



# The role of the nameless in isiXhosa ntsomi

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## Abstract

### The role of the nameless in isiXhosa ntsomi

*This article looks into the custom of not giving names to pivotal characters in some selected Xhosa tales. Given that the word “tales” means different things to different people, it is used in this article to refer to both fables (stories which deal with animals only) and folktales (stories dealing with both animals and humans). The unnamng practice is not uncommon in all types of tales and is applied to both males and females, young and old, as well as to strange mysterious beings. The motive for unnamng is analysed and its functions are alluded to. References to popular generic names of animals found in Xhosa tales are made for the sake of clarifying the need for naming, though these are not the subject of discussion here. It is therefore most fitting to use onomastics as the theoretical framework of this article in order to capture convincing patterns of the unnamng system and the creation of faceless characters in indigenous Xhosa tales.*

## Opsomming

### Die rol van die naamlose in isiXhosa-ntsomi's

*Hierdie artikel ondersoek die gebruik om sentrale karakters in bepaalde Xhosa-verhale naamloos te laat bly. Aangesien die woord “verhale” verskillende interpretasies kan hê, word dit in hierdie artikel gedefinieer as 'n term wat verwys na fabels (stories wat slegs op diere betrekking het) sowel as volksverhale (stories wat op diere én mense betrekking het). Die praktyk van nie-naamgewing is nie ongewoon by enige tipe verhaal nie en is van toepassing op manlike én vroulike karakters, jonk en oud, sowel as op vreemde, misterieuse wesens. Die motivering vir nie-naamgewing word ondersoek en die funksies daarvan*

*geïdentifiseer. Verwysings na algemene generiese benamings vir diere wat in Xhosaverhale aangetref word, dien hier slegs om die behoefte aan benoeming te verduidelik, hoewel dit nie die fokus van hierdie artikel is nie. Dit is dus heel gepas om die onomastiek as teoretiese raamwerk vir hierdie artikel te gebruik ten einde oortuigende patrone in die sisteem van nie-naamgewing en die skep van gesiglose karakters in inheemse Xhosaverhale vas te vang.*

## **1. Introduction**

Room (1996:v) observes that “names have long been a popular subject of study, to the extent that a substantial terminology for the various aspects of that study has now evolved”. This is true. The subject of the science of onomastics is very broad because everything can be given a name, and above all, the study of names theoretically encompasses all languages spoken by human beings. Neethling (2005:7) says that there is an ongoing activity of people “welcoming all the newcomers to this world by bestowing a name upon them”. This implies that the logical reason for the practice of naming is to distinguish the new arrival into the world from all those who arrived earlier on the scene. Important elements in the naming process concern the meanings and associations of names. In this respect naming has a referential function in the sense that any given name is used to refer to an individual or something (in the case of non-human things such as animals found in Xhosa tales). Room (1996:vii) states that names are a part of our everyday lives. He adds that names “are not only the ‘tags’ or labels that identify people, places, and things but also the words or phrases that often evoke particular associations”. In some cases ambiguity (the many-sidedness of names) is used to give personal names a dual function in order to create humour. Such names are frequently employed in Xhosa tales by narrators. For example, uMpungutye (jackal) may be referred to as Maqhingashe (the cunning one).

However, Zabeeth (1968:28) cautions that the meaning of a proper name is not to be identified with its purported denotation or with some uniquely determinable properties of its bearer. He cites Strawson (1952) who “rejects the view that the meaning of a genuine referring expression is identical with the object to which it applies” (Zabeeth 1968:27). Zabeeth (1968:28) concurs with Strawson (1952) that no referring expression by itself “even the so-called ‘logically proper-name’ has the power to guarantee a referent”. Sometimes there are names that do not carry any meaning, since they are often created from random sequences of sounds as will be alluded to

hereunder. There are also generative names used to differentiate between the sexes, animals, nature and the cosmos. The Xhosa tales have all these particular characteristics. Though not the subject of this article, I will pay cursory attention to the above activity in order to demonstrate how naming affects the theme and plot of a Xhosa tale. The main focus of the article is to examine the popular unnamer technique of the narrators critically and to provide a basis for the recognition and analysis of such techniques in Xhosa literature in future.

