

# **'//Kabbo's Intended Return Home' (1873) and The Conversion: Death Cell Conversations of 'Rooizak' and the Missionaries—Lydenburg 1875: Marginalised Early South African Testimonies**

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N-ka !xoë e //xara-//kam  
(My place is the Bitterpits)  
(Bleek 1911:298).

## **I**

Stemming from increasing interest in Holocaust literature, 'it has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times' (Felman & Laub 1992:4). Since November 1995 when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started its work under Bishop Desmond Tutu, testimony has become part of the fabric of a South Africa trying to come to grips with its past. The efficacy of the healing power of this painfully slow process was recently remarked upon by dr. Sean Kaliski: 'It will take decades, generations, and people will assimilate the truths of this country piece by piece' (Krog 1997:5). //Kabbo and Rooizak's testimonies can be seen as part of the truths of South Africa's history. The contending voices and identities encapsulated in these testimonies illustrate something of the historical and socio-political tensions in this multicultural community.

Transcripts of //Kabbo, the Bushman convict's dictation in 1873 was preserved in English and in his home language, /Xam, by the German philologist Wilhelm Bleek in *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* (1911). The testimony of Rooizak, a Swazi labourer awaiting his death sentence in 1874, was recorded by the missionary Albert Nachtigal in German, and sent to Berlin after his death. A hundred years later Peter Delius found the document in the East Berlin archives and translated it into English. The story of Rooizak's conversion was annotated by the historian and published as *The Conversion. Death Cell Conversations of 'Rooizak' and the Missionaries—Lydenburg 1875* (1984).

The elderly /Xam man with three names—//Kabbo (meaning 'dream'), Jantje or /uhi-ddoro—spent July and August 1873 telling the frail, middle-aged dr. Wilhelm

Bleek his life story. After having spent some time in the Breakwater jail in Cape Town for stock theft, and then almost three years in the Bleek household in suburb of Mowbray with the sole purpose of dictating as much as he could of the narratives and customs of the almost extinct /Xam, //Kabbo was intent on returning home: 'Thou knowest that I sit waiting for the moon to turn back for me, that I may return to my place' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:299). He left a month and a half later for his 'place' at Bitterpits near Kenhardt in the north-western Cape. Two years later both of them had died.

In August 1874 a Swazi migrant labourer, called Rooizak, was arrested on a farm near Lydenburg in the northern Transvaal after a fight with a Pedi man called Majan. Majan died in the fight and although Rooizak protested his innocence claiming that it had been a fair fight, Rooizak was imprisoned. For five months he did hard labour in Lydenburg prison, till the court passed the death sentence in February 1875. For one and a half months he was kept in solitary confinement, awaiting the confirmation by the Executive Council of his death sentence. During this period he tried to hang himself in desperation, but was cut loose:

it is a terrible thing to be condemned to death and to have to wait so long for execution. I wished to be dead but was stopped. I don't want to live on like this. I want to die now (Delius 1984:24f).

The German missionary Nachtigal started ministering to him, together with a mission convert who spoke Seswati, John Podumu. Nachtigal kept notes of Rooizak's spiritual development to send to his Berlin headquarters later. On 19 April the sentence was confirmed and after baptising Rooizak at 4 am on Thursday 22 April, he was led to the gallows and executed.

On a factual level the life testimonies of //Kabbo and Rooizak might seem not to have much in common except that they both originate from the end of the nineteenth century. Yet close analysis proves otherwise. They are both colonised subjects under colonial rule, waiting passively (the one to go home, the other for his death) and in the power of colonisers. In the interim they give their testimonies, locked up intimately with an interlocutor of another culture, speaking a different language—the one a German philologist, the other a German missionary. Both //Kabbo and Rooizak were illiterate. Their testimonies are, however, preserved in written form, after having undergone various processes of translation and mediation. Bleek spoke German and English and was still mastering the /Xam language.

## II

In the case of both these testimonies there are interviewers or interlocutors (philologist and missionary) who elicit responses, and who mediate the testimony. In both

cases translation into a further language is part of the mediating process.

Stemming from increasing interest in Holocaust literature, 'it has been suggested that testimony is the literary—or discursive—mode par excellence of our times' and that 'films like *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann ... or *Hiroshima mon amour* by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais, instruct us in the ways in which testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times' (Felman & Laub 1992:4).

With literary studies becoming increasingly interdisciplinary it is not strange that more attention is focused on forms of cultural discourse such as testimony where one finds a 'superimposition of literature, psychoanalysis and history', or phrased differently, elements of the historical, the clinical and the poetical (Felman & Laub 1992:6,41). With reference to Holocaust literature Shoshane Felman remarks how

The story of survival is, in fact, the incredible narration of the survival of the story, at the crossroads between life and death (Felman & Laub 1992:44).

