STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

Annie Gagiano

Dealing with Evils

Essays on Writing from Africa

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

ISSN 1614-4651

Annie Gagiano

DEALING WITH EVILS

Essays on Writing from Africa

ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover Image: Baobab Tree; © Erik W. Kolstad, Bergen, Norway (http://wnstock.net/) / Dreamstime (http://www.dreamstime.com)

Dieser Titel ist als Printversion im Buchhandel
oder direkt bei ***ibidem*** (www.ibidem-verlag.de) zu beziehen unter der

ISBN 978-3-89821-867-2.

∞

ISSN: 1614-4651

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-5867-6

© ***ibidem***-Verlag
Stuttgart 2012

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Contents

Preface ix

1. Listening for the Mediated Voices of the Southern African Khoisan in Hendrik's *Dwaalstories*: Ironies and Wonders 1

2. Marecheran Postmodernism: Mocking the Bad Joke of "African Modernity" 21

3. Anomy and Agony in a Nation in Crisis: Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* 45

4. Finding Foundations for Change in Bessie Head's *The Cardinals* 59

5. Blood Gets a Voice: Unity Dow's *The Screaming of the Innocent* 75

6. Two Late Apartheid-Era Novels: Balancing the Books in the South African Present 85

7. Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*: Painting the True Colours of Apartheid 111

8. Shakespeare, (Fanon,) Salih: Can the Black Man Love the White Woman? Can the White Woman Love the Black Man? 135

9. A. C. Jordan's *Tales From Southern Africa* 159

10. Memory, Power and Bessie Head: *A Question of Power* 173

11. Patterns of Leadership in Bessie Head's *Maru* and *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* 191

12. "Barbarism" and "Civilisation" in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and in Marechera's *Black Sunlight* 211

13. Appreciating Nuruddin Farah's Secrets 225

Acknowledgements 238

Preface

Attempts to achieve adequate or inclusive generalisations about African literature have often been made and as often come to grief. This brief preface to a collection of my essays would certainly not succeed in achieving any kind of accurate definition of the vast and varied body of literary work emanating from this continent. The decision to have these pieces published in a body nevertheless prompted the present attempt to articulate (and to summarise, in a title) what it is that has elicited my abiding interest in the kinds of African writing (or written documentation of oral texts) accessible to me – recognising my limitations in terms of linguistic reach and the vagaries of publishing in and from this region of the world. The texts described here originate from different periods and settings and were written over a number of years, but do perhaps have some underlying coherences.

As the first part of the title of this volume evinces, I have found in these texts memorable instances of authorial courage and insight – testimony to the writers' willingness to face the troubling, dangerous, perplexing or malign aspects of the societies from and of which they write, articulating the complex stresses from different sources to which African individuals have been subjected. Yet the main emphasis in all these pieces falls, I believe, on the authors' verbal artistry: the still under-appreciated treasury of literary complexity and profundity achieved and recorded in such texts by (and, in a few instances, for) those who composed them. And even though my commentaries and contextualisations inevitably reflect my own geographical, academic, racial and political realities and choices, I would hope that a collection of this kind can give its readers a sense of the impressive range, variety and art of African authors.

The works discussed here were primarily[1] penned or recorded in English – the colonial language that has been so widely appropriated by African writers and so adroitly used by them to re-map their own life-world in verbally sophisticated gestures registering both independence and connectedness in the ironies of modern African selfhood. Issues of subjectivity and the various and contending power forms besetting it; different forms of cultural hybridity, "authenticity" and abrogation and post- as well as neocolonial conditions as well as gender

[1] The two exceptions being the *Dwaalstories* of the elderly Khoikhoi or San Hendrik, recorded in Afrikaans by Marais, and Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* – in the latter case I worked with an English translation of the Arabic original.

matters are some of the subjects dealt with in the texts and in my discussions of them. African English writing does not, I would venture to claim, grow primarily out of the textual world of canonical (or contemporary) English literature, but emerges from the complex translations of local realities into a language now skilfully articulating *African* visions. Yet, by writing in a language of worldwide access, the writers of this continent lay claim to a sharable truth and sphere of experience and to a border-crossing aesthetic power in their texts. Acknowledging, grasping (on the imaginative level) and coping with what are frequently dreadful or emotionally and morally taxing circumstances (as my collection's title phrase, 'dealing with evils,' indicates), these texts testify to their authors' refusal to allow such conditions – whether psychic or social realities – to overwhelm, cow or silence them. Their delineations of African evils and opportunities and of the tangled roots, both African and (originally) foreign, of these conditions, not only demonstrate various ways of contending with difficulties or succumbing to them; of using chances or failing to do so. Their texts are also, themselves, *enactments* of various ways of contending with difficulties. In the words of the American poet Wallace Stevens, they proceed to "tell the human tale" (Stevens 451) which transforms disaster by imaginatively narrating it from beyond the event. The same point was made in a wonderfully African way by Chinua Achebe (124) by insisting on the social supremacy – above either the worker or the warrior – of the teller of tales, of the difficult "story of the land," which can vividly record and transmit the heroism even of the defeated.

