

Xhosa Onomastics as Part of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

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The idea of indigenous knowledge has gained conceptual and discursive currency only recently in Africa and has become a popular subject. It could presumably be traced back to the origin of humankind. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) consist of many components, all of them intrinsically linked to particular traditional cultural phenomena. Most of these systems have been in place over centuries, and continue to exercise their influence among the people where these systems are found.

This contribution argues that name-giving conventions among the Xhosa as practised by those involved in the process and the responses of the recipients to those names could be considered as part of IKS (or at times IKS-derived). The data is mainly from questionnaires that were disseminated among students at the University of the Western Cape.

The original name-giving process probably derives from a strongly embedded tradition that has been in existence for centuries and that could not only be linked to IKS, but should also be considered as an integral part of IKS. As life progresses, however, other name-giving traditions come into play that reveal a high percentage of uniqueness and creativity only vaguely linked to an IKS system. It seems to also focus on a more inter- or multicultural approach, that would also be more acceptable globally.

KEYWORDS Indigenous Knowledge, origin of humankind, name-giving conventions, Xhosa, embedded tradition, creativity

Introduction: IKS

The study of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) has become relatively popular in South Africa and other parts of Africa over the last twenty years. In essence, it could be traced back to the early origin of humankind, because it may ostensibly refer to any kind of aspect linked to traditional culture. Definitions of IKS often vary. Odora-Hoppers (2001: 4) defines it as follows:

...knowledge characterised by “its embeddedness in the cultural web and history of a people including their civilisation and forms the backbone of the social, economic, scientific, and technological identity of such a people.”

It seems to be clear that Odora-Hoppers includes indigenous as well as modern knowledge systems. The definition by Horsthemke (2004: 32) focuses more on the traditional aspects:

“Indigenous knowledge” is generally taken to cover local, traditional, nonwestern beliefs, practices, customs and world views, and frequently also refer to alternative, informal forms of knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge is often seen as challenging or is contrasting with “western” or “global” forms of knowledge or education (Odora Hoppers, 2002), but according to Horsthemke is “unquestioningly employed as an umbrella concept to cover practices, skills, customs, worldviews, perceptions, as well as theoretical and factual understandings” (ibid.: 33).

IKS is seen as playing a role in the thinking, behavior, and welfare of communities, and seems to focus on indigenous cultural and creative practices. It is often embedded in song, dance, folklore, design, architecture, theatre, attire, and the visual arts, attempting to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, and communication. A common viewpoint nowadays is that IKS exist in a post-millennium modernizing Africa. At conferences recently held in South Africa it was stressed that African universities must be used as spaces to reclaim African identity and to aid in decolonizing mind-sets of Africans if the IK accumulated during the course of the continent’s history is to be preserved. The identity aspect featuring strongly in traditional Xhosa personal naming could certainly be considered as part of IKS.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa has made Indigenous Knowledge one of its focus areas in collaboration with the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology since 1996 (also see the HSRC Review, 2010). Recently the NRF called for new proposals within the IKS framework for 2013/14. A number of possible research projects were listed, but onomastics was not included.

It is not the purpose of this contribution to analyze and discuss all the various interpretations regarding IKS, but rather to consider whether name-giving traditions, focusing on the Xhosa speakers who form part of the Nguni language family, might be considered as part of IKS particularly regarding a practice that has been in existence for a long time. Although IKS appears to be an “African” phenomenon, it is fairly easy to draw comparisons with other cultures in other parts of the world. Fairbanks (2014) on “Ojibwe Name Giving” at the recent ANS meeting in Minneapolis, is a case in point. Meaningful traditional Ojibwe names could certainly also be considered as IKS names.

Anthroponymy in onomastics

In 2007 an onomastic project with the title “Exploring the Link between Name and Identity: A UWC Profile” was conceptualized and it is ongoing. Data was collected on naming by means of a wide-ranging questionnaire, testing the perception and understanding of oneself as well as of the “Other” in a multicultural and multilingual context such as on the campus of the University of the Western Cape located in Bellville South near Cape Town. The student population represents an interesting diversity in terms of cultural/ethnic and sociolinguistic backgrounds.

