

Nicknaming in football: A case of selected nicknames of national football teams in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines nicknames of selected national football teams in terms of their connotative meanings, their derivation and how they reflect a relationship between society and the world in which they are found. In particular, the paper deals with nicknames in relation to their source (derivative), their specific features that motivate the adaptation of the name and how a word is adapted to [nick]name something anew. The paper establishes how the nicknaming practice in football reveals people's pride in and patriotism for their respective nations. The paper shows how a nickname of a national football team emerges from either a country's most endeared natural resource for which it is associated with or its unique and distinct national characteristics from which it draws some form of national pride. In so doing, the paper demonstrates how such nicknames become a token for national identity, pride and unity. In addition, the paper shows that nicknames of national football teams in Southern Africa do not only project national identity and pride that citizens may have for their respective teams but reveals how people use language in a relaxed but jocular manner to foreground salient and admirable features or characteristics embodied in a given object or living thing. We conclude that nicknames of football teams are symbols of national identity, pride, passion for the sport and patriotism for respective nations.

Keywords: Nicknames, sport, football, national team, Southern Africa.

INTRODUCTION

"I am disappointed with our national football team. How can we keep on losing in the quarter finals each tournament? This is the third time now if I am not mistaken? I think we should rename our national team from black stars to something else. Black is associated with bad luck".

"No we can't do that, we should be proud to be black, we are stars, black stars".

The interchange of words above was heard among two of our Ghanaian friends during the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations football tournament, hosted by South Africa at which their national football team was defeated at the quarter finals of the tournament by Ivory Coast. This interchange reminded us of nicknaming practices in sports generally and in particular that of national football teams across the

world. It is this conversation that partly motivated the current study which is an attempt to examine the nicknaming practice of national football teams in Southern African region. From the outset, it is important to distinguish between terminologies as used in this paper. The term football and soccer are here used interchangeably as synonyms to refer to the popular sport administered by the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA).

Football is a common sport played by almost all nations in the world. In individual countries, the sport is organized into national leagues in which clubs owned by individuals or corporations have made the sport professional and a lucrative enterprise. Each of the teams or clubs are known by their official name beside a nickname, for example, Chelsea football club is nicknamed 'the blues' while Arsenal football club is known as 'the gunners'. Apart from club football, individual nations select the 'best' players from various clubs playing their professional football within and outside a given country to form what is popularly known as national football teams. These national teams are often known by their nations' respective names which are considered as official names. However, it has been observed that in addition to the official name, most if not all national football teams tend to bear a nickname. In most cases, such nicknames reveal linguistic creativity; innovation and unlimited imagination on the part of the namers (Pfukwa, 2003). This practice of nicknaming in football also exhibits the nature of social interaction between human beings and other animate and inanimate beings alike in the world in which they are found. For this reason, the interchange between the two above indicates that a nickname, like a proper name, is: "a social statement reflecting the bearer, the namer and the social environment in which the name is found" (Pfukwa, 2003, p.16). Beside, nicknames in sports show connotative meanings that reflect deep rooted social, political and national pride and patriotism of the people for their respective nations. This in turn appears to foreground a nation's expectations of success in the sport. It also goes to show the power inherent in the sport in uniting diverse groups of people from different social and economic backgrounds. Evidently, nicknames are in general an interesting subfield of onomastics worth investigating as they are an embodiment of particular social values and attitudes of a people.

The term nickname has been defined as a name given to an individual [or even a collective entity] by a community which is usually descriptive in form because it tends to sum up that individual [or group] character's physical shape or idiosyncratic features (Kahari, 1990). Furthermore, Ndimande-Hlongwa (2010, p.88) citing De Klerk (1998) asserts that nicknames act as tokens for "positive identification and serve to establish an informal relaxed atmosphere". In this vein, nicknames can be used to foreground an individual or groups' collective capabilities and attributes. In some cases, nicknames are given in praise of someone's extraordinary attributes in something within a given society. It is in light of this that Cowan (2005) argues that "nicknames express attitudes, neutral, idealizing, personality, jocular, derisive, ironic, sometimes condemnatory" (p. 42).

