

Nicola Hanekom's *Land van skedels* – A Remembrance of Things Past and Present

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Summary

Nicola Hanekom's *Land van Skedels* had its premiere at the Clover Aardklop National Arts Festival in October 2013 and this production, as well as later ones, received glowing receptions from both theatre audience and theatre critics. She was commissioned by an Afrikaans newspaper (*Die Burger*) and an Afrikaans television channel (kykNET) to write *Land van skedels*. She was requested to focus in the play on the Anglo-Boer War, as well as the role played by Emily Hobhouse in this war. The main theme is, as can be expected, in a play that works with historical material, the theme of *remembrance*. The play is not a realistic depiction of the war and the concentration camps where many white (and black) women and children often died after a period of drawn-out suffering. Her play is a subjective and sensory depiction of traumatic memories and makes use of both historical and literary references to evoke these memories. These references are discussed within the context of theatre memory studies. It is clear from the references to other wars and camps in this play (i.e. Rwanda, Auschwitz) that humanity seems doomed to repeat its own mistakes and that Hanekom's play is thus emblematic of all wars and all concentration camps.

Opsomming

Nicola Hanekom se *Land van skedels* het sy première gehad op die Clover Aardklop Nasionale Kunsfees in Oktober 2013, waar dit (sowel as latere produksies) deur beide teatergehoore en teaterkritici besonder goed ontvang is. Sy het die werk in opdrag van 'n Afrikaanse dagblad (*Die Burger*) en 'n Afrikaanse televisiekanaal (kykNET) geskryf, met die versoek om te fokus op die Anglo-Boere-oorlog en veral ook op die rol wat Emily Hobhouse daarin gespeel het. Die hooftema is soos te verwagte in 'n drama wat werk met historiese materiaal, die tema van *herinnering*. Die drama is nie 'n realistiese uitbeelding van die oorlog en die konsentrasiekampe waarin baie wit (en swart) vrouens en kinders na 'n periode van uitgerekte lyding gesterf het nie. Haar drama is 'n subjektiewe en sensoriese uitbeelding van traumatiese herinneringe, wat deurgaans gebruik maak van beide historiese en literêre verwysings om hierdie herinneringe op te roep. Hierdie verwysings is bespreek binne die konteks van teater-herinnering-studies. Dit is duidelik uit die verwysings na ander oorloë en konsentrasiekampe (bv Rwanda, Auschwitz) dat die mensdom gedoem is om sy foute te herhaal en dat Hanekom se drama dus emblematis is van alle oorloë en konsentrasiekampe.

Introduction

Nicola Hanekom has made substantial contributions to contemporary Afrikaans (and South African) theatre as an actress, director and playwright. She has received various awards (*Fleur du Cap's*, *Fiestas* and *Kannas*) for her different dramatic and theatrical contributions over the years and is considered one of the most talented and versatile theatre practitioners today in Afrikaans, as well as in the broader South African theatre industry.

Nicola Hanekom was commissioned by *Die Burger* (Afrikaans newspaper) and *KykNET* (Afrikaans TV channel) to write *Land van skedels* and was asked to focus on the Anglo-Boer War with special reference to the assistance given by Emily Hobhouse to Afrikaner women and children in the concentration camps during this war. The publication of *Land van skedels* by Protea Boekhuis in 2015 followed when this drama received excellent receptions by both theatre audiences and theatre critics after its première at the Clover Aardklop National Arts Festival (October 2013). Later productions at the Klein Karoo Arts Festival were also characterised by glowing reviews. Many performative aspects, for example the use of site-specific spaces (among others, the tent town), audience participation, the use of music (an original score was composed for the production) and dance were highlighted by spectators and critics as special – even ground-breaking – elements for an Afrikaans play.

The focus of this article is Hanekom's use of both historical sources and literary sources as listed in the foreword of the published play. Although some allusions will be made to performative elements in the play, the following discussion of *Land van skedels* is a mainly hermeneutic reading of the rich textual references given in the play. These references are all linked to the main theme of remembrance (and forgetting) in the play – linking a past history with present events. This *reading* of the play will be done within the framework of contemporary memory and trauma studies.

