



Language Matters

Studies in the Languages of Africa

ISSN: 1022-8195 (Print) 1753-5395 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlms20>

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Adrian Koopman

To cite this article: Adrian Koopman (2018) Of the Same Breath: Indigenous Animal and Place Names, by Lucie A. Möller, *Language Matters*, 49:2, 128-133, DOI: [10.1080/10228195.2018.1468800](https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2018.1468800)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2018.1468800>



Published online: 16 Aug 2018.



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OF THE SAME BREATH: INDIGENOUS ANIMAL AND PLACE NAMES, BY LUCIE A. MÖLLER

Sun Press. 2017. xv + pp. 365.

ISBN: 978-1-928424-02-4, <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928424031>

Reviewed by Adrian Koopman

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7684-2891>

Durban University of Technology

Koopmana@worldonline.co.za

An indelible African meme is that of Bushmen¹ singing and dancing around a fire and later telling stories about animals. In these stories, goes the meme, the Bushmen use their incredible skill at imitating the sounds and the movements of animals to virtually bring them to life. This meme continually resurfaced in my mind as I read Lucie A. Möller's book *Of the Same Breath* (see p. 46 especially).

The book is all about how sounds made by animals were imitated by the Bushmen, how these imitations turned into the names of the animals, and how these eventually became place names. The book is divided into sections:

- an introduction which gives details of inter alia the various waves of different peoples who “colonised” southern Africa over millennia, their language families, the extent of language contact between them, and how this extensive language contact characterised the search for the etymologies of some animal names and place names in southern Africa today;
- a section on mammal names;
- a section on bird names;
- a section on the names of reptiles and invertebrates; and
- findings and a conclusion.

1 The author explains convincingly in endnote 1 (p. 313) why she uses the terms “Bushman” and “Bushmen” instead of the term “San,” which is considered derogatory by the people themselves.

There is a full list of references, a glossary of specialised terms used in the book, and separate indexes on animal names, place names and languages.

The book is illustrated throughout with delightful sketches by Daniel Otte (among other illustrations from various sources), and a painting of eland in the Drakensberg by the same artist provides colour plates for the beginning of each section and the cover. The cover is a delight: a section extracted from the just-mentioned Otte painting shows the main escarpment of the Drakensberg together with the foothills and a pair of eland. We thus have a landscape representing place, with the animals that occupy this space. Part of the foothills have had the colour enhanced to give the outline of the head and forequarters of a wildebeest, thus illustrating the combination of animal names and place names described in the book. This is presumably also what is meant by the intriguing first half of the title—“Of the Same Breath.”

The basic argument of the book, which I give here in six roughly logical sequential steps, themselves roughly chronological, is as follows:

1. The Bushmen were the “first peoples” of southern Africa, although Möller does make the briefest of mention (p. 305) of the hominid *Australopithicus² sediba* and the hominin *Homo naledi*.
2. These hunter-gatherers were keen observers of natural fauna, especially of the sounds made by various animals, birds, insects and other forms of life. Such sounds were not restricted to vocalisation, and other sounds, like the eland’s “knee-clicking,” are dealt with in detail in the book.
3. These “first inhabitants” or “first speakers” also became the “first namers,” their imitations of animal sounds becoming “onymic formations,” a phrase Möller uses frequently in reference to names in embryo—the cores or bases of what would over time become established names for various mammals, reptiles, birds, etc. in a number of different Bushmen languages (see p. 65 especially).
4. Once the “onymic formations” had become established in speech as the names of local fauna, they could be added to topographical generics—words for “river” or “mountain” or “spring” to create toponyms with meanings like “hippopotamus river” or “baboon mountain” or “quagga vlei.”
5. Over time, more groups of people arrived in southern Africa. First were the Khoikhoi, speaking languages recognised today as Nama, Damara, and Griqua, among many others. Later came successive waves of Bantu-speaking peoples, those coming from the north-west speaking languages like those recognised today as Mbundu, Herero and Kwanyama; those coming from the east speaking languages which today we recognise as from the Nguni group or the Sotho-Tswana group. Finally, the European colonials arrived, all speaking Germanic languages: Dutch,

2 Which she spells “Australopethicus.”

German and English. The earlier arrivals—the Khoikhoi and the Bantu—lived in close contact with the Bushmen for millennia, leading to an extensive language contact situation. Such contact led to a considerable number of adoptions (“loan-words”) between the various language groups as well as wholesale inter-language influence. The click sounds in Nguni languages such as Zulu and Xhosa are just one result of such extensive language contact.

