

## with... Lerato Mbele

This week, as part of our special focus on women in #WomensMonth, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie with Lerato Mbele. She is presenter of the weekly *Africa Business Report* on BBC World News, and also African Business correspondent, part of a global team providing extensive coverage for the channel...



A selfie with cameraman Jason Boswell

### 1. Where do you live, work and play?

**Mbele:** Live: I was born in South Africa and I still live here.

Work: While the first chapter of *Africa Business Report* was filmed in London we found it missed that African feel, so we brought it back 'home' for the second season.

Play: I love doing yoga in Design Quarter, Fourways; playing with my family on the beaches in KZN; and when I have more money to spend, going further afield to Mauritius, Paris and Senegal, with a trip to Thailand coming up soon.

### 2. What's your claim to fame?

**Mbele:** Ha ha, I'm still working on it! I've been a broadcaster for some 14 years now with a strong passion for diplomacy. I've had the privilege of interviewing Benazir Bhutto, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, who was later assassinated in 2007. At the time I felt that if she could accept an interview from little old me, I must be doing something right.

### 3. Describe your career so far.

**Mbele:** My journey began in earnest whilst I worked as a primetime news anchor for *News@10* on SABC. Here I interviewed the state president; trade union leaders and various heads of state from Africa, such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda. Once I started hosting *Africa Business Report* on BBC World News, I got to meet and interview Africa's richest man, Bill Gates and young inventors. It's been an interesting kaleidoscope. My quirkiest interview though was with Bob Geldof, about aid stimulating growth. I challenged him on certain

points, which led to him dropping the f-bomb a few times about the issues at hand. Another highlight was Obama's recent visit to Kenya - his first official visit as president of the US, despite having made the trip a few times previously to visit family. It's about learning to meet the demands of 24-hour live broadcasts as was the case, and accurately and succinctly covering issues of world affairs.

#### **4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.**

**Mbele:** My most favourite person in the whole world is my nephew Kea; he's inquisitive, cheeky and wonderful. I'm also very house-proud and love being at home. I'm seldom there; I spend maybe 10 days per month in South Africa so I really do see it as my sanctuary. I've also recently started running - everyday on the treadmill and 5km every weekend. No marathons yet; I need to build up my strength first, but whilst I have found that running can be gruelling, it is a wonderful way to get in touch with my own body and see how strong it really is. That links to my love of music; my iPod is always close by. Then superficially, I really am girly-girl at heart with a love of perfumes - I have 15 favourites and the one I love most depends on my mood at the time. I also really love designer bags from Ted Baker, Paul of London, Ralph Lauren, and of course Cartier bag from a special man that I adore.

#### **5. What do you love about your industry?**

**Mbele:** I love that it's so liberal. Working in the media, anything goes, whether you're homosexual, you've been married eight times, or you're not planning on having any children. It's a tolerant and open-minded industry, with the BBC even more so - all views are accepted.

#### **6. What are a few pain points your industry can improve on?**

**Mbele:** We've seen many organisations have to rationalise pay cuts since the recession, but the demand for news has increased - feeds on TV, radio and online. It's also exceptionally tough working the 24-hour news cycle, meaning you have to be alert and 'on' no matter what the time, from early morning to late at night. It's often a 16-hour work day where you don't have time to stop and catch your breath, and means you have to make lots of compromises. The industry definitely needs to invest more in production staff when covering breaking news.

In South Africa in particular, the media tends to take sides when it comes to covering issues related to government, coming across as strongly for or against - there's nothing wrong with being a fence-sitter.

#### **7. Describe your average workday (if such a thing exists).**

**Mbele:** It's demanding, but not always. I'm lucky enough to work with a team that sees the value of working ahead of schedule, so while we were doing the live feeds in Kenya during US President Obama's visit, we produced other stories during the lulls. Getting the extra work done when we have the time for it gives us a some more breathing space. A 'work day' for me often takes the span of 48 hours, incorporating interview prep, working on headlines, filming links, cutting, working with correspondents, doing voice-overs, blogging online and helping my team find fresh interviewees and working on the logistics.