Conversely, nicknames can also serve to describe someone's personality or physical being in a negative sense. For example, in Kaonde, a Bantu language spoken in Zambia, a person who is in the habit of spreading gossip in a community is likely to be nicknamed kanyamiyembe, literally 'one who goes round dropping or producing gossip' and a person who cannot be trusted may be nicknamed kanyankhupiti (one who easily changes sides in an argument or in life matters) in Nyanja, another Bantu language spoken in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. In this case, "...nicknames serve to mock or chastise...[a person]" (Cowan, 2005, p. 42), emphasis added. However, unlike nicknames with positive connotations, such nicknames are hardly known to the name bearers but rather are used by a section of the public in the bearer's absence to distastefully describe his or her character or physical being. In light of this, nicknames do not only reflect positive attributes or traits of an individual but may also reflect the negative ones. Nonetheless, this study focuses on nicknames of national football teams that have

positive meanings or those that depict positive attributes which in turn tend to reflect or tends to endear upon someone or a collective entity positive attributes (see Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2010; Pfukwa, 2003).

In this regard, Wilson (1998) states that [nick]names have associations, flavours and they are evocative and carry particular messages. This entails that nicknames are not empty word categories but are words that say something about their referents (Pfukwa, 2003). Nicknames may also reveal something about someone's or group's underlying social, physical or even psychological state. In this vein, Wilson (1998) further argues that nicknames do not only identify an individual or group but they are often the focus of one's sense of identity. Besides, nicknames, it may be argued, can locate an individual, group or institution in terms of their societal statuses and thereby presenting a message about someone or something to society. From this perspective, Mutunda (2011) argues that "...a [nick]name is viewed as a message that the name-giver conveys to society through the bearer of the name" (p. 14). This fact is epitomised in studies with clear examples which reveal that Africans have their own naming system that reflect their linguistic diversity and link them to their own cultural and social values and traditions (e.g. Appiah, 2010; Batoma, 2008; Neethling, 2004; Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2010; Mutunda, 2011; Pfukwa 2003, 2008).

In the context of sports, national football teams bear nicknames that are given purposefully and which reflect the national team's fighting spirit. In addition, such nicknames seem to foster national identity and unity, among others. Unlike proper names which are usually given by someone or by an institution and are easily identifiable, nicknames in sports may be given by either sport journalists as they write their news stories or by soccer fans through associating what they see to what they expect or what is already known (Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2010).

NICKNAMING AS A PRACTICE IN SPORTS

In recent times, nicknaming in sports has become a pervasive practice around the world although one may argue that the practice is as old as sports are. In this regard, almost all types of sports appear to entertain the nicknaming practice. Often times, in this practice, the nicknames given may range from those of individual sportsmen and women to names of teams as collective entities. For example, the South African Rugby team is known as the springboks while the cricket team is known as the proteas. In the sport of boxing, Mohamed Ali, the former world boxing heavy weight champion, was known by three nicknames as 'the greatest', 'the people's champion' and 'the Louisville lip', while Mike Tyson, another former boxing heavy weight champion was popularly known as 'the kid dynamite', 'Iron Mike' and 'the baddest man on the planet'. In tennis, world champion Roger Federer, is nicknamed FedEx (which seems to be an association between his name Federer and FedEx, a famous postal services company), while once world basketball number one Michael Jordan was nicknamed 'black cat', 'his airness', 'MJ', 'Air Jordan' and 'Money'.

