

Swearing at plants: A flash ethnography from Namaqualand

Dr William Ellis

In November 2018 we are at Willem's veepos (stockpost) halfway between Paulshoek and Leliefontein in the Kamiesberg mountains. It is early summer and the scarlet red milkweed locusts (*Phymateus morbillosus*) have begun to feast on the remaining green vegetation. The melkbos (*Asclepias fruticosa*) covers the field where we are conducting our interview. This plant is one of the favourite foods of the locusts and the milkweed's poisonous chemicals help the locust synthesise a noxious liquid that it shoots out at possible attackers. The glands from which this fluid issues are in the rear of the animals and locals call it Jan-pister (*Jan the pissier*).

In this fallow field where, Willem plants wheat every few years, four of us are gathered to talk about his animals and farming practices. I am here to look at the ecologists and their work with indigenous farmers. We are asking about the tontelbos, also known as milkweed (*Asclepias fruticosa*) and the other common shrubs in the disturbed fields such as the neon yellow kraalbos. At the mention of kraalbos we turn to talking about veld degradation and he mentions kraalbos a few times. I suggest that it is called *Galenia africana*. Willem immediately retorts, "Moenie so vloek nie!" (Don't swear like that). At the repeat of the genus and species name he repeats the reply "Moenie so vloek nie!"

Willem was of course joking, but in the comic critique lies a more serious point. The locals have an aversion for English, calling it vissies spoeg, literally translated as "spitting fish". They tease those who speak English to mask this contempt for the language. Latinised names for plants receive the same disdain here, it seems. The strange-sounding and hard-to-pronounce "scientific" names issuing from a different place, logic and time are far removed from the herder's world. The local botanists suggest that we should use the local names. Local names have their own logic and Western-trained botanists have given

some attention to the indigenous taxonomy. Indigenous names are rather descriptive, like bitterbos (bitter bush), metjiebos or vuurhoutjiebos (match bush, because of its combustibility). Sometimes the terms refers to a group of plants with similar traits, for example / geibiebos for all leaf succulent shrubs.

I want to speculate here on the retort I receive from Willem and offer it up as part of a broader theorisation by herders and pastoralists in the region. All attempts to enlighten Willem about taxonomic correctness are seen as a vulgarisation and a blasphemy. Did we just curse this land, did I just end up participating in the placing of a longitudinal curse on the land and its inhabitants? Calling it names and continuing to support the blasphemies of taxonomy and the curse of scientific magic. After all, we must admit that the names of plants were often sacred. Names remained such a vital part of the healing and magical rituals and the replacement with Latin was an attempt to erase the power of plants, their occult and magical powers. Take names such as those of the triumvirate of Rasta herbalism, Witstorm (white storm), Rooistorm (red storm) and Swartstorm (black storm). These names display a strength of not just a wind but of tempest, a healing force of raging weather, literally a power not human but meteorological. Latinising exorcises the original superstition, as it was seen by Westerners, and the sin of the plant's traditional name – and takes away its cosmological power.

The binomials rob the indigenous person of the certainty about ownership of the plant knowledge. They create a new esoteric nomenclature so that the coloniser can literally "appropriate the thing and all its effects", as Achille Mbembe puts it. Naming appropriates; it robs the original holder of their plant practice, but it also speaks of the logics of taxonomic practice. Eben Kirksey in his ethnography Emergent Ecologies reports that a taxonomist he observed noted that





Gladiolus carinatus (blou afrikaner, pypie) found on the West coast CREDIT William Ellis



Tontelbos

“some things just don’t have to be named”. This, in my reading, is not simply a suggestion to leave things in a specifying desert but it speaks to the logic of taxonomy. Further suggestion intimates that the reasons for creating taxonomic certainty is not to concretely name species because it is a necessary state of things. Species are named because an a priori reason exists for them to be named. Naming can thus be completely arbitrary. One could think the instrumental logic of much of the science practiced in the West today to begin to unravel some of the logics of nomenclature. Naming for the European other, although it may equally hold some instrumental reasoning in the process of naming, is open to this idea of not-naming.

In my plant research I have observed that one plant, for instance the aloe, is not distinguished as different species. Whereas occidental taxonomy distinguishes specific aloe species, my interlocutors treat the aloe as a more open category and they are willing to name several species as one type. Similar examples exist among Nguni healers, who use plant categories like intezezi (a range of succulent species that turn red in the dry season) as a single type of plant, although it may include several species considered unrelated in our classification. Yet this approach to naming does not exclude the adoption of scientific terminology and local farmers are familiar with and often learn to use these exogenous classificatory categories. The two forms are thus not mutually exclusive and we are merely being asked to adopt local words when in these contexts. We have to work with plants in the same way as these plant practitioners if we want the encounter to deepen our ethnographies.

Is there, however, another reading of this episode? Possibly there is a correct form of address, or, as John Hartigan suggests, some kind of etiquette when addressing plants. He argues that the etiquette concerning plants articulates three aspects of address: proper form of address, habits (habitats and context), and the kinship of the plants. I am asked to grant the plants their local names and to avoid my own “scientific” ascriptions. This avoidance immediately opens up an endogenous play of uses, knowledge and understanding of the plants. Speaking about plants in their local names immediately gives credence to a specific knowledge that people have of their ecological and historical plant practices. In our context, these home-grown forms of address reveal how the herder sees the veld: the poisonous, the palatable and the useful plants. At the same time, it may also reflect the nature of the plants: their colour, shape, taste and any other physical characteristics they may have. Adopting local forms of address further gives indications of the habits and contexts of these plants, such as vuurhoutjebos (match bush) for a highly combustible plant that has dry flower heads that look like matches. Lastly, as mentioned above, the proper etiquette also recalls the categories that locals develop and the relations they see among plants. Thus, overall, they suggest that a proper form of address in context also provides a clearer view of the endogenous plant practices for our ethnographies. I am asked to mind my manners and that my form of speaking about and to plants may not be locally acceptable. In closing, it seemed that

I did not have to name the plants in question and my logic may itself have been completely arbitrary – so much so that I might as well have been swearing.

Dr William Ellis is a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology. This is an extract from a paper currently under review for publication.

References

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Namaqualand map