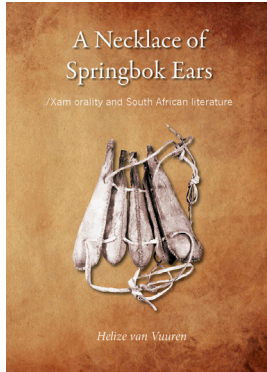


Towards the study of South African literature as an integrated corpus

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A necklace of springbok ears:
!Xam orality and South African
literature



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The title of this new work by Helize van Vuuren refers to a dancing rattle made from dried springbok ears laced together by a thong, and is an appropriate metaphor for her set of eight gracefully interlinked academic essays in which she explores the possibility of a more inclusive approach to South African literature, looking in particular at intersections between literary productions in various indigenous Khoesian languages – but mainly the !Ui language, !Xam – and Afrikaans. Along the way she gives thoughtful consideration to many of the most pressing questions in current South African discourse studies, such as the issue of possible cultural appropriation, how to meet the expression of historical trauma with adequate sensitivity, how to traverse the gap between oral and written literature, how to assess material available only in translation, and in particular, how to further an appreciation of South African literature as a multilingual and multimodal but nevertheless integrated corpus.

For many South Africans of a particular social group and class, South African literature was often narrowly imagined during the 1960s to be written almost entirely in either English or Afrikaans, by people of colonial descent. It was only slowly that we discovered giants like Wally Serote and Dennis Brutus – and no doubt at least partly because they wrote in English – so that when the landmark *Penguin Book of South African Verse* appeared¹ in 1968 with its inclusion of poetry translated from Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu, and even a few fragments of translated material intended to represent Khoi and San lyrics, it was for many a moment of epiphany. It was at this same time that a particular kind of neo-Romanticism was emerging in the West, with manifestations in movements such as the hippy counter-culture, the experimentation with heightened consciousness and mind-altered states, the 'Back to the Land' movement, the beginnings of environmental awareness, and the turning to non-Western cultures in quest of wisdoms perceived to be more ancient and more authentically in harmony with nature. This zeitgeist was part of the context in which the members of the famous Marshall family worked over many years to produce their documentaries in the form of extensive film footage and books about the Julhoan of Nyae Nyae, while it was at this time also that Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* was re-introduced to the South African public, also in 1968, in a facsimile reprint of the original 1911 edition.²

With the rediscovery of the Bleek and Lloyd manuscript notebooks by Roger Hewitt in the 1970s, there was an intensification of interest in the !Xam material, and while some scholars continued in the romantic vein of the earlier period – even to the extent of perpetuating the fascination with shamanism and states of trance, or invoking universal archetypes – in other cases, new insights came to the fore. As a result of this later work, it is better appreciated today that the narratives were of course dictated to linguists, rather than delivered in their usual manner and in their more usual context with a spontaneously reacting and participating live audience. The process of transcription may have been laborious, and has almost certainly led to a loss of vividness, including details of gesture, speech mimicry and song that would have been part of a living performance. It is also better understood today that the !Xam speakers were not channelling disembodied voices from some timeless lost world, but that both the speakers and the linguists who worked with them in the later part of the 19th century were inevitably embedded within a particular historical context and social milieu.³ The recognition of such factors has prompted literary scholars to search for new ways of approaching the material, with Michael Wessels, for example, proposing and demonstrating an 'intertextual' method, in which he considers the !Xam corpus as a whole – although always in its translated form only – and where, in order to make sense of a particular term in a particular text, he makes comparative reference to the uses of that term throughout the entire available 'network of signifiers'⁴.

Van Vuuren writes that she began her own academic engagements with the !Xam material during the 1990s, when she was struck by the continued lack of its proportionally appropriate incorporation into anthologies of South African literature. As a core part of her own project, Van Vuuren here devotes two extended and ground-breaking chapters to the neglected body of work by Gideon von Wielligh – in particular his early 20th-century volumes of *Boesmanstories* – which, she writes, 'could feasibly be seen as the missing link between !Xam orality and the beginning of one stream of Afrikaans literature'.

