



Stillborn—Flags Designed for the “Republic of KwaNdebele”

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Abstract

KwaNdebele was a self-governing Homeland in *apartheid* South Africa which indicated in 1982 that it would follow some of the Homelands and move towards “full independence”. However, internal strife and unrest within the Homeland delayed the scheduled move towards independence. The wider political developments in South Africa after 1990 and the negotiations which led to the end of apartheid and the adoption of a new Interim Constitution in South Africa halted these developments and KwaNdebele ceased to exist in April 1994.

This paper describes and illustrates the flags that were designed for use by the government and officials of the proposed “Republic of KwaNdebele” as it prepared for independence from South Africa in the late 1980s.



The Flag of KwaNdebele

STILLBORN – FLAGS DESIGNED FOR THE “REPUBLIC OF KWANDEBELE”

1. INTRODUCTION

KwaNdebele was previously a self-governing Homeland situated in the former Transvaal province, north-east of Pretoria, reserved for the Ndebele people in terms of South Africa's former policy of separate development (*apartheid*). It covered an area of 322,798 hectares (or 3,228 km²) and had a resident population of 443,100 in 1986.¹

The name KwaNdebele means the place (or home) of the Ndebele people.

The Ndebele ethnic unit, consisting of the northern and southern Ndebele, derives from one of the many Nguni tribes that emigrated to the south of Africa over 400 years ago. The northern Ndebele were, over time, assimilated with the northern Sothos and the Tswanas. The southern Ndebele are, however, characterised by having retained their own identity, language and traditions. The Ndebele of this area should not be confused with the Ndebele found at Silkaats. This latter group came from Zululand (around 1825) and remained in what became known as the Transvaal for a short period of time before migrating northward into what is today Matabeleland in southern Zimbabwe.

2. BACKGROUND

In terms of the Natives Land Act (Act No. 27 of 1913), certain defined areas in South Africa were reserved for the exclusive use of the Black population. The areas set aside in terms of this Act later formed the basis on which the various Homelands (or *Bantustans*) were created. Further steps were taken in terms of the Representation of Blacks Act (Act No. 12 of 1936) which provided for a measure of indirect political representation for Black South Africans and this was followed by the Black Trust and Land Act (Act No. 18 of 1936) which provided for the systematic increase in the land available for occupation by the Black population, subject to certain conditions.

In 1951, in terms of the Black Authorities Act (Act No. 68 of 1951), provision was made for a uniform system of local and central government in the form of tribal, community, regional and territorial authorities in the areas reserved for the Black population. In terms of this Act, the Ndzundza (Mabhogo), the Amandebele-aba-ga-Manala and the Litho-Ndebele-Ndzundza Tribal Authorities and the Pungutsha Community Authority were established in the area reserved for the Ndebele people. The Promotion of Black Self-Government Act (Act No. 46 of 1959) divided the country's Black population into ethnic units and linked each of

these units to a specific “Homeland”. This Act did not refer to the South Ndebele as a separate ethnic group and as such the Act was amended in 1977 to acknowledge the ethnic status of the South Ndebele. On 07 October 1977 a territorial authority was established for KwaNdebele which incorporated the areas under the jurisdiction of the Ndzundza Tribal Authority and the Mnyamana Regional Authority. The first step to “self-determination” by the Ndebele in terms of the South African government’s policy of separate development was attained on 01 October 1979 with the establishment of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly and an Executive Council under a Chief Minister in terms of Chapter I of the National States Constitution Act (Act No. 21 of 1971).

KwaNdebele was granted internal “self-government” on 01 April 1981 in terms of Chapter II of the National States Constitution Act and in 1982 indicated that it would move towards full “independence” from South Africa. However, on 12 August 1986, after months of internal strife and unrest in the Homeland, the Speaker announced that the Legislative Assembly had rejected independence that had been scheduled for 11 December 1986. Of the nine other Homelands in South Africa at that time, only Transkei (in 1976), Bophuthatswana (in 1977), Venda (in 1979) and Ciskei (in 1981) had opted for “full independence”.

On 06 May 1987, following the death of Chief Minister SS Skosana, the Legislative Assembly made a unanimous decision to rescind the decision by the previous Speaker and to opt instead for independence. However, the South African government introduced certain conditions, including the establishment of a Committee of Inquiry and the holding of a referendum on the issue, before the matter could be pursued further. The release from prison of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of various political organisations by the South African government in February 1990 resulted in the halt of any further political developments in KwaNdebele as South Africa, as a whole, moved towards full democracy.

KwaNdebele ceased to exist as a separate administrative and political entity on 27 April 1994 when it was re-incorporated into South Africa as part of the Mpumalanga Province following the adoption of the Interim Constitution of South Africa (Act No. 200 of 1993) which ended legalised separate development and established a fully democratic South Africa.