This remark is equally applicable to the preservation of the /Xam narratives in the Bleek & Lloyd collections of 1911 and later—even with the cautionary reminder of the inevitable loss that must have occurred between transmission from the oral mode into the written, and the mediation processes which the material must have undergone at the hands of Bleek and Lloyd.

Felman and Laub describe the typical conditions of the 'testimonial process':

there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody (1992:70f).

Testimony also foregrounds the role of memory which is essential 'in order to address another' (Felman & Laub 1992:204) and 'to appeal to a community' (Felman & Laub 1992:204). What is normally testified to, is a 'limit-experience ... whose overwhelming impact constantly puts to the test the limits of the witness and of witnessing' (Felman & Laub 1992:205). The individual voice of the testifying witness also tends to represent an absent community on whose behalf the testimony is made.

Yet it needs to be stressed also that one must be careful to 'politicize the fact of trauma and to broaden, even universalize, the perspective of victimhood' (Hartman 1995:546) because human life itself can be seen as 'an endless adaptation to the "traumatizing" ... which persists from birth to death' (Hartman 1995:546). Hartman sees the relevance of trauma theory for literary studies in three elements: (a) the grappling with issues of reality, bodily integrity, and identity (1995:547), (b) it concerns

itself with 'disturbances of language and mind' which are central to literary preoccupations (1995:548) and (c) the entrance of the new ethical theory 'tries to break down the reproductive tyranny of the education system' (1995:549).

### III

I would like to suggest that these testimonies can both be read as sites of conflicting cultural values. //Kabbo structures his narrative around a constant juxtaposition of 'here' in the Bleek household where he is forced to do 'women's work' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:301) and where the others (servants as well as Bleek family members) do not speak his language, and 'there' where he wants to 'sit among my fellow men' and listen to stories. Out of this juxtaposition comes his sense of alienation and yearning to end his last days amongst his own people. In Rooizak's story his incomprehension of the alien legal system and religious ideas suggests the missionary zeal of Nachtigal as an alienating imposition of one culture upon another.

Both testimonies have a prison experience as starting point and cause of trauma. In //Kabbo's case he feels as though he is living in exile. Rooizak's trauma is not only the fear of pending execution, but also the imposition of the evangelising fervour of the missionary, who constantly keeps harping on his sin and his awaiting fate.

'//Kabbo's Intendend Return Home' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:299-317) can be read as quintessentially a text expressing the typical psychological characteristics of the exile. He waits for time to pass so that he may go home: 'I sit waiting for the moon to turn back for me, that I may return to my place' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:299). In his imagination he travels to his home, so 'that I may sitting, listen to the stories which yonder come' (Bleek 1911:301). Then reality yanks him back to 'here' at Mowbray where he feels alienated, for 'I do not obtain stories; because I do not visit ... they do not talk my language' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:301). This leads him into another fantasy flight to his home and a description of what life is like under his people, the 'Flat Bushmen' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:301). They go to each other's huts, they smoke and tell stories. What //Kabbo is describing, is a sense of joyful and relaxed community—presumably what he misses most in Cape Town. He states: 'I feel this is the time when I should sit among my fellow men' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:303). As an old man, he longs to be with his own people to share communal life before he dies.

Tropes of travelling by road, and of movement then take over as he describes the journey which he envisages back up north. The description ends with the imagined arrival. In the fantasised arrival scene //Kabbo describes himself in the third person, suggesting 'Entfremdung' of the self:

He will examine the place ... he may examine the water pits; those at which he drank.  
He will work, putting the old hut in order (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:305)

The visualised arrival ends with //Kabbo seeing himself in the third person as an old man ('he grew old with his wife at the place' Bleek & Lloyd 1911:307). Immediately hereafter he launches into a lengthy flashback. Here he switches back to the immediacy of the first person, and the passage reverberates with vitality as he describes himself:

I felt that I was still a young man, and that I was fleet in running to shoot .... For, I was fresh for running; I felt that I could, running, catch things. Then, I used to run (and) catch a hare (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:309)

After the extended flashback //Kabbo reverts back to everyday reality, to 'here' at Mowbray. He expresses intense determination to depart soon: 'I do not again await another moon'. Now he talks about the boots and gun which Bleek promised him, and he is again conscious of his old age and past hardship:

starvation was that on account of which I was bound .... For a gun is that which takes care of an old man .... It (the gun) is strong against the wind. It satisfies a man with food in the very middle of the cold (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:317).