The !Xam stories developed by Von Wielligh were based (like the Khoekhoe and Swazi material he also published) on stories told to him by elderly members of communities encountered by him throughout his childhood and adult working life, chiefly in the vicinity of the Cederberg and Calvinia, but also in regions now known as the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga and the Free State. The essential point about these interactions is that they took place through the shared medium of Afrikaans, at a time when Afrikaans itself was hardly a written language, so that aspects of Von Wielligh's style have their origin, as Van Vuuren notes, 'in its own Afrikaans orality'. While Von Wielligh's 'Bushman stories' have generally been relegated to the category of children's literature, and have often been dismissed as derivative or even concocted, Van Vuuren makes a convincing case for their legitimacy, while their value, she suggests, is twofold. On one hand, the !Xam (and Khoekhoe) stories collected by Von Wielligh are notable for 'the poetic sparks they lit in many instances, and from which Afrikaans poetry grew in the early 20th century.' On the other hand, Von Wielligh's !Xam archive may be seen as a valuable supplement to the Bleek and Lloyd archive, and can be drawn on in the same way for purposes of the intertextual method of elucidation.

Van Vuuren moves on to describe an approach she terms 'contextual', which complements the intertextual one and is essentially multidisciplinary, involving cross-reference to fields such as archaeology, anthropology and botany, while also acknowledging the historically rooted nature of the material. She demonstrates such a contextualised reading in Chapter 4, in which she focuses on the English translation of a small and almost inscrutable !Xam lyric from the published *Specimens*, 'A song sung by the star !Gäunü and especially the Bushman women', which

asks, 'Does the *Ilgarraken* flower open?', and twice replies that 'The *‡kū-kx'am* is the one which opens'. The *Ilgarraken* were identified by Lloyd as edible bulbs, while the second flower was identified by her as the rain daisy (or ox-eye daisy), *Dimorphotheca annua* (now *pluvialis*), which is a large cream-coloured daisy notable for its dark centre. (The name given by Dialkwain may have been a borrowed Kora expression meaning 'black mouth'.) In an attempt to make sense of the four lines, Van Vuuren makes reference to aspects of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and discusses the importance of the bulbs (*uintjies*) that were traditionally harvested from the wild by the women. With this wider context considered, she concludes that 'the questions in the song are probably either mistranslated or intended to mean, "Are the *uintjie* flowers open already?"' The interest of the women, she suggests, 'is not in the daisy per se, but rather in the hidden edible corm and its as-yet unopened flower'. She proposes then that the last line might better be translated as 'The daisy is open'. (This suggested replacement for Lloyd's originally given version will be revisited below.)

Perhaps the most powerful essay in the collection is the book's third chapter, which discusses the personal testimonies of the IXam speaker, IlKabbo, and a Swazi man identified only as 'Rooizak' who was condemned to death in 1874, and who conversed at length with a German missionary before his death. (The German records of this agony-filled encounter were rediscovered a century later and translated into English by Peter Delius.) Her study of these two texts stems, Van Vuuren explains, from 'an increase of interest in holocaust literature', which, in the context of contemporary discourse studies in South Africa, takes the form of a growing interest in the expression of historical trauma. 'Both testimonies', she says, 'have a prison experience as the starting point and cause of trauma'. She later adds:

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 in which Rooizak finds himself. 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.

Van Vuuren does not explicitly make the point herself, but it is indeed one of the very manifestations of such trauma that the South African story is still all too often told in the languages and louder voices of those from formerly dominant classes.

In the second part of the book, which begins with a philosophical essay (Chapter 5) on 'The Bushman in our Consciousness', Van Vuuren moves on to examine such issues as the question of possible 'cultural appropriation', through essays on the novels of Piet van Rooyen (Chapter 6), and the poetry of Antjie Krog, Stephen Watson and Eugène Marais (Chapter 7), and D.J. Opperman (Chapter 8). The 'Namibian oeuvre' of the Afrikaans writer Piet van Rooyen spans three novels that appeared between 1994 and 2001, and which arose out of the author's personal experience as a development worker among the Julhoan at Nyae Nyae. Van Vuuren seems to be somewhat ambivalent in her assessment of this work, although it is clear that she has reservations about the author's romantic nostalgia for some imagined lost age, and the stereotypical projection of the San as 'children of nature'.

