

Black rhino, white rhino: what's in a name?

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*All this (and much more) forms a consistent, logical, and widely accepted story—which, however, cannot be sustained from the records of actual woods or forests. It is a **pseudo-history** which has no connexion with the real world, and is made up of **factoids**. A factoid looks like a fact, is respected as a fact, and has all the properties of a fact except that it is not true. (Rackham 1990, p. 23)*

It has been fascinating to witness in my lifetime the birth, growth and acceptance of a piece of pseudo-history and the factoids that comprise it. This is the widely accepted explanation of how the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) got its name, which is such an inaccurate description of its outward appearance. Its skin colour is largely determined by the soil of its surroundings overlaid on a medium grey by its wallowing in mud and rolling in dust, as it is too for the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) (Skinner and Chimimba 2005, p. 527).

The factoids can be summarized: 1) in the 18th and 19th centuries Afrikaner hunters called it the *wijd [mond] renoster* (wide [mouth] rhinoceros) in colloquial Dutch and Afrikaans; and 2) early English-speaking travellers and hunters when they heard this mistook the sound of *wijd* (*weid, weit, wyd*) for 'white', hence the English name.

The first written mention in English of the name white rhino was made by John Barrow (1801, p. 395, map) in describing his travels in Namakwaland in the present Northern Cape Province during 1798. There he met a Griqua Afrikaner who told him that in his youth he had killed 'seven camelopardales [giraffes] and three white rhinoceroses in one day' (in Skead 1980, pp. 290, 298) but did not say where.

This conversation must have been conducted in Dutch or Afrikaans, the informant using *kameelperde* and *wit(te)renosters*, not their English translations.

The earliest written use in Dutch of both the names white and black rhino was made by Petrus Borchers in a letter to his father in 1802 (English translation Bradlow and Bradlow 1979b, unpublished original in Dutch). Borchers, then in his teens, acted as assistant secretary and scribe to the commissioners of the Truter-Somerville expedition to the Tswana people at Dithakong (earlier known as Lattakoe), north-east of Kuruman, in 1801–1802. Their report to the Cape governor was submitted in English (Theal 1899), but Borchers had probably prepared the original draft in Dutch. (Where some minor discrepancies occur between these accounts, such as in dates, spelling, I follow the official report.) His first observation referred to a male of the 'black variety' of rhino killed by Jacobus Kruger¹ near Kuruman on 27 December 1801 (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979b, p. 219), and the second described a female 'white' rhino killed south of Kuruman by Kruger and Meintjes van den Bergh on 30 December 1801 (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979b, p. 220). In a separate account written in English by William Somerville, the first animal killed was called a 'black two-horned Rhinoceros' (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979a, pp. 162–165), no mention being made there of the second animal.

Of the first rhino killed, it was noted that the 'upper lip was more pointed and hung over the lower lip' (as Somerville also recorded, Bradlow and Bradlow 1979a, p. 162), and the Setswana name was *seikloa* (Theal 1899), a name (*keitloa*) for the black rhino used during the 19th century (Shortridge 1934, p. 412). It was recorded that the upper lip of the second animal killed was 'more flat', and that its Setswana

name was *magooe* (Theal 1899), which is clearly a phonetic rendering of the name *mogohu* still recently in use for the white rhino (Roberts 1951, p. 241; Setswana name provided by N.J. van Warmelo). These accounts confirm conclusively to me that the animal killed on 27 December 1801 was *D. bicornis*, and that killed on 30 December was *C. simum*, although Kees Rookmaaker thought them inconclusive (Rookmaaker 2003). The second animal was described as being smaller than the first, thereby indicating that it must have been immature, since an adult white rhino of either sex is larger than an adult black.

