.² It is making great strides in curbing the spread of the epidemic in Botswana. The serial drama is recognized for its role in educating Botswana about HIV/AIDS and health awareness throughout the country. It is lauded for the new, innovative approach it takes in teaching the public about the far-reaching effects of HIV and AIDS in Botswana.

Makgabaneng is part of a growing number of projects established to endorse preventive education among Botswana. The surge in HIV/AIDS projects can be attributed to the amount of funding that Botswana is receiving to develop HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. For instance, in July 2000, Botswana received \$100 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Merck Company. The Gates Foundation and Merck Company, Incorporated worked in conjunction with the Government of Botswana to create the African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Partnerships (ACHAP), a conglomeration of organizations intended to tackle the different dimensions of HIV and AIDS in the country.³ Additional funding for arts based HIV/AIDS education programming has come from the Botswana-USA Partnership (BOTUSA), the main sponsor of *Makgabaneng*, which is a culmination of resources from the United States government, the Government

² *Makgabaneng* means "we fall and we rise" or "rocky road" (Global AIDS Program/Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004). Its popularity has been assessed by producers at the *Makgabaneng* studios.

³ The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation make charitable donations to a number of organizations worldwide and support the Gates Millennium Scholars program. Merck and Company, Incorporated is a pharmaceutical company that provides drugs that are administered to people living with HIV and AIDS.

of Botswana, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

I first learned about *Makgabaneng* during a trip to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, in July 2004. The purpose of my trip was to investigate local HIV/AIDS arts programs in Botswana. While I was in residence, I spoke with several *Makgabaneng* staff members responsible for coordination and budgeting, editing, reinforcement activities, production, studio management, and scriptwriting. My conversations with these various staff members helped me to understand more about *Makgabaneng* and its contribution to HIV/AIDS awareness in Botswana.

Makgabaneng premiered on the government-sponsored radio station Radio Botswana in March 2001.⁴ It is a health oriented radio serial drama, meaning stories are developed “where fictional characters are made to model thought process and attitude toward risky behaviors” related to HIV and AIDS (Mooki et al. 2004). Due to the show’s focus on behavioral change and health matters, *Makgabaneng*’s managing editor, Maungo Mooki, likes to call the show a “behavior change communication tool” rather than a serial drama or soap opera (Mooki 2004). Most episodes air in Setswana, the local language of Botswana, but others are specially recorded in English.

When *Makgabaneng* began four years ago, it was based on the premise that audiences would tune in to the show to learn more about HIV and AIDS. The show has attracted a large listenership in Botswana since it began. The listening demographics include both youth and adults (those between the ages of 15 and 49) (Pappas DeLuka et

⁴Bi-weekly fifteen minute episodes of *Makgabaneng* air on the radio stations Radio Botswana 1 and Radio Botswana 2.

al. 2004). After having aired some three hundred and eighty episodes of *Makgabaneng* is still promoting messages of behavioral change and educating Batswana about HIV/AIDS.

The Entertainment-Education Formula

Programming like *Makgabaneng*, which is formulated to advance HIV/AIDS awareness and education, is considered a form of entertainment-education.⁵ According to youth communications scholars Gita Bamezai and Archana Shukla, radio serial drama is one of the preferred tools in HIV/AIDS entertainment-education strategies because it “provide[s] quick, direct contact with large populations, and can encourage dialogue and debate on important but sensitive health concerns in a compelling, attractive way” (Bamezai and Shukla 1998:113). In Botswana, radio reaches the largest possible segment of the population, and serves as an excellent way to transmit HIV/AIDS information (Fantan 2004).

Prior to the 2001 debut of *Makgabaneng*, national research was conducted to ensure that the information on HIV/AIDS presented on the shows would be relevant to audiences. This sort of research for an entertainment-education programs involves building a framework for the show that is built upon a “values grid” (Singhal and Rogers 2002:293). The *Makgabaneng* framework entails twenty-four central themes, encompassing pertinent topics like orphanages, alcohol consumption, sexual behavior, domestic abuse, and communication (Tembo 2004). These themes serve as a springboard for further ideas for *Makgabaneng*’s Modeling and Reinforcement to Combat HIV/AIDS (M.A.R.C.H.).

⁵ Entertainment-education is defined as “the intentional placement of educational content in entertainment messages” (Singhal and Rogers 2002). It is also referred to as edutainment or enter-educate programming (Bamezai and Shukla 1999; UNFPA 2002; Bourgault 2003; Global AIDS Program/Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004).