1 Historical Sources: History versus Collective Memory

The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) was a war between Britain and the two Boer Republics of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), namely Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In 1900, internment camps were established by Lord Roberts for Boer women and children, after farms were destroyed due to the implementation of a “scorched earth policy” by the British. Lord Kitchener executed this policy with even more vigour than Lord Roberts and methodically set out to destroy hundreds of farms (farm-steads were burnt; farm animals killed and crops destroyed). According to the British, the Boer women and children were taken to the camps “for their own safety”, but they were, in fact, to all intents and purposes concentration camps. It is interesting to note that separate white (45) and black (approx 60) camps

were established. Records were kept more stringently in the white camps and most sources estimate these deaths at approximately 26 000 Boer women and children. Very few or no records of people dying in the black camps were kept, but later historians gave an approximation of 14 000 plus deaths.

In her foreword, Hanekom lists the following sources on the Anglo-Boer War that she consulted: *Suffering of War* by Louis Changuion, Frik Jacobs and Paul Alberts; *The War Reporter* by J.E.H. Grobler; *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War* by Elizabeth van Heyningen and *Die Boereoorlog* by Thomas Pakenham. Two other sources given in this list are of special interest, namely the diaries of Sol Plaatje and Maria Fischer. One can surmise from her choice of Sol T. Plaatje's *Boer War Diary* on this list that Hanekom also tried to bring in a voice from the previously marginalised black group during this war. Her reference to the camp diary of Maria Fischer is also interesting, since this diary is probably the most well-known camp diary of this war. It gives in very plain and simple Afrikaans a personal, anecdotal account of how a Boer woman experienced life in a concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer War. Many Boer women wrote testimonials of their experiences after the war, but this is one of the few diaries written while the war was taking place.

Although Hanekom used only a small selection of work that has been written on the Anglo-Boer War and on the contentious issue of the concentration camps during this war, it is interesting to note the range of sources that she consulted: from later historians (Pakenham, Changuion, Van Heyningen) to personal reflections on own experiences of this war (Plaatje, Fischer). The mixed list of sources (from the general historical to the more personal testimonial, i.e. from fact to feeling) is really a hint to the reader of the text of how this play will mix historical, factual information with personal and subjective perspectives.

One of the interesting aspects of the Anglo-Boer War is that most Afrikaners (in the past, but even today) have an almost automatic association with this war with the white concentration camps where thousands of women and children died.¹ Even a highly critical historian of Afrikaner history and the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism after the war, Liz Stanley, acknowledged in her book (*Mourning becomes ... Post/Memory, commemoration and the concentration camps of the South African War*) the fact that such a great number of women and children died during the Anglo-Boer War is an irrefutable fact. She notes at the beginning of her book that (3):

1. Van Heyningen mentions at the beginning of her book that these camps "were also part of a wider global phenomenon at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century: South Africans were not the only people to be incarcerated in the colonial wars of the *fin de siècle*". She gives as examples the Cuban peasantry's treatment during the Spanish wars of 1897-1988; the Americans' use of this tactic in the Philippines and harsh treatment of the Herero and Nama by the Germans (pp. ix-x).

Relatively few men on either side died as the result of fighting. However, over 26,000 Boer women and children died in the concentration camps established by the British military, more than 22,000 of them children. Even a century later this fact still shocks, because of the number of children, even more because of the reverberations of the words concentration camp.