Concerning the female rhino killed, Borchers stated (in translation, original in Dutch): ‘She was of the type known to us as the *White Rhinoceros*. . . . I expected this animal to be entirely *white according to its name*, but found that she was a paler ash-grey than *the black*. I suppose that when the rain falls this animal is cleansed of mud and other impurities and will appear lighter at a distance, and put the derivation of the name down to that . . .’ (italics mine; Bradlow and Bradlow 1979b, p. 220; also quoted in Rookmaaker 2003). Thus the oldest written record in Dutch is unequivocally of both ‘black’ and ‘white’ species under those names and not any other. Furthermore, the recorder himself saw and described the carcasses of both animals and gave their Setswana names, in a way that identifies them beyond doubt in my opinion. Clearly, the factoids are not true. Unfortunately, neither Borchers, Truter nor Somerville asked Kruger how the names were derived.

There is no indication that any Setswana name referring to a colour or other characteristic of either rhino has been mentioned in any of the works referred to here. This also applies to the Khoen and Bushman names recorded by Guy Shortridge (1934, pp. 412, 413, 425). Nevertheless, the possibility needs further study (Rookmaaker 2003), particularly since in my experience it may be true of the isiZulu name for each species.²

Later, in 1841, Cornwallis Harris (1986, p. 86) gave the names ‘The Square-nosed or White Rhinoceros’ on his plate XIX illustrating the species; in the caption he gave *witte rhinoster* as the Cape colonists’ name, and *mohoohoo* as the Setswana name. The latter is clearly another phonetic spelling of the modern name *mogohu* for the white rhino. In the caption to plate XVI depicting the ‘African Rhinoceros’ (black rhino, *D. bicornis*) he gave the colonists’ name as *rhinoster* and the Setswana as *borili* (Harris 1986, p.

74). There is no recent version of this term (Shortridge 1934, p. 412; Roberts 1951, p. 241). He had hunted in both the present North West and Limpopo Provinces in 1836. A. Steedman (1835, p. 232, in Skead 1980, p. 293) recorded each species under the names black and white near Mafikeng in 1826. Andrew Geddes Bain also noted ‘white’ rhino in the Mafikeng area in 1826 (Skead 1987, p. 552), and both rhinos under these names on a tributary of the Molopo River in 1834 (Skead 1980, p. 293; 1987, p. 552), while James Alexander (1838) likewise recorded both species with these names in central Namibia in 1836/37 (Skead 1980, p. 288).

Thereafter throughout the 19th century other hunters travelling in the white rhino’s historical range and writing in English, such as Charles Andersson (1861), Thomas Baines (1864, not Bain), William Baldwin (1894), Gordon Cumming (1850) and Frederick Selous (1881, 1908), consistently used the names black rhino and white rhino. Selous was fluent in Afrikaans, as no doubt were at least some of the others. He often accompanied Afrikaner hunters and would not have misunderstood them. However, one writer who did not use a common name was William Burchell, either in the original scientific description of *Rhinoceros simus* or in the account of his travels (Skead 1980, p. 297; Rookmaaker 2003).

From this brief history, I believe it is clear that 1) the Dutch and Afrikaans name for *C. simum* has been *wit(te)renoster* since at least the end of the 18th century, as recorded by Barrow, Borchers and Harris, and this is correctly translated as white rhino; 2) the Dutch and Afrikaans name for *D. bicornis* gained the qualifier of ‘*swart*’ (black) at the same time as the other was named *wit*; and 3) these names originated in the country inhabited by Bushman, Griqua and Tswana north of the Orange River where both rhinos occurred together. By late in the 18th century many Griqua were of mixed descent, as Barrow noted, and were bilingual speakers of Afrikaans and Khoen-khoen. Consequently, it was probably they who were the first to use these names in Afrikaans and Dutch, as is suggested by Barrow’s report.

Rookmaaker (2003) in his detailed study of the name ‘white rhino’ concluded, on the evidence quoted above, that the English adjective ‘cannot have evolved from a Dutch or Afrikaans word. This derivation should no longer be used in popular texts to explain the name of the rhinoceros called “white”.’ By this he meant any Dutch or Afrikaans word except *wit(te)*,

from which it was translated (Rookmaaker in litt. 2007). But he did think that the accounts of Barrow or Borchers might 'hold the key to the truth', having also quoted the same passage in the Borchers letter as above, although omitting that it is translated from Dutch.

