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Note

THE CONTAMINATED ENGLISH WORDS 'ARNOCEROS', 'RHINOSTER', AND 'RHINASTER' VIS-À-VIS EBEN VENTER'S *DECIMA* AND EUGÈNE MARAIS'S KHOESAN *DWAALSTORIES*

The South African author Eben Venter's novel, *Decima*[1]—which explores the highly probable extinction of the black rhinoceros as a result of the legacy of historical colonialism and contemporary human poaching[2]—has two mottos. The first, 'If someone doesn't like animals there's something wrong with them', is attributed to Maureen Venter, the author's mother. The second, longer motto is described as extracted from a 'Bushman story, as told by Eugène Marais':

> And she hands him the tiny mirror that she'd rubbed from black **arnoceros** horn, way, way back; and also the great copper neck ring of Heitsi-eibib … And now in front of him there is the **arnoceros** mirror of Nasib-Tgam, so that he can see everything behind him; and he's rubbed shiny with tail fat.[3]

Venter's novel includes a comprehensive bibliography which directs the reader to the texts he drew on in shaping the narrative. The second motto—attributed to Marais's retelling of a Bushman story—is not, however, included in the bibliography.

First, the relevant story, '*Die Lied van die Reën: 'n Koranna-Dwaalstorie*' [The Song of the Rain: A Koranna Wandering Tale], was published in Marais's 1927 collection of Bushman and Khoekhoe folklore, titled *Dwaalstories en ander vertellings*[4] [Wandering Tales and Other Stories]. The collection, which includes both prose and poetry, is a classic in Afrikaans literature and often commented upon in South African literary studies.[5] It has been reprinted numerous times, and individual stories and poems from the collection have been widely anthologized. Despite this influence, only one translation of the entire collection into English has been published as *The Rain Bull and Other Tales from the San.*[6]

Second, in the original the Afrikaans word for 'arnoceros' is '*harnoster*':

> *En sy gee hom die klein spieëltjie wat sy vanmelewe uit swart* ***harnoster-horing*** *gevryf het; en ook die groot kopernekring van Heitsi-eibib … En voor hom lê die* ***harnoster-spieël*** *van Nasi-Tgam, sodat hy alles agter kan sien; en hy is blink gevrywe met die stertvet.*[7]

[1] E. Venter, *Decima* (Cape Town, 2023). Simultaneously published in Afrikaans: E. Venter, *Decima* (Cape Town, 2023).

[2] For analyses of the novel, see K. van Wyk, 'The Seeing Eye, The Narrating I: Animals in Eben Venter's *Decima*' (2023), *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde: 'n tydskrif vir afrika-letterkunde | a journal for african literature*, lxi (2024), 34–44; J. Rossmann and B. J. Cornelius, 'Demythologising the Rhino: From Dürer to Venter, From Beast to Being', *British and American Studies*, xxxi (2024), 245–253.

[3] Venter, *Decima*, 8. My emphasis.

[4] E. N. Marais, *Dwaalstories en ander vertellings* (Cape Town, 1927). For a focused analysis of the extract, see L. Staphorst, '"A Bushman Story:" An Opaque Reference to Eugène Marais's *Dwaalstories* in Eben Venter's *Decima*', *The Explicator*, (2026).

[5] For discussions, see J. van Melle, 'Drie Boesmanverhale van Eugène Marais', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* iii (1953), 41–50; G. A. Jooste, 'Fantasie en ideologie in Eugène Marais se *Dwaalstories*, *Literator*, xi (1990), 36–51; G. A. Jooste, 'Die tekstuele gesag in Marais se *Dwaalstories*', *Literator* xii (1991), 1–10; G. A. Jooste, 'Taaltoer in die woestyn: Marais se *Dwaalstories*', *Literator*, xii (1991), 59–68; R. Gilfillan, '*Dwaalstories* - the Stories of a Roaming Bushman; Committed to Paper by a Wandering Boer', *Alternation*, iii (1996), 148–156; S. Swart, 'Mythic Bushmen in Afrikaans Literature', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, xv (2003), 91–108; A. Gagiano, *Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa* (Stuttgart, 2008); H. van Vuuren, 'Plagiaat? Appropriasie? Kulturele oorplanting? Huldiging? Brandende kwessies rondom mondelinge tradisies – Eugène Marais en die San opnuut bekyk', *Journal of Literary Studies | Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, xxiv (2008), 85–112; H. Willemse, 'Tokkelossie, 'n Boesman, outa Hendrik en ontkennende close readings', *Literator*, xxix (2009), 57–73; S. Gray, 'Stephen, Soul-Brother Eugène N. Marais: Some Notes Towards a Re-Edit of His Works', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde: n tydskrif vir afrika-letterkunde | a journal for african literature*, l (2013), 62–80; K. B. Highman, ''The Narcissism of Small Differences': Plagiarism in South African Letters.' in E. Boehmer, E. Kunstmann, P. Mukhopadhyay, and A. Rogers (eds.) *The Global Histories of Books: Methods and Practices*, (London, 2017); J. van Niekerk, 'Afrika-oraliteit by Eugène Marais: die wisselwerking tussen enkele 'Sangedigte' en *Dwaalstories*', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde: 'n tydskrif vir afrika-letterkunde | a journal for african literature*, lix (2022), 73–95; L. Staphorst, 'Critiquing the "Lone Writerly Genius" via *Samespraak* as Reception Theoretical Concept: Eugène Marais's Bifurcated English and Afrikaans Oeuvre, the Animal, and the |xam Bushmen as Literary Scientific Source', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, xxxviii (2026), 222–237.

[6] E. N. Marais, *The Rain Bull and Other Tales from the San* (Cape Town, 2007).

[7] Marais, *Dwaalstories*, 15. My emphasis.

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This is a dated colloquial form of the standard Afrikaans term '*renoster*', and other dated variants of the same term include '*anoster*' and '*arnoster*'. In *The Rain Bull and Other Tales from the San*, translator Jacques Coetzee has opted for 'rhinoceros',[8] the standard English equivalent.

Third, Venter's English neologism is not the first instance of linguistic contamination in South African English under the influence of Afrikaans relative to 'rhinoceros'. In the *Dictionary of South African English* (accessed May 2026), the word 'rhinoster', also spelled 'renoster' and 'rhenoster', is labelled as a variant of 'rhinoceros'.[9] Like Venter's 'ar [Afr.] + noceros [Eng.]', 'rhinoster' has been shaped via contaminatory compounding of 'rhino [Eng.] + noster [Afr.]'.

A similar form of contamination has appeared in American English, albeit most probably via Dutch and not Afrikaans. In *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* of 1913 (accessed May 2026), 'rhinaster' as a synonym for 'rhinoceros' is documented, even if the etymology of the morpheme 'aster' is incorrectly noted to be 'star'.[10] It shares the same etymology as the English 'rhinoceros'.

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[8] Marais, *The Rain Bull*, 25.
[9] See https://dsae.co.za/entry/rhinoster/e05979.
[10] See https://www.websters1913.com/words/Rhinaster.

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