The Saucepan Special: the People's Radio of Central Africa

by

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Central Africa's Saucepan Special had a brief hour of glory in the annals of broadcasting and then - oblivion. Like the Volksempfänger, the cheap popular wireless set introduced into Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the Saucepan Special was the result of an official attempt to arrange for the production of a cheap radio set in order to ensure that the voice of government would reach the mass of the people. 'The poor man's radio'[1] was a four valve tropicalised short wave receiver specially designed to suit the tough conditions of the African bush and to sell at a price within the reach of village Africans; it took its name from its cabinet - an aluminium case, nine inches in diameter, which was literally a saucepan without a handle. The Saucepan Special which went on sale in the British colonies of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1949 was part of a pioneering experiment in popular broadcasting conducted by the Central African Broadcasting Station (CABS) from Lusaka, the capital of Northern Rhodesia.

The CABS broadcast in seven languages and was the first station in Africa to address itself exclusively to Africans receiving high praise from British broadcasting personalities. Martin Esslin described the work of the CABS as 'one of the romances of British Africa';[2] John Grenfell Williams, head of the BBC's African service, reported that it was 'in Northern Rhodesia that experiments on both the technical and programme sides have been carried furthest'.[3] Sylvia Hingley considered the CABS 'a model for all other colonies',[4] and Cyril Ray wrote in the Times Educational Supplement in March 1950 that with the Saucepan Special Northern Rhodesia'had made one of the biggest contributions

to the whole field of mass communications'.[5] The Saucepan Special was even the subject of a Ripley 'Believe it or Not' cartoon in the Sunday Express. The romance of the Saucepan Special ended with the coming of the transistor and it has long been relegated to the vintage wireless museum. In Broadcasting in the Third World (1977) by E. Katz and G. Wedell there is a fleeting reference to the Saucepan Special as being 'widely sold in Kenya'.[6] Sic transit mundi gloria.

The CABS grew out of a small government broadcasting station which had been established in Lusaka in 1940 under the direction of the new Information Office; its role was to bring accurate war news to African miners on the volatile Copperbelt. African miners lived and worked together in comparatively large numbers; they had gone on strike in 1935 and at the beginning of 1940 and were thought to be particularly susceptible to rumour. Copper was making a vital contribution to the war effort and the Northern Rhodesian administration wished to ensure that its production was not disrupted. Although the war produced no further industrial action on the part of African miners there was little official enthusiasm for any further development of broadcasting when the war ended. Broadcasting had had little chance to make any impact on the African population: the transmitters were weak and the reception facilities very limited. Most Africans could not afford the expensive short wave sets retailing at between £30 and £40 which were found in the majority of European homes; they had to listen in on community receivers in the few places where they were provided: crowded welfare halls in the towns and at the occasional boma or mission station in the rural areas; or to the set of an accommodating European employer.

One person who was convinced that broadcasting did have a great future in Africa was the director of Northern Rhodesia's Information Office, Harry Franklin. Not only did he have to contend with a widespread lack of enthusiasm

for broadcasting at the Secretariat but he also had to overcome positive opposition from some officials and white settler politicians. One group argued that Africans did not want broadcasting and would never understand it whilst others feared that if Africans listened to foreign stations they 'would get wrong ideas into their heads ... and cause revolutions ...'[7] Franklin would not be thwarted. He refused to believe 'that Africans would not take to broadcasting knowing that primitive tribes in Eastern Russia and peasants in India had taken to it'.[8] Franklin thought that broadcasting had great potential as an instrument of mass education; it could hurdle the illiteracy barrier. Africa could not wait upon the spread of formal education to bring education and enlightenment to the mass of the African population - that would take generations; it was imperative that the education of African adults be speeded up not only so that Africans would be better equipped to participate in development but also to prevent 'the completely ignorant black mass' from being exploited by 'agitators' from amongst the newly educated elite.[9]

In his bid to develop broadcasting as a popular medium Franklin received encouragement from Northern Rhodesian governor, Sir John Waddington, and both moral and financial support from the British government. The Colonial Office with the energetic backing of the BBC had attempted to promote the development of local broadcasting in the colonies before the war. In 1937 the Plymouth Report, strongly influenced by the Reithian creed that broadcasting should be a public service, urged the development of broadcasting in the colonies not only as an 'instrument of advanced administration' but particularly:

> for the enlightenment and education of the more backward sections of the population and for their instruction in public health, agriculture etc.[10]

Apart from the setting up of several rediffusion stations in west Africa there had been little response to the call of the Plymouth Report. A major

stumbling block was finance; before World War II colonies were expected to pay for their own development schemes, broadcasting had not been a top priority.