//Kabbo's trauma is one of lengthy exile and what he describes in his testimony is the condition of exile, an important theme in South African literature of the apartheid era. The central trope in his narrative is that of the 'stories' which he misses, which represents communality and social life amongst his kindred. He juxtaposes himself as a fleet-footed, hare-chasing young man with himself as an old man, faced by starvation unless Bleek can send a gun to help provide for food in his old age. The silence in the text is the period of imprisonment at the Breakwater prison. The only reference to this ordeal is the euphemistic word 'bound' in the phrase 'starvation was that on account of which I was bound' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:317).

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Rooizak's testimony is even more heavily mediated—first by Nachtigal and a hundred years later by Delius. Upon the missionary's first visit he asks how the prisoner feels. Rooizak formulates his sense of trauma thus:

I am to be executed unjustly and I am filled with horror at the idea of having to die such a demeaning death (Delius 1984:21).

Nachtigal expresses his wish to minister to the needs of Rooizak's soul. His response is: 'I know nothing of this and I feel nothing for it, but I will listen to what you have to

say' (Delius 1984:21). It transpires in the conversation that Nachtigal has no interest in or comprehension of the African belief system which Rooizak describes

Their spirits lived on after their deaths. They are here on earth. But they are capricious and have to be placated by sacrifices (Delius 1984:22).

Nachtigal tries to inculcate in Rooizak some concept of his deed as 'a grave sin' (Delius 1984:22) and that God is like a king who 'will forgive' (Delius 1984:22). Rooizak misunderstands the forgiveness and says, 'Then help me. I will gladly do anything to escape hanging' (Delius 1984:22). Soon hereafter he tries to hang himself in his cell. The trope of 'hanging' thus becomes central in the narrative. But he is discovered and 'from this time onwards ... he was chained' (Delius 1984:24).

On the missionary's next visit Rooizak eloquently describes the effects of solitary confinement (a central trope in South African prison literature):

I cannot stand this fear any longer ... I am forced to sit here alone. My solitude tortures me and fills me with despair. Some days I sleep to still my mind but then my nights are spent in waking terror. How can they be so cruel as to keep me waiting so long for my death? (Delius 1984:25)

When next visited by Jonas Podumu (Nachtigal is said to be incapacitated by 'a bout of savage headaches' Delius 1984:29), Rooizak is exceedingly calm because of a vision that he has had: 'I dreamt that I was taken away to a beautiful land where, feeling weak and strange, I sat on an anthill' (Delius 1984:30f). He describes how Jesus appeared to him as a 'shimmering white person' (Delius 1984:31) who greeted him and told him to go back and 'behave well' (Delius 1984:31), suggesting a traumatised psyche, obsessed with ideas of guilt. Hartman remarks on the relation between trauma and dream that 'In literature especially, shock and dreaminess collude. Where there is dream there is (was) trauma' (1995:546).

Not content with the peace that has descended over the Swazi prisoner, both Podumu and Nachtigal proceed to badger him so as to test whether his newly professed Christian faith rings true. This hectoring in the name of Christianity seems particularly cruel and suggests torture more than anything else.

Upon confirmation of his death penalty we read that

Rooizak was given alcohol to ease his shock. He became drunk and started to dance as best his chains would allow in the confines of his cell (Delius 1984:40).

Later he 'wished death to all whites'. When Nachtigal arrives the next morning Rooizak consciously introduces racial discrimination into the discussion: 'Isn't it unjust to sen-

tence me to death in my absence? I am treated like this because I am black' (Delius 1984:40). The last vestige of resistance in him comes to the fore in the taunting question: 'why is God's word not observed when a white kills a black?' (Delius 1984:41). Thereafter he succumbs to the missionaries' ministrations and is baptised at dawn on the morning of 22 April. Echoing one of the dignitaries, Rooizak stated 'I will soon be in paradise' (Delius 1984:45) just before he was killed.

The whole traumatic process lasted seven months. Rooizak's testimony, like //Kabbo's, thus also entails a long waiting, it entails a journey—but a spiritual journey—from near death through attempted suicide back to life. Through the terror of solitary confinement and back into the momentary release of a vision, and then back to the painful interrogation by the missionaries, until eventually he finds release in death. In the intense dialogue between the Swazi prisoner and the evangelists nothing is more striking than the conflict between their different cultures, different justice systems, different customs and the absolutely powerless situation that Rooizak finds himself in. In spite of the heavily mediated nature of this text it is still one of the most striking South African testimonies of one man's trauma and spiritual torture. It also eloquently illustrates intercultural conflict in action.

#### IV

'To attack and damage the memory of a people means to attack its roots, put its vitality at risk', stated Ferrarotti recently (1994:2). No matter how mediated, or how often translated, in the marginalised testimonies of //Kabbo and Rooizak we find preserved memory as part of South Africa's history and conscience.

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