The focus was on names and naming, and the perceived link between one's name and identity. Eight hundred and twenty-four questionnaires were returned, representing all the cultural and ethnic groupings in South Africa, as well as many others from other African states and other parts of the world. Only data pertaining to the Xhosa-speaking group will feature in this contribution.

The link between name and identity

One question in the questionnaire pertinently asked whether respondents see their names as a reflection of their identity. The outcomes were probably predictable: most respondents indeed identified their names as strong indicators of identity. This ties in with tendencies worldwide where an individual's name is often seen as one of the most stable elements of any person's identity. Identity is an elusive concept and not a fixed construct: it is forever changing and adapting, and it is probably true to say that most individuals develop a multiplicity of identities through their lifespan (see Wassermann and Jacobs, 2003: 15–28). A particular facet of this identity will come to the fore in certain contexts, whereas other facets at that time will be “hidden” or latent. Most individuals operate in more than one and often widely differentiating contexts, necessitating adaptations to their identities in order to function optimally in a given context. Certain cultural aspects linked to naming are foregrounded in some contexts, particularly when interacting with others belonging to the same culture. In a multilingual and multicultural context like that of South Africa, and narrowing it further down, like that on the campus of UWC, it is to be expected that a multiplicity of identities linked to one person might emerge. This is, *inter alia*, confirmed by the huge prevalence of additional (by)names or nicknames, where every nickname is traditionally used by certain people only and hence in particular contexts.

But even given this scenario, an individual, wherever s/he finds her/himself, cannot discard her/his personal name(s) and it remains fairly stable. Thus whenever an individual considers doing something unlawful, one often finds that an alias is adopted, thereby trying to hide the true identity. An interesting view on this aspect was found in a letter to the Afrikaans daily, *Die Burger*, in the Western Cape. An Afrikaans-speaking correspondent (WL van der Merwe), writing from Austria, had this to say about one's identity (my translation):

They (= philosophers) agree that you cannot sell or exchange your identity. It is like your own name that you could not choose yourself, but that you will defend in court should somebody dishonour it. You may assume other identities later, but you cannot negate your first, original identity. Should you do that, you turn your back upon a personal history. You become an exile inwardly. (6 May 2005)

The purpose with this contribution is therefore to consider whether “personal history” through traditional naming of the Xhosa people over a long period of time should be regarded as a form of IKS.

The concept of identity

The concept of identity is an elusive one and has become even more so in recent times. For that very reason identity studies have become popular. Shotter (1993: 188) remarks that identity has become “the watchword of the times.”

Initially, identity in pre-modern or traditional societies was largely perceived as reasonably unproblematic, undifferentiated, socially derived, and relatively fixed. This resonates with IKS. Nowadays, however, it is common that there no longer exists a stable and coherent cultural context that could serve as a base for a stable identity. Contemporary theorists seem to agree that contingency and uncertainty have become major role players in individual or collective representations. Bauman (1996: 50–51) describes the current state of affairs well:

[P]ostmodernity is the point at which modern untying (dis-embedding, disencumbering) of tied (embedded, situated) identities reaches its completion: it is now all too easy to choose identity, but no longer possible to hold it [. . .]. Postmodernity is the condition of contingency [. . .] nothing seems impossible, let alone unimaginable. Everything that “is,” is until further notice.

It appears as if it is now widely acknowledged that individuals draw meaning from belonging to more than one group. They construct and maintain multiple identities that emerge under different circumstances in their lives. These identities are open to change as circumstances, strategies and interactions fluctuate, and identity should best be viewed as a “process” rather than a property. If seen as such, it remains emergent, never complete, finalized, or fixed, but always in the making. Identity is therefore determined by what we “do,” rather than by what we “are” (see Puttergill and Leildé, 2006).