My subtitle is intended to reflect not only that the essays presented here are textually focused and that they approach the works discussed primarily as instances of verbal artistry, but also that in attempting to articulate my accounts of the authors' ideas and skills I use various contextualising strategies. These range (for example) from the introduction of Shakespearian texts to "pair," link or parallel with African works (Marechera's and Salih's – respectively – in two of my essays), to the selective introduction of outlines of local historical or political conditions relevant to the achievement of an understanding of the significance of events or personages evoked in a text. It will be clear as well that I draw on a range of theorists' and fellow critics' work. Seminal theoretical writers for my work are Frantz Fanon and Enrique Dussel; Fanon because of his understanding of the need for and dimensions of cultural resistance and because of his scathing and perpetually relevant critique of the traps of neocolonialism and "national consciousness" ("On National Culture"; "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness"), making him both an anti-colonial theorist and a postcolonial social and

political critic, and (more recently) Dussel because of his extraordinarily passionate and convincing plea for a redirection in world-wide cultural studies (and philosophical thinking) towards the recognition of what he so aptly terms "transmodernity." I also use the ideas and terminology of a number of postcolonial theorists and feminist scholars, as well as the observations and interpretations of important fieldworking academics such as Harold Scheub and others.

Above all, what I offer in these essays are *readings* – possible and I hope to some extent enlightening or guiding commentaries on works that are important to my continent but which also have much to tell and to teach the world at large. If a text such as the present compilation can make a small contribution to the sorely needed wider and fuller recognition of African literature, it will have served its primary purpose. My perspective is not classificatory, as I do not approach the texts I discuss in the way that a scientist from outside the continent might come to "discover" the "exotic" products of Africa and develop a "system" by which they may be recognised and neatly assigned their appointed slots; hence I prefer not to present these essays in any chronological order (either the order of the original texts' composition, or the order in which I wrote the essays engaging with them). Instead, the collection is offered as pieces to be read by those who have or who wish to develop an interest in African thought and in what is considered one of the "new literatures in English," while its matrix is linguistically much broader and more varied, as well as ranging from pre- to postcolonial and from ancient to postmodern and beyond – into a future where African literature will not merely have a "room" of its "own" but be seen as organically connected to the imaginative life of the entire human world.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann, 1987.

Dussel, Enrique. *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*. 1992. Trans. M. D. Barber. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Fanon, Frantz. "On National Culture." Fanon, *Wretched* 166-199.

___. "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness." Fanon, *Wretched* 119-165.

___. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1963. Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

Stevens, Wallace. "Puella Parvula." *The Collected Poems*. New York: Random House, 1990. 456.

Listening for the Mediated Voices of the Southern African Khoisan in Hendrik's *Dwaalstories*: Ironies and Wonders

Assessments of the present state of the Southern African Khoisan people's life and culture fall into three main categories: (1) a belief in the virtual extinction of the people, with the traces (mainly in rock paintings and engravings) seen as faint, vanishing and enigmatic, arousing at best a romantic nostalgia; (2) an insistence on the recognition of the Khoisan cultures and languages that are still viable, despite the inevitable processes of modernisation and social deterioration (for example, the Nama language in South Africa has an estimated 6,000 speakers)[1] along with a sense of the value of the store of knowledge possessed by older members of existing groups; (3) a recognition of the both initiatory and enduring relevance of Khoisan cultural work from earlier times as a resource that is still (despite many filters and inevitable distortions) to some extent "available" in the present.

The larger context to this essay, which cannot be ignored, is the bleak scenario of the precarious survival of some of the Khoisan peoples and their cultures, and of the dwindling expressive and revivalist possibilities for the remaining languages. The clearest evidence of this precariousness is the rapidly dwindling number of *contemporary* speakers of Khoisan languages. Cognisance needs to be taken of the threats to these cultures presented by land confiscations and by forced relocations; by racial contempt and suspicion often shown towards the Khoisan by members of a wide spectrum of other cultures, and by the relentless, inevitable modernisation that is occurring in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Angola – the four regions where Khoisan people (or their inheritors) are found in significant numbers.[2]

The debasement and dislocation of one such group has been unforgettably described by the Namibian poet Dorian Haarhoff. In a poem titled "San Song" he

---

[1] According to Nigel Crawhall, a linguist at the South African San Institute (SASI), as reported in *The Weekly Mail & Guardian* 12-18 Sept. 1997, 28-29.

[2] Recent (available) information gives a figure of just over 105,000 "contemporary Bushmen" in southern African countries, with almost 50,000 in Botswana, almost 40,000 in Namibia, almost 10,000 in Angola, under 5,000 in South Africa, just over 1,500 in Zambia and 1,275 in Zimbabwe (Smith et al. 65). Several articles in South African newspapers have recently highlighted the plight of those San people (or Basarwa) who are being ejected from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve by the Botswana government – see, e.g., the article by Tony Weaver. At the beginning of 2006 this dispute was still continuing.

depicts the gawked-at and debased existence of a Khoisan group formerly employed as trackers by the South African Defence Force, in the following sardonic description: "literary clans of pre and post / Van der Posts, praise / the primitive pre-cursor / grunter-gatherer, pristine man" (Haarhoff 851). Improvements in the conditions of life of these and other remaining Khoisan groups may nevertheless be achieved through the many attempts being made to consolidate their interests and to preserve and revive their cultures. First Nation status is being sought for the Khoisan peoples through representations to the United Nations Organisation.

