

# The 'price' of character Naming in xitsonga: An onomastic Reading of B.k. Mtombeni's Mibya ya nyekanyeka

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## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the depiction of characters and development of themes through naming in selected two Xitsonga novels, namely; *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka* (Mtombeni, B.K. 2008) It explores how some Xitsonga writers use character naming as a technique to depict characters and develop themes in their novels. The descriptive theory of names has been used as a theoretical framework in this study. This study is based on the interpretivist paradigm, the descriptive case study research design, and the reader-response research approach. The population of the study was Xitsonga novels and the texts were extracted from the five different Xitsonga novels to support the analysis of the use of the naming techniques in the depiction of characters in relation to the development of themes from these novels. The documentation method as well as the note-taking method, were used to collect the data. Furthermore, content analysis as well and the comparative method were used to analyse the data

**Keywords:** Literary onomastics, onomastics, symbolism, theme, fiction, character, characterisation

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The art of naming plays a significant role in any human society as it represents a particular society's cultural values and traditions. A name can be used to deliver a message, express hope, sustain a cultural or religious tradition (De Klerk, 1999). In many African societies, names are not assigned to people randomly or aimlessly; they are given for specific reasons and serve specific purposes. This art of naming is also cascaded over to literary work. Characters in any literary work are assigned names by literary writers to distinguish them from one another, and most important and relevant in this study, to send messages to readers and also to create themes for their literary works. The African literature is an important area for discussing names and their relevance for literary analysis as literature is a mirror of the culture it represents. Therefore, the researcher's attention to the study of the use of the naming technique in literary works may result from the significance of personal names in any culture or society. The study of personal names has drawn the attention of many scholars, centring on personal names, places names, river names, and surnames, among others. These studies inferred that naming is an extremely conscious activity among the name givers because the names are loaded with meanings. In addition, these studies concluded that names are not only markers of identity but a source of a variety of information. It is against this

backdrop that this researcher sees the relevancy in the portrayal of characters in the selected Xitsonga novels, with specific reference to the fact that the naming technique can be seen as a perpetuation of this cultural phenomenon in the literary work by some Xitsonga literary artists.

Bertills (2003) submits that the impact of the general proper name system when bestowing characters' names is self-evident; just like real people, literary characters need to be named or referred to in some ways. She further indicates that the main difference between an ordinary proper name and a literary name is that the reference of the literary character's name is considerably distinctive in kind from the reference of an ordinary personal name. In addition, she states that personal names in literary contexts or fiction form part of the larger group of personal names, they actualise and accentuate the same criteria used in general personal naming, in spite of the fact that they are largely influenced by the narrative context. Furthermore, this technique makes the characters in the literary work look like 'real' people, where readers can associate themselves with these characters. This is what fiction has to achieve at the end of the day, so, character naming becomes a catalyst to this in this regard.

Mutunda (2017: 101) postulates that "the use of personal names is equally a very important tool for identifying characters and determining how they are connected to the theme." It is, therefore, not surprising that personal naming has also been applied in literary works. In literature, a name contributes implicitly to the characterisation of the name bearer, and names in fiction are considerably more tied to their context. Writers give specific names to the characters in their literary works, which usually serves a particular onomastic function. It can also be conceded that personal names in literature are crucial in the understating of a writer's themes in her/his literary script. Usually, the theme is not mentioned in the narrative, instead, the writer allows the readers to work it out on their own. Therefore, character naming helps readers to understand the theme of these artistic works. The misinterpretation of the meaning of a character's name, may lead to missing the meaning of the literary work, which may lead to the missing of the meaning of a novel.