The passage of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940) ushered in a new approach to colonial development as the British government now agreed to take on the responsibility for financing colonial development and welfare schemes. Closely associated with the new development philosophy was the report Mass Education in African Society (1944)[11] produced by the Colonial Office's Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies which investigated ways in which the media, including broadcasting, could be used in adult education. Realising that Northern Rhodesia alone could not support an ambitious broadcasting development scheme for both its African and European population, Franklin, with the approval of the other colonial governments in British Central Africa, devised a regional broadcasting scheme. Financial assistance was obtained from the Colonial Development and Welfare vote and technical advice from the BBC. Under this regional scheme the Northern Rhodesian station in Lusaka was to conduct broadcasting for the six million Africans scattered thinly over Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland whilst Southern Rhodesia would take responsibility for broadcasting to the much smaller European population of the three territories. (The regional broadcasting scheme prefigured the political federalisation of the region in 1953.)

The next step was to ensure that the broadcasts could be heard; and it was here that Franklin displayed his greatest initiative. He was convinced that broadcasting would not take off in central Africa until Africans, like Europeans, could listen to the radio in their own homes. Community listening was the worst type of listening. In the towns it was difficult to hear what was being said above the din of the audience in the crowded welfare hall;[12] in the rural areas there was the problem of persuading people tired after a day's work in the fields

to trek often substantial distances to some central place, and then to keep them interested once they had been assembled.[13] A partial solution which could only be relevant in the few urban townships that had electricity was rediffusion and a small rediffusion experiment was started in Lusaka in 1950 - but most Africans did not have electricity. Franklin conferred with J.W. Murray, the chief engineer at the Lusaka station about the possibility of a cheap dry battery receiver. Murray proceeded to draw up specifications for a wireless receiving set which would stand up to a tropical climate and rough handling; it had to be short wave both to cover the vast distances in central Africa and to receive London; it had to be able to be used many miles away from an electric current and above all, it had to be cheap.

As there was no obvious profit to be made Franklin had great difficulty in finding a manufacturer willing to develop the type of set indicated in the wire diagrams produced by Murray. It took Franklin three years of searching all over the stirling area including Britain, Australia and South Africa before he finally found a company willing to oblige. In July 1948 the Ever Ready Company in Britain agreed to research and develop the Northern Rodesian idea for a cheap, short wave, dry battery receiver. During the next two months valuable assistance was given by the BBC and several prototypes were turned out remarkably quickly by the manager of one of the firm's wireless factories. Ever Ready had hopes that eventually the set might be able to tap a vast market in other parts of Africa and perhaps India and also saw possible profits in the sale of batteries for the sets. Franklin thought that the executives were also moved by a desire to make a contribution to colonial development and 'an appreciation of the part that broadcasting can play in fostering the loyalty of colonial peoples in these troubled times'.[14]

The saucepan set was run by an external dry-cell battery which had a life of about 300 hours. The set was fitted into a handle-less saucepan (the saucepan inspiration coming from the fact that the Ever Ready works were adjacent to a saucepan factory). The saucepan was closed by a screwed plate and sealed. The front panel had an opening measuring four inches. Above this opening was a combined on-off switch and volume control and below was a two-speed tuning knob and dial. The set was painted blue because it was believed that it was the only colour about which Africans did not have some superstition, and all the openings were covered with gauze to keep the insects out. The Saucepan Special had a wave length range from 25 to 90 metres and apart from Lusaka could pick up Salisbury, Zaire, Mozambique and the BBC. In contrast to the German people's radio, the Volksempfänger, no attempt was made to make the reception of foreign broadcasts difficult. Franklin thought that such a move would 'defeat the ends of broadcasting' as it would prejudice Africans against broadcasting from the start.[15] The receiver and battery each weighed 7lb and the battery measured 8" x 3" x 5½". The set cost £5 with an extra £1.5s for the battery which made it, according to Martin Esslin, 'probably the cheapest high class receiver in the world'.[16] It was cheaper in Northern Rhodesia than the other two colonies because carriers and radio dealers were willing to sacrifice more of their profits.