Evidently, nicknaming as a practice is part and parcel of sports. However, there are very few onomastic studies conducted to explore nicknaming practices in sports in general and in particular, their connotative meanings, their derivation and how they reflect a relationship between society and the world in which they are found. A few notable studies conducted in Africa on nicknames in sports include Ndimande-Hlongwa's (2010) study. This study focuses on nicknames of some South African football players and their respective local teams. In the study, Ndimande-Hlongwa demonstrates how African languages have influenced the nicknaming practice in sports and how this in turn reflects the multilingual nature of South Africa as a 'rain-ball' nation.

Although Ndimande-Hlongwa's study does not venture into nicknames of national football teams, her study is one clear example that illustrates the place of nicknames in football. Her study principally focuses on the sources of nicknames of soccer players and their respective teams in terms of their derivations and functions within the broader context of the sport of football. The study concludes that the nicknames in sports symbolize approval in a multicultural and multilingual nation of South Africa, which indeed is a social practice among Africans. Nevertheless, it is not clear how this symbolic nature of nicknames correlates to multicultural and multilingual approval although such nicknames say something about the nature of multilingual communities and the linguistic creativity among speakers.

Similarly, using nicknames in sporting, Neethling (2000) shows the influence that African names have exerted on language communities that were once 'closed up' during Apartheid in South Africa. He further demonstrates how African names which were once marginalised are making their presence felt in areas of social life such as sports. He argues that this practice is reflective of the true nature of South Africa, as a nation of Africa and indeed as a multilingual and multicultural society. Neethling particularly draws on examples of nicknames in the context of local sporting to demonstrate how once resented sports by the black communities in the Apartheid era have permeated all communities [making them less compartmentalised (emphasis added)].

Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that such language practices as evidenced in sports, do not necessarily suggest that racial differences have been reduced at all levels of social life. For example, one might still see traces of racial 'segregation' especially in the game of rugby and cricket which have remained predominantly White. Although Neethling's study does not specifically examine nicknames in football, the examples he provides demonstrate the importance of nicknames in sports generally in fostering unity in a society which was once polarised along the racial divide. His study also consolidates the point already made regarding the pervasiveness of nicknaming as a practice in sports.

Furthermore, Connolly's (2000) looks at nicknames and symbols of three college athletic teams. He focuses on how the nicknames of these colleges were derived and how they have evolved over time to occupy a place in the institutions' culture. Connolly (2000) specifically discusses the controversies surrounding the nicknames due to their racially inclined nature. Even if his study does not look at football in particular, it reveals that "athletics nicknames...are powerful cultural symbols because they not only evoke allegiance to an institution's athletic teams but also may be instrumental in shaping the image of the entire college or university" (Connolly 2000, p. 1). From this statement, it is clear that, like proper names, nicknames may mean little but tell a lot about someone, an institution or community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data used in this discussion arises from nicknames of twelve out of the fourteen national football teams found in the Southern African Development Commission (SADC), a regional economic and political organisation for countries found in Southern African region. The nations under discussion include the following: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Zambia. We intentionally settled for this region in order to focus our discussion.

The discussion addresses three main themes, namely a theme with teams bearing animal related names, a theme with war-oriented names, and a theme dealing with teams bearing names of inanimate objects. In the discussion, we firstly present the name of the country which is the official name of the team followed by the nickname of the national team in question. We then look at the connotative meanings of the given nickname and thirdly, we deal with nicknames in relation to their source (derivative), their

specific features that motivate the adaptation of the name and how the word or name has been re-adapted to name something anew.

Football Teams bearing animal names

Angola

Official name of team: Angola national football team

Nickname: palancas negra gigante (in Portuguese) 'sable antelopes'

The nickname for the Angolan national football team is taken from an animal known as sable antelope. This particular species is characterized by its large size, athletic and rarity – apparently the only one of its kind in the world and only found in Angola. Therefore the animal is considered one of a highly treasured government trophy. The importance of this animal is exemplified by government's decision to inscribe its image in banknotes, passports and even post stamps. In African mythologies, including that of Angolans, this legendary antelope, symbolizes beauty, vivacity and visual sharpness. Several ethnic groups in Africa regard the antelope as a significant animal as it is known to be a "form taken by some gods and only the creature itself knows where these gods are to be found" (Matthews & Matthews 2005, p.29). Given its national and symbolic significance as well as its physical traits, the Angolan national soccer team has been nicknamed after this particular animal. In this case, the Angolan national team is taken to resemble this animal's attributes which translate into skillfulness, athleticism and excellence on the field of play. More significantly, the nickname symbolizes the team as a national asset whose importance nears that of this national trophy.