3. KWANDEBELE NATIONAL SYMBOLS

3.1 COAT OF ARMS

Following the establishment of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly in October 1979 and the move towards the granting of internal self-government, preparations to design national symbols for the territory got underway. By Government Notice No. 1599, published in the South African *Government Gazette* (Number 7400 of 13 February 1981), it was notified that a coat of arms

had been registered for the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly (**Figure 1**) in terms of the South African Heraldry Act (Act No. 18 of 1962) with a Certificate of Registration No. 1213 being issued on 19 February 1981.²



Figure 1: KwaNdebele Coat of Arms

The symbolism of the coat of arms has been officially explained in the following terms:

Arms are traditionally depicted on a shield and in the case of KwaNdebele, a round shield was chosen. The shield represents protection and no particular significance was attached to the colours used in the shield. As far as the charge and partition of the shield was concerned, the mealie represents maize (corn) which is the staple diet of the people of KwaNdebele and symbolises the close links between man and the soil on which he is dependent for a livelihood. The stepped partition on the shield symbolises the building of the nation's future by its leaders on the firm foundations of its local traditions.

The head-ring in the crest is symbolic of that worn by the elders and is a sign of their authority in the social life of the nation. It symbolises authority and the subordination of the people to its elders and leaders. The feather (*Isiba*) comes from the breast of the crimson-breasted shrike and is presented to the Chief by one of his people at the beginning of each new year. The Chief wears this

feather in his fore-lock as a symbol of dignity appropriate to his status as Chief. The otter skin which is hung from a neck band across the chest of senior males may only be worn by men of wisdom and experience and is also a symbol of authority. It further symbolises the wisdom and insight of such men when they act as counsellors. Skins of other animals were traditionally used to signify the different status of these men in the local community. The bundle of wood staves, known locally as *Itjhwahla*, which rest in a cup symbolises the unity of the nation, who although members of different tribes, are fundamentally people with a common ideal and who work together for a common future guided by their leaders. The knobbed stick, *Umrhobha*, is symbolic of the authority of the Chief.

In saltire behind the shield, the battle axe and assegai are the traditional weapons of the Ndebele and they indicate the important role of the State in ensuring law and order, peace and prosperity for its people.

The reedbuck and blue wildebeest supporters are totems of the two most important tribes, the Ndzundza and Manala, respectively. The green field on which they stand symbolises the new home of these tribes who, once scattered in various parts of southern Africa, are now established in one territory as a nation.

The motto in Ndebele, *Kuvuswa Ezivusako*, is a local proverb and means “He who helps himself, is helped”.

3.2 FLAG

The design for a flag for the KwaNdebele Homeland is set out in section 2 of the KwaNdebele Flag Act (Act No. 4 of 1982)³ of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly. The Act became law on 19 July 1982 and was published in the *Official Gazette of KwaNdebele* on 06 October 1982. The flag (**Figure 2**) was flown together with the flag of South Africa at the buildings of the Legislative Assembly and at government offices elsewhere in KwaNdebele until 26 April 1994.



Figure 2: Flag of KwaNdebele

The blue in the flag is said to represent the colour of the sky and the endlessness of space, thus symbolising the room needed by the Ndebele to fulfill their ideals.

Yellow represented the light and energy of the sun, which is indispensable to life and which also lights the way ahead, so that the nation could advance without fear of danger which lurks in the darkness.

Green is the colour of the plants and grass that is a source of food. It also symbolises growth and advancement.

The knobkerrie is a symbol of authority vested in the government to maintain law and order, while the battle axes are symbolic of the struggle for self respect, self-determination and national pride.

The charge in the centre of the yellow stripe is taken from the head of the Parliamentary Mace of KwaNdebele. Efforts by the South African Bureau of Heraldry to have a two-dimensional symbol depicted on the flag, rather than the three-dimensional one finally adopted, were to no avail.



Figure 3: KwaNdebele Parliamentary Mace

3.3 MACE

A further symbol of national authority in the form of a parliamentary mace (**Figure 3**) was also adopted by the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly. The short ivory knobkerrie at the head of the mace symbolises the power vested in the authority of the Chiefs. It is held in position by four battle-axe heads with the blades directed outwards, which symbolises the defence of the people of KwaNdebele against onslaughts from outsiders.

The knobkerrie rests on an earthenware clay pot made of silver. Such a pot was traditionally used as a receptacle for water or sorghum beer. It is customary for the Chief and his people to drink from the same pot when they meet. This symbolises their coherence and the peace and harmony which exists between the Chief and his subjects.