## 2. Denominating of characters in *ntsomi*

Animal characters that appear in tales have certain uniform roles ascribed to them by the performers or narrators. For example, *mvundlazana* (little hare) is commonly used as a trickster while the lion, *uNgonyama*, is not only elevated to the status of king and ruler of all other animals, but is also portrayed as a cruel, gluttonous, self-centred, and stupid bully who suffers because of his misadministration. When these animals appear in the tales they reflect real life situations and thus play significant roles in the expression of societal themes of the day. Finnegan (1978:346) observes that “these animals are portrayed as thinking and acting like human beings, in a human setting”. This can be seen in Xhosa tales. The employment of appropriate grammatical devices like personal prefixes, signify personal forms.

For example, in some tales from B.B. Mkonto’s *Amakhikhizela* (1991), *mvundlazana* (little hare) is named *Mnumzana Mvundla* (Mr. Hare) and *ngonyama* (lion) *Ukumkani uNgonyama* (King Lion). However, in some cases other descriptive terms are used especially those pertaining to or denoting physical appearance. For example, hare is denominating as *mvundlana*, meaning “little hare”. The names *mvundlana* and *mvundlazana* are used synonymously to mean little hare. However, in some tales, the name *mvundlana* indicates a young male hare and *mvundlazana* denotes a young female hare.

Though gender has no influence on the grammatical structure in terms of prefixes of either masculine or feminine nouns such as *mvundla* (hare) and *fudo* (tortoise), feminine nouns are often marked by a distinctive suffix in isiXhosa. The suffix *-azana* in the names *mvundlazana* (little hare) and *fudwazana* (little tortoise) is in the strictest sense indicative of a feminine noun. Similarly, the word *intombi* (a girl) takes the suffix *-azana* to become *intombazana*. In the case of *mvundlana* (little hare) and *fudwana* (little tortoise) the

suffix *-ana* is used just as it is in words such as *umfo* (fellow) to become *umfana* (young man) to distinguish male from female. When this grammatical distinction is used, strange unnamings will result in translating she-little hare (*mvundlazana*) and she-little tortoise (*fudwazana*) for females and little hare (*mvundlana*) and little tortoise (*fudwana*) for males. Thus most storytellers ignore the unnamings techniques that are derived from gender distinctions based on human beings. Their focus on the unnamings techniques derived from gender is overshadowed by the motive behind the unnamings itself. Rather it is the grammatical function that takes precedence over other unnamings techniques. However, for the purpose of this article, the principle of gender sensitivity is applied.

The use of diminutives may imply that the narrator is intending to evoke sympathy from his/her listeners or readers. Beardsley's (1958:346) observation about the appearance of a character in a prose narrative is also appropriate to the unnamings style. He says that the "reader is interested not only in what happens but in the sort of a person to whom it happens". This "sort of a person" among other things implies physical appearance. For example, the hare, affectionately called *mvundlazana* in Xhosa fables, is the most important character in many Xhosa tales. He/she is the favourite as his/her popularity emerges when we observe characters such as *fudwazwana* (tortoise). Though the latter is sometimes more successful than *mvundlazana* (little hare), he/she still fails to gain the sympathy of the audience. Guma (1967:12) feels that this is due to the fact that *fudwazana* lacks an attractive appearance. He says, "The most despised animal is the tortoise. This is mainly due to his unusual form and appearance". According to Guma, *fudwazana* "is not responsible" for the way he/she looks. Therefore it is no wonder that some people sympathise with *fudwazana* for his unpopularity. This is perhaps compounded by the fact that in many tales, *fudwazana* uses his/her brain in order to defeat *mvundlazana*.

A number of animal characteristic traits such as the cry, appearance or behaviour may be presented in order to add to the wit or incongruity of the presentation (Finnegan, 1978:346). In the process a number of general personality traits are noticeable, namely, steadfastness of purpose and maturity of mind. For example, *fudwazana* (little tortoise) is commonly portrayed as someone who appears to know his/her limitations and is ever alert when engaging in a conversation with *mvundlazana* (little hare), and by keeping quiet avoids of being outwitted. According to Hlangwana (1979:28) "each type of the animal character is assigned certain uniform roles" that derive

from common human qualities and attributes. The incidents where animals act and behave like humans are, however, not necessarily probable. Hlangwana (1979:29) observes that

... suspension of disbelief is necessary since what is of primary significance is the successful conveyance of the message the performer wishes to put across to her audience, rather than deciding whether the incidents related are possible.

