

# A minibus taxi by any other name, would it run as sweet?

Bertie Neethling

*University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa.*

This paper deals with the names of minibus taxis, a common and popular form of public transport in South Africa, particularly in an inner-city context. The data were collected in the Western Cape in the Cape Peninsula (around Cape Town) as well as in some areas of the Eastern Cape.

The names were bestowed by either the taxi owner or members of his family, the driver of the taxi, or by the commuters themselves. Most names are displayed either above the windscreen, on the back of the taxi, or at the door. In a few cases taxis are generally known by a name, although it is not displayed.

The motivation for bestowing a name varies, but some form of identification, commemoration, or a feature of the taxi or its owner, are common categories. The paper discusses these name choices in the minibus taxi industry.

---

If onomastics is the study of names and naming systems, and a lexicon represents the dictionary entries in any given language, then one can speak of the onomasticon in any society, which would be comprised of all of the existing names, be it of persons, places, goods, or other entities. The range of items carrying names is huge, and numerous entries are added daily to the onomasticon. Creativity regarding additions to the lexicon is rather restricted: most speakers of any language use those lexemes that are current in a given speech community and Leys (1974) suggests that creativity in this regard might be limited to a social elite who are economically or intellectually capable.

By contrast, onomastic creativity is not thus restricted. It is an inclusive process which may ostensibly involve any individual or group of people. Nicolaisen (1978) labelled *Homo*

*Names* 53:1&2 (March & June 2005):3-19

ISSN:0027-7738

Copyright 2005 by The American Name Society

*sapiens* as *Homo nominans*, i.e. Man, the Namer. The possibility of linguistic creativity through name-giving is large. Names are often psychologically laden and it comes as no surprise that various scholars have commented on the sociological and cultural importance of names. Ekpo (1978:281), for example, thinks that 'the study of names bears on every aspect of human activity.' It has been argued that 'the impact of all kinds of social structures and situations will, *ceteris paribus*, manifest itself most easily and frequently in the field of proprial lexemes' (Leys 1974:449-50). It is at the level of naming that various social and other attitudes and relationships are manifested, and much more so and better than in other language forms. It is therefore somewhat surprising that onomastics has not established itself more strongly in South Africa than it has. Indigenous Bantu speaking groups in particular, have a rich and colorful onomastic heritage, often informed by the specific culture. It appears to me as if most people simply take names for granted, not pondering their roles in and their impact on society (see Neethling [2005] for a recent study on naming systems and practices among the Xhosa speaking people of South Africa).

This paper deals with the names of minibus taxis, a common phenomenon in South African cities. I gratefully and unashamedly borrow from Shakespeare and Grieshaber in selecting my title\*. Grieshaber (1990) makes the valid point that name studies have by and large neglected what he calls 'automotive names.' He deals with brand or model names. That this is important in the automotive world is confirmed by a newspaper report (Die Burger, Afrikaans daily in Cape Town, 24 August 2004) when Business Week published the top 100 brand names in the world. Toyota was the only automotive brand name in the top 10, ousting Mercedes Benz which formerly held that position. Van Niekerk (1995) also made a contribution in which he analyzed the names of

American and European cars, using semantic theory to show how marketing strategies and semantic theory, specifically then *automobile semantics*, are interlinked.

This piece also deals with the names of vehicles, although of another type, the names of minibus taxis, a common phenomenon in South Africa.

It is fairly well known that the public transport systems in South Africa cannot compare with their counterparts in other developed countries. Services are often irregular and unreliable. Over the last few decades, the minibus taxi has presented itself as a very viable and competitive alternative, particularly in inner-city contexts. Fourie (2003) describes the phenomenal growth thus:

It grew from a negligible informal operation to the dominant player in the public transport industry accounting for an estimated 65% of passenger journeys. Today the taxi industry provides transport for 5 to 10 million people every day and has a daily turnover of R15 million(p.2).

Because of the former segregation policies, black townships and suburbs are often situated on the periphery of urban development, and inhabitants are usually far from their places of employment. The minibus taxi is a cheap option of getting to one's destination quickly and regularly.

