

Socio-political Transformation and Naming Systems Today - for example "oThukela"

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0. Introduction:

An exchange of opinions that would contribute most considerably towards widening the horizon and ensuring enduring public interest in the ongoing process of naming or renaming places in Southern Africa today necessitates that the discussion on this topic be opened with a *survey* of the arguments supporting the "proposal to rename the region presently known as 'KwaZulu-Natal'"¹. The name "oThukela"² stands as proposal.

The *survey* of the arguments will be followed by a *discourse on socio-political considerations* in decision-making processes that will, as it were, focus on the

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¹ Khumalo-Seegelken, Ben (1998): Proposal to the National Heritage Council, - The National Place Names Division -, Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology of the Republic of South Africa, Pretoria, dated 21st January, 1998.

² " "Tugela" is another example. The original Zulu (in modern spelling) is uThukela. The untrained ear finds it difficult to distinguish between Zulu /g/ and the voiced, unaspirated /k/. I find, for example, that many of my first-year (white) Zulu students who have grown up on farms speaking Zulu, but have never written it, will write a word like ukufika (to arrive) *ugufiga. Then again, English does not distinguish between aspirated and unaspirated stops, so the initial th of the Zulu becomes t in English. And finally, because in English t before u is usually pronounced tyh, as in `tuba` and `tune`, not only is uThukela misspelt as `Tugela`, it is mispronounced as `Tyhugela`." "Adrian Koopman, *Zulu Names, 2002, 113.*

systems of naming or renaming of places in post-Apartheid South Africa today³. We would then conclude by posing *questions*, drawing *conclusions* and outlining some *perspectives*.

1. From 'KwaZulu-Natal' to 'oThukela' - a survey:

We recall: The proposal is to rename the province presently known as 'KwaZulu-Natal' in 'oThukela'.

"Why on earth should one consider finding a name for a province that already has one?" "If we were to rename our province at all, should it then be a name with such awkward spelling as 'o-Thu-ke-la'? Wouldn't 'Tugela' suffice?"⁴ These and similar questions have been posed and are being discussed since the above-mentioned proposal was submitted seven years ago.

Looking for a *suitable* proposal for a name for that south-eastern region of the African continent between the Indian Ocean and the mountain-range "Drakensberg/uKhahlamba" one point of orientation could amongst others possibly have been the mountain-range "Drakensberg/uKhahlamba" itself with all the historical, *linguistic* and *socio-political* perspectives associated with the word and the mountain-range "Drakensberg/uKhahlamba". One might on similar reasons consider taking one of the two rivers, the one in the north and the other in the south of the region under discussion as an alternative-proposal - "uPhongolo" and "uMzimkhulu" respectively.

The river "uThukela" has, however, the advantage of being geographically nearest to the centre of the province and, on that reason, the indisputably privileged capability of being able to *accumulate the various advantages* of a new name in the most favourable constellations, as the following discussion will prove.

1.1 The "new" name proposed: "oThukela":

"oThukela" is the locative form of the name of the river "uThukela" that flows south-eastwardly from the mountain-range "Drakensberg/uKhahlamba", through

³ This relates to "hundreds of name changes that have taken place in South Africa since 1994. It is not just place names that have changed, but the names of people, of institutions, and of objects." *Adrian Koopman, Zulu Names, 2002, 6.*

⁴ Regarding the orthography and the pronunciation of the name of the river "uThukela" from which the proposed name "oThukela" is derived, Adrian Koopman renders a very illustrative observation: "The original Zulu (in modern spelling) is uThukela. The untrained ear finds it difficult to distinguish between Zulu /g/ and the voiced, unaspirated /k/. I find, for example, that many of my first-year (white) Zulu students who have grown up on farms speaking Zulu, but have never written it, will write a word like ukufika ('to arrive') *ugufiga. Then again, English does not distinguish between aspirated and unaspirated stops, so the initial th of the Zulu becomes t in English. And finally, because in English t before u is usually pronounced tyh, as in 'tuba' and 'tune', not only is uThukela misspelt as 'Tugela', it is mispronounced as 'Tyhugela'." *Adrian Koopman, Zulu Names, 2002, 113.*

the province presently known as "KwaZulu-Natal", down into the Indian Ocean. "oThukela" literally means "at, adjacent to or on the banks of (the river) uThukela".

