

# THE ORIGIN OF SOME SCIENTIFIC AND VERNACULAR MAMMALIAN NAMES

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The elements from which scientific names are made are often; however, not always very descriptive of the animal. The origins are mostly Greek (Gr.) and Latin (L.) but also include languages such as Arabic (Ar.). The authors who described these animals, mostly during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, often did not state their reasons for choosing a particular name, therefore in some of the examples which follow only an approximation towards accuracy was possible by referring to Jaeger (1950), Wyld & Partridge (1968), Kenneth (1975) or as otherwise indicated.

1. The scientific name for springhare, *Pedetes capensis*, literally means a leaper or dancer (= Gr. **pedetes**) of the Cape Colony (= **capensis**) which is behaviourally an appropriate name for such an animal. However, the colloquial name **hare** is a misnomer since the springhare is a rodent and not a lagomorph (hare or rabbit). The name probably originated when the lagomorphs were once regarded as rodents.
2. The ground squirrel, *Xerus* (Gr. **xeros** = dry) *inauris* (L. **in** = not, **auris** = an ear) is a rodent (squirrel) of the arid regions with inconspicuous ears and is called a "waaierstertmeerkat" in Afrikaans. A misnomer as a "meerkat" (= mongoose) is a carnivore; therefore this squirrel should correctly be called a "grond-" or "waaiersterkeehoring".
3. The hippopotamus, *Hippopotamus* (Gr. **Hippos** = horse, **potamos** = river) *amphibius*, or "seekoei" in Afrikaans, is not pelagic and should rather have been called a "rivierkoei"; however, Bryden (in Shortridge 1934) says hippo are not averse to salt water and it is even possible that they may occasionally venture out to sea and make their way from one river mouth to another. The hippo is also not related to the horses (Perissodactyla) as indicated by its scientific name but belongs to the Order of even-toed ungulates (Artiodactyla). The Dutch and German names for the hippopotamus are "Nijlpaard" and "Nilpferd" (also "Flusspferd") respectively which literally means a horse of the (Nile) river.
4. The giraffe or camelopard, *Giraffa* (Ar. **zaraf** = giraffe) *camelopardalis* (Gr. **kamelos** = camel, **pardalis** = pard, leopard or spotted like a panther) opposes another interesting

derivation. The Dutch word "pardel" (=leopard) as originally used in "kameelpardel" was derived from the word pard (pardalis). However, in Afrikaans the word appears to have been confused with "paard" which is Dutch for a horse hence the "perd" in "kameelperd". The giraffe (also the Dutch and German name for this animal) is an even-toed ungulate which carries horns and is consequently not related to the horses but belongs to a different Order.

5. In English the word mongoose (derived from the Indian-Tamil word **monegos**) refers to all the Herpestinae namely Dwarf, Banded, White-tailed, Water, Slender, Grey and Yellow, mongoose, and the suricate. However, in Afrikaans only the suricate, *Suricata suricatta* and yellow mongoose, *Cynictis pectinata* are referred to as "meerkat" viz. "stokstert-" or "graatjiesmeerkat" and "rooimeerkat" respectively, while the remaining species are called "muishonde". This word is also used in Afrikaans to refer to the skunks (white-naped weasel and polecat - incidently the latter is not a felid) namely the "slangmuishond" and "stinkmuishond". Although both the mongooses and skunks are carnivores, the former belong to the Family Viverridae while the skunks belong to the Family Mustelidae.

The word "meerkat" might have several origins. In earlier literature both the suricate and yellow mongoose are referred to as "mierkat", "mier" being the Afrikaans colloquial for termite. Both species are associated with termite mounds and can occasionally be seen perched upon these and whether they have been named after this association or because of the termites they consume is not known; however, it is an appropriate name especially for the yellow mongoose in whose diet termites predominate (Lynch 1979). Miller (1972) is of the opinion that "meerkat" was derived from the Dutch word "meer" (= pond or lake) and says no name could be more incorrect as the suricate is restricted to the driest part of South Africa. One can also speculate that the word was used in a plural sense, "meer" (= many), since suricates are gregarious animals. The German for "meerkat" (*S. suricatta*) is *Erdmännchen*, an appropriate name for these burrow-inhabiting animals, while in Dutch "meerkat" is a kind of monkey.

The word suricate appears to have been derived from the Javanese words **sura** (= a chief) and **catje** (= a kitten). Whether this originated during the Dutch East Indian involvement in South Africa and that the "chiefs" had these as pets (suricates are easily tamed and were frequently kept as pets) is not known.