Just as characters in novels and drama symbolise certain individuals, each animal character in the tales represents a living human being. And since humans are by nature endowed with certain values and ideals situations of misunderstanding and conflict unavoidably arise. Commenting on the role of characters, Qangule (1974:65) says "the actions of one individual are, to a large extent, influenced by the attitude and actions of another. When these actions are in opposition to each other, conflict arises". The conflict situations often generate a variety of different kinds of behaviour. According to Beardsley (1958:693), "characters are as vital a part of the subject as the plot is".

For example, it is easier for readers and listeners to identify desirable actions as well as decrying undesirable behaviour on the part of the villainous character. Importantly, most animal characters are adaptable in the sense that they are able to turn any situation, old or new, to their advantage. Indeed, the animals act like human characters and also experience human emotions, but the fact that they are still animals is not altogether lost. This is perhaps one of the most consoling factors for people listening to or readers reading the tales, especially those who are on the receiving end of the portrayal. In this regard, unnamings find more meaning in the sense that it indicates that the talk is not directed at anyone personally.

### **3. The lack of individual personal names**

To indigenous storytellers of isiXhosa, unnamings is a rhetorical skill which is usually put to good use when a particular name is needed to express an idea. It subtly proposes a basic interpretation of human identity and the infringement of societal laws. When put into the hands of a master storyteller, the unnamings technique has the capacity to reveal in a clever manner the desired values of society. However, the unnamings technique also attempts to mask and shield all the sets of values and traditions found lacking in society. Feinberg (1967:194) contends that masking deals with the pretence of being another person. This technique is even more effective to

storytellers who create characters with the intention of symbolising human frailties and/or virtues.

An interesting case of not naming the main characters is that of *Umakhulu nodyakalashe* (The grandmother and the jackal) in *Amagontsi* (Bongela, 1991:48). Makhulu (grandmother) stays with her school-going grandchildren. When they leave for school, a roaming jackal visits her and tricks her into playing a sport called *masiphekaphekane* (let us cook each other). Makhulu cooks dyakalashe (jackal) first and when it is his turn to cook *makhulu*, he does not get her out from the pot in time and she dies. The grandchildren return from school and *dyakalashe* who pretends to be *makhulu* instructs them to eat the meat which is in the pot. The moral of this story is that people must not trust strangers as makhulu did dyakalashe.

The use of names that refer to species of animals and not individuals is not uncommon. There are many stories that carry names of the species. For example, uMvundla (hare), uNgonyama (lion), uMfene (baboon), uFudo (tortoise). Such names in stories are commonly adaptive since they are borrowed from other languages like uMvolufu (wolf), and uDyakalashe (jackal) as employed above. These two uMvolufu (wolf), and uDyakalashe (jackal) are borrowed from Afrikaans. Names of species of birds, reptiles and insects are also common. For example, uKhozi (eagle), uHotyazana (iHobe; dove), iNtengu (bee-catcher), uLulwane (bat), uNyoka (snake), lovane (chameleon), uNtwala (louse), uNtakumba (flea), uMpukane (fly), uNyosi (bee) are favourite names in Xhosa tales. It is no accident that most stories opt to use, by association, names normally given to the species themselves, rather than the individual names commonly used to name home-bred animals such as dogs (*Spotty*), cat (*Kitty*), cow (*Romeis*), or ox (*Fadukhwe*). These borrowed names are also known as “assimilated names”, and are described by Room (1996:12) as foreign names that are adopted by another language according to its phonetic principles and existing naming models.

Another interesting name associated with the actions or personality of the character is found in the story “Igqabi lenkosi” (Satyo, 1990:32-34). The main character is called Dengetyana while all the other baboons are merely called *iimfene* (the focus of this article). The name Dengetyana means “the Little Stupid One” and is derived from the word *isidenge*, a stupid one. In this story, Dengetyana is given the important task of guarding the nation’s garden in which grows a precious tree called the chief’s tree whose leaves are a source of eternal life. The chief of the baboons feigns illness, stays behind and

tricks Dengetyana by sending him on another errand and then steals some leaves from the garden. When the baboons return, they discover that the leaves have been stolen. No one admits responsibility and so they embark on a test to find the culprit: everyone has to jump across a deep pit. Interestingly, all the baboons perform admirably when jumping over the pit. When it is the turn of Dengetyana, the popular and feared guard, his fellows expect him to fail the test, but he outjumps everybody. Then, as custom demands, the chief has to jump as well and needless to say, he cannot make it, for he is, after all, the culprit who tricked Dengetyana away from his guard-post.