"uThukela" is more than just a river anywhere in Africa: On its journey from the heights of the mountain-range, the "Drakensberg/uKhahlamba", down the steep landscape till it reaches sea-level on entering the Indian ocean, "uThukela" undergoes a series of changes in speed, width, depth, temperature and colour.⁵ A number of tributaries, each with a unique history and a particular name, pour into the on-going stream and make it gradually swell into a river of remarkable size and reputation. Over the centuries factors including weather, climate, seasons, droughts and floods have made acquaintance with "uThukela" and have left their footprints on it, giving it the form and history it bears - almost just as much as politics, peace, conflicts and wars, have done and always will do.

Literally and figuratively - physically and symbolically - uThukela holds together the region south and north of it as a viable entity and as a significant component of the sub-continent. The province "oThukela" lives in *a relationship of give and take* with the world surrounding it as naturally as the waters of "uThukela" do and always shall be doing.

Expressed in African terminology:

- ° phezulu + phansi = simuye! (up + down = we are one)
"uThukela" forms a link between the heights of the Drakensberg/uKhahlamba and the depths of the Indian Ocean. People sharing an identity derived from this symbol remain at all levels one entity in diversity and always in living contact with the rest of the world - *by land, by water, by air.*
- ° mpumalanga + ntshonalanga (east + west ...)
"uThukela" forms the one, the "Orange River" the other arm that together maintain a certain relationship between the waters to the east (the Indian Ocean) and the waters to the west (the Atlantic Ocean), symbolizing two important ribs on both sides of the back-bone (Drakensberg/uKhahlamba) holding the eastern and the western halves of the one big body (Southern Africa) together.
- ° border converted into a stream of life-giving water
"uThukela" has in history often been given the function of dividing and keeping settlements and states apart; all the same

⁵ From the sea coast to the summits of the Drakensberg the relief exceeds 3385m. which, for a country little more than 250km. wide and lacking orogenic mountain folding, is exceptional. (Lester King: "The Natal Monocline: explaining the Origin and Scenery of Natal, South Africa", Durban, 1972)

this river has through generations been seen and used also as a stream of life-giving water by

the Khoi-San and the abaNguni;
 the amaZulu, "amambuka", "amakholwa", "amazemtiti"
 and other native communities in that region;
 the British colonists and their armed forces, the
 Voortrekker, the traders, adventurers and
 missionaries;
 the contract-labourers and refugees, the nameless
 masses, the employers, the tourists and investors;
 the villagers, the farmers city-dwellers and industrialists;
 and people of various party-political affiliation.

The non-discriminatory life-giving tradition of this *old but ever young` gogo*⁶, "uThukela", would certainly inspire present and future generations seeking for reconciled co-existence and set a good example for others in similar situations.

Symbolic significance and historical reasons not being the only factors in finding a new common identity, it is nevertheless encouraging to note how far they help in widening the scope and delving in this issue in some depth. *Geopolitical and constitutional guidelines* on the one and primarily emotional considerations on the other hand will certainly add up to favour consolidation under wider and future-oriented perspectives that are presented by the name "oThukela".

1.2 "oThukela - which 'new' perspectives for whom?"

The proposal of the name "oThukela" is aimed at setting a stream of learning processes in motion. Whilst the people of that region, historians and political scientists shall be arguing, whether and which "new" name their province should decide on, the name "oThukela" shall - in the same process - hopefully be growing in acceptability and advancing in serving as

- an eye-opener for the richness and diversity not yet activated adequately;
- an exercise in reconciliation and a further lesson in peace-making;
- an encouragement in "growing-together in order to grow together".