Botswana

Official name of team: Botswana national football team

Nickname: The Zebras

The Botswana national team is nicknamed the Zebras. Like its Angolan antelope counterpart, the zebra is a national animal adored by its citizens for its remarkable beauty, most particularly exclusive black and white stripes. The animal symbolises national harmony in a country with diverse ethnic and racial groupings. The significance of this animal is depicted in the coat of arms where two zebras are pictured standing side by side as a symbol of unity.

Furthermore, the Botswana national flag is partly inspired by the colours of the zebra. For this reason, the zebra is the most revered animal in the country. It is for this reason that the nickname of the team symbolises the passion that citizens have for their national football team just as they revere the zebra. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the nickname draws on some of the physical traits of a zebra, that is, the known stamina to outpace its predator when attacked through its zigzagging moves, and its hard kicks it inflicts on its enemy in order to survive. Clearly, these are some of the 'traits' needed in any successful football team. It is partly from these attributes that appear to inspire the nickname for the national team.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Official name of team: Democratic Republic of Congo national football team

Nickname: the leopards

The Democratic Republic of Congo national football team is nicknamed the leopards. As with other nicknames above, this nickname also tends to draw on unique features of this particular animal. For

example, the leopard is known for its aggressiveness, aptitude, pace and stamina which enables it to pursue and defeat its prey even larger than itself. Apart from this, a leopard is also known for its adaptability and survival skills in different habitats. Interestingly, a leopard appears throughout African myth and folklore as one of the most dangerous and courageous carnivore animals. In the same token, among most African mythologies, “it is the leopard and not the lion who is the royal beast of kings. In the then Zaire, the leopard skin covers the royal seat and a cap of leopard skin is the equivalent of a crown” (Matthews & Matthews, 2005, p.363). While among the Zulus of South Africa, the leopard skin was used as part of their military regalia to symbolize power, courage and pride. In addition, African royals used the leopard’s skin for adornment in order to symbolise power and pride. In fact, the late president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko K Ngbendu Ngbendu used the leopard skin as a symbolic adornment for power and pride. It is such practices drawn from the old generation that have since threatened the animal with extinction. Evidently, the leopard is viewed as a symbol of power, bravery and pride. Given such adorable traits, the national football team is nicknamed after the animal in order to demonstrate the like attributes and/or abilities of a leopard on the field of play, that is, pace, strength and courage to conquer the opponent no matter how powerful or skilful that given opponent may be. Furthermore, the nickname seems to reveal national pride and passion for the sport among Congolese.

Lesotho

Official name of team: Lesotho national football team

Nickname: Likuena (in Sesotho) ‘the crocodile’

The Lesotho national football team is nicknamed likuena ‘crocodile’. This reptile is legendary in many African myths due to its exceptional hunting skills and strength. The reptile is famous for its unpredictable, lethal style of hunting for any kind of mammal including humans. In this regard, the crocodile is considered one of the most dangerous reptiles that inhabit most rivers of Africa. Given its traits which enables it to ‘win’ most of its hunting encounters, the nickname connotes physical strength and skill that the Lesotho national team is expected to exhibit or is known to exhibit on the ground of play against its opponents. The nickname also suggests pride that football fans have for their national team and that of their nation.