She argues, however, in her book that this history (like other Afrikaner “histories”) was later on used by Afrikaner Nationalists to strengthen the whole ideology of Afrikaner Nationalism: “In South Africa, the post/ memory of the concentration camps became one of the histories after the fact at the heart of nationalist political mythologising. The others (are) – the Great Trek and Blood River, and the ‘First War of Freedom’ in 1881 (which Britain lost)” (4-5). Although one may not agree with her interpretation of the ideological aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War and the concentration camps (e.g. Prof Frans-Johan Pretorius, who is a well-known expert on this history, responded very critically to her book in a review), her introduction and use of the concept of post/memory is quite interesting. She defines it as follows: “This term is used in *Mourning Becomes ...* to indicate that memory, in the sense of a direct recall of events in the past, both is and is not involved in what ‘the facts’ are now understood to be”, (4) and that we can get “a history after the fact” in the words of Halbach (209-210). One can discuss and debate these issues at length in relation to the Anglo-Boer War – but this is not the focus and intention of this paper.

Of importance for this discussion, are some of the following aspects: (1) that although certain factual information can be seen as verifiable (e.g. number of white women and children who died in the Anglo-Boer War concentration camps), the *remembrance* of these incidents and *recollections* of these events can differ vastly depending from which ideological perspective one decides to interpret these events; (2) recollections of painful events can still be experienced with deep emotions – even after decades have passed; and (3) linked to this we also find the notion of *generational trauma* (younger generations are also affected by the trauma their forefathers or foremothers went through).

Although it is today a well-known fact that many black men, women and children also died when housed in similar concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War, this “history” has received very little attention by historians and the general public till relatively recently (from the 1980s). This history is relatively unknown by black South Africans and thus not remembered and commemorated within the black community to the same degree as in the Afrikaner community. It is thus interesting that Nicola Hanekom tries to address this issue and foreground it in quite a deliberate manner in her play (73-77). She does not only (through the mouths of black characters) repeat the number (14, 154) a few times, but builds it up to a crescendo when the same sentence is repeated more loudly (as seen in the use of a bigger font below):

BOKAMOSO: In this moment I walk into history. And you will hear my voice. And you will see me. And you will know me. And you will remember me. You will never forget. My name is "FOURTEEN THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY FOUR CONFIRMED DEAD THE NUMBER BELIEVED TO BE CONSIDERABLY HIGHER MOST FATALITIES OCCURING AMONGST CHILD-REN".

(76-77)

By foregrounding this matter so dramatically Hanekom, of course, tries to give a more balanced view of that period, namely that not only did thousands of white people die in concentration camps during this war, but that a very large number of black people suffered a similar fate – and that we should also remember their sufferings during the war.

One finds various historical references in the text – sometimes a long list of battles and the number of people who died in these battles are given (in such a manner that the reader of this information feels almost overwhelmed by the scale of death and destruction which these numbers imply), as well as the references to various illnesses in the camps (measles epidemics, typhoid, etc.), which refer back to descriptions found in war and camp diaries written during and after the war. The mainly surreal (almost hallucinatory) world depicted in this play, is thus permeated with a large number of historical references.

Hanekom mentions in her foreword that she often used the information found in these sources in her text and reading through these sources one can trace much of the historical information (e.g. referential information such as dates of battles, number of deaths, etc.) as given in the historical sources. One is also reminded of Fischer's camp diary when the tent town is described in the play. The tent town given in the first part of the play recalls many of Fischer's descriptions of how the women and children lived in the tents of the concentration camps – through extreme heat, cold, rain, dust storms, etc. The neatly arranged rows of tents in these camps seen in many photos (e.g. in Changuion et al) belies the desperate conditions in which these people were held. The references to illnesses (the various epidemics that killed off a large number of women and children) are given in some detail by Van Heyningen in her book (*The Concentration Camps of the Boer War*). One of her research interests is listed as "the social history of medicine" and her discussions of these epidemics and how they were perceived by the Boer women are given in some detail. One of the beliefs by many Boer women was that they were being poisoned by the meat given to them by the British soldiers in the camp – a belief also uttered by Moeder (Hanekom 51).

Even direct phrases/quotations from these historical works can be found in this play, namely the sentence: "I woke up not a slave but a pariah in the land of my birth" (75), refers to the famous words by Sol Plaatjie as published in his book of 1916, entitled *Native life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*. The full citation is as follows:

“Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth” (15).