6. The language contact situation meant that many Bushman names for the local fauna were adopted by the newcomers, but only after extensive adaptation, especially in terms of fitting the source language items into the phonological and morphological structures of the receiver languages. The same process of adaptation took place when the Bushman place names were assimilated into the Khoi and the Bantu languages. When the Germanic-language colonials arrived considerably later, they too adopted and adapted some Bushmen animal names and place names, but also introduced the notions of *translating* earlier place names or *replacing* them.

What Möller has essentially done in her book is attempt to backtrack on the six roughly chronologically ordered steps outlined above. To collect her data, she first combed a wide range of current southern African maps as well as several historical ones, consulted a number of gazetteers and dictionaries of place names, and went through several lists of names for mammals, birds, reptiles, covering a wide variety of southern African languages, from Afrikaans to Zulu. She then carefully combed every dictionary, vocabulary list and lexicon ever published on the Bushmen and Khoi languages and then, in an exercise which must have taken months if not years of detective work, attempted to seek Bushmen and Khoi roots for modern animal names and modern toponyms in various South African languages. This meant unpacking her way through centuries of what she calls “interlayered language”—the “adoption, adaptation, hybridisation, translation and other linguistic processes” (p. 2) which require such linguistic sleuthing. She refers to this arduous work in a phrase which is new to me: *paleo-toponymic studies*, in other words the process of rooting through fossilised name-forms to seek clues as to their genetic origin.

The processes of adoption and adaptation were particularly challenging to trace for the author, as when words from a source language are adapted into the phonological system of the receiving language the etymology becomes muddled and obscure. Who would have thought, for example, that the Zulu word *ibhulukwe* “trousers” and the Southern Sotho name *ntsu marikho* for the Booted Eagle are both derived from the Afrikaans word *broek*? (This is not one of Möller’s examples, by the way). To explain the links between an ancient Bushmen source word and modern words for animals and places, Möller has had to reconstruct complex phonological processes.

For example, in unravelling the etymology of the name of the Swakop River in Namibia (p. 147), the name *Rivier des Rinoserosse* on an early French map led to the conclusion that “Swakop” had its origin in an earlier Bushman word *//xwaka-ob*, meaning “rhinoceros,”

later adapted into the Nama word *tsoagau-b*. In order to complete the links, and to incorporate other, German names for this river (“Schackaup,” “Schwagaup,” etc.), the author had to travel through a maze of other Bushman words for “rhinoceros” as well as the highly complex phonological processes that went with the changes from one language to another (p. 147):

The component Swak- ... is an adaptation of the above mentioned word for ‘rhinoceros’, //xoa, //xwa. Bleek (1929:70) gives the /Xam word //xoa:kən for the ‘*Rhinoceros bicornis*’, further consonantalised as //xwagən, also //xwaga:g in one given example (Bleek 1956:638), the “unvoiced lateral fricative click with fricative efflux, //x, interpreted by various recorders as Ts-, Z-, Sch-, S-” (Nienaber & Raper 1977:1011), and the velar variant phonemes /g/ and /k/, normalised as /k/ in Swakop. It was noticed how close, on a phonological level, “the lateral click // of //xwag- corresponds to the variant component *Schwag-*, and //xwak- to *Schwack-*, the voiced and unvoiced velar effluxes respectively reflected in the early German recordings of the name” (Raper 2007:128–129).

As can be seen from this extract, one of dozens of similar passages in the book, following the phonological trail uncovered by the author requires dedicated concentration on the part of the reader.

In another example, in explaining the Zulu mountain name “iDlangampisi” (p. 100), she says:

[T]he Bushman word ... for ‘mountain’ or ‘big hill’ is *han-!la* from Hadza (C3), the word adopted into Zulu as *dlanga*, from a voiced fricative *h* to a voiced lateral phonemic cluster *dl*,³ and the cerebral click *!* of *!a* adapted to the homorganic softer velar *g*, thus producing *ga*.

This particular phonological reconstruct comes immediately after she has dismissed the suggestion “offered by an anonymous reviewer” that the element *idlanga* might be the Zulu word for a vulture “though it has not been encountered in any written sources thus far.” (I would draw the author’s attention here to p. 153 of the 1958 edition of Doke and Vilakazi where there is the entry “**idlanga** [< *dlanga*]: 1) vulture ...”.)