Few people are neutral about minibus taxis. Most would agree that they fulfill an extremely important role in the transport economy, but because of persistent problems—high accident rates due to reckless driving, overloading, lack of roadworthiness, and even minibus taxi violence because of contested routes—the industry has gained a somewhat tarnished reputation over the years.

It is not all that common for vehicles to carry names. Koopman (2002:298-99), when discussing names that have become 'a non-name' (also known as deonomastics), mentions

that 'a Kombi taxi was known as **izolabudd**' in the early 1990s. Zola Budd was a well-known South African long distance runner and her smooth running was then superimposed on the taxis and their smooth running. This is an example of onomastic shift or deonomastics: the proper noun loses its status and becomes a common noun. This is also corroborated by the following: In the 2004 September issue (p.8) of *Sawubona*, the in-flight magazine of the South African Airways, a passenger had this to say in the letter section after she had read the following on the lid of her snack box on the plane: 'Zola Budds: something you will notice in South African cities is the abundance of minibus taxis—our most common form of public transportation. Standard features on these vehicles include bald tyres and dodgy brakes, but most still set regular land-speed records on our roads. Perhaps this is why their namesake is the famous barefoot South African athlete, Zola Budd.' The correspondent then sarcastically adds that no other statistics were added to suggest the loss of many innocent lives and families that were devastated due to 'these unroadworthy vehicles being allowed on our roads.' She wryly concludes: 'Then to nicely finish it off, "Proudly South African" is added.'

The widespread problems in the taxi industry have been recognized by government, and plans are underway to get the old taxis off the road through a recapitalization program. The average age of current taxis is 14 years. New taxis will be 18- or 35-seaters, and each taxi owner will receive R50000 (about \$8000) towards acquiring a new taxi. It is hoped that all the old taxis would be off the roads by 2012 (see Fourie [2003] for a detailed discussion of this plan).

Studies in Southern African onomastics on vehicle names (excluding brand names) are inter alia that by Voss (1992) of bus names in Durban and by Ntuli on bus names in Swaziland (1999). Voss's article is a superficial, although illuminating, expositional taxonomy of bus names operating

from the Victoria Bus terminus in Durban, a South African harbor city on the east coast. Ntuli's article is more substantial. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies as yet on any other vehicles.

The minibus taxi industry is extremely competitive; owners and drivers will do everything they can to attract customers, and it appears as if a well-chosen name is one of their ploys. Ntuli regards the names of buses in Swaziland as a communication strategy (1999:326). In the Cape Peninsula (Western Cape) as well as in other areas, such as the Eastern Cape, there are many Xhosa-speaking minibus taxi owners, but their passengers are, of course, not limited to Xhosa-speakers. It depends to some extent on the particular routes they cover: if it serves a predominantly Xhosa speaking area, the chances are greater for the owner in choosing a Xhosa name. Xhosa is one of the indigenous Bantu languages of South Africa and the first language speakers are estimated at about 8 million. The appeal of English, however, is strong as 'the language of the economy' and as a supposed lingua franca. Hence, many taxi owners opt for English names. The English names also suggest a move away from ethnicity towards a multicultural identity. A fair number of English minibus taxi names were also found in the Ilinge township in Queenstown (Eastern Cape). The bus names in Voss are also overwhelmingly English, and he makes the observation that 'These names...draw their operators, passengers and even observers into a multi-cultural onomastic system' (1992:35). He lists only two Zulu bus names in his collection. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the bus names in Ntuli's study are either in Swazi (Swati) or Zulu.

The minibus taxi names collected for this study fall into some categories that present themselves as being the more popular ones regarding motivation for the name choice. These names suggest that the namers go about this in creative and unique ways. The present data represents a sample of about 60 names. The prevailing languages in the Western and Eastern

Cape are Xhosa, English, and Afrikaans, and it stands to reason that the names would reflect this linguistic context although Afrikaans hardly features.

What follows are the categories that have emerged from the data, followed by several examples.

### 1. Appearance/features (of taxi)

Many owners, drivers, or commuters choose names that emphasize the appearance of the taxi or a special feature of the taxi that sets it apart from others.

**Red for Danger.** The driver comments that the color red is associated with danger, and he likes it. Perhaps the name also suggests that passengers are actually taking a risk in getting into that taxi.

