

De Weg naar Monomotapa: Post-Colonial Studies and Dutch Literature in South Africa

De Weg naar Monomotapa

by Siegfried Huigen

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Reviewed by Johan van Wyk

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A fact that is often ignored in South African literary history is the 270 year long (1652-1925) contribution of Dutch to this history. Dutch is the oldest and the longest written language in South Africa. Siegfried Huigen's *De weg naar Monomotapa* brings this literature, and its importance for colonial discourse theory back into focus. The subtitle (in translation) reads: 'Dutch representations of the geographic, historical and social realities in South Africa' It is unfortunate that this important text is not also available in English.

The focus is on 'representations' of aspects of the South African reality through intensive research of micro-areas, using selected texts as the starting point. As an exploration of 'representation' and the institutional sites which determine to some extent the form and content of representation it relates to Foucault, especially *The Order of Things*. Representation implies not only the real, but the real looked at from a particular political ideology and context. Jan van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape in 1652 is variously represented as a great event for the expansion of Christianity and civilisation, or as the beginning of suffering and oppression in different ideological contexts.

According to Huigen, who is a lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch, his interest in South African Dutch literature developed from his discovery of the 'drekpoët' (vomit poet), Pieter de Neyn, who operated at the Cape in the period 1672 to 1674. This was the beginning of his discovery of a goldmine of material at the

South African Library and Archives in Cape Town, as well as in the Stellenbosch University Library. One has a feeling that there might even be more undiscovered material in the Netherlands.

In the introduction Huigen explores the relationship between twentieth century interest in Dutch literature, and Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaans literary historians struggled with the question of whether the Dutch texts produced in South Africa should be part of the Afrikaans literary history. He refers to the contributions of Elizabeth Conradie (the two volume *Hollandse skrywers uit Suid-Afrika*), Gerrit Besselaar's *Zuid-Afrika in de letterkunde* (1914) which is the oldest South African literary history and F.C.L. Bosman's *Drama en toneel in Suid-Afrika* (1928), a detailed description of the institutions, theatre companies, theatres and development of drama in South Africa (again covering all the South African languages).

Conradie argued that the Dutch texts should be part of Afrikaans literature, not because of its linguistic form, but because of the shared 'volksiel' (national soul) that is manifest in these texts. Huigen refers to the derivation of the notion of a 'national soul' from philosophers such as Montesquieu, Hume, Herder and Hegel. Taine popularised this concept by making literature the voice of this national soul. Interestingly a similar struggle to define a South African English literature was evident in articles such as R.F.A. Hoernlé's 'Kan ons van 'n "Engelse letterkunde" in Suid-Afrika praat' (from *Jaarboek van die Afrikaanse Skrywerskring* 1939, p. 92-98). These debates must be seen in the context of the shifting signification of the concept Afrikaner in this period. Up to about 1933 the concept Afrikaner did not primarily refer to someone whose language was Afrikaans, but to a person subscribing to Hertzog's anti-colonial slogan of 'South Africa first'. The 'soul' in these discourses refer to this identification with South Africa as homeland, and such an identification was at that time essential to a definition of a South African literature. The emergence of a strong Afrikaans literature at the beginning of the century, with its roots strongly in the South African soil, contributed to this particular approach to the South African literary identity.

Dutch colonial literature loses its importance for Afrikaans literary scholars after the Second World War due to modernist aesthetics. When Dutch is studied in this post war period it is the experimental and modern tradition from the Netherlands rather than the colonial literature.

The book consists of five main chapters. Chapter one explores the representation of the interior of South Africa in the period 1652 to 1686. In this chapter Huigen very subtly deconstructs Said's *Orientalism* and the idea that European representations of the peoples on other continents were not really determined by an experience of reality, but by long existing prejudices. He states that when exploring colonial discourses it is interesting to explore observations of empirical reality that contradicts existing discourse, and the condition under which this become possible. Huigen then

shows that ideas do change through the experience of reality. There is an important difference between those texts based on direct experience and those reporting from secondary sources. Plagiarising of previous representations was an established tradition in this period.

