

***Dwaalstories*—the Stories of a Roaming Bushman; Committed to Paper by a Wandering Boer**

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For the purposes of this article I use the term *Bushman* for lack of a better word. I do so advisedly, since the word *San* is not free of derogatory connotations, as David Lewis-Williams (1989:9) convincingly argued.

The past three to five years have seen a marked revival of interest in the Bushman in Afrikaans writing. I am referring to titles such as *Die Spoorsnyer* (Piet van Rooyen), *Koms van die hyreën* (Dolf van Niekerk), *T'sats van die Kalahari* (Willem D. Kotzé) and the work of poets such as Donald Riekert, Thomas Deacon and Tom Gouws. This interest can be interpreted as a sign of the times: perhaps it is a belated act of homage to an extinct and almost forgotten part of our nation. Be it as it may, it is a fact that the Bushman stands at present in the centre of attention at many a conference; folklorists as well as anthropologists direct their attention anew to Bushman rock art, their customs and their stories¹.

But the present concern is not the first and the only that Afrikaans writing has directed towards the Bushman. With this article I want to focus on a previous manifestation of interest—by authors who published between roughly 1920 - 1930. I am referring to G.R. von Wielligh's *Boesmanstories* in four volumes which appeared from 1919 - 1921, to *Skankwan van die Duine* (1930) by the Hobson Brothers and in particular to *Dwaalstories* by Eugène Marais. According to his biographer Leon Rousseau, Marais wrote these stories down while residing on the farm Rietfontein in the Waterberg. It was here that he met the Bushman, Ou Hendrik (Old Hendrik), from whom

¹ See especially the publications by Van Wyk (1994) and Van Vuuren (1994; 1995a; 1995b).

he heard the tales. In 1921 the stories appeared in *Die Boerevrou* (The Farmgirl), probably through the intervention of Marais' niece, Mabel Malherbe, who was editor of the journal. In 1927 it was published under the title *Dwaalstories en ander Vertellings*.

It is not clear when Marais and old Hendrik met for the first time. It was in 1913 however, when the wandering Bushman visited Rietfontein on his yearly rounds, that Marais jotted down the stories. On this occasion, the painter, Erich Mayer, was Marais' guest at Rietfontein and his presence bears testimony to this. During this visit, Mayer made the sketch of old Hendrik that was later used as frontispiece to the 1927-publication. This was timeous, for shortly afterwards old Hendrik died, well over a hundred years old.

We can assume that old Hendrik told these stories in the Afrikaans known to him, and probably interspersed with words from his own language. That Marais had difficulty with some of the Bushman concepts, becomes clear when we consider a coinage like *uitspeelstel*, which keeps baffling generations of scholars. How big Marais' input was in shaping these stories, is impossible to ascertain. From Stephen Watson's remarks in his preface to *Return of the moon*, it is apparent that to translate Bushmen stories in a way that Westerners can follow, is not an easy undertaking. He points out some of the problems:

- * /Xam stories are repetitive—a characteristic of oral literatures in many parts of the world—and they create a circling rather than linear progression.
- * Western literature relies heavily on the adjective whereas in /Xam narrative, the use of adjective hardly exists. (He points out that a phrase like the Homeric 'wine-dark sea' is quite unthinkable in /Xam)
- * The /Xam world-view differs from the modern, especially concerning time and their notion of causation.
- * Many of their narratives do not make use of closure in so marked a fashion as other literatures. Their stories simply peter out, digress, or mutate into further stories (Watson 1991 14-19)

What the raw material sounded like, we will never know. The written product, however, remains remarkable. That a poet of N.P. van Wyk Louw's stature considered these stories to be of the finest in Afrikaans is evident in his statement that '... these four pieces are of the best prose in our language'². As a journalist, Marais enjoyed the greatest esteem and as scientist he was far ahead of his time³. His literary attempts, however, seem

² hierdie vier stukke is van die grootste prosa in ons taal (cf. De Vries 1983 13)

³ Cf. his *The Life of the White Ant* and *The Soul of the Ape*

to be of lesser quality. His biographer states that with *Dwaalstories* he reaches heights that overshadow all his other prose; a scholar of Ernst Lindenberg's stature is reported to have said: 'I cannot believe that Marais wrote these himself'⁴.

This leads Rousseau to speculate on the use of hallucinogenic drugs. That Marais was a substance abuser, is a well established fact. But perhaps even Old Hendrik used drugs? Did he tell his stories after smoking dagga?

The smoking of dagga was allowed on most farms and usually children were not prohibited to listen to the stories of the daggasmokers. Amongst them were some of the most prominent storytellers and the dagga rhymes—which were recited after the first few deep, deep draws on the daggapipe and after the characteristic violent coughing stopped—constitute some of the most notable and remarkable rhymes in our folkpoetry⁵.