Remarkably, research that included character naming in Xitsonga novels are studies by Nkuzana (1996), Golele (2002) and Shirilele (2011). These studies have shown that characters in some Xitsonga novels are revealed through narrative, dramatic and name-giving techniques. They highlighted how some character's names relates to their personality or traits. However, character naming is not studied in greater detail as it was not the main focus of the above-mentioned studies, although they touched on it in passing. Not much research has been conducted on character portrayal and theme development using a naming technique in literature, particularly in Xitsonga. There is, therefore, a need for further research on Xitsonga literary work, for the representations of Xitsonga names as they are used by some authors in their novels as a technique employed to develop characters and themes. Against this backdrop, this researcher has undertaken research in literary anthroponomastics. This study focuses on the depiction of characters and development of themes through naming in selected two Xitsonga novels, namely *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka* (Mtombeni, 2008).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the descriptivist theory of names (DTN)). Poller (2014) indicates that descriptivism is a semantic theory that has its roots in the traditional Fregean approach to meaning. She further indicates that the DTN postulates that the reference of a name is determined semantically through the satisfaction of descriptive properties. Furthermore, Nikola (2010) asserts that the DTN is based on the view that the meaning or semantic content of proper name is identical to the descriptions associated with the speaker, while their referents are determined to be the object that satisfies their descriptions. According to the DTN, each name is a bunch of descriptions, and this collection of descriptions is what communicated the meaning and defined the bearer of that particular name (Nikola, 2010). On a more specific note, a person L who utters the name S, believes that the group of concrete descriptions which he or she associates with S will identify some object K uniquely. L's use of S is successful when referring to K if the associated group of descriptions fit K, otherwise, it alludes to anything that fits that associated group of descriptions perfectly (Macia, 1998). For example, Saul Kripke is synonymous with the cluster of descriptions such as (i) the man who wrote "Naming and necessity," (ii) a person who was born on November 13, 1940, in New York," and (iii) the son of a leader of the Synagogue. According to this theory, every name in the world has a particular meaning, and there are reasons why that name was given to that person. The idea is that the semantic contribution of a definite description can be explained by defining the role it plays in utterances where it is used. Descriptions are defined in accordance with the context. The DTN is preferred in this study because it is related to the objectives of this study, namely, to analyse how Xitsonga writers use a naming technique to depict characters and develop themes.

### **Mibya ya Nyekanyeka: The Novel's Literary Recap**

*Mibya ya Nyekanyeka* literally means that the baby-slings are loose. Pastor Tlhomandloti and his wife N'wa-Basana stay in Johannesburg in Soweto. They are blessed with two sons: Madambi, the firstborn and Nyiko, the youngest. Madambi is extremely intelligent when it comes to academic matters, but he disappoints his father because of his carelessness and the fact that he is always dirty. Nyiko is the loved one in the family because he pleases his father by always being neat; however, he also disappoints his father because he does not do well academically. Again, Madambi disappoints his father because he falls in love with a Xhosa girl named Soluka. His father did not like cross-ethnic marriages. Madambi decides that he will not marry any girl besides Soluka. His father opposes that decision, he does not want other tribes in his family, and he does not want to have Xhosa grandchildren.

Nyiko has followed his father's footsteps in many ways; he became a pastor and got married to a Mutsonga girl named Munene. He also depends on his father for many things. What Nyiko does makes him loved by his father. When Nyiko becomes a pastor, he is admired by the whole church. Nyiko is tempted and commits adultery with a woman named N'wa-Mdanisi, a widow from his church who used to invite him to her house, claiming she needed prayer. N'wa-Mdanisi ends up falling pregnant. The elders of the church hear about the rumour and remove Nyiko as a pastor. The removal of Nyiko as a pastor does not only affect

him, but it also affects Pastor Tlhomandloti, his father, because he loves Nyiko so much. Nyiko ends up committing suicide because he cannot stand the disappointment he has caused his family, church and the community. The following day after Nyiko's burial, Tlhomandloti dies of depression. After the death of Pastor Tlhomandloti, N'wa-Basana who has been quiet all along, appears and supports his son, Madambi, so that he can marry his soulmate, Soluka. Madambi goes to his father's grave to tell him about his marriage to Soluka. After that, Madambi and Soluka leave the grave together, while holding hands in union. On the other hand, there is the family of Mrs Cheyeza Baloyi, who seeks help from Tlhomandloti when her son, Celela, is shot by the police and, consequently, dies because of his criminal lifestyle.

In *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka*, Mtombeni has deliberately named his characters to depict their personality traits and their way of life. Characters, such as Pastor Tlhomandloti, N'wa-Basana, Madambi, Nyiko, Munene, N'wa-Mdanisi and Celela, have been named with the aim of portraying their roles and themes in the novel.

