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FUNCTION, FAMILIARITY OR FUN? NICKNAMES IN REHOBOTH, NAMIBA

by Patrick Pearson

No. 246

NOTE: This is the last Seminar for 1988. A programme for the first term of 1989 will be circulated early in 1989.

Naming practices and the use of nicknames have received a fair amount of attention from anthropologists over the years - particularly from those who have worked in the Mediterranean region and, to a lesser extent, other parts of Europe.(1) Most current approaches tend to stress an underlying utilitarian function of nicknames. It is noted that nicknames often occur in communities in which there are a limited number of "proper" names - either first names, surnames, or both - and that the use of nicknames therefore serves to distinguish individuals who share "proper" names, and who might otherwise be easily confused.

As a subsidiary argument, some authors suggest that nicknames also serve to express social boundaries, and to facilitate their maintenance. Nicknames are usually localised in their usage, and knowledge of them serves to distinguish those who are from the locality from those whose ignorance of nicknames marks them off as strangers.

Other writers note that their use may also constitute a mechanism of social control: a means through which the self-opinionated, pompous, or merely stupid may be disciplined through mockery, and effectively cut down to size. Quite closely related to this approach is one which argues that the use of nicknames may be a vehicle for male aggression, or simply male assertiveness.

The purpose of this paper is to present an example from Namibia, and also to suggest that a new conceptualisation of nicknames may prove profitable. I will examine the applicability of the explanations mentioned above to the case presented, and then discuss the humour generated by the use of nicknames. Although many authors have referred to this aspect of nicknames none, to my knowledge, have given serious consideration to it.

The Rehoboth Basters and their Names

The Baster community of Namibia numbered about 19,000 in 1975 when field work was undertaken. They occupied an area known as the Rehoboth Gebiet,(2) which was 1.3 million hectares in extent, and regarded as being amongst the best farming land in the territory. Karakul pelt production is the major source of income for Baster farmers, who also breed cattle and goats for domestic consumption and sale. Virtually no crops are raised in the Gebiet. Large numbers of Basters are dependent on migrant labour for their incomes, and commute, often on a weekly basis, to the urban centres, especially Windhoek, where they are employed in a variety of occupations. A disproportionate number of men are skilled artisans employed in the building industry, while others work in a variety of semi-skilled jobs such as truck driving and the like. Baster women are commonly employed as workers in factories and offices, and also as domestic servants.

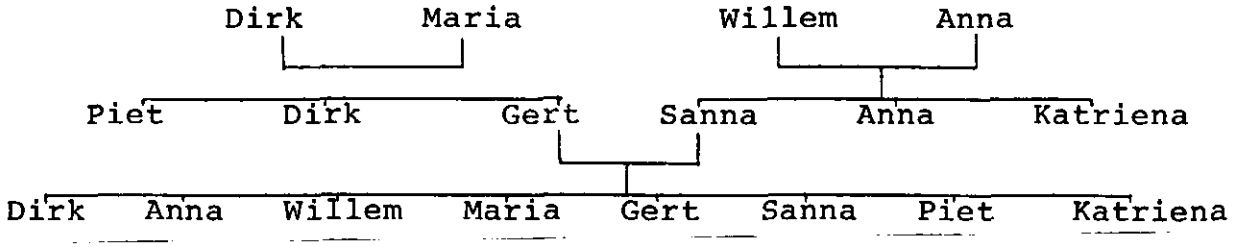
The core of the community - about 90 families - settled in Rehoboth in 1870, having left the northern Cape as refugees during the drought and !Kora wars of 1868.(3) After a brief period of independence, they accepted German protection in 1885, and were soon drawn in as collaborators in the suppression of the indigenous people. But at the outbreak of the First World War

they rebelled against the Germans and hoped, when South African forces took control of the territory in 1915, that their independence would be restored to them. This was not to be, and they rebelled against the South West African Administration ten years later. The rebellion was suppressed without a shot being fired, but the resistance continued. More than fifty years later the community was granted homeland-style "independence", and control of the Gebiet passed from the white magistrate to an elected Kaptein and Council in 1979.

