

‘Moon, Man, Women, Bushmen: Reconciling the Irreconcilable?’

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A direct impulse for the paper I am presenting today*, was my reading of some of the contributions to the third issue of *Alternation* (2,1:1995). That the journal published by the CSSALL so demonstrably encourages ongoing research and dialogue in the field of its specific interest, must bear testimony to the relevance and validity of both the Centre and the journal in present day South African culture and scholarship.

In the introduction by Smit (1995:1-4), as well as the writings of Moran (1995:16-36), Mngadi (1995:37-45) and the book review by Van Vuuren (1995:151-154), certain key words and themes linked not only the essays written by the individually mentioned authors, but also encapsulated, so it seemed to me, the pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty, complexity and multiplicity (amongst [literary] scholars) when discussing notions of aesthetics, value, power, knowledge, feminism, nation, culture, history and racism, to paraphrase Smit’s introductory paragraph. And in themselves, these essays demonstrated that in present day South Africa, the study of the notions listed above, is indeed following an ‘interdisciplinary route, unfold(ing) through processes of interaction and (is) ultimately focus(sing) on the local’ (to once again paraphrase Smit).

A few of those key words and common notions raised, form the base on which the edifice of my own arguments is constructed; arguments relating to the phenomenon of transculturalism in South African texts published during the past decade. These notions concern aspects of genealogy, cultural differences, history, feminism and literary form. My argument is that exactly these notions form a motivational cluster which contextualises the phenomenon of literary transculturalism, and that they are motivations directly related to socio-ideological discourses in South Africa today.

What I have identified as instances of literary transculturalism, came to my notice as part of a greater research project currently in process, namely the effort of rewriting Afrikaans literary history within the context of an encompassing Southern African literary whole. During my readings, a significant number of repetitive images, themes and devices appeared across a wide spectrum of texts written in Afrikaans and English (and according to other literary historians, they are also present in Black indigenous writing) during the last decade, but specifically during the past five years. In

a paper read at the ICLA conference in 1994 and recently published (Roos 1995), I proposed that amongst others, the heightened occurrence of translations from one South African language into another, the novel which presents personal history as part of the documentation of the greater South African story, the feminist mood, the interest in orature and the publication of verbal narratives, and the renaissance of folklore and fairy tales, are commonalities that speak of a marked transcultural movement in South African literature today. As a demonstration of this phenomenon, I went into greater detail to show how one of these themes, namely that of the exterminated world of the Bushman, has been assimilated, appropriated and transformed in modern day texts. That several of the essays in the above mentioned *Alternation* concentrate on aspects of this same issue, indicates that these surmises were not entirely subjective.

Since then, my initial interest which led mainly to the description of what I had seen as a literary *motif*, has broadened to include the question of WHY this specific image should suddenly 'enjoy' such a conspicuous position. Especially in the case of Afrikaans writing, but also with reference to most 'White' writing, there seems to be a rather paradoxical regard for a world that has become all but totally extinct, physically and culturally, precisely through the annihilating disregard shown to that world in earlier times by White colonists. And in a more academic context, the description of the extent and range of this particular assimilation of an indigenous, ancient African world also offered new perspectives on the question of the genealogy and cultural boundaries of specifically Afrikaans literature.

Regarding the notions of 'genealogy' and 'cultural boundaries', their inherent multiplicity of meaning, and the almost self-evident result of uncertainty which follows any dialogue about, or analyses of, their function in textual studies, must be emphasised. In the first place: I see the current interest in genealogy not as a simple search for origins, it much rather stems from a renewed realisation and the experience that the past lives in the present. Foucault (1977:142) wrote that

what is found at the beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin: it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.

and

the search for descent is not the erecting of foundations; on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.

In the same vein the second concept, that of cultural difference/boundary, does not so much refer to a state of visible difference, as to

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articulating the differences between representations of social life without surmounting the space of incommensurable meanings and judgements that are produced within the process of transcultural negotiation (Bhabha 1990:313-314).

But then also, continues Bhabha,

in the restless drive for cultural translation, hybrid sites of meaning open up a cleavage in the language of culture which suggests that the similitude of the *symbol* as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that repetition of the *sign* is, in each specific social practice, both different and differential.

