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Xhosa First Names: A Dual Identity in Harmony or in Conflict?

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Xhosa speakers in South Africa often carry a true Xhosa ('ethnic') name as well as an English one. This came about as a result of colonization and the efforts of the missionaries who often bestowed a 'church' or 'school' name upon children. This has become a convention. With the advent of full democracy, one expects that name carriers might develop different perspectives on this convention. It is argued that Xhosa society (and African society broadly speaking) is divided on this issue: although there are indications that the ethnic name is gaining ground over the English one, many name carriers are also quite content with their English names.

The concept of an identity is an elusive one, simply because identity is not a fixed construct, and may change or develop. In a 2003 publication on South African identities with the title *Shifting Selves*, editors Herman Wassermann and Sean Jacobs stress the point that identity is a journey, not a destination. It is continuously constructed anew as the social context changes. This then defeats any attempt at adequately describing or fixing identity. In a multilingual and multicultural country like South Africa, particularly given its history, it stands to reason that individual identities may adapt, adjust, and change given the prevailing circumstances in the 'new' South Africa. It is fascinating to see how cultural hierarchies and the forced ethnicities of the past are undermined by many, and how new expressions of identity are revealed on our TV screens, on stage, behind microphones and in books.

It is against this background that the names of individuals as an expression of identity can be explored. The link between name and identity is a strong one. It is recognized by many to be one of the most stable elements in an individual's identity. It is not an exaggeration to say that we often categorize or label individuals purely on the basis of their names. Elsewhere this might not be easy, but in South Africa one can make reasonable assumptions about the ethnic descent of the name carrier, the language he or she speaks, likely religious affiliation, and gender. An illustration:

Vuyo Mlambo: likely to be of Nguni descent, likely to have a Nguni language as a first language (Xhosa, Zulu), likely to belong to the Christian faith, and is male.

Kobus de Lange: likely to be of Afrikaner/Dutch descent, will speak Afrikaans as a first language, is likely to belong to a Christian (Protestant) church, and is male.

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Wendy Greene: likely to be of British descent, will speak English as a first language, may belong to the Christian faith (Protestant or Catholic) and is female.
Riedewaan Hendricks: likely to be of 'mixed descent,' often referred to as 'Coloured,' may have Afrikaans or English as preferred language, a member of the Muslim faith, and male.
Lerato Ramotabo: likely to be of Sotho descent, likely to have a Sotho language as a first language (Sesotho, Tswana, Pedi), likely to belong to a Christian church, and is female.
Ravi Naidoo: likely to be of Indian descent, likely to have English as a preferred language but may also know and speak one of the Indian languages, likely to belong to an Indian faith (Hindu, etc.), and is male.

One may, of course, err in making these assumptions, particularly when it comes to religious affiliation, but the fact remains that most average South Africans will come to these conclusions based on general knowledge or intuition given the social fabric of the country. And should this be true, then names, in a South African context, are extremely important indicators of identity and culture. One may then also assume that ethnic descent in South Africa is often seen as part of one's identity and finds expression in naming.

The Xhosa speakers in South Africa number some nine to ten million speakers out of a total population of roughly 44 million, i.e. they constitute a significant language and cultural group. Only Zulu is bigger (about ten to twelve million). Estimates as to when the Xhosa people originally settled in South Africa vary, and remain speculation. A popular theory is that they originally migrated from Central Africa and moved into Southern Africa along with other groups. Xhosa as a language was reduced to writing by the British missionaries in 1823.

Naming among the Xhosa people (and other indigenous groups in SA) is extremely interesting and a fascinating field of study. A distinguishing feature of African naming in general is that names are semantically transparent in the way they display lexical meaning. Should one know the particular language involved, e.g. Xhosa, then names are more than mere labels that refer to a particular individual. Because of the lexical meaning of the name, the name and the person becomes an entity firmly located in a cultural context. Together they convey information about Xhosa culture. This feature of African names continues to be the most important distinguishing one between African names and those of a Euro-Western origin.