Do we have, in these stories, a double dose of drugs? That is a possibility that Rousseau asks his reader to consider. Was the teller's mind sharpened by the effects of dagga? It is an established fact that the man who wrote the stories down, who honed them and gave them shape, was, to put it metaphorically, an opium-eater. Did he add something to these stories that he saw in a drug-induced state? In his discussion of *Dwaalstories*, Van Wyk Louw probably hints at this addiction when he writes: 'Here, in "visions", Marais saw something of what Afrikaans art can be. Purer than what he could ever express in verse'⁶.

With this article I want to posit that at least one of the *Dwaalstories* is about a journey undertaken in a state of trance, in other words, that it is about out-of-body travel. If this is indeed the case, we can talk about a triple trance: that of dagga, that of morphine and that state induced by the Bushmen through dance and hyperventilation. I am referring to the state of trance, when the body lies motionless; almost dead, and the spirit wanders far and wide.

The name that Marais gave to these stories, is in itself revealing. Of the word, 'dwaal', the *Handwoordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (1970) gives the following definitions:

⁴ Ek kan nie glo Marais het hulle self geskryf nie (Rousseau 1974 254)

⁵ Op die meeste plase is daggarokery oogluikend toegelaat, en kinders is gewoonlik nie verbied om na die daggarokers se stories te gaan luister nie. Onder hulle was baie van die bekendste storievertellers, en die daggarympies—wat opgesê is na die eerste paar diep, diep skuiwe aan die daggapyp en nadat die kenmerkend oordrewe hoesbui bedaar het—is van die merkwaardigste en indrukwekkendste ryme in ons volkspoësie (Rousseau 1974: 254).

⁶ Marais het hier in 'gesigte' soms iets gesien van wat Afrikaanse kuns kan wees. Suiwerder as wat hy ooit in verse kon sê (Louw 1981 136)

- 1 Op 'n verkeerde pad beweeg (to travel in the wrong direction),
- 2 Rondswerf (to wander, roam about, to stray, to ramble);
- 3 Afwyk van die goeie pad, sondig (to sin);
- 4 'n Verkeerde mening hê, jou vergis (to be mistaken, to err),

Of a person can be said that 'hy is in 'n dwaal', meaning that he is absent minded or literally, that his body is roaming about aimlessly, while his mind is elsewhere.

For the purpose of this article, I want to discuss only the first *Dwaalstorie*, namely 'Klein Riet-alleen-in-die-roerkuil' (Little Reed-alone-in-the-whirlpool). When viewed against the background of the European wondertale, this is the typical story about a young person leaving home, the trials and tribulations he meets on the way, and, contrary to expectation, the negative outcome of his venture. This young man was named 'Riet-alleen-in-die-roerkuil' by his grandfather, old Heitsi-eibib. According to Hahn (*Tsui: Goam the Supreme Being of the Khoi-Khor*; as quoted by De Vries 1983:16), Heitsi-eibib was known as a prophet 'who could tell to new born children as well as to heroes their fate'. If the young man's name was indeed prophetically inspired, we can expect him to meet his fate in water. (His name can be translated roughly as Reed-all-alone-in-the-whirlpool). That his name has to do with water, is perhaps not so surprising. The teller of the tale, old Hendrik, roamed the Waterberg, like many Bushmen did. To think of the environment as barren and desert-like, is a mistake.

The story tells, in typical wondertale fashion, that a great danger threatened the community, without going into detail about the nature of this danger. To act was of the utmost importance.

Thus the elders of the community gathered at nightfall, and at dawn the next morning, they had a plan of action. Riet was to carry a message to Rooi Joggom. He was chosen for this important task because he was the fastest man in all the tribe. The content of the message remains a mystery. In all probability the elders sent for help, and where better than from a spiritual being? The name, *Rooi* (Red) Joggem, points in such a direction, as De Vries (1983:16) indicates when he quotes Hahn as translating the name of one of the main figures in Bushmen mythology as 'Rooi Dagbreek' (Red Daybreak). There is also another possibility: *Joggem* may just as well be a distortion of *Kaggen*, the Supreme Being of the Bushmen. (We must keep in mind that Marais wrote down what he thought he heard, or, he tried to make sense of what he heard. We have no evidence that he was an expert on Bushmen mythology.)

At daybreak, Riet leaves the settlement, with the warning of his grandfather ringing in his ears: he had to be careful, Nagali has great power and she will do her utmost to outwit him. In his right hand Riet carries his

mysterious 'uitspeelstel' and with his left hand he keeps hammering the words of the message into his head. (De Vries is of the opinion that the 'uitspeelstel' probably was a lucky charm made from pieces of wood, animal teeth, bits of ostrich eggs, etc ; De Vries 1983:17.)