Although Hanekom was commissioned (as noted above) to refer in this play to the role played by Emily Hobhouse in this war, one finds only a few direct references to this person in the play (namely 31, 51, 61). She is described as an *angel* in the play – a designation (according to sources, e.g. Elsabe Brits’ recent biography on Emily Hobhouse) which was commonly used during the war by the Boers to describe her. She made various trips to South Africa with the specific purpose to see for herself what was happening in the concentration camps. She visited almost all of them, wrote numerous reports to the authorities in Britain about the appalling conditions in these camps, and organised many funding drives to assist the women and children with clothing, food and other necessities.

In the play the historical figure of Emily Hobhouse is juxtaposed with the fictional figure of *Langkappie*. The reference Hanekom gives in her fore-word is to a literary work, namely Pieter W. Grobbelaar’s *Die hart van ’n volk – Langkappie is haar naam*. Grobbelaar has compiled various narratives of what he calls “volkstories” (stories originating from the people themselves). He describes this narrative as one which originated during the Great Trek. The figure of *Langkappie* is described as a supernatural figure (a ghost) and one who scares everyone meeting her. Her name refers to the “kappies”/bonnets Voortrekker and Boer women often wore to protect their faces against the sun. The fact, however, that this is a *lang* (i.e. long) kappie, meant that her face was concealed/shrouded from the viewer and she appeared faceless (similar to the figure of the Grim Reaper in mythological tales). She is thus a fearful and demonic figure and often causes the death of someone meeting her. Her own story is based on a series of tragic events and she is thus also depicted as a restless soul, doomed to an existence of eternal unhappiness. In Hanekom’s recreation of the *Langkappie* figure she mainly focused on the demonic aspect of this character: *Langkappie* personifies death and her victims are helpless against her supernatural powers when she decides that it is time for them to die. In the play all the characters are described to have wings, which are attached to sticks with strings (like puppets) and when *Langkappie* targets her victims she cuts these strings with an enormous scissor. She literally cuts the thread of life of her victims.

The figure of *Langkappie* thus introduces another layer of reference in this play, namely the use of literary references. Apart from the many historical references, we also find an extensive use of literary texts (especially poems) in this play.

2 Literary Sources: Poems and Other Literary References

As soon as the play starts and the tent town is introduced, we find that entire poems or only a few verses from poems are used as part of a particular tent's description. These poems often echo throughout the play, and we find in later scenes that characters recall and repeat some of these earlier poetic phrases and verses.

2.1 Tent Town: Six Tents and Three Poems

As an introduction to the play itself, spectators have to walk for approximately 25 minutes through a tent camp. In this "town" a series of so-called little plays or *tableaux* are enacted in front of or in the tents. This "town" is compared to "a living museum" – a description, which again recalls the theme of remembrance and selective memory. This *museum* is, however, an interactive museum and one where the spectators are each directly confronted with raw and unromanticised depictions of gross human sufferings. This "museum" is no static exhibition of petrified objects where the spectators move through, but is a space where surrealistic elements are intermingled with recognisable and realistic historical elements. One can compare this to a nightmare in which the dreamer's dream is both unsettling and strange, but also experienced as really taking place.

The spectator thus finds him- and herself in a nightmarish world in which many sensory elements (visual, auditive, kinetic) work together to make this world even more terrifying for him/her. Various sounds and auditive elements (the sound of rain, the coughing of patients and the muttering of prayers) intensify the emotional nature of the spectators' experience.

Six different tents are presented to the spectator. What is of special interest for this discussion are the various literary intertexts and references found in most of these tents. A short discussion of each tent is given from this mainly literary perspective. Each tent is defined within the text with a particular descriptive phrase and I use these phrases to title each tent.

2.1.1 The Title: *Land van skedels* and First tent: Tommy and Bokamoso

Title

The title of the play, *Land van skedels* (*A Country of Skulls*) is taken from line 59 from the Afrikaans poet, D.J. Opperman's poem: *Gebed om die gebeente* (*Prayer for the bones*), namely: "een land vol skedels en gebeente, een groot graf"/a country full of skulls and bones, one big grave (266).