A useful, brief introduction to the complexities of the study of Khoisan people's lives in the past and present is to be found in a published keynote address[3] by Professor Phillip Tobias, the renowned anatomist-palaeontologist of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa – a paper titled "Myths and Misunderstandings about Khoisan Identities and Status" (19-28), in which Tobias states quite firmly (necessarily, in the face of many prejudices, however self-evident a point it may seem) that "the genetic make-up of the Khoisan relates them more closely to the peoples of Africa, than to any other people" (23). Tobias writes that

> The evidence of San-like figures in the thousands of prehistoric rock painting sites scattered in a wide arc from the Drakensberg and the Maluti mountains down to the folded mountain ranges of the Eastern and Western Cape, shows that the San were in earlier times distributed all over southern Africa and, to judge by the paintings, looking very much as they do today. (28)

In an early (1964) study of the ecology of the San people, Tobias saw in the "preNeolithic economy [. . .] of the Bushmen [evidence that] culture predominates over biological considerations in ensuring survival" (qtd. by himself in "Myths" 24) because the "inventive genius and flexibility" of these societies provided the qualities ensuring their survival on this continent – probably over almost 30,000 years.[4] It has been said that "San rock art is a monument to the

[3] Given at the "Khoisan Identity and Cultural Heritage" Conference held in Cape Town, July 12-16, 1997.

[4] The earliest South African rock art has been authoritatively dated as approximately 26,000 years old (see Lewis-Williams 11).

breadth, subtlety and interrelatedness of San thought" (Lewis-Williams; qtd. in Tobias 25).[5]

San or Bushman culture is in our time inextricably linked with, though in some ways distinguishable from, Khoikhoi culture – hence the blanket term Khoisan. According to the specialist historian Elphick, Khoikhoi people probably acquired cattle in the area now known as Botswana and spread southwards, displacing (to some extent) but also to a large extent socially interacting with the aboriginal San groups, their Khoikhoi language and social status becoming dominant. Unlike (*broadly* speaking!) the exclusively hunter-gatherer Bushmen, the Khoikhoi kept livestock (sheep and cattle), although they also relied on veld food like the San, often employing and intermarrying with them (Elphick 10-42). Tobias confirms this by referring to "evidence that domestic animals [have] been in South Africa for about 2,000 years" and to "evidence that hunting and herding had co-existed for a long time" in this part of the continent (26).

The historian Noel Mostert has written rather beautifully that "Khoikhoi words crack and softly rustle, and click. The sand and dry heat and empty distance of the semi-arid lands where the Khoikhoi originated are embedded in them." He adds: "But so is softness, greenness. They run together like the very passage of their olden days" (35). Touched as it is by a sort of tender nostalgia, Mostert's description brings one to the point of the extreme scarcity, the scantiness of verbal recordings of Khoisan expressive culture. Because so much of the knowledge, lore, skill and wisdom of these peoples is irretrievable, the little that is available has taken on especial value.

Amongst academics and others interested in these early southern African cultures it is well known that (from about 1860) a German philologist then working in Cape Town, Wilhelm Bleek, and his English sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, learnt and also devised an orthography for one of the numerous Cape San languages (/Xam), producing some 12,000 pages of transcript from their /Xam informants with accompanying English translations. This is an invaluable archive concerning the beliefs and social practices of a particular San culture, the evidence recorded at the time of (and clearly registering) the colonial disruption in the Cape region, when Khoisan people were subjugated, enslaved and often ruthlessly hunted down (leaving out of consideration the depredations of smallpox and

[5] Presumably most readers of an article such as this are aware that, "San" being a pejorative Khoikhoi term for the designated people, there has been a reversion among some scholars to the term "Bushman," even if this name, too, has been resented.

other “imported” diseases). There is a scattering of other verbal records in both English and Afrikaans, but the Bleek-Lloyd collection[6] is likely to remain the chief documentary source for a verbal expression of a particular Khoisan group’s vision of life in an earlier southern Africa.

To say this is not to overlook the limitations and probable distortions of even these records, since they were transmitted under the constraints of highly unequal social relations between the recorders and the informants, who patiently dictated their lore to outsiders (Bleek and Lloyd) with a very recent knowledge of the language. The information was translated by the latter into a language (English) perhaps not particularly well fitted for communicating the lineaments of the original culture. A contemporary researcher among the Ju/’hoan (San) people warns against “the ultimate linguistic colonisation, that of a local oral tradition by the literate mind-set” (Biesele, “‘Different People’” 7) – a warning one might need to “apply” retrospectively to recognise that even the treasury which the Bleek/Lloyd transcripts and translations represent was established with somewhat unreliable, perhaps distorting instruments.[7]

As an extension of this warning, Biesele records another caution – against what I would call museumisation (which is a form of commodification) of earlier cultures such as those of the Khoisan. She writes in an article: “We try to ‘fix’ other peoples in categories learnable by rote, and the result is that individuals become invisible. The ways they are transforming themselves [. . .] [t]heir great, current histories of themselves flatten into trite minor fictions” (“‘Different People’” 15).