### ***Tlhomandloti***

According to Masunga (cited in Nkuzana, 1996: 127) the name Tlhomandloti "is a compound noun that consists of the verb stem *tlhoma*, which means to stick, and a noun *ndloti* which means cheetah. The name is probably derived from the Xitsonga expression *kuandlala ndloti*, which means to give a red royal treatment. The skin of a cheetah is used as a symbol of royalty in the Xitsonga culture, and it is spread out for the royalty to sit on as a sign of honour. In the case of the pastor's name, *ndloti* is not spread, but stuck, that is, it is misplaced." This name portrays his superciliousness, his pride and his social position as a man of God, community advisor and a family counsellor. This supposition is supported by Tlhomandloti's words as follows:

*Wa swi tiva leswaku muti wa hina wu hundzukile rivoni exikarhi ka vusiku leri voniwaka hi vanhu va ha ta hi le kule. Hi hina timboni ta munyama wa vanhu va ka hina; hi hina hi faneleke ku va rhangela emahlweni eka hinkwaswo leswo fulama ni leswi akaka mikhuva leyinene, vumunhu ni nhluvuko wa vanhu varikwerhu. Munhu loyi a nga ni xirive u ta leterisa ku yini vanhu va ka vona ke? (p. 17-18).*

(You know that our home has turned into a lamp in the night which is seen from far by people. We are the lamps to light up the darkness of our people; we have a duty to lead them well in everything and in a good way, with humanity and for the development of our people. How will a person who is forgetful guide his people?)

Pastor Tlhomandloti regards his family as being of such a high standing that he does not leave room for failure or for seeing the dark side of life. He desires perfection, as exemplified by his desire for his sons to be perfect. The character's name, in this case, reinforces the ideas of his community. He behaves like a person who is at the cutting edge in all aspects of life. This is seen in the way he advises his son, Madambi, regarding his academic progress at school:

*Ndzi ri u nga fani na van'wana. Madyondzele ya wena ya komba leswaku u le mahlweni ka hinkwavo, kutani u fanele ku endla leswi hlawulekeke, u tlula hinkwavo eka hinkwaswo - fungha marito ya mina (p. 19).*

(I say you should not be like other people. Your academic progress shows that you are ahead in everything; therefore, you should perform exceptionally well, and surpass everyone in everything - heed my words).

Pastor Tlhomandloti advises his son in this matter because he feels he should occupy the first position in all that he does. Therefore, Tlhomandloti's name portrays him as a character who acts as an extremely important person in society. The name Tlhomandloti is used to reinforce the theme of perfectionism. Tlhomandloti wants everything to be perfect in his life and never leaves room for disappointment. This character goes well with the name Tlhomandloti.

### **Nyiko**

In general, *nyiko* is an abstract noun which means “a gift” in English. It can refer to something given to someone, especially to show appreciation. Nyiko is the lastborn child of Pastor Tlhomandloti. He is portrayed as the favourite child of the family. The writer describes him in this way:

*Nyiko yena a a ri xiluva xa ndyangu. Swo tala a swi nga endliwi handle ka rikitse ra muti. (p. 6).*

(Nyiko was the flower of the family. A lot of things would not be done without him.)

Nyiko is used to highlight the theme of “blessing,” he is considered a blessing and a gift from God by his father. He is the most loved child in his family. After Nyiko’s burial, his father feels as if he has lost everything, although he has another son. Tlhomandloti regarded Nyiko as his everything, he said to himself:

*Hinkwaswo swi fambile (p. 53).*

(Everything is gone.)

Through this citation, it is perceptible that Tlhomandloti wishes he could also die in order to join Nyiko. This is well articulated, though metaphorically, in the expression ‘all is gone’, indicating how his whole life has grossly being affected since the ‘gift’ has been taken away from him.