When the set was ready to market the Northern Rhodesian Information Department launched an advertising campaign to promote the medium itself; a similar campaign had been mounted in Germany in the 1930s to promote broadcasting when the cheap people's radio had first gone on the market there.[17] The Northern Rhodesian campaign made use of posters, the government newspaper for Africans, the radio, film trailers and film strips, and a special promotional film - Lusaka Calling. The film shows a mobile recording van

arriving in the Tongan village of chief Shiamundu. The engineer recorded some local songs and played the record back to the people, telling them that the record would soon be played over the CABS. The chief bought a Saucepan Special and one scene showed the villagers listening, incredulously at first, as their music was played over the radio. The film also has a scene where chief Shiamundu is shown around the broadcasting studios in Lusaka.[18]

The first sets began arriving in Northern Rhodesia in September 1949 and the stores soon sold out of their supplies. Within four months of the sets appearing on the market the Lusaka station had received 312 letters of appreciation: 'I feel proud when I switch on my set and have the WHOLE WORLD in my house', wrote one delighted customer.[19] In 1952 when the new Lunda paramount chief, Mwata Yamvo was being installed in the then Belgian Congo he was presented with a saucepan wireless by one of the Lunda sub-chiefs from Northern Rhodesia.[20] To give further encouragement to broadcasting the CABS started a listeners' club and a monthly radio magazine, the African Listener. The CABS staff both European and African put together a series of experimental programmes designed to encourage African music and drama as well as to educate, inform, explain and promote government policy.[21]

Suddenly the CABS and its Saucepan Special were news. The station received many enquiries. Queen Salote of Tonga purchased 100 sets[22] and in the early 1950s a number of sets were exported to other parts of Africa, to Malaya and Singapore, to India and to the Middle East. Other firms produced alternative receivers including the Cossor 'Biscuit Tin',[23] however, the basic design remained unchanged for ten years. By early 1957 50,000 cheap dry battery receivers had been imported into central Africa, about half of these being bought by Africans.[24]

The Saucepan Special and its imitators had demonstrated that like people everywhere the African population of central Africa responded enthusiastically

to broadcasting; but Franklin's dream of a radio in every village was still far from being realised. Costs rose in the course of the decade and although the set was cheap by European standards it was still expensive for a villager living at or near the subsistence level; for an ordinary worker the set represented one or two month's income. Furthermore there were problems of servicing and battery replacement never satisfactorily solved, (The CABS also suffered a loss in popularity when it abandoned its neutral stance and began to actively support the proposed Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963) which was bitterly opposed by the Africans of central Africa.)[25] It was not until the development of the transistor that broadcasting was finally able to take off amongst the world's poorer communities in Africa and elsewhere. The transistor has made broadcasting the single most important medium of mass communication in Africa. The Saucepan Special had been a precusor.

Notes and References

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2. Esslin, M. (1950) The Saucepan Special, London Calling, 12 October 1950
3. Williams, J. Grenfell. (1951/1952) Broadcasting in the African Colonies, B.B.C. Quarterly, 6,4,p. 216.
4. Central African Post (Lusaka) 25 January 1951.
5. The Times Educational Supplement, 10 March 1950.
6. p.77.
7. Franklin, H. (1949) The Development of Broadcasting to Africans in Central Africa, p.6 (Lusaka Government Printer).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, p.7.
10. Interim Report of a Committee on Broadcasting Services in the Colonies, 1937. (Plymouth Report) p.5, Colonial No. 139.
11. Mass Education in African Society, 1944. Colonial No. 186.
12. Franklin, H. (1949), op. cit., p.4.
13. Williams, J. Grenfell., op.cit., p.218.
14. Franklin, H. (1949), op.cit., p.10.
15. Ibid., p.11.
16. Esslin, M., op.cit.
17. Sington, D. & Weidenfeld, A. (1942) The Goebbels Experiment: A Study of the Nazi Propaganda Machine, pp.142-143 (London).
18. Lusaka Calling (Central African Film Unit, 1950?, dir. Louis Nell) 16mm. colour, sound, 20 mins. National Film Archive, Australian National Library, Canberra. It was reported from Gatooma in Matabeleland in Southern Rhodesia that after the film was shown there 16 members of the audience asked where they could buy the Saucepan Special; several produced the money on the spot. African Listener, 25 January 1952.
19. Franklin, H. (1950), p.12
20. Northern News (Ndola), 18 January 1952.
21. For an entertaining anecdotal account of the vicissitudes of the CABS in the 1950s written by a former broadcasting officer, see Fraenkel, P. (1959) Wayaleshi (London).
22. Franklin, H. (1974) The Flag-Wagger, p.186 (London).
23. The Cossor 'Biscuit Tin' appeared on the African market in 1955. The circuit was a conventional 4-valve (B7G) battery superhet covering two short-wave and the medium-wave broadcast band. Its designer had previously been employed by the Metal Box company and used an MB biscuit tin for the insect-proof cabinet. See editorial note to Smyth, R. (1977) The Saucepan Special, British Vintage Wireless Bulletin, 2,3, p. 43.

23. Codding, G.A. (1959) Broadcasting without Barriers, p. 52 (Paris, UNESCO).
24. See Fraenkel, P., op. cit., pp. 196-208.