In this tale, the naming of Dengetyana, which commonly refers to ignorance and stupidity, is pitted against the unnamed *iimfene* (baboons). Though Dengetyana has been tricked by the chief baboon (who is also nameless), he is portrayed as an upright and steadfast character who refuses to carry the guilt for another person's misdeed. The unnamed "iingwevu" (elders) of the baboons are also depicted here as the real custodians of the social norms and value systems found in human societies. Their reverence of social tradition in respect of contentious issues underline their age, experience and ways of solving problems. Hence, in this story the lack of individual personal names is not a stumbling block to the construction of the plot. In actual fact, it is common in most African literatures and cultures that the lack of personal names can express approval or disapproval. In some cases, a degree of flattery can be detected in the presentation of nameless characters, depending on whether they are self-named or whether the names are bestowed by other characters in the tale.

#### 4. The unnamings of male figures

In the story "Isincamathela sendlela" from the book *Ezinye iintsomi zamaXhosa* by Ndibongo and Ntloko (1986:65-68), the narrator describes the experiences of a man who is only named *indoda* (man). His wife affectionately calls him *Sobani* (father of so-and-so). The character *indoda* is portrayed here as a stupid person. At first the man borrows the eyes of Hlungulu (the ring-necked raven) and gives Hlungulu his own eyes. When he encounters problems with the borrowed eyes he lies to his wife and she rescues him. The next day the *indoda* sees a child crying along the road and asks it to climb on his back. The child refuses and the *indoda* beats the child and forcibly puts it on his back. Ultimately the child gives in having warned him "andimntwan'ubelekwayo" ("I am not a child who is car-

ried on the back”). The *indoda* does not bother and carries the child while herding cattle, but when he goes home he wants the child to climb off, but it refuses and then a problem ensues. The *indoda* is again rescued by his wife who pours boiled fat on her husband’s back so that the strange child loses its grip on the man’s back.

Naming the man *indoda* and his wife calling him *Sobani* in the story “Isincamathela sendlela” is fully artistic and deliberate. The full wording of the name *Sobani* is *Yise kabani* (Father of Someone) but the supposed child’s name is not mentioned either. Though it is common practice for married women not to call their husbands by name, the use of such euphemistic expressions in this tale is very significant. The name *Sobani* is therefore no name because the child of the couple is not named. It is meaningless to someone who does not understand the subtleties of the cultural matrix of the amaXhosa, because Xhosa names, as observed by Neethling (2005:92), “are mostly semantically transparent, i.e. they have clear lexical meaning to those understanding Xhosa”. Usually the child’s name is used in reference to its parents. For example, Mqhayi (1969:188), when addressing the black and white contingent of 1916 in the poem “Ukutshona kukaMendi” (“The sinking of Mendi”), mentions his own chief by using the name *Sotase* which is a reference to Chief Maqoma because the name of her daughter was Tase.

Feminists and other gender sensitive people can easily accuse the storyteller of such a story being very defensive and protective of male chauvinism. The *indoda*, who is not given a name, is blatantly stupid and it is suggestive that the narrator does not seem to want to attach such a bad personality to a man’s name. The accusation that the man’s patriarchal status is being protected from degradation to the level of stupidity, is baseless. The evidence is quite clear: *indoda* or *Sobani* is blatantly ignorant, though the punishment meted out to him (in the form of hot fat on his back) is not harsh enough. In this story the wife, who is also not given a name, is shown to be brilliant. She rescues her stupid husband, but the narrator does not extol her virtues in any form whatsoever. This rather is suggestive of a narrator deliberately leaving her nameless and also not giving her credit for her ability in order to keep the focus on the stupid man.

The element of arousing readers’ and/or listeners’ curiosity comes out very strongly when the technique of namelessness is employed. The storyteller appears to be eager to exercise the shattering power of surprise by using an unnamed character. This is neither new nor unique in indigenous storytelling. In the story “Intombazana nenja” (“Girl and a dog”) (Mkonto 1991:29) the narrator does not name the



main characters, the dog and the girl. The girl goes to the forest to fetch her lost dress. It becomes dark and she gets lost and sees light coming from a house. She approaches it and when she knocks at the door, a voice says, “Hawu, hawu ngena” (“Woof, woof enter”). On entering, she discovers that the owner is a dog which keeps her captive and treats her as his wife by forcing her to cook and sleep with him. The narrator says,

Yathi le nja ‘Hawu, hawu ndiphekele’  
 Yathi le ntombazana, ‘Tyhini andiqhelanga kuphekela zinja mna’.  
 Yathi le nja ‘Hawu, hawu ndakutya’. Yothuka le ntombazana  
 yabona ukuba mayiyiphekele le nja.