M.A.R.C.H. is intended to “promote behavior change through showing people how to change and reinforcing their efforts to change” (Mooki et al. 2004). The main way that M.A.R.C.H. operates is through character modeling where characters are created to fit positive, negative, or transitional roles. Positive characters are people who always do the right thing, negative characters consistently do the wrong thing, and transitional characters fit somewhere in between the two extremes (Mooki et al. 2004). Out of the three types of characters, the transitional one is most like the everyday person (Ibid.). The major lessons of the show come from the positive characters that function as role models.

The six script writers working on *Makgabaneng* take these character models into account when they write the storylines for each episode. Scripts undergo eight stages of development. First, the writers must do research on contemporary issues that a character would encounter and gather enough information to build a script. Next, they insert some kind of conflict or character barriers into the story so that a character has certain things that they will have to overcome in each episode. The barriers are conceived in terms of what is facilitating them. Following this step, there is a period of writing, refining, and discussing the storyline with a writing committee. Finally, the script is rewritten with more precision, sent to the managing editor, and completed.

Makgabaneng scriptwriters dedicate six weeks to preparing stories for the serial drama (Mothowamodimo 2004). The scriptwriters carefully craft the characters to make sure that they are believable and the scenarios are convincing. Listeners should be able to identify the repercussions of the negative character’s behavior, the benefits of positive character’s behavior, and the transformations in the transitional character’s behavior

(Mooki 2004).⁶ Radio serial drama analysts Peter W. Vaughan, Alleyne Regis, and Edwin St. Catherine point out that transitional characters hover “between the positive and negative values,” positive characters typically “embody positive values and are rewarded,” and negative characters “embody negative values and are punished” (Vaughan et al. 2000:149). *Makgabaneng* relies on this character modeling and the creation of fictitious scenarios to equip listeners with the vital skills they need to deal with HIV/AIDS in real-life situations.

An Episode of Makgabaneng

The best way to interpret these different character models is to analyze an episode of *Makgabaneng*. I will examine the character models as they are portrayed in an English episode of *Makgabaneng* entitled “Masego and Cecilia Disclosure.” In this episode, a young woman named Masego discovers that she is HIV-positive after taking a trip to the local health clinic. She shares the information with another character, Cecilia, who is one of her trusted friends. Once Masego divulges that she is HIV-positive, she and Cecilia carefully consider the myths and realities of living with HIV.

LISTENING EXAMPLE: “Masego and Cecilia Disclosure”

This episode of *Makgabaneng* confronts listeners with HIV/AIDS related issues that are affecting Batswana on an individual and societal level such as the emotions one experiences after being tested for HIV/AIDS, having faith that one can continue to live a full life after contracting HIV, the necessity of pre- and post- HIV test counseling, the challenges of life as a single mother, and the urgency for HIV-infected mothers to pursue pre-natal checkups and treatment for the prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission.

⁶ Positive, negative, and transitional characters fit within psychologist Albert Bandura’s theory of social learning theory which emphasizes how character modeling, personal factors, and societal factors alter behavioral patterns (Bandura 1977; Bandura 1997).

The listener can gain a better understanding of these matters through the experiences of the positive character (Cecilia), the transitional character (Masego), and the negative character (Thabo).

Stories such as that of Masego reinforce the two main behavioral change objectives of *Makgabaneng*: positive prevention and care (Mooki 2004). Positive prevention encourages Batswana to adjust their behavior by either practicing abstinence, delaying sexual intercourse, or using condoms regularly. More importantly, it emphasizes getting tested for HIV/AIDS. Care requires undergoing any sort of therapy and treatment required in order to live with HIV/AIDS. This goes hand in hand with the national sentiments for people to get tested and learn their status.

Audience Responses to Makgabaneng

Makgabaneng staff members assess the impact of the show on listener's behavior, HIV prevention, and care through surveys that assist in the monitoring process. Surveys have produced quite a few useful statistics for measuring the show's popularity in Botswana and its potential role as a behavioral change device.⁷ As of July 2004, 45% of *Makgabaneng* listeners tuned in to the show one or more times per week (Mooki et al. 2004). Overall, 71% of the population listens to the show and 50% listens at least once per month. Of these statistics, listeners are more likely to get tested for HIV and get tested during pregnancy (Mooki et al. 2004). These statistics are evidence that *Makgabaneng* listenership has had a significant effect on Batswana knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

⁷ Singhal and Rogers note that data accumulated through these sorts of surveys is sometimes "unreliable" (Singhal and Rogers 2002:131). Therefore, they recommend the use of markers, "distinctive elements of a message that are identifiable," in measuring radio serial drama listenership (Ibid.). These markers may include the mention of certain brands of contraceptives.