The prevalence of nicknames in the community was first documented by a German physical anthropologist, Eugen Fischer, who studied the community in 1903, and the practice of bestowing nicknames does not appear to have altered since. The main explanation for the use of nicknames given by Fischer (1913), and subsequently repeated by at least two other authors: Budack (1979), and Messina (1980), is identical to that commonly offered by anthropologists of the Mediterranean: that a duplication of names within the community leads to the confusion of individuals, and that this confusion is eradicated by nicknaming.

The duplication of names in Rehoboth emanates from the method through which names are given. Baster informants told me that there is a specific traditional means for deriving the first names of children. The oldest son should take the first name of his paternal grandfather, the second son that of his maternal grandfather, the third son that of his father. The rule for naming subsequent sons is less clear-cut, but informants usually suggested that the fourth should be given the first name of one of his mother's brothers, and the fifth that of one of his father's brothers. The rules for naming daughters are very similar. The first daughter should take the first name of her maternal grandmother, the second that of her paternal grandmother, and the third that of her mother. Again, the rule for naming the fourth child is not clear, but the father's sister's name is generally regarded as being most appropriate. There appears to be a relatively free choice for subsequent children's names, although the principle is still that relatives should be honoured.

An example would be as follows:



In a case in which two eldest children of eldest children of two families marry, and in which two sons and two daughters are born of the marriage, ten individuals will share a total of only four first names if the rules are followed. Cousin marriages and "sibling-group" marriages (where two siblings of one family marry two sibling of another), both of which are far from uncommon in the Baster community, increase the proportion of shared names even further.

In fact, the naming rules are honoured more often in the breach than in the observance, but they are nevertheless honoured often enough to generate a situation in which quite a large number of people share the same first name. In a sample of 837 subjects there was a total of 208 different first names. In other words, 75% of first names occurred more than once. More importantly, more than one third of the sample bore one of just seven different first names, while more than half bore one of only 17 different first names.(4)

The most common names in the sample were:

Females	(%)	(cum. %)	Males	(%)	(cum. %)
Anna	(11)		Johannes	(14)	
Elisabeth	(9)	20	Willem	(8)	22
Katriena	(8)	28	Jacobus	(7)	29
Maria	(6)	34	Gert	(7)	36
Magrieta	(4)	38	Petrus	(3)	39
Sophia	(3)	41	Hendrik	(3)	42
Wilhelmina	(3)	44	Cornelius	(3)	47
(n=299)			(n=538)		

(5)

Just as there is a limited number of first names, there are also relatively few surnames in the community. According to Fischer there were 37 original surnames among the trekkers, and once again there was a very uneven distribution among them, with Beukes and Van Wyk being by far the most common. Immigrants to the area introduced many new surnames, so that by 1903 there were at least 98 different surnames. The sample which I collected in 1975 had 133.(6)

The fact that the giving of first names follows a pattern means that certain first names tend to predominate in certain families, and hence make for common combinations of first- and surnames. Thus Sophia is common in the Swarts family, and Piet in the Beukes family. If the rules are followed, eldest patrilateral parallel male cousins will always share first and surnames, as will second-born female parallel cousins.

Because of a lack of observance of the custom, however, the situation is not nearly as confused through uniformity as it might be. In the sample of 837 individuals, more than half actually had unique combinations of first and surnames. This would suggest that a generally very effective way of distinguishing individuals from one another is achieved by simply using a person's first- and surname in combination. The supposed necessity of conferring nicknames in order to avoid confusion becomes less convincing still if one examines the data more closely. If one excludes individuals who are unlikely to be regularly confused because they a) live in different areas, b) are parent and child, and can therefore be easily specified, or c) are separated by more than 25 years in age, and can therefore once again be easily specified, the duplication drops further to about 12.5 per cent. For example, of a total of 542 men, there were 33 cases of possible confusion, involving only about 68 individuals.

Clearly, while nicknames may be quite invaluable for avoiding possible confusion in a few very particular cases, they are a remarkably elaborate and developed mechanism if their purpose is to solve what is apparently a relatively rare problem. Further difficulties with this utilitarian explanation arise when one examines a sample of nicknames in some detail.

Nicknames

Budack (1979) contains a most useful list of nicknames from the Gebiet. He classifies the 155 names he collected in terms of their derivations: physical attributes, personal attributes and character traits, events and circumstances in people's lives, occupations, and the like. There are a number of points that are of importance to my argument here.

The first is the remarkable variety of names subsumed under the term "nickname". These range from those which state neutral social or geographical connections, through to those which are obscene or malicious, and intended to wound.