The staff of the mace comprises two wooden *kiaat* staves representing the Ndzundza and Manala tribes. These are bound together in the centre by a bronze band with ivory inlays and silver depictions of sorghum and heads of cattle to represent agriculture (cultivation and stock farming) above which the name KWANDEBELE is engraved, representing the firm bonding of these tribes and their loyalty to one another. The ox heads and sorghum ears also depicted on this band refer to the importance of a healthy and flourishing agricultural industry for the economic prosperity of the country.

The foot of the mace is also bronze and comprises aloe plants and alludes to the territory, KwaNdebele, where the Ndebele people have found a permanent home.

4. FLAGS DESIGNED FOR AN INDEPENDENT KWANDEBELE

It has recently been discovered that an official car flag and some pennons⁴ had been designed for use by KwaNdebele following its independence originally scheduled for 11 December 1986. Art-cards bearing the logo and address details of the Departement van Ontwikkingshulp / Department of Development Aid (Chief Directorate : Works, Sub Directorate : Drawing Office) show the designs of the following:

Car flag for the President of KwaNdebele

Official Pennon for the President of KwaNdebele

Official Pennon for Ministers

Official Pennon for Ambassador

Official Pennon for Consul.

The designs of each of these are described in detail below.

4.1 CAR FLAG FOR THE PRESIDENT OF KWANDEBELE

The art-card entitled “*Voorgestelde Registrasieplaat vir ampsmotor van KwaNdebele President*”⁵ shows an illustration of a flag in the proportion 2:3 comprising a white field in the centre of which is the Coat of Arms of KwaNdebele in colour. Beneath the Arms is the proposed official name of the territory in Ndebele, “REPHABLIKI YA KWANDEBELE” (Republic of KwaNdebele) in light blue capital letters (**Figure 4**). The size of the proposed car flag is not indicated on the art-card which is dated 24 April 1986.



Figure 4: Proposed car flag for the President of KwaNdebele

From the title of the art-card and the flag illustrated, it can be deduced that this flag was designed as a car flag for the President of KwaNdebele, to be used on official vehicles by the Head of State once the territory gained its independence.

It is a matter of speculation as to whether the President of KwaNdebele would have used such a design for a presidential banner should the territory have become independent from South Africa as originally planned. None of the Presidents of the other so-called independent Homelands which received independence from South Africa flew distinctive flags, although it has been reported that a flag for the President of Bophuthatswana had also been designed.

4.2 OFFICIAL PENNON FOR THE PRESIDENT OF KWANDEBELE

The pennon designed for the President of KwaNdebele was a pennant with a brown vertical stripe adjacent to the hoist approximately 9% of the full length of the pennant, with the remainder of the pennant being yellow ochre. Adjacent to the brown stripe, and occupying not more than 40% of the pennon, is the KwaNdebele Arms in full colour (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5: Proposed pennon for the President of KwaNdebele

No specifications are mentioned on the art-card although it does indicate that the “Front and Black Elevations are Identical (including the weapon)”.

4.3 OFFICIAL PENNON FOR MINISTERS

As with the pennon designed for the President of KwaNdebele, the pennon designed for KwaNdebele Government Ministers was a pennant with a brown vertical stripe adjacent to the hoist approximately 9% of the full length of the pennant with the remainder of the pennant being dark green. Adjacent to the brown stripe, and occupying not more than 40% of the pennon, is the KwaNdebele Arms in full colour (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6: Proposed pennon for KwaNdebele Government Ministers

No specifications are mentioned on the art-card although it does indicate that the “Front and Black Elevations are Identical (including the weapon)”.

4.4 OFFICIAL PENNON FOR AMBASSADORS

The pennon designed for KwaNdebele Ambassadors was a pennant with a brown vertical stripe adjacent to the hoist approximately 9% of the full length of the pennant, with the remainder of the pennant being blue. Adjacent to the brown stripe, and occupying not more than 40% of the pennon, is the KwaNdebele Arms in full colour (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7: Proposed pennon for Ambassadors of KwaNdebele

No specifications are mentioned on the art-card although it does indicate that the “Front and Black Elevations are Identical (including the weapon)”.

4.5 OFFICIAL PENNON FOR CONSUL

The pennon designed for KwaNdebele Consuls followed the same basic design, being a pennant with a brown vertical stripe adjacent to the hoist approximately 9% of the full length of the pennant, with the remainder of the pennant being described as broken white. Adjacent to the brown stripe, and occupying not more than 40% of the pennon, is the KwaNdebele Arms in full colour (**Figure 8**).

No specifications are mentioned on the art-card although it does indicate that the “Front and Black Elevations are Identical (including the weapon)”.