In a South African context these developments are also very prominent. In pre-1994 (apartheid) South Africa, identities were often manipulated, suppressed and imposed. In post-1994 in the “new” South Africa, freed from these inhibiting factors from the past, it is certainly not surprising and actually noticeable how cultural hierarchies and the forced ethnicities of the past are undermined by many, and how new expressions of identity are revealed on our television screens, on stage, on sporting fields, behind microphones, and in books. Wassermann and Jacobs (2003), editors to a publication on South African identities called *Shifting Selves*, stress the point in the introduction that identity is a journey, not a destination. It is forever constructed anew as the social context changes. Individual identities will adapt, adjust, or change according to the new circumstances.

One can, however, still explore the original names of individuals as an expression of identity and of IKS. It is important to note that a proper name has unique reference, and we can speak of onymic identity, that is, the identity of names, when the same name is used for the same entity at different times in language use (speech or writing) over time. In a wider sense, “name” and “named” are conceived of as existing in a diachronic continuum, ranging from their origin to the present day, at least in the minds of the contemporary speaking community.

A socio-onomastic approach

A socio-onomastic or socio- and psycholinguistic approach was followed with this project. The bestowed names at birth are also those ones the individual still carries into his/her grave. It is probably acceptable to postulate that given first names along with the accompanying family name, are one of the most stable elements in any

identity profile. This is then an IKS phenomenon. Many people also make (usually) valid assumptions about the perceived identity of an individual just by looking at or hearing a name. Assumptions are often made about nationality, race or ethnicity, language, gender, religious affiliation, and so on based on a name only. An individual is often “categorised” or “labelled” purely on the basis of his/her name. Then it becomes clear that names can indeed function as strong indicators of identity.

In the UWC project respondents were asked whether they saw their name(s) as a reflection of their identity. From the responses it was clear that many, probably most, have never been confronted with such a question before. In spite thereof, a significant number very strongly agreed. Xhosa first names are formed via the lexicon of the Xhosa language, and appropriate nouns, verbs, and descriptives are used in this regard. The outcome is that names are invariably meaningful, and knowledge of the language allows one to infer the meaning of the Xhosa names. Namegiving is generally considered to be an important cultural event, and care is taken that names project positive values that are often strongly embedded in the Xhosa culture. The IKS nature of such names comes strongly to the fore.

After giving information about their first (given) names at birth and their family names (surnames) that would generally feature in identity documents, respondents were also asked whether they are also known by any other name, why they have them, who bestowed it on them, and if they were happy with those additional (by) names or nicknames.

The results were overwhelming in quantity, as well as in the diverse nature. Around 80% of all respondents indicated that they have and are called by such additional names. The fact that so many respondents (= the name bearers) quite readily shared these names, suggests that the respondents are generally happy with and proud of these names.

The term “byname”

The term *byname* (or nickname) needs some clarification. It seems to be reasonably clear that there is some terminological overlapping in the onomastic world regarding such names (see Dalberg, 1993). While it is true that the term *byname* exists in English, it is certainly not commonly used by English speakers, nor by all names scholars. One can ostensibly say that all bynames are additional names added to another (more official) name already borne by the name bearer.

The question about whether there is a link between name and identity, however, also came strongly to the fore when the additional or bynames were taken into account. It is at this point that the views expressed above find application regarding the unstable and forever-changing identities given the never ending changing circumstances individuals are exposed to nearly on a daily basis (see Neethling, 2012a; 1994; 1990). As indicated earlier, individuals find themselves belonging to different groups, and in the process they construct and maintain different identities. The applicable one at any given time is determined by the company they keep, and because these group formations come and go and are forever changing, so are old identities discarded and new identities created, or old ones are adapted or adjusted in order to fit the new or changed context in which the name carrier finds him/herself. Many respondents have

more than one byname, and it is clear that the one used at any given time is determined by the social context, that is, who are present in the group and the activities operative in that context.

Most bynames are acquired at a teenage level (high school) and moving to young adulthood after school, such as in educational institutions like colleges and universities. It is at this time that close friendships are formed, and it is also a time when peer group pressure is high. A university campus like that of UWC is then likely to be fertile soil for producing a myriad of bynames. The other obvious source is at home and amongst family, even from a very young age. Some of these bynames are lost as children grow up, but some remain. Within close knit circles an aspect of endearment or affection is usually contained in bynames, often through affective diminutive forms. Different individuals or groups are responsible for coining these bynames.