6. Another misnomer is the name **white-rhinoceros** or "**witrenoster**", *Ceratotherium simum*. Shortridge (1934) writing of the square-lipped rhino says "When standing on a ridge exposed to the slanting rays of the morning sun they look absolutely white, and these animals would have been first encountered by the early Dutch hunters —, it is possible that its present familiar, though inappropriate, name thus arose." Rossouw (in Shortridge 1934) says "-this animal received its name merely because it was slightly lighter in colour than the so-called 'Black' Rhinoceros, which impressed those responsible for the name to such an extent that they called it 'white' in contradistinction to the ordinary darker-coloured species." Another possibility is that the names white and "wit" were wrongly derived from the words "wyd mond" i.e. wide-lipped or mouthed (T.R.H. Owen in Maberly 1967) a character which clearly distinguishes it from the black rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis*. Colour between the two species is not recognized as a criteria of distinction, consequently the white-rhino should

preferably be called the square-lipped rhinoceros.

7. The specific name of the springbok, (*Antidorcas*) *marsupialis* is also intriguing, as all mammals of the African continent are placental animals, while marsupial (pouch-bearing) animals, such as the kangaroo, occur primarily in Australia. Possibly the name *marsupialis* refers to the springbok's large dorsal gland. Dollman & Burlace (1922) and others described this gland to be a fold or narrow pouch (sic.) capable of being turned partially inside-out during periods of excitement (i.e. when pronking).
8. Several vernacular names originated from names given to these animals by the indigenous peoples such as kudu (Hottentot), impala (Zulu, Swahili Ndebele), and quagga. The Afrikaans word "kwagga" or "couagga" from which the English name quagga is derived comes from an onomatopoeic Hottentot word "khoua khoua" (Penzhorn 1969) denoting the call made by the zebra. The word zebra in turn has been derived from the Abyssinian, **zibra** meaning striped; however, Penzhorn (1969) is of the opinion that zebra is a Congolese word. The Afrikaans word "zebra" or "sebra" therefore has no historical or other right of existence and it is proposed that the correct Afrikaans name for the two extant zebra should be : "bonrkwagga" for Burchell's zebra (*Equus burchelli*) and



A "river-horse".

“bergkwagga” for the Mountain zebra (*E. zebra*) and “egte kwagga” for the one extinct zebra (*E. quagga*) (Penzhorn 1969).

9. The origin of the name pangolin (*Manis temminckii*) is from Malay, peng-guling (= roller i.e. from the habit of rolling itself up). However, the origin of the Afrikaans name “ietermagô” or “ietermago(g)” appears to be dubious. Boshof (1936) agrees but says that it is probably an indigenous word. Shortridge (1934) lists 22, and Roberts (1951) an additional nine “native” names for this ant- and termite-eating animal, however, not one of these resembles the name “ietermagô”, therefore the Afrikaans name remains an enigma.

Scientific names albeit not always appropriate are universal, therefore eliminate the confusion which might arise when for example referring to vernacular names such as “rooimuis hond” (*Herpestes sanguineus*) and “rooimeerkat” (*Cynictis penicillata*) or “draaijakkals” which in some areas is believed to be *Vulpes chama*, however, is also the name used for the “bakoerjakkals” (*Otocyon megalotis*). In addition, these scientific names are systematically grouped to illustrate their relationship, so that even if a porcupine (*L. pocus* = pig) is called an “ystervark” its classification shows that it is not a pig but a rodent (“knaagdier”).



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#### SKENKING VAN MEV NELLIE SWART

Mev. Nellie Swart, eggenote van Oud-Staatspresident C.R. Swart, het onlangs nege pragtige aandrokke, wat sy vroeër tydens amptelike geleenthede as Staatspresidentsvrou gedra het, aan die Museum geskenk. Die rokke, wat deur bekende modeontwerpers gemaak is, is nog in 'n uitstekende toestand. Daar is 'n besondere mooi rok wat gemaak is van suiwer wolkant, 'n rok met 'n bypassende baadjie en handsak van swart Franse satyn, en 'n rok van goue lamé waarvan die materiaal uit Parys gestuur is. 'n Donkerblou rok van fluweel is versier met pragtige kralewerk wat borduur is deur Maleiervroue van Kaapstad.

Die Museum is dankbaar dat die besondere skenkking vir die nageslag bewaar kan word, en bedank mev. Swart hartlik daarvoor.