In typical wondertale fashion Riet meets with three obstacles in ever increasing grades of intensity. Almost in textbook fashion the story answers to the first functions that Propp has distinguished as inherent to the wondertale:

- 1 A member of a family departs from home (absentation);
- 2 The hero is warned against evil; in this instance, against Nagali (interdict);
- 3 Riet does not recognise Nagali in the shape of a lovely girl, and he interacts with her (the interdict is broken).
- 4 The scoundrel, (Nagali) makes contact with the hero (reconnaissance)
- 5 The scoundrel gets information from the hero (delivery)
- 6 The scoundrel tries to trick the hero (trickery)
- 7 The hero plays into the hands of his opponent (complicity)

It is evident that this Bushman story fits perfectly into the pattern of all wondertales world-wide. Due to his own, inherent weakness, Riet does not complete his mission and he does not live happily ever after. He is being tested, and he fails. He fails because of his pride.

Riet cannot accept that he is not the fastest runner of all, and he allows himself to be distracted. So it happens that it is at the evil time of nightfall that he reaches the river. On the bank, the knobkierie of the sorceress Nagali sits. It is imbued with a life of its own, for the kierie is laughing at Riet. It is as if Nagali is so assured of the outcome, that she no longer bothers to put in a personal appearance. And here, in the black waters of the river, Riet will meet his fate. (It is not for nothing that this particular drift is called 'Moetmekaar se drif' (Stream of Meeting) (Marais 1964:10). That he will be all alone in the whirlpool when his fate is decided upon, was foreseen by his grandfather when he was still a small child upon his mother's back.

Riet is tired out from having taken two detours (dwaalweë) and from the strenuousness of the journey. Thus he is no longer able to recognise the crocodile for what it is when he reaches the river. He takes it for a tree-trunk and plans to use it as a means of transport across the 'angry' stream. Such is his confusion that he does not even notice that he is washed up on the selfsame bank from where he departed. As soon as he reaches land, he starts running again. Significantly, it is at daybreak that he notices the fire, and he takes it as a sign marking the end of the journey: he must be close to Rooi Joggom's abode. But alas! It is of course the homefire that he sees burning

and it is his own grandfather who is waiting for him. The story ends like this:

Before he reached halfway, they grabbed him and only then did he realise that he was back again in Gammadoekies and that it is his own grandfather who was clutching his left leg.

And Heitsi-eibib said to old Rockrabbit One-eye 'We have to stretch him tighter than the string of the big ramkie!'

And there they killed the fire of Reed-all-alone-in-the-whirlpool⁷

After considering David Lewis-Williams' work on Bushman rock art, I took a fresh look at 'Klein Riet-alleen-in-die-roerkuil'. I suppose it is the collective title that Marais gave to these stories that kept turning over in my mind: *Dwaalstories*. That, together with Marais' addiction to morphine and Rousseau's hints about Old Hendrik's use of dagga, compelled me to reread Lewis-Williams on Bushmen rock art. If Riet had to carry a message of great importance, what better way to travel than out of body? I kept asking myself. Carlos Castaneda's account (see *The Teachings of Don Juan*) of his encounter with his dog-god while under the influence of peyote, was also making a reappearance in my thoughts. A wise and well-travelled Bushman such as old Hendrik, would surely be aware of the possibilities of the trance?

Why run at all when it was possible to cover vast distances in the spirit?

So the trance must be considered. The trance was achieved for specific purposes, as is pointed out in *Images of Power*:

During this state of trance, Bushman shamans perform their tasks, the most important of which is to cure people of known as well as unperceived ailments. Other important tasks ... include rain-making, visiting distant camps on out-of-body travel, and control of animals (e.a.).

Today Bushmen hardly ever use hallucinogens, but they may have done so in the past. Instead, they rely on hyperventilation, intense concentration and highly rhythmic dancing to alter their state of consciousness (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:32)

7. Maar eer hy halfpad was, gryp hulle hom, en toe gewaar hy dat hy weer terug is in Gammadoekies, en dis sy einste oupa wat hom aan die linkerbeen beet het

En Heitsi-eibib sê vir ou Klipdas-Eenoog. 'Ons moet hom stywer span as die snaar van die groot ramkie!'

En daar het hulle die vuurtjie doodgemaak van Riet-alleen-in-die-roerkuil (Marais 1964:11).

The danger that threatened Gammadoekies could have been a severe drought, in which case a shaman would have been sent in search of the rain-bull. Another possibility is that Kaggen's help was needed to direct animal herds towards the settlement. Whatever the exact nature of the task, it was a matter of urgency, and for this, the best man was chosen. The most effective way of travel, would of course have been out-of-body, especially in an emergency such as this.