In this particular instance the symbol, which I shall call the 'Bushman-*motif*' for the purposes of this paper, is a multifaceted one, referring to the world of the Bushmen, that nomadic group of hardy hunter-foragers who were the earliest known inhabitants of Southern Africa, and who left not only a countryside filled with marvellous paintings and engravings, but, before they were exterminated by White settlers, also let some vestiges of their narrative art be known. Some of those 'cultural sites' and 'social practices' as they are manifested textually, the different repetitions of the sign, and a hypothetical motivation for these differentials, are what I would like to discuss here today.

From the list of texts given as references, the diverse nature of the relevant titles and the recent date of their publication can be deduced. Popular fiction, prize-winning novels, docunovels, scientific reports, collections of poetry, autobiographies, art exhibitions, philosophical treatises, children's stories, books for coffee tables are included—a veritable postmodernistic 'cultural site'. And as is to be expected in a postmodernistic space, defining the hierarchical boundaries between genres, meaning and intended reading audiences proved to be very difficult when discussing these texts.

Perhaps one may impose a self-styled order by referring in the first place to the essentially oral nature of Bushman narrative, and the manner in which this characteristic has been presented in the writings mentioned on my list. The prime source of Bushman folklore preserved for Western consumption, is the famed collection by Bleek and Lloyd from 1911. A paper read at the 1995 CSSALL conference (Köppe 1995), gave a detailed account of the subsequent influence of that early text. I would like to draw attention to the diverse nature of my list of modern day analogies. The most reputable probably is the 1993 collection by Megan Biesele of oral narratives from the Ju/'hoan people living in Namibia and Botswana. The author, a famed anthropologist, presents her 'translations' as faithful renderings of transcribed performances; the work is the result of years of scientific research, illustrated with photographs and maps, the style precise and erudite. Also presenting itself as a recording of Bushman narratives,

is the glossy publication by Coral Fourie (1994). But this is a book of a different order: the 'transcriptions' are accompanied by idealised drawings of the numerous narrators and highly decorative illustrations done by the editor, interspaced by lyrical, often cloyingly sentimental 'quotes' from what is called 'Bushman songs'. And yet, both collections reveal an explicitly feminist tone, letting the spotlight fall on female narrators, emphasising the pivotal role of women in the Bushmen society, focusing on narrations concerning menstrual rites, childbirth, and the (feminine) image of the moon. The third analogous text is of a completely different genre; this is the collection of poetry by Stephen Watson, titled *The return of the moon* (1991). Here the well known poet rewrites the Bleek transcriptions, trying to

bring the words of the narrators to life once more, and in such a way that they might continue to speak to us who are alive in the last decade of the twentieth century (Watson 1991:11).

A remarkably similar mood is created in the work of the Afrikaans poet Petra Müller. In a collection of poems published in 1987, she uses images from the world of the Bushmen, and especially the myth of the returning moon, to speak of the mortality of man. Speaking in this vein, one must also mention one of the best known Afrikaans novels of 1993, *Karolina Ferreira* by Lettie Viljoen. In her story of transformation and rejuvenation, the moon is a recurring, portentous image, one of the complicated characters is the shamanistic homopathic healer Willie who once was saved from certain death by a small group of Bushmen, and the narrative mood is decidedly feminist, commenting biting on the power games that men play.

Disempowerment, dispossession and the conflict of race and gender form a second group of 'social practices'. One important category is made up of scholarly research reports mainly by scholars in Anthropology and the Social sciences. The range here stretches from the analytical and ethnologically sound *Hunters and herders of Southern Africa* (1992) by Alan Barnard (1992) to the riveting and passionately written description of what may be seen as ethnocide, Robert J. Gordon's *The Bushman myth. The making of a Namibian underclass* (1992). This latter work makes lucid use of state and church documents, photographs, analyses of movies, museum exhibits and other 'Western' depictions of the Bushman people. Gordon stunningly represents his theory that the focus on the 'difference' between and unassimilability of colonist and Bushman, premised the nature of the white man's discourse on Bushmen and the firm belief that they must disappear from the face of the earth. But a second and sometimes just as interesting category is that made up by fictional works. *Die koms van die hyreën*, a short novel by Dolf van Niekerk, depicts the growing enmity between a desperate white farmer and a Bushman who suddenly appears on the drought stricken