Madagascar

Official name of team: Madagascar national football team

Nickname: Barea

The Barea is the nickname for the Madagascar national football team. Bareas are a type of zebu found in Madagascar. The animals are said not to be native of Africa, but that they were transported from Asia many years ago. In Madagascar, the animal is a symbol of the national economy as well as a symbol for political unity. For this reason, the barea is a revered animal in the country. Its economic and political significance is depicted in the coat of arms, a national symbol of Madagascar. In the seal, the animal’s horns are depicted holding or supporting the island of Madagascar and below them is the country’s motto: Tanindrazana – Fahafahana – Fandrosoana (meaning: homeland, liberty, development). In fact, zebras are mostly used as draught oxen, as dairy cattle and as beef cattle.

Given the above, the animal tends to symbolise the nation, the freedom of the people and economic development. Therefore, this makes the animal occupy an important symbolic space in the overall social, political and economic activities of the nation. For these reasons, the national team has been nicknamed after the barea considering its significant value in national, social and economic

development. Therefore, the animal symbolises the nation and so does the national football team. Thus, in the national team's logo which is decorated with Madagascar's national flag's colours, the barea's horns are re-contextualised, that is, instead of holding the island of Madagascar, they are depicted to be holding up a football.

It is clear that this nickname symbolically associates the critical position that the barea occupies to Madagascar's national development. Nevertheless, note that unlike other nicknames observed above, there is no clear link between the physical features of the barea and the skills a football team is expected to display on the field of play. Instead, what is evident is that the nickname tends to project further the national ideals which in this case are reflected in football. The nickname might also suggest the importance of football in uniting the nation together.

Mozambique

Name of team: Mozambique national football team

Nickname: The black mambas

The Mozambican national football team is nicknamed the black mambas. A black mamba is known to be one of the most dangerous snakes in the world and many of its bites on human beings result in death. It is for this reason that the snake is seen as the most dreaded in Africa. The snake is also known for its pace and ability to defeat any purported 'intruder' within its territory. This snake is thus associated with extreme danger. Therefore, a football team nicknamed after a mamba signifies the like features, for example, pace, ability to strike (score) and defeat an opponent regardless of their size. It is such traits that the national football team tends to identify itself with.

Football teams bearing nicknames for 'war'

Namibia and Zimbabwe

Name of countries: Namibia and Zimbabwe

Nicknames: The Brave Warriors (Namibia) and Warriors (Zimbabwe)

We have combined the two nations in this section since both use similar nicknames except that the Namibian national football team's nickname warriors is modified by the adjective brave, thus the Brave Warriors, while the Zimbabwe national team is known as the Warriors. The difference is in the use of the adjective brave. The word 'warrior' according to the Free Online Dictionary, has its origin from the French word *werreieur* meaning to make 'war'. Thus the word warrior implies one who engages or experienced in 'warfare'. The concept of warrior is well-known and written about in most African histories when kingdoms fought battles against one another for power and domination. Every kingdom had an army of warriors whose role was not only to protect the ethnic group and kingship from invaders but also to save their people from any possible enslavement. Sometimes warriors could be invaders of other people's territory upon orders from their leader.

The main distinctive features of warriors are bravery, strength and spirit of unity to conquer enemies. These features are what particularly inspire the nicknames of the respective national football teams. It is bravery, experience, strength and unity that a team needs in order to succeed in the sport of football. In fact, a warrior is expected to be skilled at his job and thus skill is also part of the motivation for the nickname in football as it is important for any successful team. Interestingly, the word warrior already indexes bravery but yet the adjective 'brave' has been used. This is in order to reinforce the kind of 'bravery' expected from the warriors, that is, brave warriors should emerge victors in any 'battle' they

take on. However, one might argue that perhaps the adjective brave was used in order to distinguish the team from the Zimbabwean counterpart, whichever came first.