### **Madambi**

The name Madambi is the plural form of the noun *dambi*, which means misfortune. It is usually given to a child whose birth is preceded by bad luck and misfortune of who is born miraculously. The children given this name are usually associated with the frustrations and problems that they cause their parents. Madambi is the firstborn in Tlhomandloti’s family. The writer portrays him as a careless person and that makes his father feel that it is unfortunate to have Madambi as his son, the writer explains:

*Xidyoho xa yena a ri ni futa ni vufendze. Loko mana wa yena a ngo n'wi tekela swo ambala a swi hlantswa, yena a swi ambala swi ka swi hlakala. Ku hlamba ka yena hi loku ko sindzisiwa naswona a timbalambadza. ...misisi a wonge i mubi wa mihlahle kumbe xihuku xo endliwa hi dzovo ra mangwa (p. 5).*

(His problem was that he was untidy. He wore his clothes until they were extremely dirty unless his mother took them from him and washed them. He only bathed when he was forced and he bathed for the sake of bathing. ...his hair was long, uncombed and dirty.)

Madambi also frustrates his father as he wants to marry a Xhosa girl while his father is against a cross-ethnic marriage. The author succeeded in using a naming technique to depict Madambi as his name reflects how his father feels about him. The name Madambi is used to develop the theme of “curse,” He is regarded as a curse by his father because he is always opposing his father’s wishes. The fact that Madambi is untidy upsets his father because everyone in his family is neat. Madambi also wants to marry a Xhosa girl, while his father is against cross- ethnic marriages.

### ***N’wa-Basana***

The name N’wa-Basana comes from the phrase *n’wana wa Basana* meaning Basana’s child (basically a female child). The noun *n’wana*, which means a baby, has been shortened to leave only the prefix *n’wa-*. The name Basana is derived from the verb stem *basa*, which literally means clean/neat/pure or a white colour. The verb stem *basa* can also refer to good work, it can be used to show appreciation for someone’s work like: *ntirho wa wena wu basile*, meaning a person is doing a job well. The word can also refer to a kind heart. *Basa* can also be associated with being HIV negative, a person can say, *ngati ya mina yi basile* (my blood is clean), meaning that he does not have diseases as people’s disease is seen in their blood. The word can also be used when someone has not committed a crime, as in, *mavoko ya mina ya basile*, literally meaning that “my hands are clean.” In the Xitsonga culture, the name Basana can be given to someone who is always clean or who is kind-hearted. In *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka*, N’wa-Basana is Pastor Tlhomandloti’s wife. N’wa-Basana and her husband are always neat. The author explains to us in this way:

*Misisi ya vona havambirhi a yi tshama yi fefiwile, ni ku tshama yi komile yi tsemetiwa swo xonga. Swo ambala a va rhandza swa ntima tanihi vafundhisi vo tala ni vavasati va vona. Swiamabalo leswi a swi tshama swi basile, swi phumundhiwa ritshuri mixo wun’wana na wun’wana hi malwandla ni nsaso lowo khatisa swinene (p. 2).*

(Both their hair was always combed and cut beautifully. They loved wearing black clothes just like other pastors and their wives. Their clothes were always neat, because they dusted them every morning carefully and skilfully.)

When her husband judges their sons, namely, Nyiko for not performing academically at school and Madambi for being untidy, Nwa-Basana opposes him in this way:

*Kasi loko va ku mubya wu tsemekile kumbe va ku wa nyekanyeka a va vuli swona leswaku munhu wa vutlhari a vuya a lulama u tswala vana vo dadavala, va mihupana, miharihari, kumbe va va ni lunya, xindzhuvu ni futa xee? (p. 02).*

(When they say the baby-carrier is cut or loose, did they not mean that an intelligent person did give birth to idiots, naughty, mischievous, stubborn, wayward and careless children?)

N'wa-Basana welcomes Soluka into her family after Tlhomandloti passes on. She gives them her blessing so that they can marry each other:

*Mina ndzi dyuharile; ku ta fika laha ndzi nga ha swi kotiki ku ku swekela ni ku ku hlantswela. Naswona a ndzi ta tsaka ku vona n'wingi wa mina, nhlomi ya mativula ya mina ndza ha hanya (p. 61).*

(I am very old, it will get to a point where I cannot cook and wash for you. I would be happy to see my daughter-in-law, my first son's wife, while I am still alive.)