In some of the cases recorded by Budack the name of another person with whom the subject is linked in some way (usually through a kinship connection) is combined with his or her name. Hence: Ouma Tina **Afrika** Isaak, the widow of Afrika Isaak; Ellie **Maans** Beukes, the wife of Hermanus Beukes; Johannes **Griet** Beukes, the son of one of two wives of his father (a half-brother was called Jan). This form of nicknaming is not limited to everyday social interaction, but is also regularly encountered in dealings with officialdom. In many documents, such as petitions, in the Windhoek archives the father's first name or initial is added to that of the petitioner, with the word zoon, sohn, or simply "z" or "s". Hence: Gert van Wyk P z; Willem Slinger **Thomas sohn**; Daniel Morkel W **zoon**. In a similar way, people are sometimes linked with places, almost inevitably with the farms on which they live. Sometimes people are also identified by their occupations: Dirk **Magistraat** van Wyk was a former Baster magistrate; Piet **Koporasie** Beukes is employed by the cooperative; and Piet Ouderling Beukes was a church elder.

These nicknames would appear to be completely innocuous and, in my experience, are used only when confusion is likely to arise in the course of conversation, or in some official correspondence, rather than being a habitual addition to the names of the individuals concerned. Standing in strong contrast are nicknames which reveal a degree of insult, malice or satire. **Fokop** (also known as **Tafelberg** because of his enormous, flat, square, head); **Lelik** de Klerk; **Besembek** van Wyk, who wore a substantial moustache; **Jammer** van Wyk who became maudlin and self-pitying when drunk; **Driebok** Bezuidenhout, a very poor man; **Popstrond** who habitually used the expression "Dis alles popstrond", and many others are clearly of a different order to those listed earlier. We shall return to these types of nicknames shortly. First, however, we must look at Budack's sample in more detail, and query once more the utilitarian explanation for nicknaming.

Of the total of 147 individuals whose nicknames Budack lists, more than 62 per cent actually have a unique combination of first name

and surname. One might have imagined that common combinations would have been very much more in evidence in the sample if the primary function of the nicknames were to avoid the confusion of individuals bearing the same name. In fact, there are only 19 cases of possible confusion in Budack's list.

A second point to note is that five of the individuals are not Basters, but are (or were) drawn from the small number of personnel of the local Catholic Church. It is most unlikely that members of the community ever came across more than one Sister Mara, Manuelis, Emilia or Castora, and so the reason for them being known by Nama words which can be loosely translated as "Four Eyes", "Red Mouth", "Rat's Teeth", and "Dictator" must surely be sought elsewhere. The local Catholic priest was nicknamed "Hurry" or "Puce". Since the physical or personality characteristics which are expressed through these nicknames are far from uncommon, one might suggest that they could easily apply to quite a large number of individuals, and their use could consequently give rise to more, rather than less, confusion. In other words, there are fewer Sister Maras than there are women who wear spectacles, fewer Father Baumgartners than there are hasty or impatient men.

This leads to a third point which is worth noting: that nine individuals in Budack's list have more than one nickname. A profusion of nicknames is undoubtedly counter-productive if the primary reason for their existence is one of avoiding confusion.

Finally, less than six per cent of those to whom nicknames are given are women. We shall consider some possible reasons for this at a later stage.

Other Explanations of Nicknames

Alternative explanations for the existence of nicknames includes one which stresses the role they may play in the exercise of social control, another which emphasises the boundary-maintaining function, and a third which regards them as aspects of a broader "struggle for masculine respect and reputation" (Gilmore, 1982: 686-7). All of these explanations have at least some validity when applied to Baster nicknaming.

Certain nicknames in the Gebiet might well be interpreted as imposing a social sanction on the bearer, but this is seldom the only socially significant aspect of their use, as we will see. Klaut, for example, once filched some leather from his employer, was caught and punished, and now bears as a nickname a German slang word meaning "thief". Snork van Wyk had a habit of falling asleep during church services. Griek Freygang used a knife in fights. Voorpoot van Wyk was mean, and gave his servants only the front feet of a goat as rations. Sanna Kanstaan Visagie was notorious for stopping to chat at every opportunity. Stout Willem Mouton was said to have impregnated his sister-in-law. In all of these cases the individual's behaviour might be controlled to some extent through the use of the nickname.