**Igazi leMvana.** This Xhosa name means 'the blood of the Lamb' with reference to the biblical Jesus. It was, however, the color of the taxi that inspired the name: it was bloodred, and the members of the family, all of the Christian faith, remarked that 'Ligazi leMvana le taxi' (It is the blood of the Lamb, this taxi). One may ostensibly also place this name in the category below that deals with religious affiliation.

**White Stallion.** This taxi is white, and the owner feels that his powerful vehicle is well represented through the stallion concept.

**Sprocket.** The driver indicates that the name means 'something nice,' and the name was chosen because his taxi is one of the most beautiful ones in the rank and is always clean. However, the name does not really make sense. A sprocket is usually a wheel rimmed by teeth that drives or is driven by a chain. There might be a misconception here on the driver's side regarding the interpretation of the name.

**No Noise.** The driver is very proud of his taxi that runs quietly compared to many of the other older taxis that 'make a lot of noise.' This is a clear indication of the good mechanical order of the vehicle.

**Sigcebezana.** The name is a slightly contaminated slang form of *'isigqezana,'* which is a mini skirt. What is interesting is that the name was given by other drivers. The driver comments that he can take fewer passengers compared to the others, i.e. his taxi is smaller, hence the name. He likes the name, because 'it suits the taxi.'

**Ingqeqe.** This Xhosa name refers to a little dog or a dwarfish person. The taxi is also somewhat smaller than the normal one, hence the name.

**Express.** This driver thinks his taxi is faster than the others and runs like an express. It makes him a lot of money, although his passengers regularly request him not to drive too fast.

**Isiphekepheke.** This Xhosa noun refers to 'a runner, a person who is in haste or out of breath' (see Kropf 1915:327) and in early days also to a steam engine. Its usage nowadays is with reference to any fast-moving object. It was the community that bestowed the name on this taxi because the taxi is quick.

**Umgqagqanisi.** This name ties in with the previous example and also refers to a speedy person. Boys using this taxi to school bestowed the name because they were never late, and they started calling the taxi by this name, i.e. 'the quick one.'

**Cand' amathafa.** This Xhosa name literally means 'cross the plains.' The taxi owner specializes in long distance travel, particularly between the Eastern Cape to the Cape Town area in the Western Cape. Along the N1 route, there are vast areas of flatland with sparse vegetation, hence the 'plains' concept.

**Mr. Too Damn Good.** This name applies not only to the taxi, but also to the driver. The driver prides himself on the fact that his taxi simply outshines the others, and he as the successful driver feels that the name also applies to him.

**Faithful Edition.** The name is self-explanatory. The taxi will never let you down, and you are sure to reach your destination in time and safely.

**Navigator.** The name is self-explanatory. The taxi owner believes his taxi will never lose its way.

**Inkwili.** The taxi is an old Volkswagen microbus, with the old characteristic round shape. To the son of the owner the taxi looked like a submarine, and the owner summarily named it thus. It is the Xhosa for 'submarine.'

Voss's collection contains a number of buses with the generic 'Express' following a noun such as '**Banana**' or '**California**.' Other features include names such as **Old Faithful**, **Dream Machine**, **Marathon Man**, all names suggesting smooth and reliable travel. Ntuli's Swati or Zulu names often rely on inferences in a metaphorical way: **Imbabala** (bushbuck) and **Impala** (antelope) will get you to your destination in no time, while **Inyatsi** (buffalo) will get you there without breakdowns: maybe not as quick, but definitely reliable (1999:315).

## 2. Characteristic of owner/driver

In a few cases the taxi received a name because the owner or the driver displays a specific personal characteristic or habit.

**Gononda.** This name was taken from a radio story in which the character carrying the name was a giant. An old Xhosa form for 'a giant' is *ugononda*. The taxi owner in question is a big man, and the community calls him Gononda. He dislikes the name, but because everybody calls him by it, he decided of his own accord to put that name on his taxi.

**Ikwerekwere.** The taxi received this name in an indirect way. The owner bought the vehicle from a Nigerian. There have been various incidents in South Africa lately involving skirmishes between black South Africans and Africans from other countries who have migrated to South Africa in search of better opportunities. Various such incidences of xenophobia have been reported because the South Africans believe that the others compete with them for employment, and are often prepared to work for extremely low wages. The term



'amakwerekwere' has arisen in Xhosa, a rather unflattering term to refer to the Nigerians and others.