Mtombeni uses this name to highlight the themes of "peace" and "kindness." She never intervenes, although she disapproves of her husband's judgemental and tribalist behaviour, she keeps quiet for the sake of peace. Indeed, people did not talk too much and did not entertain conflict-related issues.

### ***N'wa-Mdanisi***

The name N'wa-Mdanisi is derived from *n'wana wa Mdanisi*. *N'wana* means a baby and Mdanisi is derived from the verb stem *danisa*, which means embarrass or humiliate. The noun *n'wana* has been shortened to leave only the prefix *n'wa-* which denotes a female person. The idea is that she is a daughter of Mdanisi. Mdanisi refers to a person who does embarrassing things or, things that may embarrass other people or the person him/herself. In short, the word can be translated as the humiliator. N'wa-Mdanisi is a widow and a member in pastor Nyiko's church. She invites him into her house to pray for her child, who is not feeling well. When the pastor arrives at N'wa-Mdanisi, everything in the house is well organised and attractive.

*Loko mufundhisi Nyiko a fika eka N'wa-Mdanisi a nga swi langutelanga leswi a nga swi kuma kona. U kumile swakudya swo swekiwa hi malwandla swi vekiwile etafuleni swi tlhela swi funengetiwa hi pesa ro sivela tinhongana ku tshama ehenhla ka swakudya. N'wana wa vanhu na yena a nga bombanga o kendla hi vomu ku pelela hase ka malwandla. Endzhaku ka ku pfluxelana va tshamile etafuleni va dya swakudya va ri karhi va dya bulu va titsakerile (p. 44-45).*

(When pastor Nyiko arrived at N'wa-Mdanisi's place, he was not expecting what he found. He found tasty food on the table that was covered with a folding-fly proof cloth. In addition, she was extremely well dressed. After greeting each other, they sat and dined at the table while chatting happily).

N'wa-Mdanisi is a brave woman who will say anything. She uses her tricks to catch Pastor Nyiko's attention and keeps him in the house until late. She requests the pastor not to leave; a

request he cannot ignore. Indeed, the pastor sleeps over, as is explained in the following sentence:

*Loko mufundhisi a huma endlwini ya ka N'wa-Mdanisi vurhonga bya matakuxa a byi humile* (p. 45).

When the pastor leaves N'wa-Mdanisi's house it was already dawn of the following day.

Pastor Nyiko feels embarrassed on his way home because a pastor is not expected to sneak around. From that day onwards, the pastor continues sneaking into N'wa-Mdanisi's house at night. N'wa-Mdanisi's affair with the pastor becomes known and she leaves the church after falling pregnant. Because the committee and the church cannot take it any longer, the church committee decides to remove Nyiko as a pastor. Consequently, Nyiko ends up committing suicide. Indeed, N'wa-Mdanisi's actions are humiliating as her name says. Her actions make her leave the church because she is embarrassed about what she has done. It is also her actions that led Pastor Nyiko to his death, he would have kept his position as a pastor if it were not for N'wa-Mdanisi's disgraceful actions and he would not have committed suicide. Therefore, the name N'wa-Mdanisi relates to her role in this novel. The author also used the name N'wa-Mdanisi as a technique to reinforce the themes of "disgrace" and "humiliation." What N'wa-Mdanisi and Pastor Nyiko did was a disgrace, that is the reason why she leaves the church, she is embarrassed by her own actions. Pastor Nyiko commits suicide because he cannot stand the ignomy of being excommunicated from the church.

### **Munene**

The name Munene is derived from the phrase *munhu lonene*, which means someone with a good personality or behaviour. Munene is pastor Nyiko's wife. The morning when Nyiko arrives home from N'wa-Mdanisi's home, he requests Munene to pray for him claiming to have been tempted by bad spirits. Munene does pray for her husband because she is a peaceful and a kind person. Her name reinforces the following themes: "kindness" and "peace." In most cases, people who forgive are the kindhearted ones and they prefer peace. This teaches women to forgive and support their husbands to strengthen their marriages.