Southward of the Orange River the black rhino continued to be known as just the *renoster* or *rhinoster* at least until 1841 (Harris 1986, caption to plate XVI). Not long afterward in 1853, or possibly 1858, the last of its kind in that region was killed near Port Elizabeth (Shortridge 1934, p. 416). This had been its name from the time when it was first encountered by the early Dutch settlers near Cape Town in the 17th century. They knew no other African rhino for more than a century thereafter that would have warranted distinguishing it specifically (Skead 1980, p. 277).

The names of the two species are a contrasting pair whether in Dutch and Afrikaans or in translation. As Teddy Roosevelt and E. Heller remarked in 1915: 'The Black Rhinoceros has not received its common English name because its coloration is actually blacker than that of the other species, but rather to contrast it with the other African Rhinoceros which has been so unfortunate as to have the designation "white" bestowed upon it' (Shortridge 1934, p. 423–424). Rookmaaker (2003) also suggested this as a possible explanation for 'white'.

Since the names do not describe the skin colour of either species, they could allude metaphorically to their differing reactions to humans: *swart* referring to that species' well-known aggressiveness, with *wit* as its opposite for the inoffensive animal. *Swart* in Afrikaans and 'black' in English have similar metaphorical allusions to anger, danger or threat, as for instance in *die swart kuns*, *swart kyk* (Eksteen 1997), 'the black art', 'things looked black', 'a black look' (Tulloch 1993). However, *wit* in Afrikaans does not have the allusions that 'white' has in English; in both languages they are just the opposites of *swart* or black (Tulloch 1993; Eksteen 1997). Thus, I would argue, the derivation of the name *swart* should be the issue with *wit* as its opposite, and not vice versa, as Roosevelt and Heller and most other writers have supposed. Nevertheless, there is neither etymological nor historical support for this idea.

This difference must have been as significant to hunters of both rhinos as those in their outward appearance. It is to such behaviour that Ian Player (1972, p. 30) refers in his suggestion that 'the old

Boer hunters likened the white rhino to the white man because of its timid disposition as opposed to the black rhino which was wild and fierce, like the tribes of the interior'. (His choice of analogy was perhaps unfortunate.) In 1802 Somerville (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979a, p. 164) said of the black rhino: 'This animal is the most ferocious that Africa produces . . . for when wounded he seldom fails to fly to the place from which the shot came.' Conversely, in mitigation Borchers at the same time wrote: 'One must surmise that much more is told of the ferociousness of this animal than is actually in his nature (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979b, p. 221). A famous early report of black rhino bellicosity described Simon van der Stel's close encounter with one near Piketberg, in the present Western Cape Province, in 1685 (Skead 1980, p. 284). Alexander (1838) described this behavioural difference between the species: 'The white rhinoceros . . . is a timid animal compared with the savage black which commonly charges whether wounded or not, whereas the white variety tries to effect an escape' (Skead 1980, p. 302).

However, nine of the ten etymological theories identified in the literature and discussed by Rookmaaker (2003) consider only the white rhino and its physical appearance, ignoring both the black and the behaviour of either. Borchers's response to the name *wit* or white rhino in 1802 (quoted above) was echoed by nearly every writer after him. The exception is Player's suggestion that the names refer to a behavioural difference. Without saying so, Alexander's description in 1838 of these differences (quoted above) also points to this explanation.

The earliest suggestion that the original Dutch and Afrikaans name for *C. simum* was not *wit(te)renoster*, and that another adjective had been misunderstood by English-speakers, was a speculative proposal made in 1931 by Charles Pitman, first game warden of Uganda. At that time the northern white rhino (*C.s. cottoni*) still occurred in western Uganda although it later became extinct there. He thought that a Dutch word meaning 'bright', 'shining' or 'great' might have been used instead of *wit* but did not give an example of such use (Pitman 1931a). He then dismissed the first two possibilities on advice he received (Pitman 1931b, p. 1 footnote), and soon after Shortridge (1934, p. 435 footnote) showed that Pitman's third possibility, *widg*, is not a Dutch word.