In this poem a mother mourns the death of her son who went to war and whose body (“his bones”) is lying somewhere. She is haunted by the idea that these “bones” are restless and that the son is like a ghost wandering through the country. Only when she can find and bury his bones will the two of them be at peace. The motive of the *ghost* (a strong theme within the play) is introduced with two meanings associated with it in Afrikaans, namely (1) the dead figure described as a *ghost* (a figure that evokes fear in anyone seeing or meeting it) and (2) where the word is used as a verb, with the meaning to *haunt* someone. The son’s death (“bones”) is, however, simply emblematic of all the deaths in this country (“a country of skulls and bones”, Hanekom 12) and even of the continent (“Afrika is groot Hier is genoeg plek om almal te begrawe”,/Africa is big There is enough space to bury everybody, 64). A number of critics (e.g. Krog) interpret this poem as referring to a particular historical figure, namely Gideon Scheepers – a well-known Anglo-Boer rebel. He was, after a short trial, found guilty of war crimes by the British forces and killed by a firing squad. His body was taken away and never found. His mother apparently kept on searching for his remains till her dying day.

Not only the *bones* of the dead people, but also the bones of the many dead animals – killed by the British soldiers as part of Kitchener’s scorched earth policy – are referred to in the play, namely when the audience is being led by the actors to the stage area (“Die kinderkoortjie sluit aan by die sang en druk as’t ware die gehoor in die rigting van die pad van beendere. Honderde wit, gebleikte beendere van diere maak ’n pad waarlangs die gehoorlede stap om te gaan sit vir die volgende gedeelte van die stuk”/The children’s choir becomes part of the singing and pushes the audience as it were in the direction of the path of bones. Hundreds of white, bleached bones of animals create a road along which the spectators walk to get to the seating area for the next part of the play, 28). The cover of the printed play has, in fact, a picture of a woman lying on the ground staring at various animal skulls.

First Tent: Tommy and Bokamoso

One finds in this tent that Tommy (slang for a British soldier) is ironically reciting a part of D.J. Opperman’s *Gebed om die gebeente* in English (“vertaalde verbastering”/translated hybridisation, 12). A number of issues are of importance: (1) since the poem was only written decades after the war, this reference is clearly anachronistic. However, it is also clear from other things found in the tent (e.g. the small white and black TV, 11) that this is a deliberate insertion and probably with the function to underline the surrealistic and a-historical atmosphere that often permeates the dramatic action in the play. It is also an ironic reversal to put the words in the mouth of a British soldier – when the poem is about the suffering of Afrikaners in the Anglo-Boer War.

2.2.2 Second Tent: Mother. A Tent of Fever and Sand (*Moeder. Dis 'n tent van koors en sand, 12-13*)

In this tent we find a description of a space that is both present in the physical reality of a tent, but also placed in a surreal world: “Dit is 'n tent van koors en sand”/A tent of fever and sand). The character (“moeder”/mother) is not only sitting on sand in a tent, but experiences this “sand” as engulfing her (“Die oneindige sand suig haar in sodat net haar bolyf uitsteek ... desperate trane loop oor haar wange. Die sand loop deur haar vingers. Dit stroom by die bek van die tent uit”/The endless sand sucks her in so that only her upper body protrudes ... desperate tears course down her cheeks. The sand runs through her fingers. It streams through the opening of the tent, 12). While this is happening, she repeatedly says (“prays”) C. Louis Leipoldt’s poem (“Die einde”/The end). The poem prays for courage and patience during difficult times and ends with the positive belief that evil will change into good and that after darkness light will follow. One can perhaps link this scene at the beginning of the play with the end of the play, which closes with the call for people to “Rise free” (85) – probably an exultation to be free of the past injustices and to embrace a new beginning.

The reference to *sand* in this tent recalls many of the descriptions given in Tant Miem Fischers’s diary of how the inhabitants of the concentration camps had to continually battle the pervasive sand in their tents. The sand infiltrated everything in these tents and when it rained they again had to battle the mud inside and outside the tents.