*The dog said ‘Woof, woof cook for me’  
 The girl said, ‘What?! I am not used to cooking for dogs’.  
 The dog said, ‘Woof, woof I will bite you’. The girl was shocked  
 and she decided to cook for the dog.*

The abusive dog is, without any doubt, the villain here. He is portrayed as a creature who has by sheer fortune, been presented with a free gift: a wife who is to cook for him. It is clear from the story that the dog has neither toiled for her, nor has he ever declared his love for her, other than to say when she knocks at the door, “*Hawu, hawu ngena*” (“Woof, woof enter”). A listener and a reader may find this scene amusing or despicable because it is unheard of in the Xhosa society that one can welcome someone in one’s house and then force her to work for you. The effect of this amusement is further compounded by the fact that this character is unnamed other than the use of the species’ name, *inja* (dog). So both cleverness and evil are left unnamed in this tale.

A more humiliating act ensues when late at night *inja* (dog) forces her to come to bed. The incident is captured in this way:

‘Hawu, hawu masilale’ Yathi le ntombazana, ‘Andiqhelanga kulala nazinga mna’. Yathi le nja, ‘Hawu, hawu ndakutya’.  
 Yoyika le ntombazana yalala.

*‘Woof, woof let us sleep’. The girl said, ‘am not used to sleeping with dogs’. The dog said, ‘Woof, woof I will bite you’ The girl was frightened and she slept.*

The element of ambiguity referred to above, emerges in this incident. Firstly, the wording of *inja* (dog) lends itself to semantic misinterpretation. The word *ndakutya* means both “to bite” and “to eat”. In this context, it means to bite as correctly translated. It may also mean to eat food and may therefore connote that the *inja* (dog) may

eat the girl as food. A less common interpretation is the one most loved by older boys and young men which refers to sex, since the word may also refer to sexual intercourse when used with reference to a female. In this instance, the time of the day (late at night), and the activity, meaning to sleep, easily conjures up images of the *inja* (dog) inviting the girl to have sexual intercourse. The submissive response of the girl in agreeing to sleep with the *inja* (dog) is quite fascinating to such interpreters and it is no wonder that boys and young men love to narrate this story to girls and young women respectively.

The story goes on to tell that the following day the girl saves herself by extracting hairs from her head and planting them in different places in the homestead so that her responses may come from those places when she is summoned by the dog. She runs away back to her home and is never threatened by the dog with “Hawu, hawu ndakutya” (“Woof, woof I will bite you”) again. This clever action of the girl demonstrates once again that unnamed characters are commonly used to depict intellectual abilities that are life-saving.

Other languages also utilise this literary device since it speaks to the popular literary element of rarity. For example, the Jewish historical narration as captured by the King James Version of the Bible transcribes the Tetragrammaton (Yahweh) as follows: “I Am That I am” which literally means that God is nameless, or cannot be named. Benston traces archaic instances of insistent namelessness to Hesiod, Pindar and the Hebrew prophetic texts, particularly the writings of Ezekiel and Isaiah. In all the cases, the refusal to be named

... invokes the power of the Sublime; a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority (Benston, 1990:153).

In its earliest manifestations, Benston adds that the act of unnameing is a means of “passing from one mode of representation to another, of breaking the rhetoric and ‘plot’ of influence, of distinguishing the self from all else – including Eros, nature and community”.

## **5. The unnameing of female figures**

Characters in indigenous tales are presented with natural and human traits in the texts which, in their overwhelming multiplicity of possible referents, engender a desire to read for singular and final meanings. There seems to be a strong feeling among storytellers

that to name the ineffable is to kill it. This appears to be a working formula as it offers the audience and/or readers scope for critical thinking. Sometimes the storyteller may use the unnamng style to suggest the stigma of social exclusion, as a device of unnamng alienation, or for the imposition of a rigid communal role. Each reader or listener sees in it something of his/her own, some trace of an unspeakable mark of difference. A curious scenario, which captures the mind of the reader, is perhaps the frequent unnamng of old women characters. This style of character presentation cannot only be viewed as deliberate self-potrayment by the majority of storytellers who usually happen to be old women. There are also some other reasons for this. Three tales from the three books recording these tales is fascinating and calls for close scrutiny.