**Mdala.** This literally means 'he is old.' The owner is an old man.

**Gimba.** The owner always eats in the taxi and the taxi is untidy, hence the commuters bestowed the name. 'Gimba' means to eat a lot.

### 3. Identification/Commemoration

Minibus taxi owners or drivers often bestow names that in one way or another suggest some form of identification with the owner, his family or clan, or some other entity. One could also suggest that commemoration is at play here. Voss suggests that there appears to be a significant correlation between naming and private ownership with the Durban buses. This is also the case with Ntuli's bus names.

**Zidla Zigoduka.** The name means 'they (= the sheep) eat and go home.' The driver suggests that it is 'an old Xhosa saying' and that by using this name, he indicates that he has not forgotten his roots. The commuters then also refer to him as an '*isiXhosana*' (a young Xhosa person).

**Umzamo WabaThembu.** The name literally means 'an effort of the Thembu people.' The owner prides himself on the fact that he is a Thembu (an offshoot of the Xhosa people), and as in the example above, indicates that he has not forgotten his roots.

**Amaqwathi.** Xhosa society is organized around clan names that suggest a common ancestry. Xhosa speaking people when meeting for the first time would generally enquire after clan affiliation: *Ngubani isiduko sakho?* (What is your clan name?) Not unexpectedly, people pride themselves on their clan affiliation, and such identification is to be expected. Other taxi names that reflect this, are **Tshangisa**, **Majola**, and **Rhadi**.

**Boss of the Road.** The owner says that he chose the name because he is the boss, he likes the name, and he feels as if he

is on another planet when he is driving his taxi. One begins to understand why the industry has such a bad name!

**Amakhosi for Life.** The allegiance to soccer clubs is also manifested in the minibus taxi names. Kaizer Chiefs, affectionately known as the '*amakhosi*,' is one of the most popular soccer clubs in the country. The driver is a great fan, and not unexpectedly, his taxi is popular with Chiefs supporters. In Langa, a township near Cape Town, one taxi is called **Chiefs**, referring to the same club.

**Pirates.** Orlando Pirates is another popular soccer side, and so is **Swallows**, and the **Black Leopards**. Soccer is the most popular sport amongst black South Africans, and this type of identification comes as no surprise.

**Red Devils.** Even soccer clubs beyond our borders have fervent supporters. This taxi was named after the well-known English soccer club Manchester United with their characteristic red shirts. The driver comments that the name shows he follows international soccer.

**UMadluphuthu.** This is the nickname of a well known television soccer commentator, and the taxi owner carries the same nickname and then bestowed it on his taxi. It literally means 'the one who eats phuthu [= a type of porridge].'

**Nkalakatha.** This taxi is named after a well-known song by the very popular kwaito (a popular style in South Africa) singer Mandoza. In 2000, Mandoza released a CD with this title. The title song has since come to be known as a crossover song in that it appealed to both black and white. The name roughly means 'boss' or 'somebody who is recognised' in Zulu. That Mandoza is extremely popular is certain. In a recent controversy, the African National Congress (the ruling party in South Africa) Youth League was reported to be furious because CCP Records, Mandoza's label, claimed that his success story was that of a young man who is like Mandela (see Cape Argus 16 September 2003). The CCP promotions director was quick to respond: 'We can't match Mandela and

Mandoza. They don't match.' However, the mere suggestion says it all. The fact that Mandoza appeals to a wide cross-section of South Africans was nowhere better illustrated than with his invitation to perform at the Rugby Currie Cup Final match in Pretoria between the Blue Bulls (formerly Northern Transvaal) and the Sharks (formerly Natal) in 2003. Securicor Loftus (the stadium in Pretoria) is a decided bastion of 'Afrikaanerdom,' but it was clear that many of the spectators enjoyed his performance.

**Godoba.** Ostensibly following the lead of the previous example, this name also comes from a Mandoza album, released in 2002. The driver says that he likes Mandoza, and always plays his music in his taxi. Koopman (personal communication) suggests that the meaning presented—that of 'someone with money' (in Zulu)—is contested. It could apparently also mean someone always looking/begging for money. The name is likely to be derived from the Zulu *uhodoba*, meaning the epitome of a negative type.