2.2.3 Third Tent: Closed

This tent is closed and the spectator is kept in the dark regarding what is happening inside the tent.

2.2.4 Fourth Tent: The Tent of the Fallen Soldier, Boetie (*Die tent van die gevalle soldaat, Boetie, 13-16*)

Boetie is described as the “fallen soldier”: he is crippled after losing both his legs (he now has “legs of wood”) and is also blind (the bandage across his eyes shows two bloody spots where his eyes should be). Although the two characters seem to speak to each other, their dialogue is repetitive – one also finds later in the play that the same scene repeats itself between the two characters with some repetition of the dialogue. There is, however, a dramatic development when Sussie dies at the end of the play and Boetie is then on his own. Although no reference to a poem is given in this scene, Boetie’s description of Sussie is given in a lyrical, poetic manner (full of imagery), e.g. “Gewoonlik staan jy regop soos 'n riet in 'n poel vol sonlig. Jou hart klop soos 'n wilde gans in jou bors”/Usually you stand up straight like a reed in a pool of sunlight. Your heart beats like a wild goose in your breast (15). These

phrases are repeated verbatim by Boetie at the end of the play (58), but with the difference that Sussie is now dead.

2.2.5 Fifth Tent: Tent of the Dead Babies (*Die tent van die dooie babas*, 17)

In this scene, a mother (Lenie) plays the violin with her dead baby on her lap. According to the stage direction she is clearly mad. She interrupts her violin playing by repeatedly reciting her “own version” of a well-known poem by Leipoldt: *Siembamba*. A version of this poem is also known as a popular song – one that has generated quite an interest among critics to try and determine the origin of this poem/song. It is often seen as a lullaby, but its words are so violent (in a popular version it sounds as if the baby is strangled, thrown into a ditch and his/her head trampled on!), that various interpretations are given to both the origin and meaning of this poem/song to explain the meaning of the words.

It is interesting to research the origin of *Siembamba* within South(-ern) African cultural history. According to Alberts (26-32), black slaves (brought by the Portuguese to the Cape in 1658) introduced it as a game played by children. According to Alberts, one can distinguish five variants of *Siembamba* during the 250 years that follow – from being used as a soothing lullaby by a loving mother to the much more violent and longer version currently associated with it. A poem by C.J. Langenhoven (a well-known older Afrikaans author) based on this theme, was musically arranged by H. Pieter van der Westhuizen into a song and became very popular. In seven stanzas the baby (although seemingly murdered by the mother in the first stanza), grows up (from a little boy, to a young man, to a married man) and states in the third stanza that he can now get off the mother’s lap because he can also kill other men.

In the play, Hanekom (17) states that Lenie is muttering her own version of C. Louis Leipoldt’s poem (another poet working with this material). Although the title of the poem is not given in the play, the reference is to a well-known poem by him (*’n Nuwe liedjie op ’n ou deuntjie*/A new song in an old tune), which is based on the old song/poem (*Siembamba*). Leipoldt apparently extends the first stanza (named by him a “lokasieliedjie”, i.e. township song) to three more stanzas. In the first of these stanzas, the singer mentions the wind howling, although it is silent in the camp. In the next stanza, the camp is described as a “kinderkamp” (camp for children) and in the last stanza, it is clear that the child for whom the song is sung, has died and will be buried with another child in one coffin. References are given to well-known illnesses in the camps (among others whooping cough and consumption) which killed off many children in the concentration camps. The refrain: “Vou maar jou handjies dig tesame, Sluit maar jou ogies, en se ame!”/Fold your little hands tightly together, Close your eyes, and say amen, is also found in Hanekom’s

version of Leipoldt's poem (17-18). In Lenie's "version" she changes the word: *Siembamba* to *sien 'n mamba* (See a mamba). This adds another layer of reference to this song, since an etymological search of the word *siembamba* refers to either a Portuguese or an isiXhosa origin of the word based on words referring to the snake (mamba). In this version the baby can thus sleep peacefully because the caregiver (probably a black woman) will protect him/her against the snake.

