

# Afrikaans folklore and regional ethnology

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## Afrikaans Folklore and Regional Ethnology

By *Abel Coetzee*, Johannesburg

§ 1. The state that became known as the sovereign Republic of South Africa in 1961, developed out of a very small settlement that was founded in 1652 at the south-westernmost tip of Africa, at Cape Town, in order to grow fresh vegetables for the recovery of scurvy stricken sailors, soldiers and officials on their way from Holland to the East and vice versa. Very much against the wishes of the Dutch East India Company, owners of the settlement, permanency of domicile developed and the settlers started to drift into the hinterland. Out of the seventeenth century Nether-Franconian speech of the Province South Holland (Amsterdam, Den Haag) a new language developed at the Cape, which is now officially known as Afrikaans. The new language signifies the existence of a new people with a "new" culture, the roots of which can be traced back to Holland (the origin of 52% of the original parent stock up to 1806, when the colony became a possession of England), Germany (26% of the parent stock), and French Huguenots (1688, 17% of the parent stock). Descendants of this original stock are called Afrikaners and they comprise somewhat more than 60% of the white population of the country. The rest are mainly English speaking descendants from the United Kingdom and Ireland since 1806. Within the borders of the Republic are also large numbers of Bantu, some half a million Indians, and more than one million Coloureds. The whites are outnumbered 1:4. The Afrikaners were the original pioneers. They are to be found in cities, towns, and on the farms, in the professions and the services. In trade, commerce and industry they have made a belated start, and have only been making rapid progress during the last three decades.

This article concerns itself exclusively with the story of what has been achieved in the field of folklore and regional ethnology of the Afrikaner.

§ 2. When scholars and travellers from Europe visit far and outlying places, it seems almost natural for them to have an eye for the exotic, for what is strange to them. Consequently much more is scientifically known about the Bushmen and Hottentots, who were at the Cape when the whites came, but are now almost extinct, and of the Bantu, who arrived in the northern parts of the Republic approximately at the same time as the whites entered at the south. Up to the first half of the nineteenth century only fragmentary and disjunctive observations touching the Afrikaner, are to be found in the numerous diaries

of travellers, missionaries and scientists. Even so, these remarks are very often not lucid or unambiguous.

Since the commencement of the organised Great Trek, during the thirties of the nineteenth century, our knowledge of the Afrikaner is more or less continuous, varied and orderly.

§ 3. In 1875 a society was founded to develop a written and literary language out of colloquial Afrikaans. This language superseded Dutch as one of the two official languages in the Republic in 1925. The society was intended to be a literary organisation, but its members were encouraged to make notes on contemporary local speech, custom and usage, and to collect folktales (in the broadest connotation of the word). Some of their notes and collected tales were published in their quarterly journal: *Ons Klyntji* (1896–1906) and some were published as separate issues: *Diere Stories* I–IV, by G. R. von Wielligh 1917–1921. Thus, what was intended to be a linguistic and literary “movement”, unwittingly became the first grouping of “folklorists” in South Africa, as was pointed out by Abel Coetzee, *Die Verhaalskat van ons Klyntji* (Voortrekker Press, Johannesburg 1940), and by S. C. Hattingh/S. C. H. Rautenbach, *Volkskuns uit die eerste tydperk* (Voortrekker Press 1942). Members of this society, however, had no idea they were actually folklorists.

§ 4. The first scientific approach to this field was made by F. Theo Schonken, who proceeded to Leipzig to prepare an academic thesis under the supervision of Eugen Mogk, *Die Wurzeln der Kap-holländischen Volksüberlieferungen*; when he died in 1909 it was not yet completed. A friend, A. Fuldauer, took care of the completion and the translation into Dutch, and he found a publisher for it in Amsterdam: *Oorsprong der Kaapsch-hollandsche Volksoverleveringen*, 1914. His approach was largely “folkloristic”: riddle, rhyme and folktale; but he also devoted some attention to folk-architecture and other aspects of the material culture. Then followed a series of folkloristic studies for higher degrees at Dutch universities by a group of scholars who were pre-eminently men of literature and medicine. F. C. Dominicus (medicine) made a study of social customs during the first half of the 18th century: *Het huiselik en maatschappelik Leven der Suid-Afrikaners in de eerste Helft der 18de eeuw* (Amsterdam 1919); S. J. du Toit followed with a comparative study of Afrikaans riddles, rhymes and folksong: *Suid-Afrikaanse Volkspoësie* (Amsterdam 1924). C. F. Groenewald (medicine) presented a thesis on riddles and rhymes: *Rympies en Raaisels* (Groningen 1919), and C. Pijper (medicine) completed a short study on some aspects of Afrikaans folkmedicine: *Volksgeneeskunst in de Transvaal* (Amsterdam

1919). This phase of folklore research was rounded off by Abel Coetzee with a thesis on Afrikaans folkbelief: *Die Afrikaanse Volksgeloof* (Amsterdam 1938).