More common in the Baster Gebiet are nicknames which merely serve to mock or tease people for unwise or immoderate behaviour in the past. Drie Angel was stung three times on his lower lip while

robbing a beehive. Koos Petisie sent innumerable petitions to the League of Nations and United Nations. Louhand stuck his hand into a lion's cage while drunk at a circus, and was mauled. It would be stretching the point to argue that these nicknames which refer to accidents or unusual activities serve in any way to impose sanctions on those who behave at variance with community norms.

Nicknames may also be used to stress in-group solidarity. This is most obvious where nicknames are bestowed on members of an out-group. The nicknaming of the Catholic Sisters, mentioned above, would seem to be an example of this. Similarly, Fischer (1915) records that two local white shopkeepers were known as Stripkeps and Witkeps, according to their preferences in headgear. Occasionally a whole category of people may be known by a nickname, as in Kapaters (gelded he-goats) for Catholic priests, a contraction of "Katolischer Paters", but also a reference to their celibacy.

Nicknames used in this way commonly stress in-groupness in two ways. Firstly they constitute a kind of conspiracy between those who use the name, since they occur almost exclusively as terms of reference, and never of address. To use one of these names when addressing someone would probably be an aggressive action. Secondly, the names are often in Nama, which is a language that Basters commonly use for purposes of exclusion, as when they are in the company of a white person, but wish to discuss something privately between themselves.

Whites are not the only bearers of Nama nicknames, however, nor are all Nama nicknames used only as terms of reference. "Troetel" or "/iri" names, which are bestowed on babies, but quite often survive into adulthood, and even old age, are commonly in Nama. This may be because the names derive from Nama servants, or simply because they sound "cuter" in Nama. Other nicknames where Nama is used are often derogatory or slanderous. The use of a language other than the vernacular serves to diminish the significance of the name, since it signals that the situation is not "normal", and is thus not subject to accepted rules of social conduct.

Nicknames in the Gebiet may also be used as an expression of aggression, or among men (especially younger men) to signal male assertiveness. It is likely that many of the names referring to physical characteristics derive from this. Basie Hamel Mouton, Gertjie Rolle Swarts, Ronde Jacob Mouton, were all fat; Stokkie Beukes and Ribbetjie Bezuidenhout were thin, Hoepel Coetzee was actually knock-kneed. Brandes (1975) has suggested that in Spain men who are linked by voluntary ties use nicknames to express the bond. In Rehoboth, friends who are age-mates regularly use nicknames among themselves - even those which are unkind, and sometimes even quite derogatory. It would seem that the names were given in childhood or adolescence , and that once the bestowers and their victims have grown up, the names no longer carry the connotation of competition and aggression that they once once did. Instead, they signal an ease, and even intimacy, of interaction.

All the forms of explanation discussed above clearly have merit, for as Gilmore has noted (1982:686-7) nicknaming is a multiplex

phenomenon. It is not so much that the theories are in competition, as that a wide range of phenomena is being discussed. To refer to someone as Ouma Tina Afrika Isaak clearly has very different social implications to addressing, or even referring to, someone as Fokop or **Leklik** or **Hoepel**. The first is clearly simply utilitarian, while the second is perhaps aggressive, certainly demeaning. But the other difference is that while the first has no emotional content, the second is mocking, is funny, is a joke.

An interesting point to note is that a number of the explanations for nicknames given above have close correspondence with theories of humour. The idea that nicknames enable one to establish one's own reputation at the expense of others has a parallel in Hobbes's writing, which suggested that laughter is "... sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others ..." Similarly, one form of humour - satire - is generally regarded as an instrument of social control. According to Auden it is a device through which certain individuals (often those who are powerful) are made to appear ridiculous and even mad, or wicked and unmoved by their own guilt. The purpose of satire is often to undermine that power or question its legitimacy. Finally, Lorentz suggests, laughter "... creates a bond among those who laugh at the same thing and draws a line against those who either do not laugh, or are laughed at." The idea of an "in-joke" is perhaps the best expression of this theory, which has its parallel in that theory of nicknames which stresses their boundary-maintaining function.(7)

I suggest, therefore, that there may be merit in distinguishing between names which serve a purely utilitarian function, and those which are intended to generate humour. It might be useful even to refer to them by different terms, reserving the word nickname for the latter, and referring to the former as "agnames" - a word which was once used interchangeably with "nicknames", but has now fallen into disuse. Nicknames are, I suggest, best understood not merely in the functionalist terms of most current theories, but rather as vehicles of humour. This necessarily leads to a discussion of the social significance of humour. It is an area which is much to complex to attempt to cover in any detail here, and so what follows is simply a note on the way in which one might approach the study of nicknames as humorous devices.