Sometimes these phonological reconstructions are a little difficult to follow. In another reconstruction of a Zulu toponym containing the word *impisi*—the Zulu river name “iNgwempisi” (previously understood to mean “Leopard-Hyena River” from *ingwe* “leopard” and *impisi* “hyena”)—Möller proposes that the element *ingwe* in the name is derived from the word *kwe*, a “relic from the Hie (C3) Bushman word ... for ‘river’.” She explains that the “the *n* [in *ingwe*] function[s] ... either as consonantal nasal bridging sound or as grammatical construct.” I can understand here that the phrase “grammatical construct” may refer to the nasal prefix *in-* of Zulu noun class 9, but what a “consonantal nasal bridging sound” is, I am at a loss to say.

3 For the record, *dl* is a “digraph,” two letters representing a single sound as *th* and *sh* do in English. As a single phoneme, *dl* cannot be a “phonemic cluster.”

On other occasions her need to link disparate elements stretches credulity to its breaking point. Such is the case with the Gorgeous Bush-shrike (pp. 270–271). Möller correctly points out that the Afrikaans name *konkoit* and the Zulu name *ingongoni* are derived from its call. I live in the north-eastern corner of South Africa where this bird occurs, and the two names are an accurate rendering of the bird's vocalisation. But Möller has come across a painting of the Malaysian bird the Black-naped Oreolus, and on this painting are the words *Boorong koonjiet koonjiet*, presumably the Malay name(s) of the bird. She cannot resist making a connection:

The Afrikaans name *konkoit* may have been derived from this Malay designation in the second component *koonjiet koonjiet*. It may also have been brought from Malacca to South Africa by the Dutch colonists, or the Malaysians themselves, via the trade and slave routes to and from these lands during the seventeenth centuries and applied to the same-sounding gorgeous bush-shrike.

Möller does not explain why slaves brought to Cape Town should have brought a Malaysian bird with them. She does not tell us what the call of this bird is and whether this is the basis of “*koonjiet koonjiet*.” Most of all, she does not tell why a bird restricted to the north-eastern corner of South Africa should be named for an exotic bird brought to the opposite corner of the country, namely Cape Town and surrounds. She goes on, nonetheless, to say of the Gorgeous Bush-shrike that

In southern Africa it therefore [sic] seems to be called by both [sic] its Malayan, Afrikaans and Zulu onomatopoeic names.

Land, Naming and Power

This book quite coincidentally landed on my desk a week or two after the African National Congress controversially adopted a land policy of “appropriation without compensation.” The underlying motive for this policy, as evidenced in countless speeches by politicians from various parties, was to “give back to the people the land stolen from them by the whites.” The underlying assumption here is that colonial powers “stole” the land from those inhabiting the “land” before the colonial arrivals. Who these previous inhabitants are is never actually specified in the political narrative, but again the assumption here is that these are the (indigenous) black peoples of southern Africa, who are, in terms of numbers, overwhelmingly mother-tongue speakers of Bantu languages: Zulu, Venda, Xhosa, Tswana and the other languages that make up the nine non-Germanic official languages of South Africa, as well as the non-official languages and dialects and the other Bantu languages of neighbouring territories. Möller's book offers new food for thought on the notion of “stealing land” and the question of who stole what from whom. The book in fact sheds light on the dynamics between naming space, naming the resources of such space(s) and the holding of power over such space and its resources.

Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987) has since its publication been used extensively by onomasticians and social geographers for its thoughts on how naming space allows the namer to take control of that space and essentially become its owner. In other words, to name an entity is to have power over it. The current political debate in South Africa has not really been about the legal concepts of "ownership" and "theft" of land, but more about who has power over the land and its resources. Möller's book, as we saw above in this review, frequently makes mention of the Bushmen as "first peoples," and more importantly, as "first namers" (pp. 4, 21, 25, 66, among others). First, she suggests, they named the animals (Genesis 2:19 comes to mind here). These living creatures simultaneously defined the land by their presence and were a food resource. Then these first namers achieved power over the land itself by naming both the spaces and the topographical features in such spaces after animals and other features. During the millennia that followed, the Khoikhoi, and then the Bantu, and then the various European colonists, all came into this named space and "adopted, adapted, hybridised and translated" names on a continual basis, creating their own names as well.

Current political discourse focuses on the way in which colonials (the Dutch and the English are mainly meant here) have replaced "indigenous" names with European names, and the period after 1994 has seen a wholesale return to the "original" names. The names of towns and streets have mainly been the focus of such renaming. Möller's book shows us that the densely interwoven tapestry of language contact in southern Africa with its consequent name changing is far more complex than that. The book shows us too that the notion of returning stolen land to its original owners is also an excessively simplistic view of a millennia-long history of shifting power over space, such power being exercised by naming.

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