The programmatically name "oThukela" simultaneously extends an *invitation* and poses a *commitment*. Everyone living in or by any means associated with that south-eastern region of the African continent gains with the name "oThukela" more awareness of the fact that people living in that area are

⁶ "Gogo" = „grandmother“ in the African sense of an experienced, senior member of the clan, who has known most of the others members long before their could be who they are today!

part of a society trying to live up the tradition and traditions of the river “uThukela” and her history – namely to:

- ° quench thirst and let others do the same
- ° build bridges and help ends meet
- ° irrigate and cultivate
- ° swim across and widen the horizon
- ° save lives
- ° provide sanctuary for unique and endangered species
- ° endure droughts and floods
- ° keep top and bottom together
- ° remain yourself whilst progressively changing.

Last, but not least: “oThukela”, a name in a language once and so long marginalized and disused, symbolically redresses the injustices of the past and unveils new perspectives towards a continent kindling a *revived sense of self-esteem and self-reliance* in a universal context.

Self-esteem rooted at “oThukela” remains imbedded in a global network of streams and perspectives essential not only for South Africa.

2. Socio-political considerations in decision-making processes

We agree: Symbolic significance and historical reasons cannot be the only basis for taking decisions on names of places or regions. *Geopolitical and constitutional guidelines* on the one and primarily *emotional considerations* on the other hand are just as equally essential.

2.1. “ukuzetha”⁷:

We maintain: A place-name once *imposed* by whatever authority at what juncture in history whatsoever, stands sooner or later to undergo scrutiny by the inhabitants of the place or region concerned and to be weighed against such alternative proposals as the people directly concerned would themselves make. This makes the process of decision-making on a “new” name resemble an overdue *transition* from a *non-participatory* to a *participatory* mode of exercising power in public responsibility. Ten years since the acquisition of a democratic framework for their ongoing pursuit towards being part of a free and peaceful world, the people in that part of Africa are, indeed, going through a *transition* with far reaching perspectives

⁷ “ukuzetha” (isiZulu) means “to give oneself a name”

and responsibilities and can rightly affirm: We can at last decide on our own to either retain or replace names given to us and to our places and parts of our country in the past. As competent subjects of their own affairs they ultimately hold the responsibility for their destiny in their own hands. To underline the significance of this state of affairs, we render the following illustration:

The very simple relationship between the active initiative of *giving* a name (= "ukwetha") and the passive/receptive reaction of *being given* a name (= "ukwethiwa") is the actual question at stake, when the inherited name "KwaZulu-Natal" is to be replaced by "oThukela".⁸ The province concerned shall - at the end of that process - have come of age and for the first time in history exercised in a participatory and genuinely democratic manner the right of *giving* itself a name of its own (= "ukuzetha").⁹

Rediscovering and accentuating the difference between "naming" and "being named" or "letting (something to be) named/having (something) named" ("ukwetha" as opposed to "ukwethiwa" or "ukwethelwa") marks merely the starting point of a process meant to stretch over a certain period of time and to cover a wide field of disciplines and areas of practical political involvement: A multi-lingual society¹⁰ with a variety of cultural and historical traditions¹¹ that have witnessed the birth of the new democratic nation in April 1994 together, can, by jointly engaging in a process of finding a "new" name for their province, *develop a new common identity*, which could support the ongoing process of overcoming the visible and the invisible fences still existing. In this joint effort of 'redefining their world' they would discover each other and explore together paths leading to a better tomorrow for all. A name derived from a geographical, historical and socio-political background relevant to possibly *all* population groups inhabiting the province today, agreed upon in a participatory process with

⁸ *Giving* a name ("ukwetha") is of such authoritative significance that no democratic society would for ever live with names inherited from a pre-democratic past, in which names were simple *given* to them ("ukwethiwa") by the rulers of the day. "KwaZulu-Natal" reminds very strongly of the recent atrocities by the Bantustan-functionaries under Apartheid laws as well as the arrogance and brutality of colonial and other powers that waged wars, looted, massacred and exploited the people of this part of Africa at a large scale. A new name is overdue.