Various motivations for bestowing a name may exist at the time: the name may express an aspiration or expectation of the parents for the child, the name may reflect the composition of the family, i.e. the position and gender of the child, the name may commemorate particular individuals that played a prominent role in Xhosa society, or the name may reflect the particular circumstances that prevailed at the time around the birth (see Neethling 2005: 24–71). All such names could be considered as 'ethnic' in the 'true' sense of the word.

With the advent of Christianity as practised by the missionaries, the Xhosa people were introduced to an additional 'Christian' name or a church name, usually bestowed at baptism, and which often served as a 'school' name when formal education started. This 'Christian' or 'school' name took root and eventually became a convention among the Xhosa speakers. This name was usually an English one. Koopman, regarding the situation in Zulu, refers to this English name as *igama*

lesilungu, literally 'a white man's name' and describes it as 'a name derived from another culture, usually from the colonial language dominant in the area' (2002: 21). It is clearly a legacy of colonialism which was carried forward into the apartheid era when blacks remained in subservient positions and had no economic or political power. Alia (1994: 1) confirms this: 'When power is unequal and people are colonized at one level or another, naming is manipulated from the outside' Bangeni and Coetser refer to the 'disparaging of African names, consistent with the Western values imposed on blacks by both the church and the school' (62). Herbert suggests that the 'so-called Christian names were never well-integrated into the indigenous systems of naming in southern Africa' because such names lack the meaningful criterion (6). This is in my opinion debatable. This name has indeed become part and still remains part of the name giving conventions in many African societies.

A good exposition of this practice comes from Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa. He was given the name Rolihlahla by his father, which literally means 'pulling the branch of a tree' with the more colloquial meaning of 'trouble-maker.' It is not clear why his father chose that name; perhaps he had prophetic vision. Mandela, in his well known autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* comments on this matter as follows:

> I do not believe that names are destiny or that my father somehow divined my future, but in later years, friends and relatives would ascribe to my birth name the many storms I have both caused and weathered. (3)

His bestowed name would have caused great problems to the unaccustomed tongue: the many fricative sounds would have led to embarrassment on the world's political stages. But *Nelson* was easy to pronounce. How did he get the name? He tells us:

> On the first day of school my teacher, Miss Mdingane gave each of us an English name and said that henceforth that was the name we would answer to in school. This was the custom among Africans in those days and was undoubtedly due to the British bias of our education. The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture and British institutions were automatically assumed to be superior. There was no such thing as African culture. Africans of my generation — and even today — generally have both a Western and an African name. Whites were either unable or unwilling to pronounce an African name, and considered it uncivilized to have one. That day, Miss Mdingane told me that my new name was Nelson. Why she bestowed this particular name upon me I have no idea. Perhaps it had something to do with the great British sea captain Lord Nelson, but that would only be a guess. (13)

Mandela's view is a fairly good exposition of the practice at the time. Parents out of their own free will still nowadays bestow such English (sometimes Afrikaans) names upon their children: it has simply become a convention. An amusing story did the rounds just prior to Mandela's release from prison in 1990. Some primary school children were asked if they had heard of Mr. Mandela, who was still in prison, and whether they knew what his first name was. Some of the children spontaneously offered *Release*! The slogan 'Release Mandela' was seen everywhere from graffiti to printed T-shirts.

Over the years then a pattern has established itself; many Xhosa speakers, probably the majority, carry a Xhosa and an English name as in these typical examples:

Lwandile Ivan
Vuyokazi Valencia
Sazisi Kenneth
Nozuko Cynthia

The Xhosa one usually comes first, but not always.

This is not exclusive to only Xhosa people; other language and cultural groups in Southern Africa had a similar experience. Guma describes this phenomenon among the Basotho, while Saarelma-Maunumaa reveals how enormous the impact of the Finnish missionaries had been on Ambo name giving in Namibia in the twentieth century. In Mozambique, Penvenne and Sitoe show that Africans often took on a Portuguese name (62).