farm, looking for ancient engravings as a proof that the land rightfully belonged to his forebears. Their struggle forms the central plot line, simultaneously incorporating topical situations like land restitution and primeval shamanistic experiences. Set in much earlier times, both Geoffrey Haresnape (*Testimony* 1990) and Karel Schoeman (*Hierdie lewe* 1994) touch on similar themes. Schoeman's prize-winning work is the story of a dying old woman, recalling her stunted life on a lonely farm. Some fragments of her tale refer to the callous dispossession of land belonging to Bushmen. In Haresnape's novel, the narrative form is that of an oral report by a woman of ill repute, a social outcast, describing the last, decadent days of a nineteenth century rural community during which also the few remaining members of a Bushmen clan were hunted down. But this is also an intensely lyrical text, and in the narrator's final song of salvation images from Bushmen myths intermingle with allusions to Christ. The repeated references here to the moon, linked to the occult, and the idea that the characterising function of naming people, animals and plants can attain mystic dimensions, also occur in the previously mentioned book by Viljoen.

Bushman narratives concerning the transformation of people into animals and *visa versa* and the ominous part played by the moon in this magical world, have for a long time been regarded from a Western perspective as subject matter for children's tales. Especially in the Afrikaans literary tradition, fragments and adaptations of the Bushmen world readily found its way in stories written for young readers, and as Van Vuuren (1994) indicates, even the Von Wielligh collections of folklore intended for the adult reader, were judged as too simplistic to be included in the literary canon. The two small books recently published by Hanneke du Preez, *Kgalagadi Tales* (1994; 1995) present this conventional view of the Bushman as primitive child, only half human, at its stereotypical best. In her patronising 'word to parents and teachers', the author claims that these stories are

truly primitive ... in the style and spirit of the Bushmen ... [and c]hildren sense in them a kinship for which there is no rational explanation.

Just how widespread the acceptance of this viewpoint may be, can be indicated by the fact that these booklets with their pretty illustrations, were translated into sixteen different African and European languages and sold/are selling very well. But claims as to the childlike quality of the Bushmen world can not always be taken at face value. One of the most revered texts of classic Afrikaans literature, *Dwaalstories* by Eugène Marais, is a collection of four lyrical tales preceded by a strikingly misleading foreword in which the author describes his writings as tales of little meaning, childlike, literally transcribed from stories told by old Bushmen. And then he confronts his reader with some extremely complex and sophisticated narratives, in which the authentic depic-

tion of the harsh African veld, a world of drought and hunger and transmogrification, becomes a stunning indigenous manifestation of the nineteenth century symbolist mode. This structural 'exploitation' was repeated, and in my view extremely effectively, in John Miles' docunovel *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991). The real but still unsolved murder of a young black policeman by his fellow officers, who feared that he would inform on their involvement in then operative death squads, is reported by Miles according to structural patterns typical of the Bushmen oral art, but also with explicit references to characters, episodes and even specific phrases taken from the Bushmen stories 'edited' in 1927 by Marais (Roos 1993).

In popular fiction the symbol and its different signs have become very noticeable in the last few years. Two authors seem to dominate this trend. Piet van Rooyen won the competition run by the glossy magazine *De Kat* in 1993 for his novel *Die spoorsnyer* (1994), a tale of hunters, the hunted and shamanistic hallucinations. The main character, a Namibian Bushman incongruously called Paul Chapman, uses his remarkable knowledge of his people's traditional way of life to act as a policeman and spy for white farmers. The very topical question of divided loyalties and lost identity forms the central theme, but it is treated in a rather superficial way. Even less convincing is Willem Kotze's *T'sats van die Kalahari* (1994), which underwrites the perception of the primitive, animalistic nature of the Bushman world. In both cases the authors have also published autobiographical texts, in which references to their fictional characters and events abound. The most interesting is Van Rooyen's *Agter 'n eland aan* (1995); not only is the real life person of Paul Chapman extensively described, but the author's personal involvement with the Ju/'hoansi people of Namibia, his dealings with the world famous Marshall foundation and Megan Biesele and his matter of fact style create an unexpected but credible linkage with other textual sites.

I do think that even this cursory review demonstrates how, by its pervasive presence in such differing texts, the Bushman motif makes it possible for notions of aesthetics, power, culture, history, feminism and racism to be explored. This exploration must take cognisance that nowadays there is a great and world-wide interest in folk art and folklore, in rural crafts, in meeting with different cultures. The introductory essay to *Contested images*, a collection of scientific reports on Rock art research edited by Dowson and Lewis-Williams (1994:348), stresses the 'remarkable power of this art to arrest the attention of the modern viewer'. This very fact was demonstrated by an impressive exhibition of ancient rock art paintings and engravings, together with modern day popular crafts, held in Rotterdam in the Netherlands at the beginning of 1994, and called 'The return of the moon. Bushmen art from the Kalahari'.