South Africa

Official name of team: South African national football team

Nickname of national team: Bafanabafana (in Zulu) 'boys'

The South African national football team is referred to as bafanabafana. The nickname is said to have first been used in July 1992 by three journalists to identify the country's national football team. From there on the nickname grew in popularity among football loving fans. The word bafana means male youthfulness, a stage of life associated with agility, athleticism and strength. These are important attributes for competition especially in a sporting activity that calls for both physical and mental resilience. The reduplicated form 'bafanabafana' is meant to incite praise for the players. In fact, the use of this reduplicated form is a friendly, jocular reference to the young male players (Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2010).

Swaziland

Official name of team: Swaziland national football team

Nickname of national football team: Sihlangu semnikati (in Swazi) 'King's shield'

The Swaziland national football team is nicknamed sihlangu semnikati 'King's shield'. A shield was once used as part of military weaponry which a warrior would use to protect himself from enemies. The shield is an important historical cultural artefact which has since been used by the Swati government to symbolise protection from political and economic 'enemies'. In the sporting arena, the shield does not only suggest protection from 'enemies' which in this case are football opponents, but may suggest ownership of the national football team by the King who is in this case is the custodian of the land, the King's shield. The nickname therefore tends to give honour to the King as well as morale to the players. In essence the nickname presupposes that the team will fight its opponent through to victory with their shield in order to preserve the dignity of the kingdom.

Malawi

Official name of national team: Malawi national football team

Nickname: The Flames

The flames is the nickname given to Malawi national football team. The nickname signifies the consuming effect that flames inflict on anything that comes in close contact with it. In this case, the nickname suggests the ability for the team to defeat its opponents no matter how strong they might be. It is all about the winning spirit that appears to inspire this nickname of the national team.

Zambia

Official name: Zambia national football team

Nickname: Chipolopolo (in Bemba) 'Copper bullet'

The Chipolopolo is the nickname for the Zambia national football team. This nickname reveals two things. First, the fact that Zambia is one of Africa's copper giants and its economy is highly dependent on it and the value attached to it. Secondly, the nickname reveals one of the many products that come from copper, which is a bullet. However, the actual name chipolopolo 'bullet' is formed by the

pejorative prefix 'chi' in Bemba, one of the dominant languages of Zambia, which is attached to the root polopolo 'bullet' This prefix may be attached to any root in order to form an adjective that describes something awful but in this regard it denotes something harmful or something that causes harm, in this case the polopolo (bullet). In as much as every bullet is harmful, the prefix in this context appears to project the nature of devastation that this kind of copper bullet can cause. In this respect, the nickname suggests agility and capability of the team on the field of football to 'devastatingly' conquer the opponents. In short, the nickname is meant to signify a determined purpose for the national team to reach its aim and be as accurate and damaging as a bullet flying towards its intended target.

Future research directions

It would be interesting to extend this kind of research to other footballing nations, particularly to the rest of Africa and compare the trend in the nicknaming practices in football. In addition, it would be interesting too to consider nicknames of professional footballing clubs in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above is revealing that every name, be it personal or nickname, of anyone or anything tells something about its owner (society/individual) or the namer. In this regard, the nicknames tell something about people's identities and what is most treasured about them. It is evident from the discussion that most of the nicknames considered suggest desired characteristics that connote certain qualities about a team. It is in this vein that all the nicknames discussed in this paper clearly convey some (needed or preferred) attribute of the respective teams. However, these nicknames do not always reflect the performance of the teams in question but rather merely express the desires of the fans. The nicknames also reveal the deep rooted passion for the game of football in Africa and its unifying effect.

Furthermore, the nicknames seem to be used in order to bond fans with respective teams which in turn are used to express the pride and patriotism that fans associate with their respective nations. This is done by identifying one or two national symbolic emblems which are then adapted to nickname a team. In so doing, fans are not only showing pride in a nation but also identifying a team as a symbol representing the nation. In this regard, namers tend to re-appropriate social, economic and political symbols through what we may call semantic shift to nickname their football teams. In essence, the discussion reveals the creativity and innovativeness of speakers in manipulating language in order to meet their desired social goals.

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