In *Sasinoncwadi kuqala* (Satyo, 1990:30) the narrator presents two unnamed characters, *umama* (mother) and *intombazana* (girl). The unnamed daughter mistakenly leaves behind her mother's kerchief at the playground. It is late and her friends cannot accompany her to fetch it. She goes back to the playground and as she approaches it, she gets accosted by an unnamed giant who abducts her and puts her into a bag. On his way, he gets thirsty and begs people for water, entertaining them by beating her to sing from inside the bag as if she is his harp. When passing the girl's village, her people recognise her voice and rescue her by sending the giant to fetch water from a nearby river, delaying him by giving him a leaking bucket. The villagers remove the girl and put various poisonous insects and snakes into the bag. Upon arriving at his home, the giant prepares to eat the girl and sends for the bag which he had left outside the door of his house. His wife and children are unable to bring it because they are bitten by the insects (bees and scorpions, etc.) inside the bag. He drives them away, fetches his bag and locks the door behind him in order to eat his meal alone. When he opens the bag the insects sting him. He breaks open the door, runs into the river and drowns.

It is interesting to note that the narrator deliberately avoids giving a name to the main character here, namely the girl. Neither is her physical appearance described, other than the subtle description of her in the diminutive linguistic form of the word *ntwazana*. The diminutive nature of the leading character is sufficient to evoke emotions of sympathy for the girl. Those who understand the subtleties of the language will not fail to take note of this point and will therefore not see the need for a name. Sympathy for the girl is further emphasised by the presentation of an unnamed giant as well. The physical

presence and prowess of the giant is also not described. However, the giant's power is demonstrated when he catches her, puts her inside the bag with ease and carries her on his back on his long journey back home. The imagination of the readers and listeners during this story performance is doubtlessly engaged, which ensures that they are all participants as the story unfolds.

In *Ixhegwazana nonyana walo* (Mkonto, 1991:34) a grandmother and her grandson are unnamed and portrayed as poor. She sends the grandson to ask for food and a benevolent person presents them with a special table. On his way home, he sleeps over in another unnamed old woman's house and makes the fatal error of asking the woman not to say to the table, "Tafile, tafile phum'ukutya" ("Table, table give out food"). The cruel woman tests this expression and on finding out that it dishes out food, she exchanges it for another table. When the boy arrives home, the fake table is unable to give out food and he is punished by his grandmother. He goes back to the benevolent person who gives him a sheep. The same old woman applies her tricks when the boy sleeps over at her place with the special sheep. He again gets punished by his grandmother and goes back to the benevolent man who gives the boy a switch. Once again he sleeps overnight at the old woman's house and tells her not to say, "Sabhokhwe, sabhokhwe ndibethe" ("Switch, switch whip me up"). As usual, the bad old woman approaches the switch and begs it to whip her. She is whipped and is rescued by the boy after she confessed that she stole the table and the sheep from the boy.

The technique of not naming the main characters is once again used here. The two women are merely called by the diminutive generic term *ixhegwazana* (little old woman). Interestingly, both the poor old woman, the grandmother of the unnamed boy and the cheating old woman are treated the same. Perhaps this is suggestive of masking the women's identity or avoiding giving offence to anybody listening or reading the story. That both women act appropriately in a womanly manner by providing food for their respective families is perhaps another way of concealing their identity. Whereas one sends out a boy to seek food, the other woman treacherously intercepts the means of living. The storyteller's intention may also be viewed as moralistic in a veiled attempt to prevent his/her young listeners from associating given names with old people living in the community.

## **6. The unnamings of weird figures**

Ashley (1989:73) asserts that in real life a "funny" name hurts. He adds that the strangeness of a name depends on the people using

it. He further maintains that such a name can produce a maladjusted child or a neurotic adult. Stressing the point, Ashley cites Ford (1968) who “proved that people with strange names are more prone to amnesia and may not be able to remember their names at all”. Commenting further on the use of a weird name, he views such a naming as a form of abuse and a sign of instability or hostility on the part of the name-giver. This is true in real life situations but may be a bit exaggerated in fiction such as tales.