The Social Significance of Humour and Nicknames

As William Martineau (1972:103) has shown, humour can serve different - and even contradictory - functions in different social circumstances. It can be a "lubricant" which facilitates social interactions in some circumstances, and can be an "abrasive" which alters the nature of the interaction in a direction which may lead to interpersonal conflict in others. It can be a means of striking up a conversation with a stranger, effectively saying to her or him "we can share a joke: we have something in common". Or it can convey malice, and cause an opponent to appear ludicrous. But in the latter situation there generally remains a bolt-hole: if the victim responds with anger the tormentor can retreat into the claim that he was not being serious. This is because humour creates a new level on which social interaction takes place, and

it is one in which meanings and rules - in so far as they exist at all - are different from those underlying a serious interaction. As Douglas (1975:96) notes of the joke, it produces "... an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general". In other words, humour produces an unreal state.

Nicknames operate in a similar fashion, also generating a new level of interaction. This may be because the act of giving (and, to a lesser extent, using) a nickname is one which involves imposing one's own definition of that person on them. To impose a nickname on someone is to say that the characteristic referred to is of greater significance to you than is his or her broader personal identity. The use of the nickname alone as a form of address is the most extreme type of imposition. When it is used in conjunction with one or both of the person's proper names this tends to reduce the extent to which the user's definition is being imposed.(8)

Nicknames, as with humour in general, can do more than simply facilitate interaction. Because they operate at a level which is less constricted by the normal rules of interaction, they can enable communication of something which is difficult to say. In other words, "covert messages about taboo topics" can be conveyed. (Martineau 1972:113). This may be a necessary first step before negotiation between interacting parties can take place. An example may be instructive. A local shoemaker is known by two different nicknames: **Klaut**, and **Haasoorleer**. The first, as noted above, means "thief" in German, while the second means "Rabbit-skin Uppers". Budack dismisses the latter nickname as mere teasing by those who nevertheless recognised the excellence of the craftsman's work, But a less charitable explanation is that Haasoorleer also has connotations of dishonesty. For a customer to address the shoemaker by either of these names is to signal that he or she is aware of the man's reputation, and is on guard against being cheated, but it allows the customer to do this without causing the shoemaker to lose face, and it simultaneously provides a bolt-hole for the customer should the shoemaker take offence.(9)

Humour is, of course, not a constant, and a nickname which was once regarded as funny may cease to generate the amusement which it once did. It may then be dropped or, if the individual is one who tends to be the butt of humour, as some people do, it may be replaced with a new one. In many cases it may continue to be used, but become increasingly like an agname in its social significance. It might be instructive to seek a pattern in the changes in the status of nicknames over time, and to examine the variety of names used at different stages in the life-cycle.

Conclusion

Joao de Pina-Cabral (1984:148-50), in a comment in the correspondence columns of Man defines nicknames as "... unwritten and unsystematically derived names which are given by the community to the individual, the household or the family, usually independently of their stated choice."

This definition has the disadvantage of lumping together a great variety of usages with very different social implications. It is also not necessarily true that nicknames are unwritten. For example, the Rehoboth voter's roll identifies many individuals by their agnames and, more rarely, nicknames. Similarly, addressees of letters (which are usually sent care of the local farm school) are very commonly identified on the envelope in this way.

Although he stresses a fundamental uniformity, de Pina-Cabral's does distinguish between different types of nicknames. He categorises them as personal, household, and family names. He argues that nicknames of whatever form are secondary phenomena: that the distribution of these different forms simply attests to different "experiences of community". Personal nicknames (which he implies are most often offensive) and family nicknames (which often derive from personal nicknames) are a feature of "agonistic societies", in which "... equality is achieved through competition, and each member's reputation is constantly being checked ... societies where one typically encounters the honour-code, a strong sense of male domination and fierce manifestations of individual pride".