### **Celela**

The name Celela is derived from the verb stem *cela*, which means to dig. *Celela* means to dig for something or to bury something. From *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka*, Celela is portrayed as a problem child who is a criminal. He is gunned down by the police after breaking into a white man's house and stealing a large amount of money. The author demonstrates his behaviour in the following passage:

*...ndzi dyohela misava ni vanhu va yona, ndzi dzolonganise kurhula ni ku tenga ka timbilu ta vona. Ndzi ve ni matlotlo ku fikela laha ndzi nga tlhengula swisa swi hisa vaorhi na mina mutlhonthli wa tinhlahle ta xitiko ti ndzi hisa. A ndzi hanya hi ku faya ni teka tinhundzu ni timali ta vanhu hi nkanu. Namuntlha hi tshove yindlu ya Mulungu un'wana hi teka mali yo tala swinene. A hi kotanga ku yi hlaya hikuva loko hi huma endlwini ya leyo a ku ri siyan'wiya. Maphorisa a ya balesela hi tivholovholo, va hi hlongorisa ku sala ku nuha*



*ngati. Vanghana va mina va baleseriwile va fela kwalaho, kambe ndzi twe ndza ha ri na matimba yo khwita ndzi fika laha kaya ni mbanga leyi (p. 15).*

(... I have wronged the earth and its people, I have destroyed their peace and pure hearts. I have been rash, and I provoked the wrong people, and it came back to me. I used to break in and take people's belongings by force. Today we broke into a woman's house and took a lot of money. We could not count it when we left the house because it was hectic. The police were shooting and chasing us. My friends were shot dead at the same time, but I had the energy to limp home with this wound).

In the above paragraph, Celela is telling Pastor Tlhomandloti and his mother what has happened to him. Celela ends up dying. The author confirms Celela's death in the following sentence:

*Vafi va yimbeleriwa, va mikosi va sala va hanya va yimele siku ra vona ro fa va ta celeriwa tanihi Celela (p. 20).*

(The dead were praised, those who were still alive lived and were waiting to die and be buried like Celela).

Mtombeni (2008) used the name Celela to highlight the theme of "crime." He conveys the message that crime does not pay. Nothing good comes from his criminal lifestyle, he only faces the terrible consequences of his actions. It is crime that resulted in him being gunned down by the police. This deduction is reinforced by Celela's utterance:

*A ndzi hanya hi ku faya ni ku teka tinhundzu ni timali ta vanhu hi nkanu. Namuntlha hi tshove yindlu ya Mulungu un'wana hi teka mali yo tala swinene. A hi swi kotanga ku yi hlaya hikuva loko hi huma endlwini yoleyo a ku ri siyavan'wisiyaka. Maphorisa a ya balesela hi tivholovholo, va hi hlongorisa ku sala ku nuha ngati. Vanghana va mina vambirhi va baleseriwile va fela kwalaho, kambe ndzi twe ndza ha ri na matimba yo khwita ndzi ta fika laha kaya ni mbanga leyi (p. 15).*

(I used to take people's belongings and money by force. Today we broke into some white man's house and took a lot of money. We did not manage to count it because we were running when we went out of the house. The police were shooting with the guns, they chased us until there was a smell of blood. My two friends were shot to death same time, but I had the energy to limp until I arrived here at home with this wound.)

The above scenario gives an explicit narrative of how Celela was involved in break-in activities that culminated into his demise. Celela ends up dying, and everything to do with him became history as highlighted by the sentence, "*Ku herile malembe mambirhi Celela a file, ku ririrwile – a celeriwile (p. 21).*" (Two years had elapsed since Celela died, was mourned and buried.). thus, as his name denotes, he was buried and that defined the end of his existence because of his ethico-moral propensity.

## CONCLUSION

The portrayal of character naming in B.K. Mtombeni's novel, *Mibya ya Nyekanyeka* was examined. This paper intended to analyse how B.K. Mtombeni uses a naming technique when depicting his characters and also how he uses those characters' names to develop the themes in their novels. From the above analysis, it was revealed that the novelist did not give names to his characters randomly, but they were named in relation to the roles assigned to them in the novel. The names of the characters in the above analysed novel have meanings that reflect back to their actions, situations and personalities. It is noteworthy that some of the characters' names in the above analysis also convey the text's thematic concerns.

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