Makgabaneng retains its strong listenership through assorted community reinforcement activities which were designed to foster discussion (Mooki et al. 2004; Rametsi et al. 2004). Radio serial drama specialist John Douglas Storey points out that these activities contribute to a radio serial drama's popularity because aspects of the serials are "discussed by many people and become a part of society's mainstream of popular culture" (Storey 1996:xii). Such discussions emerge through the four primary reinforcement activities associated with *Makgabaneng*.⁸ The first activity is listening spots which foster such discussions is the establishment of listening spots, locations where people congregate throughout Botswana to listen to *Makgabaneng* (Joyce 2004; Mooki 2004).⁹ Sometimes listeners meet in hair salons, pubs, or *khumbis* (taxis). Whatever the location, the main goal of listening spots is to get Batswana to listen to episodes of the serial drama, analyze what is transpiring in each episode, and internalize the messages being presented.

The second type of reinforcement activity is listening discussion groups. Typically these discussion groups emerge from listeners' interest in talking about topics presented on *Makgabaneng*. A key location for listening discussion groups is in Botswana's schools. Discussion groups generally exist for an average of three months and provide a forum for listeners to carefully analyze what they hear on *Makgabaneng*. There is now a move to establish even more listening discussion groups in schools so that young people are better educated about HIV/AIDS (Joyce 2004).

⁸ Reinforcement activities are methods of strengthening the messages about HIV and AIDS that appear on episodes of *Makgabaneng*.

⁹ Information periodically gathered from listening spots is used in compiling statistics for *Makgabaneng* listenership surveys.

The total community outreach program is the third reinforcement activity sponsored by *Makgabaneng* (Tembo 2004). Individuals from the *Makgabaneng* staff and cast form groups and appear at road shows in cities throughout Botswana to address HIV/AIDS related topics. *Makgabaneng* road shows assist in disseminating information on HIV/AIDS and other health related matters such as tuberculosis. Actors from *Makgabaneng* perform, giving audience members a chance to connect with the characters that they hear so often on air through broadcasts of the show.

The final reinforcement activity is letter writing contests. Letter writing is an excellent method of reviewing audience feedback to radio serial dramas. Fans letters provide “insights” about how *Makgabaneng* “affects the audience” (Law and Rogers 1999:360; Singhal and Rogers 2002:130). The first form of letter writing includes contests where listeners answer questions about *Makgabaneng* storylines and characters. The second form of letter writing involves listeners writing responses to the *Ipoletse* Epilogue which airs at the end of each episode of *Makgabaneng*.¹⁰

Conclusion

In his dissertation on HIV/AIDS preventive behavior in Botswana, Boga Fidzani, a member of the monitoring and evaluation staff at NACA, calls for the implementation of “a wide array of preventive and curative strategies to bring [HIV-infection] to a halt” (Fidzani 2003:3). *Makgabaneng* is one of the many preventive strategies that have been formed in Botswana over the past five years. It uses HIV/AIDS health education and behavioral change programs to transform perceptions of HIV and AIDS in the country. Maungo Mooki believes *Makgabaneng* serves as a “gateway to behavioral change” that

¹⁰ The *Ipoletse* Epilogue is so popular that up to 3,600 letters have flooded into the *Makgabaneng* studios in a two-week time frame (Mooki 2004).

can make considerable contributions to Botswana's HIV/AIDS pandemic (Mooki 2004). With the recent movement to wipe out HIV/AIDS in Botswana by 2016, the fiftieth anniversary of Botswana's independence, *Makgabaneng* has certainly opened the gate to new possibilities for reversing the devastation of HIV/AIDS in the country.¹¹ Based on the program's various accomplishments and successes, members of the *Makgabaneng* staff are convinced that the "trajectory" of the serial drama is "endless," and they plan to continue producing the serial drama for years to come until the war on HIV/AIDS in Botswana is won (Tembo 2004).

¹¹ Vision 2016 is a governmental plan to obliterate HIV/AIDS in Botswana. The details of this program can be found in Towards an AIDS-Free Generation: Botswana Human Development Report 2000 – The Popular Version (UNDP 2001).

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Discography

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