On the other hand, household nicknames, which are "emotionally neutral" and are accepted - sometimes even with pride - by their bearers are a feature of "consensual societies" in which "... equality is seen as a value which should not openly be questioned, and where differences in reputation are constantly understated ..."(p150)

There are a number of difficulties with this formulation. It would be legitimate to question, in a general theoretical way, the usefulness of drawing a continuum of societies based on such "ideal types", but my main disagreement with the model is based on empirical rather than theoretical grounds. In the first place, de Pina-Cabral describes the "consensual societies" as ones "... where the experience of equality is strongly felt as a part of group membership ... where the honour code is not prevalent, where personal pride is not fiercely manifested and where women are given a less subservient role to play in the actual management of everyday life."

In some terms, the Rehoboth Basters could easily be described as constituting a "consensual society" according to this description, since there is nothing remotely resembling the honour-code of the type sometimes found in Italy and Spain, and many women play a most important part in the management of everyday life - especially on school farms, and in the many households where men are absent as migrant workers. But this is not to say that Baster society is entirely lacking in competition, that personal reputations are invariably unimportant, or that women never occupy a subservient position. These features are undoubtedly to be found, but they are unevenly distributed among individuals and - much more importantly - among different strata of the society. De Pina-Cabral's formulation treats the societies as if they were entirely lacking in any form of stratification or, alternatively, as if there were no differences in attitude and behaviour between the members of different strata. In the Baster community, as elsewhere, competition between individuals varies markedly, in

both form and degree, between different classes. Similarly, personal reputations are of far more concern to people of one age-group than another. This point is particularly important for nicknaming, since it would appear that many are acquired in adolescence, and survive, but often with quite different implications, into adulthood. The differing socialisation of boys and girls most likely creates different conceptions of pride and reputation, and this possibly accounts for the fact that few women bear nicknames. Another related reason might be that women generally spend less time in the public arena, and the home environment is not one in which nicknames usually flourish.

The other difficulty with the formulation is that while Baster society is not generally "agonistic", it is nevertheless noted for both personal and family nicknames, which are supposedly manifestations of such a society, while it seems to lack the household names which are supposedly typical of de Pina-Cabral`s "consensual societies".

But despite the disagreement that I have with his compounding of nicknames with what I have chosen to call agnames, and his treatment of societies as if they lacked any form of stratification, I believe that de Pina-Cabral has touched on a most important point. Nicknames <u>are</u> a secondary phenomenon, and they might well reflect the "experience of community" he writes about. The clue may be to understand them as one vehicle for the expression of humour in a society, or cultural group, and to consider this as a product of that community's broader historical and social experience, and as a means of coping with the particular circumstances of the group. As Lukes and Galnoor (1987:vii) note:

> Jokes ... are the king of the minor arts (folksongs pop music, comics, cartoons etc.). They are minor, no doubt; but their historic and social influence raises them high above comics and pop songs.

But humour, probably more than any other of the arts, provides delicate and vulnerable evidence: the act of analysis seems almost inevitably to cause its essence to evaporate.

NOTES

1. See, among many others, Barret (1978), Brandes (1975), Breen (1982), Dorian (1970), Gilmore (1982), Pitt-Rivers (1954).

2. The German spelling is still retained.

3. See Pearson (1986:61-72) on the Baster migration. Strauss (1979) has an excellent description of the !Kora wars.

4. Fischer likewise records that more than one third of his sample bore one of seven names, while half bore one of only twelve different names.

5. I have conflated names and their versions, so that Johannes, for example, includes Johan, Jan, Hans and all diminutives.

6. The sample is based on the names of subjects who provided blood samples for a sero-genetic study, as well as on the names of their parents. Since the sero-geneticists with whom I worked were particularly interested in individuals deriving from the original trekkers, the sample is biased in a way which reduces the likelihood of bringing to light many names of immigrants. However this bias does not undermine my main contention (that confusion is actually less likely to occur than might be supposed) but rather strengthens it.

7. I have drawn on only secondary sources for this paragraph. Most useful have been Holland (1982) and Martineau (1972).

8. This is not to suggest that there is inevitably resentment on the part of the subject. Some may simply be resigned, while in a few rare cases people may prefer their nicknames to their given names.

9. In short, it allows one to be a /ie or "twee-gat jakkals". (This is a nickname for a branch of the van Wyk family.)

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