§ 5. The activities of folklorists who were schooled in Holland, and of English speaking researchers, acted as a stimulus to local effort, be it sporadic, unorganised and disjuncted, that resulted in some publications of merit. First of all attention was focussed on the Afrikaans folksong by S. P. E. Boshoff/L. J. du Plessis: *Afrikaanse Volksliedjies* Ia and Ib, and *Afrikaanse Minneliedjies* II (1918, 1921. Pretoria-Amsterdam). The Reverend C. Pettman consolidated the outcome of years of patient research into the origin and meaning of South African place names in a single volume: *South African place names* (Queenstown 1931), ably supported by archivist C. Graham Botha: *Place names in the Cape Province*, 1927, and J. du P. Scholtz: *Uit die geskiedenis van die naamgewing aan plante en diere in Afrikaans* (Cape Town 1941).

In this category projects prompted and promoted by the South African Academy for Arts and Science should be grouped viz. a collection and annotation of Afrikaans riddles by G. H. van Rooyen/S. H. Pellissier: *Raai raai riepa, die Afrikaanse raaiselboek* (Pretoria 1954); Trudy Kestell on folk costume: *Die erfenis van drie eeue* (Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns, nuwe reeks I/2, Oct. 1951); the Douw Steyn-Commission on Folkmedicine with a voluminous collection which is at the present moment nearing completion.

The only methodical study of the folklore of the Coloureds and people of Asian origin was undertaken by I. D. du Plessis: *Die hydrae van die Kaapse Maleier tot die Afrikaanse Volkslied* (Cape Town 1935); *Die Maleise Samelewing aan die Kaap* (Cape Town 1939); *Maleise Liedereskat* (Cape Town 1939); *The Cape malays* (Cape Town 1944).

§ 6. A third phase of folklore research was entered when the society for Afrikaans folklore (*Genootskap vir Afrikaanse Volkskunde*) was founded in June 1944. It immediately commenced publishing a quarterly journal for folklore and linguistic research (*Tydskrif vir Volkskunde en Volkstaal*, Aug. 1944), which is still in current publication. Then in 1946, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, founded the R. K. Fraay Chair for Afrikaans Linguistics and Folklore, within the set-up of the Department of Afrikaans-Nederlands. Up to the present moment it is still the only university institution where the subject is read and studied—be it as a very subordinate discipline.

The occupant of the chair, author of the present survey, has a number of publications to his name: *Die Afrikaanse Volksgeloof* (already quot-

ed): *Tokkelossie* (Pretoria 1941, a study in acculturation); *Ons Volkslewe* (Pretoria 1949, essays); *Die Afrikaanse Volkskultuur* (Cape Town-Amsterdam, 1953, second edition 1960). The latter volume may be regarded as an introduction to Afrikaans folklore, being a survey of the entire field with a full account of bibliography and literature.

The chair attracted a considerable number of talented folklorists who undertook research projects for attaining higher university degrees. Of these studies only one, on the fairy tale, was published, by S. C. Hattingh: *Sprokiesvorsing* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1950) (completed in 1943). This was followed by research into other aspects of the folktale: S. C. H. Rautenbach—the formation of a folktale cycle; P. D. Swart—the folktale of the Basutu and Batswana; W. J. Loots—the race between the hare and the tortoise. H. J. Schepers made a study of the language and culture of the alluvial diamond digging communities and of children's games; M. H. O. Kloppe studied the beliefs, customs and folklore of an isolated rural community; B. F. van Vreeden gave a brilliant account of acculturation between whites, Coloureds and Bushmen; C. W. Hudson traced the development of Afrikaans social institutions out of Dutch and European originals during the 17th and 18th centuries; and C. P. Mulder described the traits of Afrikaans national character.

Abel Coetzee, with the aid of a Bureau for Folklore Research, completed the first set of six folklore maps in 1959, and is at present heading a team of collaborators which is compiling an Afrikaans folktale type and motif register.

§ 7. A few fairly well-stocked museums for folklore study are in existence, among which the following are the most notable: Albany Museum, Grahamstown (1855), South African Museum, Cape Town (1856), National Museum, Bloemfontein (1877), Old Transvaal Museum, or State Museum, Pretoria (1892), Voortrekker Museum, Pietermaritzburg (1912), Koopmans De Wet-House, Cape Town (1913); Drostdy, Swellendam (1921), Groot Constantia, Cape Town (1926/27), War Museum, Bloemfontein (1931), Africana Museum Johannesburg (1933), Cottage Museum, Durban; Cape Town Castle Museum.