#### **8. What are the tools of your trade?**

**Mbele:** For me, it's my Master's degree in development studies, which I use daily, as it broadened my already keen interest in current affairs, politics, the business of capital markets and economic issues. Also important is knowing how the numbers come together and understanding currency fluctuations.

Technological skills are also a big must-have, and keeping in touch with new ways of doing TV, using technology to enhance it, such as taking a story online and vlogging or including podcasts to keep on trend.

On-the-job training is also crucial, where employers empower their workers for example by sending them on courses in financial reporting or even legal frameworks to enhance the accuracy of their reporting and training on security when out reporting in war zones.

At the end of the day, it's all about that open mind, basic general knowledge and keen interest in the state the world is in.

## 9. Who is getting it right in your industry?

**Mbele:** The BBC, of course! Seriously though, we have a philosophy that it's important to be first with a breaking news story, but it's more important to be right.

## 10. What are you working on right now?

**Mbele:** We're working on a beautiful piece about Dr Betty Gikonyo and her husband, Dr Daniel Gikonyo. They are a pair of cardiologists from Kenya, who dreamed of building a private high-care facility in Nairobi. Their dream finally came to fruition in the Karen Hospital, and I got the opportunity to go on a walkabout in the hospital. It's a story of triumph and shows what happens when business and medicine mix. These are the kinds of stories that affirm our work on *Africa Business Report*; telling the stories that showcase talent, strong business acumen and the investments that ultimately change African societies. We also have a special edition coming up about the lucrative game-hunting side of tourism, challenging the conservation side. It's in light of the tragic killing of Cecil the lion and the struggles against rhino poaching. So in order to understand the profit-motives and the environmental consequences, we have gathered views and analysis from South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

## 11. Tell us some of the buzzwords floating around in your industry at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself.

**Mbele:** 'Quirky!' When applied to a business, it's a great way of seeing the lighter side, with people doing inventive things. Nic Haralambous of the [Nic Harry](#) happy socks business is a great example of this. He is funny, young and doing business in a quirky way.

Other catchphrases we keep hearing at the moment are 'African Renaissance' and 'African revival', as it's definitely Africa's time to shine. We also keep hearing about 'youth unemployment', and the need to be objective and not get caught up in sunshine journalism. As a reporter, ISIS, Boko Haram and the al-Shabaab movements have made security a top talking point, and from a business perspective it's all about disruption by design and focusing on the game changers and entrepreneurs.

## 12. Where and when do you have your best ideas?

**Mbele:** Sometimes in the shower, sometimes on the treadmill, sometimes while out filming on location. It's usually when I'm in crisis mode though, put me on the spot and I'll come up with something. The show has been on air for almost two years and we want to keep things fresh and prevent it from getting stale, which is why we now focus on the news makers and shape shifters, or youth making an impact on the industry. We discover so much just from being out and about and talking to others.

### 13. What's your secret talent/party trick?

**Mbele:** I can sing! Watch this space; this is about more than just singing in the shower. I can also play the piano, albeit badly.

### 14. Are you a technophobe or a technophile?

**Mbele:** I'm a 'phobe at heart. Technology intimidates me, I'm often the last person to come onboard with something - luckily the BBC forces me into things like Twitter.

### 15. What would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

**Mbele:** A few photos of my family and boyfriend, pics I've taken while on shoots and cityscapes from all across Africa... along with a few risqué selfies!

### 16. What advice would you give to newbies hoping to crack into the industry?

**Mbele:** It's simple - journalism's no rocket science. You don't have to be the smartest out there, you just need to be inquisitive, work hard, and be willing to sacrifice your time and family as breaking news waits for no-one. Wave goodbye to Christmas lunch with the family and have an open mind, be willing to try new things - and, most importantly, make sure you're always willing to travel, with a valid passport.

### 17. How can we follow you/your work online?

**Mbele:** [@BBCLerato](#) on Twitter.

#### ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of inclusion, belonging, and of course, gourmet and drinks! Now follow her travel adventures on YouTube [@MidlifeMeander](#).  
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