Along the same lines, Helize van Vuuren warns against the “use [of] glib phrases” such as “reconstructing voices from the past,” and on the tendency to “romanticis[e] these ‘little people’ [. . .] as symbolising the original South African presence.” She asks: “But are we perhaps merely recolonising exotic material into our defunct white canon with the aim of revitalising it?” (211). There is probably no escape from the accusations of exploitation and contamination attendant upon the contemporary researcher’s efforts, for, as Tony Morphet has

6 The collection is housed in the University of Cape Town library; small selections from it have been published (see my bibliography).

7 Compare Mathias Guenther’s comment on the Bleek/Lloyd archive: “The social and emotional tensions and strains marking the relationship between the researchers and narrators presumably left their mark on the narratives that were presented” (Guenther 88). See also the article on the photographs of the Bleek informants by Webster.

noted, "there is no independent Bushman archive," we must simply acknowledge "that all forms of collective memory can now only be mediated through the formal archive of established social power" (98). Even a conference such as "Against All Odds"[8] (held to celebrate Africa's indigenous languages and literatures), in being funded, among other instances, by such bodies as the World Bank and the Ford Foundation was to *some* extent an example of this (inevitable?) infiltration of the "original" – by the powerfully modern, probably alien cultures – which is the dark side of globalisation.

Since the subject of my essay is a little group of four Khoisan tales (taking up just over 20 small pages of print) that were told, recorded and published *in Afrikaans*, I shall touch briefly on some aspects of the development and function of this language in South Africa. Languages become powerful usually through the politically dominant position of their speakers, and what could be termed "white" Afrikaans is no exception to this pattern. In an essay titled "Building a Nation from Words: [on] Afrikaans language, literature and ethnic identity [from] 1902-1924," Isabel Hofmeyr refers to the

> diversity of the [Dutch-Afrikaans] dialect [as having] partly to do with the historical trajectory of the lowland Dutch dialect spoken by the seventeenth-century [white] settlers [in South Africa]. In confronting the language of the slaves [that had been brought here] – Malay and Portuguese creole – along with Khoisan speech, this Dutch linguistic cluster had partly creolised. In later years it picked up shards of German, French and Southern Nguni languages and a goodly layer of English after 1806. (96)

Then followed a struggle by white speakers of the language, waged mainly against English colonial denigration, to establish Afrikaans as a language of what the historian-philosopher-anthropologist Ernst Gellner terms "high culture" – which in the South African context meant establishing it as a middle-class, "white" language, distinct from the Afrikaans spoken by those classified "non-white."[9] To this day the term 'Afrikaans' (including of course its associate, 'Af-

---

[8] It was at this important conference (held in Asmara, Eritrea in January 2000, and titled "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the Twenty-First Century") that an earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper.

[9] Hofmeyr in her article makes important points concerning the struggle to achieve the status of an established language for Afrikaans. I cite three quotations from her article (note that there are quotations *within* her quotations):

rikaner') is all too frequently taken as demarcating a "white" racial-linguistic identity.[10] As spoken by whites and eventually established as one of the two "official languages" of the apartheid dispensation, Afrikaans thus became the marker of white domination, whereas, as spoken by other (darker) South Africans, it became the marker of their subjugation. Introducing a 1933 publication, *The Early Cape Hottentots*, the anthropologist Schapera noted:

> In Little Namaqualand descendants of the old Naman are still found in fairly considerable numbers. Here, too, their tribal cohesion and cul-

---

a) The columns of Preller's paper *De Volkstem* soon began to carry innumerable articles which began the long task of making Afrikaans respectable. Some of these spoke about 'Taal en Self-Respek' [Language and Self-Respect]. Others attempted to legitimate an Afrikaans language struggle by referring to similar developments in other parts of the world, most notably Flanders but also Quebec, Wales and Ireland. Subsequent articles began to emphasise the links between Dutch and Afrikaans, which made the latter a 'white man's language', and gave it an entree via Dutch into that font of civilisation, the Graeco-Roman tradition. Through these debates carried out in various journals, the people involved refined their objectives. The first was to try and standardise a middle-class variant of Afrikaans. The point was made in many ways, but nowhere more clearly than in the following sentences:
'Language unity is the natural outcome of national unity, the necessary precondition for a national culture. In a situation where there are a variety of dialects, language unity can only be achieved when one of these dialects becomes hegemonic.' (Qtd. in Hofmeyr 105)

(b) See the statement made by one Van Rijn in 1914: 'Afrikaans is no *bastard tongue* [. . .] It is a true *white man's language*, Dutch to the core.' (Emphasis original). Qtd. in Reinecke *et al*., *A Bibliography*, p. 322. By about 1910 D.F. Malan was linking Afrikaans to Dutch, German and French, 'the natural inheritors of the civilisation and art of the old Greeks and Romans'. Qtd. in Schoonees, *Die Prosa*, p. 13. (Qtd. in Hofmeyr 119 n.)