Based on the experiences of the other independent Homelands, only South Africa and the other independent Homelands would have recognised the independent status of KwaNdebele. These Homelands had Ambassadors in Pretoria and in the other independent Homeland capitals and Consulates in other South African towns and cities adjacent to the respective territories. An “independent” KwaNdebele would have in all probability been no different. The proposed pennons would thus have been used on ceremonial occasions involving South Africa and the other independent Homelands, since international recognition would not have been granted.

5. CONCLUSION

It is interesting that these flags were designed by, or on behalf of, the Department of Development Aid and not the Bureau of Heraldry which has the responsibility in terms of the South African Heraldry Act (Act No. 18 of 1962) for the design and registration of heraldic representations in South Africa, whereas the Department of Development Aid was responsible for inter-governmental relations and fiscal transfers between South Africa and the self-governing Homelands at that time.

A possible explanation is that the Department of Development Aid quite simply prepared these designs prior to liaison and discussion with the Bureau of Heraldry. The irony is that the South African State Herald at the time was, in fact, a member of the KwaNdebele Logistic Committee, involved in the design of decorations and medals for the territory, so it is not that Bureau was uninvolved or excluded from the preparations for KwaNdebele’s proposed independence.⁶

While some of the trappings of statehood had been adopted by KwaNdebele following the attainment of self-governing status, preparations for the adoption of further symbols of sovereignty were made in the period preceding the initial date set for independence. This was in spite of the fact that only South Africa, Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei and Venda would have recognised an

independent “Republic of KwaNdebele”. Events within KwaNdebele and wider political developments in South Africa at the time that independence was being considered had far-reaching consequences, resulting in the demise of the formal *apartheid* system and the abandonment of the Homeland policy in 1994. As a result, the process towards independence for KwaNdebele was halted and consequently these flags were never brought into use. Nevertheless, the fact that they were designed indicates the commitment towards independence shown by officials in both South Africa and KwaNdebele in early 1986 and reveals what vexillological symbols would have been used if KwaNdebele had attained its independence.

ENDNOTES

1. *KwaNdebele – Introductory Economic and Social Memorandum*, 1987: Government of KwaNdebele and Development Bank of Southern Africa.
2. The blazon of the Coat of Arms registered with the South African Bureau of Heraldry under Certificate of Registration No. 1213 issued on 19 February 1981 is described as follows:
 - Arms: Per fess battled embattled Or and Brunatre, masoned sable, in chief a mealie head seeded Argent leaved Vert; behind the shield a battle-axe and assegai in saltire, proper, and in pale a bundle of woodstaves Or and a knobkerrie, resting in a quiver, proper.
 - Crest: In front of an otter skin Brunatre pendant from the woodstaves by a neckband Vert, a breast feather of the red-breasted shrike issuant proper.
 - Wreath: A heading Sable.
 - Supporters: Dexter a rietbok (reedbuck) and sinister a wildebeest, both proper.
 - Motto: KUVUSWA EZIVUSAKO (He who helps himself, is helped).
3. The KwaNdebele Flag Act (Act No. 4 of 1982) of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly reads as follows:
 - "(1) The KwaNdebele Flag shall be a flag consisting of three horizontal stripes of equal width from top to bottom of blue, yellow and green on which shall appear in the centre of the yellow stripes a short knobkerrie erect conjoining to four battle axe heads.
 - (2) The knobkerrie shall be brown, the rear battle axe heads shall be brown and the front battle axe heads shall be grey.
 - (3) The width of the KwaNdebele flag shall be equal to two-thirds of its length.
 - (4) The length and width of the central charge referred to in subsection (1) shall be two-thirds of the width of the yellow stripes".
4. The Dictionary of Vexillology at Flags of the World (<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/Flags/vxt-dtoc.html>) describes a pennon as being a small flag or pennant, usually swallow-tailed or triangular and of generally simple (bicolour) design, formerly carried below the lance head by those cavalry regiments so armed, or currently by some mounted police units in parade dress, and now restricted to historical/ceremonial use (also known as a lance pennon).

5. Afrikaans for the “Suggested registration number plate for the official (motor) vehicle of the KwaNdebele President”.
6. Personal communication with the former State Herald of South Africa, Mr FG Brownell.

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About the Author

Bruce Berry was born and bred in Zimbabwe and watched with interest the vexillological changes which occurred in that country up to and immediately after independence in 1980. This interest developed into a substantial (and still growing!) flag collection. He participates in a variety of vexillological projects – both formal and informal – together with contributing to vexillological publications and conferences. Bruce attended Rhodes University and the Universities of the Witwatersrand and South Africa culminating in a Master of Arts degree and a diploma in Project Management. He is a Unit Manager at the Development Bank of Southern Africa and lives in Johannesburg with his wife and two sons. He is a founder member of the Southern African Vexillological Association (SAVA) and has been Secretary/Treasurer since its inception.



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