Hanekom's version (in the words of Lenie) is thus a mixture of various versions (found in poems and songs). She intermingles the ominous version of the baby becoming a young man who murders other men with the more "acceptable" version where the word *siembamba/sien 'n mamba* refers to a snake (mamba). By mixing the various versions, Hanekom keeps the meaning of this poem ambivalent for both reader and spectator.

2.2.6 Sixth Tent: Mud and letters (*'n Tent van modder en briewe, 20*)

In this tent, a woman repeatedly writes (on little scraps of paper) the poem, "Dis al"/That's all (by Jan F. Celliers) and signs it with the name: Ellen de Groot.² This poem is probably the most iconic poem in Afrikaans written about the Anglo Boer War and its aftermath. Most commentators interpret the poem as referring to a man returning to his farm from exile after the war and being confronted by a scene of utter destruction. The use of the name *Ellen de Groot* is an interesting reference. According to Anne Frank's diary, it was apparently common during the Nazi occupation in the Netherlands when letters were censored, to sign a letter as written by Ellen de Groot. When the three words are conjoined into two words, namely *ellende groot* the meaning becomes clear, namely: *suffering greatly*. By replacing the real author's name (Jan F. Celliers) with a fictional author (Ellen de Groot), Hanekom, of course, widens the referential breadth of this poem. From this reference it is clear that Hanekom really sees the Anglo-Boer concentration camps as being

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2. Jan Celliers' Dis al and Guy Butler's English translation: That's all
 Dis die blond//*Gold*,
 dis die blou//*blue*:
 dis die veld//*veld*,
 dis die lug//*sky*;
 en 'n voël draai bowe in eensame vlug//*and one bird wheeling lonely*,
high –
 dis al//*that's all*.
 Dis 'n balling gekom//*An exile come back*
 oor die oseaan//*from over the sea*;
 dis 'n graf in die gras//*a grave in the grass*,
 dis 'n vallende traan//*a tear breaking free*;
 dis al//*that's all*.

emblematic of other concentration camps: in all such camps the *ellende* will be *groot*/ the suffering will be great.

The Poems

The use of all of these poems in the play is interesting on various levels. They introduce a certain *lyrical* quality to the characters' speech, while the numerous *repetitions* of these poems by these characters (sometimes verbally, at other times in written format) create the impression of characters in a state of neurotic shock – an expression of the extreme trauma they are experiencing. Although they are within a camp, i.e. surrounded by many people, they seem to be lost in a world of their own, repeating the same words and actions endlessly.

In her excellent study of postmodern memory theatre, Malkin (1999) mentions the link between memory and trauma, namely: "One of the distinguishing features of postmodern memory-theater is its overabundance of disconnected stimuli: conflicting discourses, intruding images, overlapping voices, hallucinatory fragments The images often reach back into the pasts of a society, but their arrangement does not suggest historical reconstruction; rather, chaotic memory – perhaps even *traumatized* memory – seems to be at work" (29). This is a good description of what is found in Hanekom's play.

It is, against this context, also important to keep in mind that these poems are, in fact, *anachronisms*. They were all written many years *after* the war – and not during the war. The Anglo-Boer War and the death of so many women and children in these camps made an enormous impression on Afrikaners. These incidents inspired many Afrikaans poems, plays and narratives (short stories and novels) for many years after the war. The poem *Dis al*, for example, has iconic status within Afrikaans literature and has, from its first publication, been seen as referring to the Anglo-Boer War's traumatic effect on the Afrikaner. In a recent poll, inviting the general Afrikaans-speaking public to indicate the 100 most well-known Afrikaans poems, it was placed in tenth position. The fact that this poem (and *Siembamba*) especially is even today associated with the Anglo-Boer War and the Afrikaner's losses and suffering during that war, can be seen as evidence of the workings of *collective memory* within that community. These poems give expression to emotions of anger, bitterness and futility as experienced during these traumatic events, while the trauma experienced is then conveyed to every new generation of readers of these poems.