⁹ "What is changing in South Africa is" in the words of one correspondent in a letter, published in the *Natal Mercury* on 17 August 1994 under the headline 'SA is now recognising those other names', "that the existence of several million inhabitants of this country is now being acknowledged. From the major step of granting these inhabitants status as voters comes the corollary of acknowledging their languages as official, and then the acknowledgement that these languages have their own names for various towns and cities." *Adrian Koopman, Zulu Names, 2002, 7.*

¹⁰ Of the 9 616 138 inhabitants in 2002, "only" 8 004 730 speak isiZulu as first language. (Source: Bureau of Market Research, in South African Institute of Race Relations: South Africa Survey 2002/3, 7)

¹¹ 651 438 of the total of 9 616 138 inhabitants were classified as „White“, 833 126 as „Indian“, 126 844 as „Coloured“ and 8 004 730 as "African". (Source: Bureau of Market Research, in South African Institute of Race Relations: South Africa Survey 2002/3, 7)

due regard to the different affiliations and loyalties prevailing¹², is the appropriate agenda.

2.2. "ubuntu"¹³

The "Kingdom of Zululand" up to its destruction in 1879¹⁴ used to be a political entity of strategic significance and great economic importance for a large section of the subcontinent. Today - 125 years later - the constitutional framework within which the inhabitants of the region in question live is hardly 10 years old. It is a democracy willing and learning to accommodate parts of its traditions, including the office and the status of the monarch on the basis of the constitution and the laws of the land.

The province presently known as "KwaZulu-Natal" may on many reasons, however, not be held to be identical with that political entity once named the "Kingdom of Zululand". Consequently, arguments for or against retaining the name "KwaZulu-Natal" do not necessarily relate to a possible alternative proposal "King of Zululand" and vice versa. This, however, not being the point at issue, we proceed to highlight an aspect of values inherited from a cultural tradition of high esteem that also found fertile ground in the region once known as the Kingdom of Zululand: *ubuntu* (= humanness).

Words of wisdom centred around the value system of *ubuntu* - wise words like "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (I am, because we are; since we are, therefore am I) have quite often helped keep the spirit of *ubuntu* alive.

Ubuntu manifests itself in many ways - also in a very **concrete** sense, for example:

The inhabitants of the province presently known as "KwaZulu-Natal" could - for example - decide that the 'new' name of the province they live in not include the term "Zulu" or any derivation thereof and instead consist of a term that would have to be able to be written and pronounced by everybody in correct isiZulu - for example "o-Thu-ke-la". Such a decision would be the most convincing gesture of the willingness to face and handle the future *together* that the majority of the inhabitants with strong ties to the language, the culture and the history of *amaZulu*¹⁵ would ever extend towards the minorities of other traditional background that share that part of the country with them as their home today. Only a name born out of such magnitude would be the most suitable - a name *by* and *for* all.

¹² Which political parties, religious organisations and denominations, cultural traditions are cherished and supported by the 9 616 138 inhabitants of that province today?

¹³ "Ubuntu" (isiZulu/isiXhosa) is a philosophy underlying life and strife in most parts of Africa, highlighting the significance of interdependence and mutual reliability, literally meaning more or less 'humanism' or: „I am since we are; we are since I am“.

¹⁴ We refer in the first place to the publication by Jeff Guy: „The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom. The Civil War in Zululand, 1879-1884“, Ravan Press, 1982.

¹⁵ „amaZulu“ = the people of „Zululand“ also named "the Zulus".

2.3. "ihlambo"¹⁶:

Cleansing ceremonies of different kinds are known and practised in different parts of the world today - also in that part of Africa under discussion. The public awareness that led to and accompanied the hearings before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has continued to prevail over similar acts of facing the past with all its ugly faces and agreeing to stand up and face the future with new eyes seeking for new common perspectives together: *ihlambo* as a gate to new horizons for all.