**The Red R Kelly.** The equally popular R&B/Hip-hop singer-songwriter R Kelly from the USA, was the inspiration for this name. The artist's name was then also linked to the color of the taxi.

**Makaziwe.** This is the name of the wife of the taxi owner. He loves her and gave her name to the taxi so that he is constantly reminded of her.

It should be clear then that identification with ownership, with the owner's roots, or with some other entity like soccer clubs or performing artists, is a popular source for minibus taxi names.

#### 4. Positive Values

Some owners choose names that suggest some positive value or message to attract commuters. In this way, the service that the taxi industry is rendering to the community is stressed.

**Umhlobo.** This is the Xhosa word for 'friend.' The taxi owner also extends credit to commuters, although he keeps a close record of his debtors, but this nevertheless depicts him as a friend of the community.

**Bhuti, ndihamba nawe.** This whole phrase suggests the name. Its Xhosa meaning is: Brother, I am going with you. The term 'bhuti' for 'brother' is a kinship term, but is also widely used to suggest affiliation with a group, much like in an Afro-American context. The name suggests an expressed preferential desire of the commuter to travel with this particular taxi.

**Khwela sowubhatele.** This name is reminiscent of the previous one. It literally means 'Get in, you have already paid.' It serves as an encouragement to the commuters to get in and fill up the taxi so the driver can go. The taxis do not run according to any specific time schedule and will not move unless it is full. It is therefore of the utmost importance to fill it quickly with commuters, so that it can do as many trips as is possible.

**New Horizon.** This English name is included here although its origin is personal. The taxi owner and his wife were separated. On the very day that he bought the taxi, his wife returned to his home and he was overjoyed. To celebrate the new start, he named his taxi thus.

**Ncedo.** This name is derived from the Xhosa verb *-nceda* 'to help.' The deverbative noun *uncedo* 'help, assistance' is then shortened to **Ncedo**. The intention is obvious: the taxi aids the commuters by transporting them to their destinations.

## 5. Religious affiliation

Some taxi owners boldly display a name that clearly indicates their religious affiliation. It is estimated that some 70% of the South African population is Christian and this is also confirmed by the names of this kind in the database. All the owners suggest that the name also helps in spreading the

Gospel. The taxis are further characterised by the Gospel music that is constantly played.

**Ndikhokele oh Yehovah.** This Xhosa phrase means 'Lead me O Jehova.' The driver seeks the blessing of God to safeguard him against possible accidents on the road. Given the high accident rates of minibus taxis, it is not surprising that the help of a Higher Hand is sought.

**Jesus is coming.** This is equally clear. The owner believes in the Christian doctrine regarding the Second Coming of Jesus. At the same time he gets the message across to the commuters. Those who are Christians, like travelling with him.

**Igazi leMvana.** This name, literally the 'Blood of the Lamb,' also featured in the minibus taxi feature category. The owner and his family are Christians, and the bloodred taxi reminds them of the blood of the slain Lamb, i.e. Jesus.

**Redeemer.** The wife of the taxi owner bestowed the name, believing also that no harm by way of accidents will come to them. It could be considered a 'protective' name.

## 6. Miscellaneous

In nearly all classifications, one finds examples that defy classification. Some names simply do not fit into the above categories. Taxi owners at times also choose names randomly without any obvious reason, particularly when using English.

**Who's next?** Because of this driver's incessant asking about 'who's next in the queue' at the rank, the taxi was given this name.

**Shay' Izandla.** This Zulu name means 'clap (your) hands.' The driver claims that he drives a beautiful taxi with a nice interior, and his commuters always comment: 'Intle le taxi' (this taxi is beautiful). He elicits 'applause' from the people when they see his taxi, thereby also indicating their preference. One could argue that this name could have been

included in the first category, dealing with appearance, but it is unique in many ways.

**Simunye.** This slogan was popularized by the SABC TV 1 channel, to emphasise that 'we are one' after the coming of full democracy. The driver claimed he named the taxi after the slogan 'Simunye grooves.' He is clearly happy with the political development in the country, and 'feels free politically.' He is adamant that '...there is no more black and white' in South Africa. One could again argue that the name also represents identification with the 'new' South Africa, and could hence be accommodated in category 3 above.