In the light of the earlier exposition regarding the link between name and identity, and between ethnic affiliation and identity, one may now raise the questions: Do Xhosa speakers identify with this English name and what it stands for? Could one on the basis of the presence of an English name claim that those name carriers display a kind of dual identity? Or is the carrying of an English name merely a survival of the dictates of the time and does not have significant meaning? If the bestowed name 'interferes' with the perceived identity one favors, what would the reaction of the name carrier be?

It is probably too soon after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 to expect a major trend shift in naming patterns of the Xhosa people, particularly regarding the bestowing of an English name. Having said that, it is also likely that Xhosa speakers nowadays carrying an English name may have a changed perspective on the matter, particularly those who see it as an element of imposed identity.

In a pilot study I conducted among Xhosa-speaking students at the University of the Western Cape in 1987 (see Neethling, 1988), the results were as follows: more than 80% of the males and nearly 90% of the females had an English name. About 25% of the males and 34% of the females had very negative perceptions of their English name. Thipa's observation in this regard is valid:

> Equate white with colonialism and political domination and you will realize why Basotho and amaXhosa (and I believe other Blacks as well in Southern Africa) are increasingly avoiding names which are not considered Black. These people are in their own way trying to shake off what they regard as an aspect of their being politically dominated. (287)

By contrast some 21% of the male respondents and 18% of the female respondents had very positive feelings around their English names, although it should be noted that the data sample came from only 111 respondents (287).

I followed this up with a more extensive study, using graduation and diploma ceremonies programmes at UWC in 2000 and 2001, supplemented with questionnaires among the students as well as in the adjacent Xhosa speaking community. The percentage of those carrying an English name had come down to 62%. In the 1988 group 8% of the females and 15% of the males had only Xhosa names. This had now gone up to 36%. Based purely on these statistics, the convention of carrying an English name is losing ground to the 'Xhosa only' category. One may want to link the new trends to the prevailing socio-political circumstances in the country, i.e. that Xhosa speakers have regained their dignity and value as human beings after the

democratic elections in 1994, and have taken pride in their own cultural heritage as expressed through naming. One needs to remember, however, that all the respondents were born and therefore named long before 1994.

The perceptions indicated in the returned 201 questionnaires, were more interesting. An English name featured in 129 of these. The majority (72%) of those who did not have an English name were predictably negative about bestowing an English name on their children. They did not like English names, they were proud of their Xhosa culture and identity and saw no room for an English name within such an identity, or they considered such a name to be a slave name, *igama lobukhoboka*. Some lexicographers suggest that the term ikhoboka has been derived via Dutch ingeboekte ('booked/registered') i.e. that a person had been registered to perform slave duties (see McLaren, 1963: 72). Some indicated that they had an English name but dropped it as soon as they could.

Nearly 51 candidates who carry an English name had very negative perceptions about this. This represents nearly 40%, indicating growing resentment as compared to the 1987 study. The arguments are mostly the same as expressed above. Some are very pragmatic: whites do not carry an African name, why should African natives have an English one? One could summarize by saying they regard the English name as a burden: it is not considered part of their identity even if it appears in their identity document, and without fail they also indicate they would not even consider giving their children such a name. The English name represents an element of imposed identity that they are not comfortable with. One could ostensibly speak of 'a dual identity in conflict.' The 'meaningfulness' of the Xhosa name as compared to the English one, is also frequently mentioned, i.e. the Xhosa names are considered superior to the English ones because of this criterion. This links up well with Gardner and Mathangwane's study in Botswana (1998) where this feature is listed as the biggest negative factor concerning English names. Many English names do, of course, have a particular etymology, but the 'meaning' is often shrouded and so the names are viewed as being without meaning.