In all these bestowed bynames, the name giver has identified an identity aspect, no matter how small and insignificant, that adds to the total makeup of the name carrier. It may then be a combination of positive and negative features. One should also stress the fact that the name carrier is best situated to recall or know all the bynames used to refer to him/her and hence the method of self-reporting questionnaires remains likely to be the best way of collecting information on bynames. It is equally important to realize that many of these bynames may not have a formal written (down) tradition, that is, are only used in speech. As such, their representation or spelling remains arbitrary and entirely in the hands of the name carrier who reports on them.

These bynames are sometimes derived from IKS names, but not always.

Name giving conventions

One of the first things that happen to newborns is the acquisition of a name bestowed upon them usually by the parents or other family members. In most cases the name issue is discussed and decided upon even before birth. With the sophisticated sonar facilities nowadays the gender of the to-be-born can also be determined, and hence name givers can therefore often eliminate one sex when searching for a name.

Among the Xhosa the importance of a “good” name is seen in the type of name usually given. The name often displays a clear positive message in terms of its meaning that is clear or transparent. A number of categories reflecting these “good” names exist, and will be covered later (also see Neethling, 2005: 11–21). With the re-emergence of many of these names by many unconnected name-bearers it appears as if there is a popular and established “inventory” of names in the Xhosa culture.

Name data

The number of names, whether full first (personal) or bynames, is huge. A relatively small selection, however, will serve as the examples for illustrating a category. The most common semantic categories of first names that are popular among the Xhosa people and those that would be considered as IKS names, reflect the following: a) Aspirations/Expectations; b) Gratitude to God/Ancestors; c) Composition(gender)/Extension of family; and d) Commemorative types. Here are some illustrative examples:

a) Aspirations/Expectations

Kanyisa “giving light to the future”

Ntomboxolo “girl of peace”

Fezidinga “fulfill the promise”

Mthobeli “the obedient one”

The type of names in this category are nearly endless. The namegivers, usually the parents, “transfer” or “relay” a positive characteristic to the newborn. As one may expect, the options are many although a specific name is carried by many. As soon as the namebearers understand the meaning of the name as they grow up, they strive towards fulfilling the positive aspects entailed in the name. The link between name and identity is therefore easily established, although some individuals, because of varying social circumstances, have a tough time in displaying the positive aspect through their behavior. Old well-known traditional names are consistently used, backed up by newly coined IKS names.

b) Gratitude to God/Ancestors

Simcelile “we asked for him”

Nkosiphendule “the Lord has answered”

Nomthandazo “a prayer”

Unathi “He is with us”

It seems to be clear that the Xhosa community also takes religious affiliation in consideration when giving names. There are practically no statistics available regarding the particular religious affiliation of the Xhosa people. A large percentage of Xhosa people was converted to Christianity since the introduction of this faith by the early missionaries at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and many call themselves “Christian,” and this may vary, ranging from the “traditional” Protestant churches, such as Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches, but then also Roman Catholicism. There are also “traditional” indigenous African belief rituals featuring the forefathers, and between the Christian and the “traditional” way, there are also the so-called “independent African churches,” somewhat mystical and even secret in the mixing of ceremony and conviction. There are no statistics regarding all these “religious” connections, but it might be fair to say that they do play a role in name giving among the Xhosa. These can also be considered as IKS names.

c) Composition(Gender)/Extension of family

Mzwandile “the house (= family) has expanded”

Sandile “we have increased”

Ntombifikile “a girl has arrived”

Ongezwa “one (girl) who was added”