(c) For attempts to exorcise the 'coloured' nature of Afrikaans, see 'Is Afrikaans Plat?' [Is Afrikaans a common or vulgar language?], *Die Huisgenoot*, August 1919, and then the debate on this article in *ibid*., November 1919.
(Qtd. in Hofmeyr 120).

[10] A point made, *inter alia*, in a text proclaimed as the first Afrikaans novel by a "coloured" South African, *Vatmaar* by A. H. M. Scholtz, which claims the language for a mixed-race community in the face of a snobbish tendency (among white speakers of the language) to denigrate their use of the language. Scholtz's text is now available in an English translation (see my bibliography).

> ture have been completely destroyed by contact with the Europeans, and they have also absorbed a good deal of white blood. A few of the older people still know their own language, but the great majority now speak only Afrikaans, the regular medium of intercourse even amongst themselves. (xiv-xv)[11]

Along with this linguistic domination (and the political domination of which it is the marker) went another sort of domination, which the South African born novelist Bessie Head (in an essay) described in the following terms:

> A sense of history was totally absent in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. We, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth; we did not know who and what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation. (66)

Given this truth, all possible forms of re-attribution and recognition, whatever the ironies and complicities involved in such work, do need to be undertaken. Focusing on such a neglected South African cultural resource as the Khoisan *Dwaalstories* can be a small contribution to the reconfiguration of the past and (even, perhaps) the present of South African society.[12] As a mere exercise in romantic nostalgia it would not be worth undertaking, however; the only worthwhile aim would be to recognise in these tales a time-transcending contribution to present-day social realities,[13] which (as I hope to demonstrate) they do certainly offer.

---

[11] Compare the following citation from another anthropological study: "Owing to the prominent part Afrikaans, or some form of it, plays in the daily life of the Korana, it became the medium in which most of our conversations were carried on" (Engelbrecht 203).

[12] The collection *Dwaalstories*, with the name of Eugène Marais as author, was recently reissued (in Afrikaans) by the publisher Human & Rousseau (Kaapstad/ Pretoria 2007), simultaneously with the first published complete translation into English of this collection (including the introduction by Marais). The English translation: Eugène N. Marais. *The Rain Bull and other Tales from the San*. Translated by Jacques Coetzee. Illustrations by Katrine Harries. Cape Town / Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 2007. ISBN-13 978-0-7981-4833-7.

[13] Compare Biesele's reference to "the hidden teaching capacities and the sense-making functions of folklore and dramatic games" and to "expressive forms [as]

These *Dwaalstories* (a title meaning *meandering*, or *wanderers'*, *tales*) are particularly significant in offering a portrayal of a Khoisan society (or societies – the stories seem to depict a degree of cultural variation) as fraught with its (or their) own social tensions. All too common is the tendency amongst present-day commentators to see those societies as pure, utterly harmonious and socially blameless communities – a perspective I find problematic because such romantic idealisation is finally a form either of condescension or of misrepresentation in that it denies full human status (which must include recognition of the harmful capacities of individuals and societies) to the Khoisan. As E. N. Wilmsen puts it, this leads to the position where the Khoisan "can be pan-human only by being pre-human" (19). In a comment I see as paralleling Wilmsen's, Anne Solomon insists that "interpretations of the rock art which prioritise the transcendent at the expense of the mundane must be seen as unacceptable; and an approach which emphasises or proceeds from the religious is as much a 'tranquil' account that conceals historical realities" (56).

But it may not be necessary to dichotomise the religious (both as the transcendent and as the moral dimension) from the historical, in the way that Solomon suggests here. For, in stories like the *Dwaalstories* – simultaneously social documentation and social assessment – these perspectives coexist in mutually enriching ways. In his major essay "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature," Harold Scheub says that "myth is a metaphor, and because of that it is a narrative device" (3). This may be taken to mean that in myths which represent "recognisable" social formations and events, the process of recognition or understanding follows the thread or clue that the story-line provides.

Scheub offers ways of considering what he terms "tales that [. . .] have epic dimensions" (14) – a description which I believe fits the *Dwaalstories*, or which I would like to extend to apply to them. To Scheub such tales (with "epic dimensions") transcend the schismatic distinction between what is considered *either* religious *or* historical material, as well as between materials classified *either* oral *or* literary – in an argument I find compelling and liberating. Scheub writes that

> the refocusing of attention from things done to who does them is critical, not only to an understanding of the oral tradition and its permutations, but to a comprehension of its ties with literature.

---

articulat[ing] meanings that must be shared in order to perpetuate society as an entity of shared understandings" (*Women Like Meat* 192-193).