The general force of a weird name applies equally to the weird names storytellers give to their characters. The only difference, from the perception of Ashley, is that the name-giver is a stable person who purposefully gives a strange name, as will be shown below. Storytellers are fond of using bizarre, grotesque, outlandish, way-out and weird names, especially for extremely strange, eccentric, unusual, abnormal, ugly or deformed mysterious beings. The manner in which these names appeal to our senses and imagination as readers and listeners is described by Long (1883:10) when he says that “no word appeals so powerfully to the spirit within us as our proper name”. In this sense the construction and use of weird names is purposeful.

Weird or strange names are commonly found in Xhosa tales and such characters appear in different forms and functions. For example, in the story “UMaginyinyathi neempondo” (Bennie, 1978: 55-56), the villainous character is named *Maginyinyathi*. The name which is derived from the word *ukuginya* (to swallow) and *inyathi* (a buffalo) is a linguistic construction of a verb and noun, meaning “one who swallows a buffalo”. This name therefore is intended to create an image of a mystical or mythological beast in order to stimulate fear. Indeed, the effect of the name is achieved, when this huge and funny named being devours the crops of the animals and hare, who is the first to be sent to encounter it, hears it saying,

Ndim, ndinguMaginyinyathi neempondo; nakoMvundlazana  
apha, ginyiqobo!

*It is I, I am Maginyinyathi neempondo (Swallower of buffalo and  
its horns); even to Mvundlazana (little hare) I am a voracious  
swallower.* (Bennie, 1978:55.)

Little hare runs back to his own people, the other animals, to report the matter. They are all afraid of this monster which has not only devoured their fields and crops but also challenges anybody to a fight by lying in wait in their field. Ironically, it is the slow-walking

tortoise who takes up the challenge and kills it with an axe. The un-naming of the hare and the tortoise easily arrests the interest of a reader and or listeners. They both are put in a situation where they learn the name of their adversary while the latter does not even bother to know their names. This gives the impression that to the monster they do not exist as it would swallow them.

The same style of using strange names for villainous characters appears in the story "UQwebede-Qwebede" (Mkonto, 1991:46-49). Qwebede (to push or press forward) is a dinosaur-type of an animal which devours everything and in the story is pitted against a nameless woman. The word *ukuqwebeda* in isiXhosa refers to the act of pushing hard or of pressing determinedly forward like a galloping horse. It is linguistically alliterative as this is beautifully constructed by compound naming. Regarding compound naming, Room (1996:5) says it carries elements with the same letter or letter group. In this tale, both meanings that refer to the act of pushing hard or pressing forward are by association attached to the name Qwebede with the intention of discrediting a stubborn and obstinate nameless woman who is determined to visit her people without the approval of her husband. She meets Qwebede on the way. The narrator puts the confrontation in this fashion:

Luqinisile uthuli, lusiya lusondela ngokusondela lwade lwafika kubo. Uthe akuphosa amehlo, umfazi wabona into ebusha engadanga yagqiba. Ithe ukuba ifike yema phambi kwabo yathi, 'Gxishi xhaka-xhaka Qwebede qwebede mfazi!' Wathi nkamalala umfazi exakiwe ukuba uza kuthini na ukuthetha nale nto.

*The dust thickened, coming closer and closer until it reached them. When she looked up, the woman saw something which looked like a horse but not completely. When it arrived it stood before them and said, 'Thump strut-strut Qwebede qwebede woman'. The woman was surprised and did not know what to say to this thing. (Mkonto 1991:46.)*

The animal chases her all the way home and she drops every article she carried in order to save herself while Qwebede devours all. She even throws down her only child to be devoured by Qwebede who tirelessly gallops after her. Lastly, Qwebede is able to bite off a piece of her buttocks before she is saved by her people. The nameless woman is seen as a hard nut to crack, a hard and dry field to fertilise and cultivate. She fulfils her role as the hard and dry field which is properly treated by Qwebede who like a hoe works on her by chasing hard and even cuts a piece of flesh from her body. So in

the story, she is punished by the stranger, Qwebede, rather than her husband who had earlier submitted to her stubbornness. Thus unnamings function as mechanism to conceal the woman's identity so that she can represent a generalised lesson for others.