The textual power of the Bushman motif may partly lie in such a nostalgic longing for a bygone world; in modern man's ultimately unrealistic wish to 'return to nature'. Andrew Smith (Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994:389) cynically refers to the Bushmen as the

original ecologists. They are presented as an admonition to those who degrade the environment today. This is a comfortable view for present day colonials because it provides something for which the Bushmen can be admired but which, at the same time, removes them from the political arena. It reduces the guilt of their destruction by placing them along with the inevitable destruction of the environment consequent upon colonial expansion. The shooting out of game and the decimation of Bushman communities become closely related, even inseparable—unfortunate but unavoidable.

(As an aside: I must refer here to the text written by Coral Fourie. The production of that book abounds with ironies, especially in the context of Andrew Smith's words. Not only is it published by an elitist group named 'Ekogilde', but according to the short biographical notes, many of the original oral performances were given at the Omega SADF base. Having had access to the subservient Bushmen soldiers stationed at this notorious military camp, the editor's credentials appear somewhat suspect.) But to return to the question of guilt: certainly also in a political sense the casting of Bushman as characters in stories about racial conflict and the dispossession and restitution of land is an easy way of fictionalising contentious issues. After all, very few claimants to the disputed land are left. Gordon (1992:212-214) convincingly argues that the treatment of the Bushmen in Namibia anticipated the racial ideologies of Nazi Germany, but that forgetting or rationalising this colonial experience comes easier than in the case of the European holocaust. However, in many of the above mentioned texts the white man's guilt is the central concern. The final paragraph of *Die spoorsnyer* ends in a question: 'Wie sal die skrywer en die sersant genadig wees'? (Van Rooyen 1994:117). By touching on this sense of wrongdoing, even if it avoids the really topical, the narratives partake in the rewriting of the history of Southern Africa.

The markedly feminist mood displayed in so many of these texts may be seen as a different form of rewriting history. By accentuating that relationships of equality characterised these ancient societies, the struggle for gender equality in modern day life gains unexpected support. Biesele (1994:85) defines the nature of Ju/hoan tales as 'organic pictures of the balance and interweaving of the powers of women and men'. Mysticism and the power of the subconscious are related notions; in the reports on rock art research, through the retelling of oral narratives and even in the modern novels where only allusions to the Bushman motif appear, strong emphasis is placed on the spiritual, the unseen and the striving for a harmonious relationship between the everyday and the inner worlds.

Regarding much of what has been said, one may come to the conclusion that the present prominent position of the Bushman motif very likely is just another fashionable trend. In describing the nature of so many displays of rock art in museums today, Andrew Smith also laments what he sees as the 'manipulation of "the Bushmen" in popular literature, advertising, [and] the manufacture of souvenirs for tourists ...'

(Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994:399). It is therefore noteworthy that on its back page blurb, the autobiography by Piet van Rooyen is approvingly compared to *A Year in Provence*, that tremendously popular and very trendy European fake.

I, however, would prefer to interpret the recurrence of this motif in a positive light. Megan Biesele (1994:47) states that

stories play a part in engaging and motivating social energies in a desirable way; ... stories are makers of sense

In a similar vein it may be argued that through these recurring images conventional boundaries are extended and overrun, the present literary activities are inspired by the cultural past, a reappraisal of a common, but long neglected heritage is done. Particularly in the case of Afrikaans literature where stories about and from the Bushman world have often been told, the latest crop does reveal a new attitude. Traditional perspectives about the genealogy and aesthetics of Afrikaans literature are challenged as what used to be peripheral now becomes prominent.

Whether only echoing it, or hopefully in some instances encouraging it, these texts participate in a transcultural South African discourse about new beginnings, changing values, and broadened histories. Gordon (1992:220) concludes about the present scientific attitude that 'much of post-1980s Kalahari scholarship is emphasizing ... not difference but similarity and ha[s] strong integrationist overtones'. And in a literary context too, what may seem to be irreconcilable can be reconciled; stories are makers of sense.

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*Paper presented at the first CSSALL Interdisciplinary conference, University of Durban-Westville, 13-16 September 1995.

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