> While Trickster and Hero[ine?] stand alone, each yearns to be an insider. But it is not *being* on the inside that is important, it is *becoming* an insider. *Being* an insider means accepting the society as it is. *Becoming* one means altering the society to accommodate what an individual stands for, not the other way round. The shift is revolutionary. (14)

For, in creating such redefinitions, "the hero's vision and his [or her] struggle have to do with the future" (14). In "this breaking of a cyclical pattern," Scheub writes, "the epic character moves away from the tale character towards the historical figure. [. . .] But the break is the thing, for it allows the introduction of realism into the oral narrative" (15).[14] In what follows I shall attempt to indicate that Hendrik's *Dwaalstories* exemplify the kind of tale that Scheub refers to as simultaneously "religious" and "historical," and as transcending the oral-literary divide.

The *Dwaalstories* were four among those (the others now lost) told by a venerable old man of at least a hundred years old, a narrator identified as a Bushman (i.e. San) by the white Afrikaans writer Eugène Marais,[15] who recorded them. Of the teller, we know only his advanced age and his Afrikaans name, Hendrik, as well as the fact that he was an itinerant visitor to the farm in the Waterberg region (in the Northern Province of present-day South Africa) where Marais, himself at this time something of a pariah due to his hopeless morphine addiction, stayed. It is likely that Marais's friend Tindall, son of a Wesleyan

---

[14] Scheub continues the argument to make the point that "History and fiction have come into a tentative union in the epic, making possible the birth of the novel" (15; compare also 46).

[15] A political adversary of and (in the local context) "liberal" campaigner against President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal (Boer) Republic before the Anglo-Boer War and a political activist against British domination in South Africa during and after the war; a gifted and pioneering naturalist – one of the very first to study groups of primates in their natural habitat, who also developed important theories concerning termite behaviour; a fiery journalist in his early years, who took a British law degree, acquired a great deal of medical and especially psychological knowledge, read widely in science and philosophy; made jewellery; a very important pioneering creative writer in Afrikaans (whose home language was more English than Afrikaans) and an author of scientific articles and studies; as well as an incurable and almost lifelong morphine addict, who died by suicide – these are some of the many and (in contrast with the Khoisan "Hendrik") well documented roles played by Marais.

missionary who was a pioneering student of Khoisan languages in northern South Africa and Namibia, first interested Marais in these cultures (Rousseau 170). Marais was also interested in the success another early Afrikaans writer, Von Wielligh, had achieved in collecting and publishing Khoisan tales in Afrikaans (Rousseau 194). A visit to Marais by a friend, the German artist Erich Mayer, in 1913 resulted in a fine ink portrait of "Ou [=old] Hendrik" (as the storyteller was known). It was perhaps at this time that Marais first heard the *Dwaalstories*.[16] The tales were first (serially and separately) published in 1921, in a popular Afrikaans women's or family magazine, *Die Huisgenoot*.

---

[16] A vexed aspect of Marais's position vis-à-vis the Khoisan is the fact that he wrote the following (in an essay, titled "The Yellow Streak in South Africa," which was never published):

> The psychologist finds so many ape-like mental attributes [in the San; Marais is writing as a naturalist who extensively studied primate behaviour and is evidently vaguely echoing the Darwinian ideas of his time] that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that nothing more than the skeleton of an articulate language separates them from the anthropoids. And to the comparative anatomist the thing seems beyond question. The profound somatic differences between the Bushman and the lowest human race precludes all idea of a common human species [. . .] Everything points to a near ape-ancestry and to an ape-ancestry different from that of the rest of the human race.

To this Marais added:

> And it is a singular thing that this ape-like being [. . .] the first cousin to the chimpanzee, should yet be the only true native South African artist. He was the first and only engraver and painter; the only musician; a poet and storyteller whose genius would compare favourably with that of any human race of a far higher degree of culture. And wherever the yellow streak has polluted the stream of "higher" South African blood it has prepotently carried with it this masterly strain of artistry. The so-called Bushman is our true and only Bohemian. With a broken-backed fiddle, a hoarse concertina and a bottle of virulent brandy he can still at will transform the wilderness into a joyous paradise. And withal, a sense of humour always proof against all miseries and vicissitudes.
>
> (Qtd. in Rousseau 266)

As Tobias comments, "What a strange mixture of pejorative and racist ideas with what high praise for the San artistic accomplishment!" (22).

Elsewhere, Rousseau (his biographer) notes further evidence of Marais's preoccupation with the idea of generic differences between "Bushmen" and other humans: "According to Marais, the tiny bony projections on the human lower jaw

Marais acknowledges regretfully that he never recorded any of the stories *verbatim*, but testifies that he did write down "a few" immediately after the telling. These details (and what follows) are mentioned in Marais's introduction to the first collected edition of the *Dwaalstories*, published in 1927 with the abovementioned portrait of Old Hendrik (who had died at "over a hundred years old," shortly after this likeness was sketched in 1913) as its frontispiece. In this introduction, Marais refers prominently and knowledgeably to Bleek's transcriptions of a San language (discussed earlier in this article). Marais draws a distinction between San tales which, imperfectly transliterated into Afrikaans, are near-gibberish, and those which have the power to move their listeners imaginatively. Marais seems to assign the stories to a children's audience (and, it would seem, one of white Afrikaans children!), yet his references to Bleek, to the complexities of San storytelling and to European "equivalents," as well as the trouble he took both in recording the tales and in scrupulously acknowledging the authorship of "Old Hendrik," indicate a definite recognition of their value.

