

BOOK REVIEW

WATER STORIES: ORIGINAL !GARIB NARRATIONS OF THE WATER SNAKE/ WATERSTORIES: OORSPRONKLIKE !GARIB-VERTELLINGE VAN DIE WATERSLANG

Mary E. Lange (ed.)

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Mothers probably told their children stories about the water snake to scare them away from the waters. Eventually these stories became part of the belief system of a community, and remained part thereof even when the community was Christianised.

Water stories is a beautifully arranged book containing some of these stories from the !*Garib*. The !*Garib* is the local (Nama) name for the Orange River, a large river that flows through the – often arid – parts of the Northern Cape Province of South Africa that borders on Namibia. !*Garib* then also means a large amount of water.

Situated on the banks of the !*Garib*/Orange River is the town of Upington from where these eleven stories come. They were told to Mary Lange, known for her programmes in cultural education, by five women who were cleaning women in a holiday resort, *Die Eiland*, in Upington. They are Nana de Wee, Mokie Malo, Poppie van Rooi, Girlie Saaiman and Bessa Sixaxa. They are the proud bearers of Xhosa, Tswana, Sotho and Khoisan blood who, in spite of their Christian affiliation, shared the cultural stories of the water snake which catches people who go near the river but may deliver them again on command of the traditional healer.

As oral historians we know that if these stories are not collected and published, they will be lost for posterity. Because of this book, we now have preserved the story of Willem who was sent back from the water by the water snake to testify: I will never go near the water again. We also know the story of the 12 year old girl who was pushed into the water by her friends. Much later she came back one day to show her mother that she is indeed alive, living under the water. We also read of how the water snake can turn itself into a mermaid to lure people to the water. These and other stories are delightfully related as they have been told originally in Afrikaans by the women, with an excellent English translation positioned side to side with the Afrikaans.

The stories are illustrated, or rather expanded, by the art of Betta Steyn whose love for this region is well known.

The stories present numerous research possibilities and are of special interest to the religion researcher because of their constant referrals to sangomas, the traditional healers, and the spaces the latter occupy presently in the minds of believers. The tension experienced by believers between their cultural and religious identities is a further potential field of investigation with these stories as inter-texts.

The book needs to be acquired, worldwide, for its beauty and its heritage.

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