The *waters* flowing from the highest to the lowest point right through the middle of the province symbolise *a stream of potentials* accessible to *all beings* surrounding her and in any way connected to her - by air, on land or by sea¹⁷. Water being such a valuable commodity that is not so fairly distributed in Africa and in many parts of the world as such, playing a significant role in life coming into being, growing and remaining healthy, it is known to many as being essential for healing ailments and cleansing body and soul not only in a figurative sense¹⁸.

Including the element of *water* in the name of the province would certainly give room, to exchange opinions among all involved also at the level of ethical considerations surrounding the concept of *ihlambo* and so emphasizing the necessity of laying down the worn out rags of the past and putting on a new robe - in *rainbow* colours¹⁹.

These and many other considerations of socio-political significance have to part and parcel of any process aimed at finding a suitable name for a geographic entity - especially in "new South Africa" today.

3. Questions, Conclusions and Perspectives.

Back to square one: Why should one invest time and energy in agreeing on names (of places) at all? Why can't places retain the names they have "always (?)" had? Does a new place-name necessarily mean anything worth taking notice of at all? What is in a name?

¹⁶ „ihlambo“ (isiZulu) = „cleansing ceremony“

¹⁷ We refer to the passage `phezulu + phansi = simuye! (up + down = we are one) under 1.1 The "new" name proposed: "oThukela" above.

¹⁸ Traumas and wounds resulting from atrocities of the past, from violence (including rape and "farm-killings") and the HIV/AIDS-epidemic are the concern of the various suitably qualified experts dealing with them. They are also the concern of responsible government and far-sighted leadership at all levels. No facet of life in that part of the country - not even "Nature Conservation and Tourism"! - would in the long run afford to ignore the necessity of seeing the society being healed and remaining healthy (i.e. going through the ceremony of cleansing).

¹⁹ The various population-groups corresponding to the various colours that together form the fascinating unity depicted by a rainbow.

A place-name that fulfils its primary function of facilitating accurate localisation²⁰ is the utmost goal of all efforts of setting out to find one at all. A successfully chosen place-name is, however, more than merely a 'serial number'; it entails furthermore some *deeper meaning* centred around the hopes and wishes, the past and the present of the people immediately associated to that name. It entails some *agenda* for the future lying ahead and serves as *a compass and a map* not only to those immediately associated to it.

Economic considerations and geo-political criteria not being the primary and only considerations in seeking for a suitable place-name, it is, of course, not immaterial, how soon *tourists, potential investors, neighbouring countries and international institutions* would manage to be acquainted with a 'new' name. In the face of such considerations aimed at integrating the 'new' name in the existing system of place-names all over the world, a decisive first step is already done, if the people immediately associated to that name engage in a finding-process of a participatory nature as outlined in our proposal above. Oslo, Kigali, Chile, Havana, Pretoria and Harare are geographical entities that have not 'always' been known under those names; the world is capable of learning, if encouraged to do so²¹!

Bureaucracies are prone to becoming stumbling blocks that often delay or thwart democratic processes. *Responsible governing* in relation to processes of naming and renaming of places normally entails interest in proposals being submitted, considered and subjected to public opinion and decision-making on agreed procedures. How effective these channels of communication do actually function and how efficient the *exercising of political power* relates to initiatives and contributions by the electorate towards better perspectives for all, may not be underestimated, since it is essential for ensuring reliability and maintaining good esteem. We may point out, however, that governments quite often need to be reminded of their own agendas! This will be a remaining task for all people of goodwill - also and especially in that province presently known as "KwaZulu-Natal" today.

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²⁰ Zungu, P.J. 1998, *Toponymic Lapses in Zulu place names. Natalia*, 28>" Adrian Koopman, *Zulu Names*, 2002, 112: "... names should not fail to perform an unequivocal and unambiguous locational function".

²¹ "The Chinese did it with Beijing (who remembers Peking?); the Zimbabweans with Gweru (Gwelo); why can't we do it in South Africa?" - a rhetorical question by a correspondent to the *Natal Witness* in January 2000, cited in: *Adrian Koopman, Zulu Names*, 2002, 110-111.

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 (Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek) into isiZulu of the present day towards a new "iBhaybheli
 ngesiZulu".

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