

Boertjie and Toots and the Ire of the Imams

(Ameen Akhalwaya)

The Indicator • 1986

During his childhood he was a fan of Aussie cricket captain Richie Benaud but because Fordsburgers pronounced it “Beano” that became his nickname.

A rose by any other name may be as sweet, but Imams in Johannesburg mosques have expressed their sorrow over the tendency for proper Islamic names to be displaced by nicknames.

But they’re not winning the battle, despite the increased Islamic fervour in South Africa over the past few years. For, if there is any passion that South Africans of all persuasions share, it is in the giving of nicknames.

Afrikaners in their rugby zeal have such splendidly colourful names as “Vleis” Visagie and “Piston” van Wyk; Africans in their sporting zeal append nicknames to anyone who kicks a ball or throws a punch: “Who’s Fooling Who” Hlongwane, “Masterpieces” Moripe, “Sugar Boy” Malinga, “Chincha Guluva” Motaung, “Magwegwe” Klein, “Screamer” Tshabalala, “Nightshift” Mangena, and “Homicide” Sithebe are household names.

Those classified “coloured” are no slouches either in handing out names. And among those whose forefathers (sorry, foreparents) came from India, the story is no different. Those who lived in Vrededorp and Fordsburg before the front-end loaders (ex-Cabinet Minister Marais Steyn’s nickname for the Group Areas Act’s machines of destruction) moved in, were cricket crazy.

Every Vrededorp youngster who could bat or bowl was given the name of a famous cricketer, usually English or Australian. (Black South Africans traditionally supported visiting teams because they were barred from representing their own country.)

Ismail Garda, a leading black cricketer of the 1970s, is still known as “Morris”, after Aussie star Arthur Morris; Yusuf Garda, a colleague of Basil D’Oliveira in the heyday of black cricket, is still called “Chubb” after an English player; “Bradman”, “Loxton”, “Hutton”, “Hasset”, “Fuller” are still around.

But cricket apart, nicknames are given to just about everybody. Those who lived in mixed areas such as Sophiatown, Newclare, and Newlands received lively Afrikaans nicknames such as “My Ma Hoor My”, “Malan”, “Koos”, “Boertjie”, “Chommie”, and “Voeltjie”.

Once “Indians” were removed to their group area, Afrikaans-orientated slang became less fashionable, and few Afrikaans nicknames are now heard in Lenasia. Others (the origins of their nicknames are lost with the passage of time) bear such

tags as “Commentary”, “Facility”, “Bomber”, “Sergeant”, “Shotgun”, “Pirate”, “Comrade”, and “Dagga”.

One set of Fordsburg brothers bear the names “Jackie”, “Coffee”, “Chicory”, “Pierrie” (after Pierre Balmain), “Maal”, “Bendix”, “Sadedie” and “Blondie”. They were all members of our soccer and cricket clubs, and when our squads were announced, other names on the list read something like this: Charlie, Fowlie, Mealie, Jack Four Fingers, Birdie, Saps, Savage, Hoongie, Hattat, Bok, Beano, Fishy, Caps, Slobs, Dwarfie, Goofie, Garp, Lamba, Dobben the Horse, Tubby, Fats, Boots, and Tootsie.

Little wonder that the Imams started pleading for their real names to be used.

The nicknames make a colourful change, for in earlier years, it was fashionable for people of Indian origin to be known by their initials: MN Pather, SK Chetty, RK Naidoo, and AK Docrat were some of the better-known ones.

The result of nicknames and initials is that often in Lenasia if you ask for a person by his full name, many won’t know whom you’re talking about. In fact, sometimes, even if you give the correct name some people may not know whom you’re referring to.

At the turn of the century, when people of Indian origin went to register their children’s names some uncomprehending bureaucrat recorded incorrect details on birth certificates. In one such case, a white clerk is said to have rejected a surname because it sounded European, and asked for the father’s name.

Father is “Bapu” in some of the Indian languages, and that became his surname. His descendants, as a result, bore different surnames, some with the correct one, others with the father’s or grandfather’s first name. Insurance agents are aware of this, and sometimes they record the policy-holder’s official name and the aka (also known as).

In the 1970s, when black consciousness took root, many African people decided they no longer wanted to be called by their Christian names, preferring their African names. Names may reflect hopes – or ideologies.

When Lenasia was established, it was almost all veld. The name was derived from Lenz, near the station and military base of that name, and Asia was added to reflect the origins of its inhabitants.

But nicknames reflect the sense of humour (or malice) of those who give them, often reflecting the hopelessness of their situation. As Lenasia expanded, the government officially called the new area Extension 1, Ext 2, and so on.

But the new residents didn’t want such boring names so instead the extensions were tagged Rainbow Valley, Township (where the rich “lahnees” live), Suicide

Valley, near a quarry where several people committed suicide, Mosquito Valley alongside swamps, and Luxury Valley, a middle-class area with larger homes.

When people from Vrededorp (aka “Fietas”, origin unknown) were being forcibly moved to Lenasia, the new state of Bangladesh had come into being after breaking away from Pakistan. Thus, Lenasia named its own Bangladesh.

Other areas were tagged “Uganda”, “Vergenoeg”, and “Uitgegooi”, but for some reason, the names didn’t stick. Nor did “Happy Valley”. Earlier residents say it was a mythical place named by people who had emerged from shebeens. Others say it was in the vicinity of bottle stores and shebeens.

Others have never heard of it. But then who had heard of “samoosa parliament” until the Nats created the tricameral system?