

Name it and claim it

THEBE IKALAFENG

Sunday Times Business Times – ADvice (page 7)

14 May 2006

TO ASSERT our newly reclaimed Africanness, recognize our heritage, and exercise our power, many of the new South Africa's people, places and institutions have gone on a re-branding spree.

Our esteemed Premier of Gauteng, Sam Shilowa became Mbhazima Shilowa. Labour Minister Shepherd Mdladlana became Membathisi Mdladlana and Defence Minister Terror Lekota is now Mosiuoa Lekota.

On returning to South Africa after 20 years living with her marital name, Suttle — because Americans couldn't pronounce her African name, Mabuza — Felicia Mabuza-Suttle popularised double-barrelled names. This soon became a trend, adopted by ordinary folk and politicians alike.

Like many black Catholics, I still curse my parents' blind admiration of my old Irish parish priest, Father Munc, and burdening me with a relatively unpronounceable Irish middle name, which I never use, except at the insistence of the Minister of Home Affairs. If it were John, David or Paul I'd probably deal with it easier — but Aloysius?

Institutions and places have also been renamed: DF Malan became Beyers Naudé; Harrow Road, Joe Slovo Drive; and — if approved — Johannesburg International Airport could become OR Tambo International.

The latest to join the fray is KwaZulu-Natal. Like many South Africans, I never quite understood why our Zulu kingdom was privileged with a name and surname.

But my learned friend, Mqondisi Gumede, originally from KwaZulu-Natal, informs me that in 1497, when an uninvited guest, Vasco da Gama, landed on the Durban shore on Christmas Day, he marked the occasion by naming the town Port Natal, from the Portuguese name for Christmas.

A name is the embodiment of much more than the location. Like all brands, it is the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface is the history, the heritage and the experiences of people.

There's really no problem with the intention of the people of uShaka to change the name of their province. But perhaps a better start is to sort out the nation's brand. Done right, this will become an overarching strategy and will guide the policies that govern the naming of our institutions, places and people.

The basic steps of naming, according to Rick Jacobs, principal of the global corporate branding consultancy Monigle Associates, comprises — among others — involving the people who can articulate the vision and strategy of the company, decision-makers and all employees (in this case, the citizens). The name should then be tested, the results tracked and a timeline for adoption put into place.

It has been said that it is neither fortune nor possessions that people leave behind which matter, but their name. And the descendants of Vasco da Gama and Jan van Riebeeck have left their mark on South Africa. Which begs the question: when is the name change of Mzansi going to be put on the national agenda again? — Ikalafeng is founder of multi-disciplinary brand consultancy, Brand Leadership, and Africa's first online forum for brands, www.leadingbrands.org