

## Siebert ‘Bertie’ Neethling (1947–2022): an obituary

Siebert ‘Bertie’ Neethling, a professor of the Xhosa language at the University of the Western Cape and one of South Africa’s most prolific onomastic scholars died recently, at the age of 75, after a long illness.

Fellow South African onomastics scholar Adrian Koopman remembers first meeting him at an African languages conference in 1983, at a conference of the Names Society of Southern Africa (NSSA) in 1989, and at a folklore studies conference in 1993. These three conferences reflect the main academic interests of Bertie Neethling over the years: the Xhosa language, onomastics, and folklore together with Xhosa oral poetry. But it was onomastics which really captured his interest and dominated his numerous conference presentations and publications for the rest of his life. What began as convivial acquaintance among two academics with shared interests (African languages, onomastics and folklore studies), says Koopman, developed into a warm friendship, which lasted over the years. When Bertie organised the 10<sup>th</sup> congress of the NSSA in Hermanus near Cape Town, Koopman had the pleasure of meeting Bertie’s wife Vicky, and was able to do so many times in the years that followed.

Professor Neethling taught at the University of the Western Cape for nearly three decades, and was one of the pioneers who established the Department of Xhosa in the mid-1970s. He retired from the University in 2010 and was appointed an Emeritus Professor. The website of the University says “He will always be remembered for his subtle sense of humour and his liking for indigenous languages and culture”.

Although some of his publications were on second-language teaching, linguistic aspects of Xhosa, Xhosa oral poetry and folklore, by far the majority of his research publications were in the field of onomastics. He focused on anthroponymy rather than toponymy, and many of his earlier publications were on Xhosa names, as might be expected. These included “Voornamen in Xhosa” in *Nomina Africana* in 1988, “Xhosa nicknames” in the *South African Journal of African Languages* (SAJAL) in 1993, and an article on Xhosa first names in the journal *Names* in 2008. While over the years he published in a wide variety of journals and contributed chapters to several edited books, the three journals just mentioned remained his favourites, and he was a major contributor to all three.

Bertie Neethling did not just restrict himself to anthroponymy: he also published several articles on literary onomastics, such as an article on the onomastic aspects of Elsa Joubert’s novel *Poppie Nongena*, published in the conference proceedings *Names 1983*, and an article on the emotive toponyms in Christopher Torr’s song “Hot Gates”. He first published this in *Nomina Africana* in 1995, and then reworked it into a more general discussion of names in songs as a contribution to Carole Hough’s *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (2016). In his later years he developed an interest in brand names, publishing two articles on wine labels in edited collections in 2009 and 2013, and following up with “The Role of Anthroponymic Commemoration on Wine Labels in South Africa”, published in *Names* in 2017. From here he moved to liquor and beer, publishing “Economics, gender and onomastics: Liquor brand names in South Africa” in *Nomina Africana* in 2019 and “The choice of craft beer names in present-day South Africa: An analysis” in *Nomina Africana* in 2020. In 2021 he published “Choice of naming: lifestyle estates in Cape Town and surroundings” in *Nomina Africana*. These articles, just a few of the scores he published in his lifetime, show what an

eclectic range of topics he covered, how he found research opportunities in the most unlikely places, and, more specifically, how he was able to meld his interest in anthroponymy with the names of brands.

In addition to his articles in peer-reviewed journals, Neethling also published in edited collections of onomastic articles, and in the proceedings of onomastic conferences. Perhaps the highlights of his publications were his two major books: *Naming among the Xhosa of South Africa* (2005) and *Onomastics: A Multidisciplinary Field of Study: What's in a name?* in 2017.

Bertie Neethling was a stalwart of the Names Society of Southern Africa (NSSA): he was on the editorial board for many years, reviewed articles on a regular basis and served as the Vice-President of the NSSA from 2006 to 2014. He was also a regular presenter of papers at conferences. After his first paper at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the NSSA in 1983, he never missed one of their biennial congresses. He did his share of congress organising as well, and besides the congress in the seaside town of Hermanus in 1998 mentioned above, he organised one at Langebaan Lagoon, north of Cape Town, in 2010.

After presenting a paper at the 21<sup>st</sup> conference of the International Council of Onomastic Scientists (ICOS) in Uppsala in 2002, Bertie never missed an ICOS congress, presenting papers at Pisa in 2005, Toronto in 2008, Barcelona in 2011, Glasgow in 2014 and Debrecen in 2017. In his later years he also attended several conferences run by other institutions, such as the regular Names in the Economy congresses and the regular ICONN (International Conference on Onomastics) held in Baia Mare in Romania. Professor Oliviu Felecan of the University of Baia Mare remember well his visits to Romania, often accompanied by his wife Vicky. Felecan remembers that between the ICOS Congress in Barcelona in August 2011 and the first ICONN congress in Baia Mare in September of that year, Bertie and Vicky took a cruise in the Mediterranean for three weeks. These regular visits to Europe also gave the Neethlings a chance to visit two of their three sons: one in Paris and the other in Dubai.

Bertie Neethling loved his country and all the things related to it: languages, culture, nature, food and wine, etc. At any scientific event he attended all over the world, Bertie usually wore shirts in bold African designs, wearing them with pride in his homeland. Felecan remembers him saying sadly that many of his countrymen, including two of his children, had left their native country due to post-apartheid insecurity. He was pleased to learn that South Africa is one of the biggest investors in Romania. A hospitable man, he loved to invite his international friends to Cape Town and show them the beauties of the antipodes.

In conclusion: Vicky Neethling and her sons have lost a husband and a father, and they are in our thoughts. The University of the Western Cape has lost one of its most distinguished scholars. The Names Society of Southern Africa has lost one of its life members. And the discipline of onomastics has lost one of its most prolific authors, a man whose wide range of interests in the field of names and naming brought life to onomastic studies both in his beloved country South Africa as well as the wider world.

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