In the story of "Intsomi kaGalaskiki" from Bongela's (1991:37-39) *Amagontsi*, an unnamed woman leaves her children behind in search of her husband. The children stay in an anthill and feed themselves from its soil. They also prepare to take to the road in search of their parents when an unnamed man appears to them. He promises to help them find their parents and sends them two doves. The doves fly to a certain village, perch on a tree in front of a specific homestead and sing:

Asimahotyazana 'kubethwa,  
Galaskiki!  
Asimahotyazana 'kubethwa,  
Galaskiki!  
Sifun'Malkhomese  
Wasishiya sisodwa,  
Galaskiki!  
Sadl'umhlaba sakhula,  
Galaskiki! (Bongela, 1991:38.)

*We are not little doves for beating,  
Galaskiki!  
We are not little doves for beating,  
Galaskiki!  
We want Malkhomese,  
Galaskiki!  
He left us alone,  
Galaskiki!  
We fed on soil and grew,  
Galaskiki!*

Malkhomese tries to run away but the doves catch him and fly with him to his children. Strangely, this bad character is given a name.

A fascinating characterisation appears here. Galaskiki, a strange name which is derived from the song of the doves, is used to denote virtue instead of evil or wrongdoing. Its alliterative quality is meaningless. The doves are therefore named Galaskiki who come to help the abandoned children find their parents. Interestingly, the technique of unaming the children rather than Malkhomese, the cruel father, is applied. The victims who are children and their mother are not named, but the unknown father's name is revealed. It is clear

that the narrator does this in order to stimulate the audiences and/or reader's sympathy.

## **7. Conclusion**

In summing up the above analyses, it can be said that storytellers, like all authors, choose names, consciously or unconsciously, for a reason, some more or less carefully or deliberately than others. In some stories the names of the characters, including those present but not named, are more important than others in respect of the roles they play. But as Ashley (1989:203) observes, it always stands to reason that "art demands a reason, effect has a cause". Names contribute to the plot, tone, and every other literary element. Another interesting observation is that names tend to resist the natural corruption of words more than most other word formations, but they sometimes get distorted. Perhaps this is caused by the frequent use of names and the fact that each story reflects subtleties of the cultural matrix. This is clearly seen in the use of weird characters where names are coined either by compounding or by the use of alliterative formatives.

This article has argued that unnamming does not eliminate the idea of conveying powerful positive or negative messages, especially on moral issues. The faceless and unnamed characters define themes, express common human qualities and attributes, and help to convey the message of the story successfully. In some cases the main characters are given no names for the sake of moralising whereas in another instance villainous characters go without name in order to ridicule and expose such personalities. In some instances all characters lack names while in others victims of situations are denied names. All these are suggestive of a deliberate intention to craft fascinating stories. It is in this sense that narrators can be assessed by their abilities to employ different techniques of naming or un-naming in their attempts to express the life force creatively and to understand situations wisely.

In my view, the practice of creating nameless characters in Xhosa indigenous literature reflects tensions between the self and the community, intuition and influence, self-reliance and history. Respect for existing names, especially those carried by elderly persons in the community, is usually high among the amaXhosa. Avoidance of such names is therefore welcomed. Since Africans, like all other human groups, are interested in their past, accounts of their experience is readily made available to us through the analysis not only of the motifs of the tales, but also through the naming of



characters who are worked and reworked to depict the necessary moral lesson (Herskovits, 1968:362). Though the little stories teach and point to a moral, they also give meaning to the verbal aspects of the creative life of the people and their artistic traditions. In the cited stories, it has been discovered that the employment of no names, per se is neither good nor bad; it is not a drawback, but rather an advantage which challenges audience/listeners to critically apply their minds. Recognising that the unnamings process is very volatile, allows the narrator's audience the capacity to understand that such presentations are open to abuse as well as creative manipulation.

It is therefore important to know that the style of using the unnamed character can mean different things to different people and is thus an unreliable device, susceptible to conflicting definitions. However, what is clear is that unnamings adds another dimension to the artistic qualities of storytelling. It forms part of the orchestration of the ingredients to produce a remarkable and enduring quest for the main character as well as for the reader or audience who is lured into the quest of getting answers to real life issues. Thus its success lies in its use as an additional resource of narrative technique to arouse the imagination of the reader or audience.

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**Key concepts:**

anomastics  
manysidedness  
naming  
referential

**Kernbegrippe:**

anomasties  
benaming  
veelsydigheid/veelkantigheid  
verwysings