This a common category whereby the extension of or addition to the family is emphasized. There are many examples. In the sporting context the male Dugane twins have both represented South Africa in rugby known as the Springboks at national level. The one is called *Odwa* meaning “only,” suggesting that there are only boys (= “amakhwenke”), and the other one is called *Akhona*, meaning “they are there/present”, that is, only boys. The gender is therefore clearly marked. These names are clearly IKS names and both players seem to function proudly with these names only. Another name of a well-known rugby player is Siyanda Grey. Despite

his seemingly Western family name, his first name *Siyanda* suggests that he is not the only child, meaning “we are expanding.” It emphasizes the extension aspect and is another IKS name.

d) Commemorative names

Lovedalia “Lovedale” (an educational institution)

Sabata “Sabbath” (born on a Sunday)

Nomahlubi “a Hlubi clan girl”

JongamaBhele “look after the Bhele clan”

Mabhelandile “the Bhele clan has increased”

This is not a big category in the database. The most common category is a link to the specific clan. Many Xhosa speakers are very proud of belonging to a clan. After meeting one another for the first time, it is common to ask: “Ngubani isiduko sakho?” that is, What is your clan name? *Isiduko* is the Xhosa word for a clan and greatly respected in Xhosa circles, although not that common as a (first) personal name. These are also IKS names.

Bynames

When it comes to bynames, a popular category is that of derivation from the full (= IKS) name, usually through abbreviation or shortening. Then there are also affective diminutives derived from the personal name and lastly there is a huge variety of other additional bynames that appear not to be linked to the full personal name through any kind of derivational connection. The circumstances giving rise to the formation and usage of such additional names, are so varied that it is extremely difficult to organize the data in a meaningful way. Although respondents were asked to elaborate on how and why these additional names were bestowed, many did not supply any meaningful explanation or detail, and one is left to one’s own conjecture. This last category of non-derivative bynames are, inter alia, connected to physical characteristics, personality features, soccer (football) connotation, links to music and finally, linked to an event that occurred. Many appear to be the “whim” of an individual with no obvious strong motivation behind the choice. De Klerk and Bosch (1997: 95) argue that “Such names offer a rare example of people using language creatively in accordance with a logic that is not laid down from outside; they are a means of displaying linguistic licence, of breaking rules freely, and getting away with it.” This category will not be discussed.

Some examples of the most important byname categories will now follow:

a) Derivation from full personal name (shortening)

Luyanda > Luya

Simcelile > Sim

Siyavuya > Siya

Sonwabile > Sonwa

Sandisiwe > Siwe

Vuyiseka > Seka

Particularly longer first names in any language or culture group are subject to shortening, simply to facilitate communication. The given names in the Bantu language groups found in South Africa, are often fairly long, because of the

“meaningful” aspect linked to them. A name in its “translated” form, say in English, often represents a whole phrase. The agglutinative nature of these languages makes that possible. One should also mention the fact that some of these names also contain click and fricative sounds which pose a challenge as regards pronunciation. Respondents often remarked that the shortening of their names facilitates pronunciation particularly by others not part of that cultural group (also see Felecan, 2009). Sometimes the difficulty in pronunciation cannot be solved through shortening and calls for a more extreme measure. A good example is that of the former president and now deceased Nelson Mandela. His English name was simply given to him by the Xhosa-speaking teacher when he started attending school. His traditional IKS name, *Roli-hlahla* (breaking a branch off a tree, i.e., a possible troublemaker), is not only long, but extremely difficult to pronounce by most people, and he essentially dropped its usage. His role in South African politics after his release from prison was also not that of a troublemaker but rather exactly the opposite.

As mentioned earlier, Xhosa first names are usually semantically transparent. Xhosa people generally pride themselves on their names and often consider their Xhosa names as “superior” to Western type names with no immediate and obvious meaning. The irony with the shortened forms is that there is invariably a “loss” of meaning due to the shortening. The shortened forms now function much as the Western name that is often considered as “meaningless.” It is also noticeable that gender name markers in female names, such as No- is lost in the shortened forms.