The essay on the three poets revisits the bitter saga that began when Stephen Watson notoriously accused Antjie Krog of plagiarising his own poeticised versions of some of the IXam material (in fact, of Bleek and Lloyd's English *translations* of that material). As a way of throwing more light on issues surrounding the Watson-Krog spat ('a long, distasteful and unnecessary controversy'), Van Vuuren offers us a fresh consideration of Eugène Marais' *Dwaalstories*, which – much like the *Boesmanstories* and *Dierestories* of Von Wielligh – are supposed to have been obtained, through the medium of Afrikaans, from elderly storytellers of 'Bushman' and Korana origin. Marais' stories were obtained in the Waterberg region of the province now known as Limpopo, and it is this material that was the spark and source material

for his own *Die Lied van die Reën* ('The dance of the rain'). Van Vuuren highlights the complexity of the notion of 'cultural appropriation' in such a context, where it is material from an oral tradition that has been the source of inspiration. Once again, Van Vuuren seems ambivalent in her final assessment, suggesting that any 'migration of the oral tradition' of the San is on one hand a form of tribute, and may also have a function of preservation, while on the other there is an undeniable benefit that generally accrues in one direction only, in the form of heightened stature for the writer who draws on the material.

Van Vuuren's collection of essays is without question a valuable addition to the changing field of South African literary studies. Having said this, and at the risk of seeming to carp, there are a few issues that cannot be left unaddressed. For one thing, the lay user should exercise considerable care when consulting Dorothea Bleek's *Bushman Dictionary*⁵, which lumps together data from a range of different sources of greatly varying quality, for languages that belong not only to the !Ui and Taa divisions of the TUU family (Bleek's 'Southern Bushman'), but also to the JU family ('Northern Bushman'); and which even covers languages ('Central Bushman') that in reality belong to the KHOE family, which includes not only Kalahari varieties such as Naro and Khwe, but also Khoekhoe varieties such as Nama, Dama and Kora (or !Ora). It is only data labelled 'S1' in the *Dictionary* that illustrates IXam itself, while as a general rule it is only safe to expand a search for meanings of IXam words to entries for related !Ui languages, such as those labelled 'S2' and 'S3'.

The greatest issue, however, and one not by any means unique to Van Vuuren's work, concerns a persistent belief that the IXam material cannot be directly accessed in the original language. While both intertextual and contextual approaches have much to offer, as Van Vuuren herself demonstrates, in the end it is surely nothing less than the text itself that we should take as our starting point. It is a poor excuse to protest that we are powerless to do so simply because there are no speakers left: linguists have been able, after all, to establish the syntax of extinct languages such as Ancient Egyptian and Hittite, where they have had far less to work with! It is true that we do not yet have a comprehensive reference grammar for IXam (although linguists based in Germany are currently working on one) – but we have ample resources to proceed with in the meantime. Bleek and Lloyd left us a wealth of carefully transcribed material, in many cases accompanied by detailed translation or at least partial glosses, while it is hardly as though these scholars undertook *no* linguistic analysis at all: Lloyd's detailed notes on the morphology and syntax of the language are reflected in the numerous entries that were later incorporated into the *Dictionary* by her niece, who also collated them into a sketch grammar.^{6,7} (Tom Güldemann has provided an updated version of this sketch in which he uses a more contemporary linguistic terminology.⁸)

We already know enough about the IXam language to realise, for example, that the revised reading Van Vuuren proposes (p.100) for the *uintjieblom* song is untenable. The fourth line of the song, which she would like to re-interpret as 'the daisy is open', is:

‡kū-kx'am kang Ilkuang ā Ilkhou beri-sing

This line contains two aspectual markers, *kang* and *Ilkuang*, which both signify a continuous action or process, while the auxiliary *Ilkhou*, which seems to have been associated with verbs of motion or process, gives the implication 'become'. It is difficult to find an idiomatic English equivalent for all of this, but the sense of the original line can perhaps clumsily be conveyed by 'the ox-eye daisy is indeed being the one that goes open', or as it was given by Lloyd in the first place, 'the *‡kū-kx'am* is the one that opens'. One way to make sense of this might be to treat the little song as a rubric for distinguishing the more useful geophytes from mere daisies (which do not have bulbs), as the flowers of a daisy habitually close at night and open up in the morning, which is the time when the women would have gone out in search of food.

These minor notes aside, Van Vuuren's string of sensitive and resonant essays unequivocally makes a contribution to current South African literary studies, and provides a significant impetus to the quest for a more integrated concept of South African literature. Someday perhaps,

when our universities start to transform their academic programmes, studies of this kind may even take place within the ideal context of a holistic school of languages, linguistics and literature.

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