

## The soul of the white ant plagiarised...

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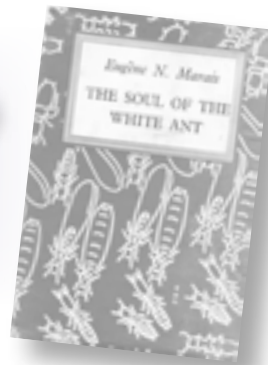
With reference to your recent article regarding the plagiarism of Eugène Marais's research findings, I would like to mention David van Reybrouk's interesting book, **Die plaag**, translated from Dutch into Afrikaans by Daniel Hugo (Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2003) in which he endeavours to find substantial proof that plagiarism of Marais's **Die siel van die mier** had in fact taken place.

His curiosity was first aroused when he chanced upon Robert Audrey's contention of plagiarism in his book, **African genesis**. He was shocked to read the accusation levelled at such an important figure as Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian Nobel Prize winner, an accusation which Solle Zuckerman, the director of the London Zoo and a South African by birth, subsequently vehemently denied, calling it 'sheer nonsense'. He became interested in the controversy and set about trying to set the record straight for once and for all.

Although he could not find an example of page by page copying of Marais's ideas in Maeterlinck's work, **La vie des termites**, as stated by Marais, there was a decided similarity of ideas and conclusions which, Van Reybrouk conceded, could have been pure coincidence. He had to find conclusive proof to refute the allegation.

This led him on a long road of discovery. He travelled to South Africa and visited the main libraries, archives and the offices of **Die Huisgenoot**. He followed Marais's footsteps to the Waterberg Mountains and visited the exact spot where Marais spent many months living in solitude close to nature, studying apes and colonies of ants. He wanted to visualise Marais's existence there and to enter the inner workings of his mind and psyche. He realised that Eugène Marais had based his conclusions on exact observation whereas Maeterlinck had never seen, much less studied, colonies of termites.

Irrefutable proof of plagiarism was eventually found in the use of the scientific term, *nasicornis* (ant with a horn) invented and



used for the first time by Marais to describe the ants. This term was inadvertently copied by Maeterlinck.

Van Reybrouk also managed to find the link between the publications of Marais and Maeterlinck and the proof that plagiarism had in fact taken place by way of additions to the latter's work before its going to press.

Not only is this book full of engrossing information, but it also gives an interesting and often amusing perspective of Post-Apartheid South Africa through the eyes of an unbiased and observant outsider.

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