Thereafter the idea seems to have lain dormant in South Africa until revived by Charles Astley-Ma-

berley (1963, p. 11) who wrote: ‘There have been a variety of suggestions as to why the species became known as “white”, the best I think being that offered by T.R.H. Owen [probably Owen 1956, quoted in Rookmaaker 2003]—that it is a corruption of the term “wyd mond” or “broad-mouthed” originally applied by the old Boer hunters.’ Owen was in the British colonial service in Sudan and had encountered the white rhino in the south-west of that country, where it is also now extinct. He was repeating a suggestion made in 1952 by W. van den Bergh in relation to white rhinos acquired by the Antwerp Zoo in Holland (Rookmaaker 2003).

The originally speculative suggestions of Pitman, van den Bergh and Owen—clearly made in ignorance of the early 19th century reports (Borcherds was not published until 1979)—evolved into factoids in publications after 1963. These ignored the fact that no historical example of such a use had ever been produced in their support. And they went on being repeated, although not by Reay Smithers. He accepted my comments on his draft manuscript on the white rhino, omitted the speculation about the name, and relied on documented facts in *The mammals of the southern African sub-region* (Smithers 1983, p. 558), which became the standard work. They are repeated in its second edition (Skinner and Smithers 1990, p. 567). However, the current edition (Skinner and Chimimba 2005, p. 527) states further: ‘The most popular explanation for the derivation of the colloquial name is that it probably derives from the uninformed interpretation of the Cape Dutch word *weit*, meaning wide, referring to the species’ wide mouth’—once more resurrecting the factoids. But it does mention Rookmaaker’s report that there is no etymological evidence in either Dutch or Afrikaans that *wyd* or its cognates have ever been used in the name of a rhino (Rookmaaker 2003). However, it concludes that there is insufficient evidence for a definite explanation.

Consequently, one should keep in mind Rackham’s (1990, p. 23) further warning: ‘Pseudo-history is not killed by publishing real history. In a rational world this might lead to a controversy in which either the new version was accepted or the old version shown to be right after all. In our world, the matter is not controversial: either the old version is re-told as if nothing had happened, or authors try to combine the two versions as if both could be true at once.’

Short and pithy, *swart* or black with its opposite *wit* or white have remained firmly in everyday use to distinguish the African rhinos for more than two centuries. As a pair they are an appropriate metaphor in Afrikaans and English for a well-known difference in the rhinos’ reactions to humans—at least today, if not so used originally. Thus the names will no doubt continue in common usage, whatever their etymology or the alternatives preferred by zoologists. One thing is certain, no other African animal has attracted as much attention to its name as has the white rhino.

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Notes

¹ He had been charged with issuing bank notes forged by his younger brother Carel in 1783, for which the penalties were 15 years imprisonment and death, respectively. Thereupon together they fled the colony. Carel was killed by an elephant he was hunting in 1791. His body was carried to its burial place approximately 50 km north of Carnarvon from somewhere further north, perhaps beyond the Orange River. Jacobus was later pardoned (Mossop 1947).

² Black rhino, *ubhejane* = 'one that is enflamed with anger', from *bheja* 'to be red in anger', referring to its usual reaction to humans; white rhino, *umkhombe* = 'the pointer', from *khomba* 'to point at', referring to the carriage of the head when walking with its mouth close to the ground and horns pointing to where it is going (explanations given by Magqubu Ntombela to author c. 1978; see Doke and Vilakazi 1953). However, in isiXhosa *umkhombe* is the black rhino, and has the alternative meaning of 'a fierce, savage person; a person who is furious or in a towering rage' (Mini et al. 2003). Historically, the white rhino did not occur in the region inhabited by isiXhosa-speakers, whereas the black rhino was found in its westernmost part (Skead 1987).