---

were somehow related to the power of speech. In the Bushman, he believed, as in the ape, there were tiny holes instead of knobs, which indicated the Bushman's less advanced stage of development" (Rousseau 389-390).

Shocking and disappointing as these statements seem, coming from the recorder of the *Dwaalstories*, it should perhaps be noted that although his *practice* (both socially and artistically) contradicted these ugly, narrow-visioned prejudices, Marais was perhaps (in these statements) yielding to ideas for which he should not be held the sole scapegoat. Indeed, even the great Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop could (in a footnote in his *The African Origin of Civilization – Myth or Reality* (1974) refer equally disparagingly to the Khoisan (in order to express contempt towards certain whites): "These Whites are *savages* today, *in the Bushman or Hottentot sense of the word*; they make masks, grimacing and tormented, indicating a cosmic terror equalled only by the Eskimo" (Diop 164; my emphasis).

Very similar sounding to the white Afrikaner Marais's assessment (quoted above) of the San is the comment by the Botswana historian S. M. Molema in his important work *The Bantu Past and Present*: "Amongst the lowest of the world's inhabitants, they [the San] exhibited some traits of the most advanced [. . .] Much lower in the scale of humanity than the Bantu around them, they showed greater advances in some arts – such as painting – than they. In their folklore, too, [. . .] if they did not actually surpass, they were not surpassed by the Bantu" (26).

And for good measure one can add here an 1850 quotation from the famous British missionary David Livingstone's writings: "The Bushmen of the desert are perhaps the most degraded specimens of the human family" (161). See also my own essay, "'By What Authority?' Representations of the Khoisan in South African English Poetry."

The ironies of undervaluation and exploitation are more evident in the later white Afrikaans literary establishment's reception of the tales than in Marais's dissemination of them. Quite simply attributing the excellence of the stories entirely to Marais himself, the doyen of Afrikaans poets, N. P. Van Wyk Louw, wrote that Marais "here [i.e. in the *Dwaalstories*], in 'visions,' caught occasional glimpses of what Afrikaans [literary] art can be. Purer than he ever managed to convey in [his] poetry" (Louw 136; my translation of the Afrikaans original). One later critic suspects that Louw may have alluded (in choosing the term 'visions') to Marais's well known morphine addiction – a point she then simply extends to the speculation that Hendrik may have told the tales while under the influence of marijuana (Gilfillan 153-156). A contemporary Afrikaans literary critic even told Marais's biographer, Rousseau, that he "could not believe that Marais had himself written the tales" (Rousseau 262) – denying (it seems) *both* Marais *and* Old Hendrik the verbal capacity to have composed these masterpieces! The poem quoted at the end of the present essay was by Marais himself attributed to the character "Joggom Konterdans" who is an artist-figure featuring in the tale told to him by Hendrik. For generations this poem has been taught in South African schools as a composition by Eugène Marais who was (as he himself insists) its *transcriber*. Few pupils were ever taught that the poem had been taken from its context in one of the *Dwaalstories*, let alone that the original visionary or poet was a Khoisan person expressing an imaginative and conceptual understanding particular to his own, now neglected or half-buried South African culture.

Yet it is, of course, impossible to establish what was lost – or gained – by the mode of transcription of these stories. Marais himself ends his introduction to the 1927 edition by regretting that much of value was lost because of the delay between his initial hearing and subsequent recording of the stories. He refers to unusual "Afrikaans-Bushman words and expressions," not all of which he could recall, and adds observations on the inevitable impoverishment (in the transition from oral to literary mode) of the recorded version of the tales because of the absence of appropriate accompanying gestures, natural mimicry and (facial) expressions (Marais 1927: 7; my translations). Marais's awareness of translation as a form of betrayal (*tradurre tradire*, as the Italians say) is therefore fairly sophisticated.

Scheub's may (again) here be a useful perspective: he reminds us that "in ancient Egypt, the craft of the scribe was 'the greatest of all professions'; [. . .] the scribe was the mediator between the oral performer and his audience." Scribes,

Scheub tells us, "felt free to rephrase, rearrange and transpose." In this, he sees a metaphor for the transition from the oral to the literary mode, and a model of their possible mutual enrichment – "The two media continued their parallel development; [. . .] there is no unbridgeable gap between them; they constantly nourish each other" (Scheub 16).