A few examples:

Luyanda: It (the family) is expanding

Luya: No meaning

Simcelile: We requested him (from a Supernatural Entity)

Sim: No meaning

Siyavuya: We are happy

Siya: No meaning

Sonwabile: We are content/happy

Sonwa: No meaning

Sandisiwe: We (family) have grown

Siwe: No meaning

Vuyiseka: The one that made (us) happy

Seka: No meaning

The considerations that applied in the original namegiving process are no longer evident in the shortened forms, except perhaps in an indirect way via the base IKS name. The pressure to shorten longer type names is so huge that this highly rated aspect of meaningful namegiving among the Xhosa is sacrificed. A popular sportsman is Siyamthanda Kolisi. He is a rising young Springbok rugby player. His full personal name, *Siyamthanda* (= “we love him”) is shortened to *Siya* by all his teammates as well as all the sporting journalists. The fairly long name is hence shortened with the resultant loss of meaning. One could call *Siya* an IKS-derived name whereas *Siyamthanda* is clearly an IKS name.

b) Affective diminutive forms (of first names)

In Xhosa the productive diminutive suffix, *-ana*, can only be linked to ordinary nouns, for example, *inja* (a dog) > *injana* (puppy, small dog). Names, however, cannot be diminutized in that way, but because Xhosa speakers feel the desire to

affectively use diminutive first name forms, they do so under the influence of English and/or Afrikaans and then partly according to the same system applicable to Afrikaans and English, that is by using diminutive suffixes like *-i*, *-ie*, and *-y*. Landman (1986: 167) refers to the tolerance regarding borrowing from English and Afrikaans nicknames. Xhosa appears to share the same kind of tolerance.

Examples:

Andile “they have increased” > Andy
 Nombulelo “gratitude” > Buli
 Sandisiwe “we have been added to” > Sandy
 Nonkululeko “freedom” > Nkuli
 Wandisile “he has been added” > Wandy
 Solomzi “eye/guardian of the home” > Solly
 Mpumelelo “success” > Mpumi
 Zoliswa “one who calms” > Zolie

As with the shortened forms in category a), the meaning is sacrificed in the diminutive forms. The semivowel *-y-* [j] in the Xhosa names is now clearly the English suffix [i], hence borrowing it certainly is. The bynames ending on *-ie* also appear strange because vowels in Xhosa are never juxtaposed unless they are the same vowel, so this is probably due to influence from Afrikaans where *-ie* is a common diminutive suffix in common and proper nouns. In a multilingual country such as South Africa, this is not surprising.

It appears as if emotivity plays a significant role in the so-called diminutive forms (and even in all the other typological formations of bynames). Respondents always remark that these bynames are used by those who love them, that is, close relatives, intimate friends, and loved ones. Semantic values such as affection, affinity, endearment, love, closeness, and friendship play a major role here.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, one could perhaps tentatively put forward the following observations. It seems reasonable to accept that given names (at birth) along with the inherited family name, can and do function as fairly stable identity indicators. Those names appear on birth and death certificates, education certificates, and all legal documents. Even in modern society one will not be able to function without them. That projected onymic identity is relatively fixed. These are **IKS names**. Other additional names gathered over time, expands this identity, and manages to project the name carrier in a more rounded and multifaceted way. It suggests that the original given names are considered restrictive and only effective in certain (more formal) contexts, not able to express the different emotive nuances that bynames can do. The IKS names are often shortened and/or become diminutive forms expressing affection with the resultant loss of transparent lexical meaning and perhaps some cultural identity. One could call these names **IKS-derived names**. Name bearers are also endowed with bynames or nicknames based on various aspects (e.g. appearance, behavior, involved in an event, etc.). These are **non-IKS names** certainly also contributing to identity, but with no direct link to the IKS names and hence not featuring in this contribution.

Onomastic scholars, particularly in Africa, but also elsewhere, could then accommodate anthroponymic onomastics as part of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Personal name-giving among the Xhosa has been in existence for many centuries since their appearance on the scene in Africa and notably Southern Africa. The right to a good name (see Neethling, 2012b) is cherished by many and upheld. It is also clear that IKS and IKS-derived names appear alongside one another. Depending on the context, the namecarrier or name user often chooses which one to use.

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Notes on contributor

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