In the seventeenth century a myth of fabulously rich civilisations in the interior of South Africa was prevalent and the Dutch were obsessed with discovering these. They sent a number of expeditions to find this empire of Monomotapa. They had to meticulously record their observations of their journeys into the interior. Each expedition though was disillusioned with the discursive stereotype. What they encountered were Namaqua pastoralists who were not all that different from the Khoikhoi at the Cape. (These expeditions though missed the cities such as Latakoo which at that time had considerable big populations and were involved in iron-smelting and trade with the Portuguese.) Huigens makes an interesting contribution by elaborating on the prescriptions of the Dutch east India Company on how the journals should be constructed in terms of a daily report on the geographic position of the expedition, and the careful collection of geographic, ethnographic, commercial and political information. He links these directives to the genre of *ars apodemica* or the systematic presentation of observations when travelling. Huigens also makes the point that if representations are only determined by existing discourses, and if reality plays no role, it would be impossible to criticise any discourse, because it would be impossible to determine which discourse contains the truth. What would make Said's discourse more credible than that which he writes about.

In chapter 2 he contextualises Jan de Marre's lengthy praise-poem to the Cape, 'Eerkroon voor de Caab de Goede Hoop', as a representation in which the representation of the Cape is determined by a classical conception of order which were prevalent in 18th century Europe, rather than from a specific colonial ideology of power. The poem is about the dichotomy of 'order' replacing 'chaos' with colonial settlement through a process of cultivation.

In chapter 3 Meent Borcherd's depiction of precolonial Khoikhoi life in 'Gedicht over de volkplanting van de Kaap de Goede Hoop' is seen as a reaction against the idealisation thereof by John Philip in his *Researches in South Africa*. Before Europeans came the Khoikhoi according to Philip lived 'in a state of independence, possessing in abundance the means of subsistence' (Huigens 83). Borcherd through reference to other texts such as Kolbe's *Naaauwkeurige en uitvoerige beschryving van de Kaap de Goede Hoop*, and the use of poetic imagination, in his construction of his poem attacks Philip's 'primitivism'. Borcherd's representation derives from Christianity, and the idea that man in his natural state lives in misery. Huigen also mentions another text by Borcherd's 'Reedevoering over het Christendom' ('Debate about Christianity'). It seems as if these texts by Borcherd's and Philip can form the basis of a much larger

intertextual project. William Wellington Gqoba's 'Discussion between the Christian and the Pagan' and 'Great discussion on education' as allegorical debates come to mind.

Chapter 4 deals with the popular history series by D'Arbez (pseudonym for J.F. van Oordt) and its increasing focus on the Dutch East India period. Although racist prejudice dominate in these texts, there is also another conflicting code of the universality of moral and religious values operating in these texts.

In chapter 5 he rediscovers Jacob Lub's *Het zwarte gevaar* ('The black peril') from 1913, and apparently the second Jim-comes-to-Joburg novel produced in South Africa. Douglas Blackburn's *Leaven: A black and white story* of 1908 being the first. It is a text dealing with the identity transformations that the main character experience through the process of urbanisation and coming to consciousness of his being equal to whites. Although the text endorses a patriarchal and rural order the text clearly counters the way authors such as Said, Fanon and JanMohamed essentialises colonial discourses as always representing blacks as the 'quintessence of evil' (Huigen 140). The main character is portrayed with great sympathy. The impact of realism as literary form was possibly decisive in this.

Huigen surprises not only through the historical detail uncovered, but also through intelligent argumentation backed up with extensive evidence. This is an important contribution and would gain considerably by in future going much more extensively beyond the confines of Dutch to the texts in the other South African languages.

Colonization, Violence and Narration

Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing:

André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee

by Rosemary Jane Jolly

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The contemporary concern with representation usually precludes the kind of ancillary