Putting the above suggestions to the test brings one to the stories themselves and to the brief illustrations from them that can be contained in an article like this. The thematic outlines of the four *Dwaalstories*, are as follows: in the first one, the exposure of untested fame as undeserved, meeting the braggart's severe punishment for betraying his social responsibility at a time of crisis; in the second, the non-violent overthrow of unearned power; and, in the last two tales, unrecognised (female) excellence winning through. Because of constraints of space, it is only possible to summarise briefly the greater part of the most substantial of the four stories, the one that Marais placed second in the published collection, which bears the title "The Song of the Rain." The story is subtitled "A Coranna Wander-story," a reference which identifies it explicitly with a Khoikhoi group (the Coranna). Although Marais consistently refers to "Bushman stories" and to "Old Hendrik" as a "Bushman," details such as references to the keeping of livestock and to settled dwellings, as well as a reference to Heitsi-Eibib, the great (mythical) hero-ancestor of the Khoikhoi (in this and in one other story) point to their being of Khoikhoi origin – but then, the distinction between San (or Bushman) and Khoikhoi was (and is still) often blurred, both in fact and in description.

"The Song of the Rain" tells of a period of great suffering and near-starvation amongst the members of a smallish community, due to a terrible drought. The emergency resource that should be made available to all members of the community during such a crisis – a fountain or water-hole which never dries – was given into the keeping of the foremost musician and composer of this small social group, with express orders to guard it from common use, *but* to allow access to the water by other members of the community during any critical drought. Yet this man has grown arrogant and selfish and has come to see his caretaker's role as that of an owner with a personal possession, refusing to share the resource.[17] The other (ageing) man who might defeat the usurper in a musical con-

[17] Compare the following:

> Moreover, land ownership is loosely defined; the 'owner' or 'master' [. . .] of a territory, or of a permanent water hole that defines it, exercises a form of 'responsible stewardship', [. . .] in the words of Richard Katz,

test is unequal to the task, himself a foolish and vain person. Quietly, secretly, however, an outsider-figure by the name of Krom [or Bent – i.e. crooked, or crippled] Joggom Konterdans – whose full name seems to signify the stigma he bears as a hump-backed person, as well as his innovative, inventive genius in its allusion to the art of dancing "differently"– sets about constructing a new musical instrument according to the ancient lore of his people.

When the instrument is at last complete and the composition is performed, "Counterdance" (as one might render his last name in English) is recognised by the old grandmother and cultural authority of the community (who is named Nasi-Tgam) as their potential saviour. I now cite my own English translation (from the Afrikaans original) of the concluding part of the story (Marais 19-21; my unpublished translation 9-10):

> And she handed him the small mirror which she long ago polished from the black horn of a rhinoceros, as well as the great copper neck-ring of Heitsi-Eibib.
>
> And that morning when the light dawned Counterdance sat at the Steep Stone inside the yard fence of the Berry Trees; this is at the tip of the Skew-water; he had turned his back towards the yard-side. And in front of him he had propped up the rhinoceros horn mirror, so that he could see everything behind him; and his whole body was gleaming with the tail-fat. And around his head dangled three tassels of mongoose skin; and around his neck was the great copper neck-ring of Heitsi-Eibib.
>
> And he composed the Song of the Rain.
>
> And Jacob Tame-One [the tyrant-figure who refuses to share the water: I have freely translated his name from the Afrikaans], when he took the trumpet and opened his mouth wide to blow it, was suddenly dumb-struck. And his little ones rushed from the yard-side shouting: "Our Dad, our Dad, there's someone on the marker stone at the Skew-water who shows only his back. And the people are dancing in their shelters."

Megan Biesele and Vera St Denis, [he is] 'more an informed person who can care for a water resource so that it can be shared than an exclusive holder of rights to that water.' (Smith et al. 73)

And Jacob Tame-One made a grab for his panga, and he shouted for the warriors, but there was no reply. He heard them saying: "Klips! [i.e. "Gosh!"] That is a Master musician, that one."

And Tame-One struck the big drum, and he called out: "Today I'll invite *all* the vultures! Today will be the great battle of the Berry Trees!" And he crept up on Counterdance behind the thorn shelter of the Skew-water.

And Counterdance sang the Song of the Rain, and he played his violin [the stringed instrument he had so painstakingly constructed].

And Tame-One saw his own people go to meet him [Counterdance], and they danced and spoke admiringly to Joggom Counterdance. And at the top of the hill he saw the old crone Nasi-Tgam and she spread the black skin cloak out wide, and behind her followed the people from all the other yards, with calabashes and ostrich egg-shells ready for the water, and he felt his heart weakening.

And Bent Joggom Counterdance played the Song of the Rain, and he peeped into the mirror.

And then Jacob Tame-One tossed his panga into the Skew-water, and sat down in the dust, and he called out: "My children, my children, your old father's riding-horse is dead!"

And on that day the old crone Nasi Tgam re-intoned the Law of the Berry Trees, and it was Bent Joggom Counterdance who distributed the water.

The Song of the Rain
(By Bent Joggom Counterdance)

First she peeps slyly over the mountain-top,
And her eyes are shy;
And she laughs softly.
And from far off she beckons with one hand.
Her bracelets shimmer and her necklaces shine,
She calls softly.
She tells the winds of the dance.
And she invites them, for the yard is wide and the wedding grand.
The big game rush up from the plain.