According to Lewis-Williams (1989:32), most young men desire to become shamans, 'not for personal gain, but because they will be able to serve the community'. Riet was chosen to serve the community because he was the fastest runner. That much can be established when we look at the story realistically. If Riet was chosen for an out-of-body journey, it must have been because he had proven himself in this way before. The gathering which lasted throughout the night, could have been the prolonged dance used to induce the state of trance. To go into a state of trance is a painful process. I quote:

A !Kung man told Richard Katz: 'The young ones fear n/um and cry out. They cry tears. They cry out, "It's painful! It hurts!"' By the age of thirty-five they will know whether they will be able to conquer the pain and fear to become effective shamans (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:34).

When Riet departs on his journey, there is great fear among the men:

And the men are so afraid, that their toenails rattle and the sweat rolls down their bodies in big haildrops. Each one can blow out the fire with one blow⁸

Possibly the men are so frightened because they know how painful and dangerous the journey can be. They are familiar with the treacherous nature of the manifestations of the spirit world.

Riet is carrying his 'uitspeelstel' when he departs on his journey. We do not know what the exact nature of this object was, apart from De Vries' guess that it could have been a sort of lucky charm. David Lewis-Williams points out that 'ordinary items of equipment' often had special bearing on the trance. He mentions the hunting bag, the digging stick and the fly-whisk in particular and suggests that they had special significance beyond everyday use—in short, they are metaphors for trance experience (Lewis-Williams 1989:116-117).

On his journey Riet encounters the sorceress Nagali in different guises. He first meets with her in the form of a beautiful maiden who leads him back to where he started from, and who robs him of his 'uitspeelstel'. At

⁸ En die mans is so bang dat hulle toonnaels kletter en die sweet drup van hulle lyf in haelkorrels. Elkeen kan die vuur met een asem doodblaas (Marais 1964:8)

the next meeting Nagali appears in the form of a man who challenges Riet to race with him. In both instances it is Riet's pride that forces him to interact with these illusory personages. In both instances these forms lead him astray and tire him out before revealing their true nature: the girl was Nagali's whirlwind and the man was none other than her gazelle.

These two meetings may perhaps correspond with the first two stages of trance. In the first stage, the so-called entoptic stage, people see luminous geometric shapes which are experienced as shimmering; they seem to be moving with a life of their own. (The dancing girl, who turns into a whirlwind?) In the second stage, people try to make sense of the entoptic phenomena by 'translating' them into objects with which they are familiar. This is most probably how the ordinary 'vaal Boesman' has to viewed (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 60-67).

Due to these delays, it is at dusk that Riet reaches the river. Lewis-Williams (1989:54) points out that another metaphor for trance experience is *underwater*:

Like 'death', being underwater has a number of parallels with trance. Both involve difficulty in breathing, sounds in the ears, affected vision, a sense of weightlessness, unusual perspectives and, finally, unconsciousness. Numerous accounts of trance experience show that the Bushmen link trance with being underwater'.

Moreover, the experience of descending into a pool, corresponds with the last and deepest stage of the trance. This stage is associated with powerful emotional experiences.

It is during this stage that Riet's failure becomes irreversible. He never reaches his destination. He does not meet Rooi Joggem to deliver his message. The reason for this is probably his sense of personal pride. In Bushman society the shamans are not a privileged class. They are ordinary people who also have to perform all the everyday tasks (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:31). Riet's pride in his ability was thus misplaced.

The ensuing punishment seems extreme, particularly among the Bushmen who were a nonjudgmental people. Failed shamans simply resumed their ordinary life in the group as if nothing had happened. Perhaps it was Marais who ended the story in this particular way—his (eurocentric) need for closure probably got the better of him. The story thus ends at Gammadoekies where it had started. Moreover, it ends at break of day—the same time that Riet had departed on his journey and so the circle is completed. At the same time the small span of Riet's life has also reached its conclusion '... and there they killed the fire of Reed-alone-in-the-whirlpool'⁹.

⁹... daar het hulle die vuurtjie doodgemaak van Riet-alleen-in-die-roerkuil

Riet's pride in his own ability probably caused his downfall. This, in turn, brings Carlos Castaneda's experience back to mind. He went into training with an old Indian named Don Juan, to become a man of knowledge. (In other words, a shaman.) Yet, the teaching became so strenuous and the encounters with the spiritual world so frightening, that he gave it up. Years later, on another meeting with the old Indian, Don Juan told him that he took himself far too seriously:

'The reason you got scared and quit is because you felt too damn important', he said, explaining my previous withdrawal. 'Feeling important makes one heavy, clumsy and vain. To be a man of knowledge one needs to be light and fluid' (Castaneda 1971:13)

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