3 Remembrance versus Forgetting

The published text is a rich text, which reveals a number of different themes to the reader. The main theme is, as to be expected in a play that works with historical material, the theme of *remembrance*. Already in her *Author's note* Hanekom states: "Ons moet altyd onthou om te onthou. Ons vergeet dit soms. Ons moet die dier binne ons in toom hou en probeer luister na die engele in die chaos"/We must always remember to remember. We sometimes forget this. We have to rein in the beast within and try to listen to the angels in the chaos (1). The danger of forgetting is thus that we will repeat the mistakes of the past and that the bestiality, which characterises all wars, will burst through the thin veneer of civilisation.

The surrealistic and nightmarish nature of the depiction is further emphasised by the appearance of "ghosts", strange characters (the Boer and Brit on stilts), Langkappie (the figure of death) and the depiction of characters as puppets. In the face of war and its atrocities (concentration camps) most people are helpless ("puppets") and powerless to resist and overcome their traumatic circumstances.

The play is thus no conventional realistic depiction of the Anglo-Boer War and the concentration camps where women and children died in great numbers after much suffering. Where Deon Opperman, for example in *Donkerland* gave us an epic play where Afrikaner history is given chronologically in different historical periods and his play is seen as a *tour de force* of mainly realistic depictions, Nicola Hanekom's *Land van skedels* is probably the most subjective and sensuously most disturbing exposition of how *memories* in the spectator's head (his/her "skedel") can portray comparable historic material.

The recall of war memories is usually very traumatic and in the words of one of the characters, Bokamoso: "If only we could wind back the clock and put into words the new script of history, decode our minds and soften the blows of memory" (73). It is, however, even more dangerous if we forget these memories. In the end, Sophia (another character) states: "Orals, orals het hulle van ons vergeet. En toe het ons van onself vergeet. En gedoen wat hulle gedoen het."/Everywhere, everywhere they had forgotten about us. Then, we forgot about ourselves. And did what they had done (84).

Apart from the historical and literary references listed in the foreword, Nicola Hanekom also mentions personal testimonials (in written format, e.g. given in camp or war diaries or in verbal format, e.g. anecdotal re-collections) as sources for her play. In these types of recollections, the *subjective individual* experience – what it entails and how the person remembers the traumatic event – is foregrounded. Hanekom's use of various types of references (historical, literary, and anecdotal) creates thus a mixture of both a *collective memory* (the Afrikaner community) and an *individualised experience* (the suffering of Boetie, Sussie, Lenie, and other characters in the play). By bringing in other well-known historical references of war-related

atrocities (Rwanda) and notorious camps (Auschwitz), Hanekom increases the referential breadth of this play. Although the play focuses almost entirely on the South African reference (Anglo-Boer War and concentration camps), she seems to use this reference in an emblematic manner: all war atrocities should be remembered in order to avoid a repetition of the same horrors and sufferings characteristic of all wars.

It is, however, clear from the references to other wars and other concentration camps (among others, Rwanda, Auschwitz), that humanity is generally doomed to repeat its mistakes. The disturbing depictions of Afrikaner women and children in the Anglo-Boer concentration camps are thus emblematic of similar camps all over the world even today.

The play works with the interconnectedness of opposites: the historic factual elements which are presented in an a-historical and surrealist manner (as seen in the anachronistic use of the poems); the big space of the veld and camp versus the intimate spaces of the interiors of the tents; time and space, which are both particular and flowing. Memories are subjective, flowing and often work with associations – elements, which Hanekom masterfully foregrounds in her play. Although the theme of the Anglo-Boer War and concentration camps is a familiar theme in Afrikaans literature (in older texts and scripts), it is also one which is today a popular topic to be revisited by contemporary Afrikaans authors and playwrights. Nicola Hanekom makes, with this play, a very original contribution to such a corpus of work.

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