The other side of the coin is this: 61 respondents (47%) had no problem with their English name, and viewed it in a positive light. In my earlier study (1988) nearly 50% of the respondents were totally neutral about their English name. This category has now shrunk to only 13%, indicating that respondents are more sensitive to this issue and more conscious of the roles their names play. Having been freed politically in 1994 when institutionalized apartheid was finally laid to rest, it comes as a surprise that such a significant percentage from the sample still consider their English name more as a blessing than a burden. Quite a number associate easily with their English name, and indeed see it as part of their identity. It is clear that the English name is not preferred over the Xhosa one, but acknowledged and accepted alongside it. This may then indeed point to the growing acceptance of 'a dual identity in harmony.' One should also note the occurrence of an English name that appears to be a translation or representation of the Xhosa name regarding meaning as in these examples:

Nozuko Gloria
Loyiso Victor
Nobuhle Beauty
Thandisizwe Lovenation

Nombulelo Fortunate
Present Sipho
Ntombenhle Prettygirl (a Zulu example)

It is probably easier for these name carriers to identify with both names.

The work by Reisaeter on the name choices by bilingual families in Norway is also to some extent relevant here. Norwegian families with at least one parent born outside of Norway, often opt for 'compromise names,' by bestowing two names on a newborn: one representing the origin/culture/language of the parent born outside of Norway, and one suggesting a Norwegian identity. The context is, of course, very different, but it is also a good example of 'a dual identity in harmony.'

In 2005 I registered a project with the title 'Exploring the link between name and identity : A UWC profile.' Of the 800 returned questionnaires, 279 respondents indicated that they were Xhosa-speaking. The carrying of an English name is not the focus of the project, but respondents had to list their first names. Of the 279 responses, 15 indicated that they only had an English name (or a name from another non-African language), 53 had at least one Xhosa and one other, usually English name, and an overwhelming 211 respondents indicated that they had only a Xhosa name (sometimes more than one). This suggests a further move away from carrying an English name and the statistics from 1987 to 2005 suggest that this is an ongoing trend: discarding the English name in favour of a 'pure' ethnic identity. It should be mentioned that respondents when realizing that it was a questionnaire on naming, may deliberately have omitted their English name (for whatever reason). I could not control that. It is, however, probably fair to say that if they were proud of their English names, they would in all likelihood have listed them.

Reference should, however, be made to De Klerk's two significant studies on name changes in South Africa in 1999 and 2002. In the last one she compares the results of both studies. She investigated the changing of first names over two three-month periods (one from 1997 and one from 2000) as reported in the South African Government Gazettes. The most important finding is the surprising trend of African language speakers (not only Xhosa) who favoured English in changing their names, either by adding one, or deleting an African one, or putting the English one first. She expresses surprise at the findings given the changed political scenario and concludes that the 'appeal of English is still strong' (1999: 12). In the follow-up study she comes to the same conclusion: 'The growing positive attitude towards English names across the board, and particularly from speakers of African languages is surprising in view of recent political changes in the country . . .' and further, '. . . despite a change in language policy and despite a political turnaround in the country, accompanied by enthusiasm for the African Renaissance, the appeal of English seems to be growing' (2002: 218). This appeal is also strengthened and confirmed by the continuous bombardment of mainly American pop culture through the mass media notably television. Although the indigenous languages (that are now also official) and related cultural programs are featured on South African television, it is clear that role models from the entertainment world, particularly successful African-Americans, enjoy great popularity among South African blacks.

This underlies the current dilemma; it seems as if Xhosa society (and the African communities at large) is divided on this issue. It seems as if the 'ethnic' identity is

gaining ground over the 'English' one, but as identities change and as the broader and diverse South African society buckles under the relentless pressures of globalization, often manifested by the dominance of English, it becomes clear that naming is in the crossfire, and only time will tell the final outcome. There is on the one hand a fervent desire to create a South African identity in the quest for nation building, which should take preference over an ethnic identity. Others reason that this is a futile quest: one should instead manage the diversity rather than create a superficial 'one nation' concept.

One can only watch as events, also regarding name giving, unfold.

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