**Toe roer jou.** This is an Afrikaans name which translates roughly as 'Come on, get a move on!' Although the owner is Xhosa-speaking, the route he is serving frequently has Afrikaans speaking commuters. One could interpret the name in two ways: on the one hand it is an exhortation by the commuters to the taxi and the driver to get going, because they need to get to their destination. On the other, it is an exhortation by the taxi to the passengers to get in and not to let the opportunity go by. It is again a good example how carefully a name is chosen in the multilingual South African context. The Xhosa-speaking owner is alert to his clientele and their linguistic preference.

In the cases of **Pelican**, **Discovery**, **Conqueror**, **Labrador**, and **Sovereign**, the owners could not shed light on the choice of name. Some merely suggested that they 'liked the name' or that they 'saw the name somewhere' and decided to use it on the taxi. One may, of course, assign some motivation regarding the choice of these names, but it remains speculation.

### Conclusion

It should be clear that taxi owners or their families, the drivers, and often the commuters are quite creative when

considering a name for a taxi. The above only represents a relatively small sample from taxis in the Western Cape in the Cape Peninsula and one area in the Eastern Cape, and it is clear that the inspiration comes from various sources. Although the two areas, geographically speaking, are far apart, the naming strategies appear to be similar.

It would be interesting to monitor the situation around the naming of taxis: when loyalties or circumstances change, it might have an effect on existing names. The taxi industry is growing, and name-giving in this context is certain to be interesting and an ongoing activity in future. It is not clear at this point how the government recapitalization plan will affect naming, but I am convinced it will give rise to more and new interesting names. These names are a barometer of social identity, attitudes and interests, again underlining the important role that names play in society.

### Notes

\* The inspiration for the title comes from two sources: the first one is the old bard, William Shakespeare, and his familiar oft-quoted lines spoken by Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet” (1967:86). These two overworked lines, and particularly the first phrase, are often used by many as an opening line to, ironically, prove exactly the opposite of what Juliet is trying to say, namely that there is often more to a name than meets the eye.

The other source I would like to acknowledge is Nicky Grieshaber, formerly of the University of Natal (in Pietermaritburg, South Africa) and currently a freelance language practitioner. In 1990, he published an article in *Nomina Africana* (vol. 4.2) with the evocative title, *A Rolls by any other name...would it sell as sweet?*

## Bibliography

Cape Argus (Cape Town English daily) 16 September 2003

Die Burger (Cape Town Afrikaans daily) 24 August 2004

Ekpo, Monday U. 1978. 'Structure in Ibibio names.' *Names* 26(3)

Fourie, L.J. 2003. Rethinking the formalisation of the minibus taxi industry in South Africa. Masters of Engineering (Technology Management) dissertation: University of Pretoria

Grieshaber, N.J. 1990. 'A Rolls by any other name...would it sell as sweet?' *Nomina Africana* 4(2)

Koopman, Adrian. 2002. *Zulu Names*. University of Natal Press: Pietermaritzburg.

Kropf, Albert & Godfrey, Robert. 1915. *A Kafir-English Dictionary*. Lovedale Mission Press

Leys, O. 1974. 'Sociolinguistic Aspects of Namegiving Patterns.' *Onoma* 18(3)

Neethling, Bertie. 2005. *Naming among the Xhosa of South Africa* New York: Mellen Press

Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1978. 'Are there connotative names?' *Names* 26(1)

Ntuli, D.B. 1999. 'Bus naming as a communication strategy – A Swaziland experience.' In *African Mosaic*. Festschrift for J.A. Louw. R. Finlayson (ed.) UNISA Press Pretoria



Sawubona September 2004. SAA In-Flight Magazine

Shakespeare, William. 1967. *Romeo and Juliet*. Penguin Books

Van Niekerk, Johan. 1995. 'Outosemantiek: Bemarkingstrategie en Linguistiekteorie.' *Nomina Africana* 9(1)

Voss, Tony. 1992. 'Alligator to Zulu Dawn: a Taxonomy of Durban Buses.' *Nomina Africana* 6(1)

---