

obituary Han Kloosterman (1931-2016)

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HAN KLOOSTERMAN – A ROMANTIC CATASTROPHIST

Kloosterman's geological career commenced with his dissertation *Le Volcanisme de la région d'Agde, Hérault, France* (Utrecht, 1959) and thrived with his alluvial prospecting – cassiterite, diamonds and gold – for various mining companies in West Africa, for 4 years, and then the interior of Brazil. In this period, he published in professional journals and adopted a catastrophist perspective, supporting the view that Earth history is punctuated by violent discontinuities. His first foray into catastrophism was a “revelation” he had during a 9-day paddling trip down the Jamanxim River in 1973, when he discovered the contours of a giant caldera. He founded, edited and published the ephemeral journal *Catastrophist Geology* (1975-1978).

Upon arrival in The Netherlands on a day in 1961, Dutch army officials arrested him for evasion of military service and interned him in an army base, along with 18-year olds, to be conscripted for the conflict over western Papua New Guinea – a colonial exploit in a time of decolonisation. While on leave in the second weekend, on a night in November, he took ‘absence without leave’, crossing the border to Germany on foot through a forest in black clothes, boarding a train to Switzerland and flying thence to Dakar. There his money ran out and he slept on a beach. With money borrowed from the Dutch consulate, at the risk of being traced in the list of missing persons, he flew on to Rio de Janeiro and remained in exile for 12 years – without a passport – until his offence had expired; in that period, he visited Holland only once, by ferry from England, when passports were barely checked. When the geological work dried up in 1983, Kloosterman returned to The Netherlands, where he took courses on parapsychology, hypnosis and Mesmerism.

As the world's sole living ‘hamacologist’ *soi-disant* and only the second one ever, he argued that the use of native American hammocks never leads to pressure ulcers – because the weight of the body is distributed over a much larger surface than on a mattress – and that their design cannot have been a chance discovery, as it was based on the ellipsoid. He defended this position at a moving exhibition in The Netherlands on the cultural history of the hammock which he organised in 1992, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' exploration of America. On a hammock he slept wherever he could, notably in his own home. A favourite anecdote was that Einstein, for all his intellect, did not grasp that one must lie on a hammock diagonally, thus tumbling to the floor.

Arguably the pivotal event in Kloosterman's profoundly Fortean life was his miraculous ‘return from the dead’. In 1993, he was diagnosed with terminal throat cancer and, having disposed of all his books and papers, he travelled back to Rio de Janeiro in order to die there in the company of his ex-wife and three children. On his deathbed in Ipanema, three blocks from the sea, he claimed to be able to hear the surf, an apparent impossibility, and endured entoptic hallucinations of ants. Four months on, he had lost 35 kg, but the disease had gone into remission and to the astonishment of his doctors he was soon tumor-free. He soon recognised psychosomatic origins of the cancer in his unemployment, divorce and oral suppression of thoughts, but this

was of little practical help, as the destruction of his official documents prior to his 'death' prevented him from leaving Brazil until 1999.

While in this political limbo, Kloosterman spent 3 months convalescing among a coastal group of Guaraní, between Rio de Janeiro and Santos, surviving on an exceedingly meagre Brazilian state pension. His life took a dramatic turn in 1998, when someone presented him with a copy of Walter Alvarez' book *T. rex and the Crater of Doom* (1997). According to Alvarez, a carbon-rich layer found in 1985 by Wendy Wolbach at the boundary between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary periods demonstrated that a global conflagration – caused by an asteroid impact – had contributed to the demise of the dinosaurs. This reminded Kloosterman of the Usselo horizon, a similar sooty, charcoal-rich layer in the late-glacial Allerød stage of northwest Europe, which he had interpreted – as early as 1977 – in terms of a *Weltbrand* associated with the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna. Finding that neither Alvarez nor Wolbach had heard of Usselo, the insight prompted Kloosterman to fly to Holland the next year on money borrowed from his son-in-law and to start a new geological project – the catastrophic end of the last glacial period.

Until his death, Kloosterman busied himself networking, collecting literature and geological samples of the Usselo layer both from Arizona and 12 sites in northwest Europe and studying the direction of tektite falls. His research received a boost in 2005, when the American scientists Firestone and West integrated the Usselo horizon into their model of a cometary impact over North America – a potent hypothesis which remains the focus of intense research and debate. From 2003 onwards, Kloosterman also compiled a database on catastrophist mythology, which – apart from deluges and fires – focussed on collapse of the sky and the *axis mundi*, overturning of the earth, pole shift and inversion of the sun's movement. In this set of motifs he saw evidence for the late Peter Warlow's theory that the earth has repeatedly toppled over in the fashion of a tippe top, modified by Stig Flodmark's demonstration that only the crust and mantle will turn over, leaving the core in its original place. One such inversion arguably occurred around the same time as the Allerød conflagration and the geomagnetic Gothenburg excursion, though much chronological and especially stratigraphical fine-tuning remains to be done. Kloosterman perceived a growing schism between a new orthodoxy of catastrophists who will only accept impact scenarios and more extreme ones who also consider earth inversions.

With this work and his *Catastrophist Manifesto* (2007), Kloosterman ranked as the only professional Dutch scientist promoting secular catastrophism – secular indeed, as he despised Christianity and would relentlessly point out the countless homicides and genocides committed in its name along with the inanity of blind faith. In dating, he preferred the abbreviations 'BC' (before censorship) and 'AD' (*anno diaboli*). With dignity, he resigned himself to his inexorable banishment to what he often called the 'lunatic fringe' of science. He lectured a number of times for the British Society of Interdisciplinary Studies (SIS) and planned to write a book on his discoveries. Regrettably, a decades-long writer's block prevented him from composing scholarly work of any length and substance after the 1970s.

Two early losses inspired longstanding interests. A Jewish girl called Froukje van Leeuwen had been one of his classmates in primary school in Utrecht. The discovery that her sudden disappearance had been due to her deportation to Sobibor waxed into indomitable philosemitism, a trait which frequently caused Kloosterman to fall out with others. Similarly, when Kloosterman learned that Mary Saydee, a winsome Kru girl he had dated in Liberia, had been kidnapped by a secret society to

be sacrificed to the sea god, the result was a scholarly fascination with human sacrifice, including anthropophagy. On the paternal side of his ancestry, family tradition indicated some Jewish admixture, while he believed to have inherited some Inuit blood through his mother's side. The recognition of Jewish surnames was one of Kloosterman's pet subjects.

In c1977, Kloosterman encountered a giant deer with hauntingly beautiful eyes at a close distance of 10 or 12 m. His inability to pull the trigger challenged his principle that one should only eat flesh when one is personally able to kill – but it took some 2 years before he mustered the courage to make the change. It was during a trip in India that Kloosterman turned into a passionate vegetarian. This happened quite impulsively; he discovered his motivation only a year afterwards – as a protest against the gods which allow us to be born on a cruel planet with food-chains. Mastering 7 or 8 European languages, he qualified as a polyglot. He attributed his facility with foreign languages to his having been a late-talking child, along with such luminaries as Einstein, Feynman, Rubinstein, Teller and Mussolini. Tragically, the 'unnecessary tortures' of chemotherapy cost him all his teeth and he developed a speech impediment as a result. He was an avid compiler of research notes, which he filed in shoeboxes, a bibliophile and – not necessarily the same – a voracious reader. He encouraged the free selfless sharing of bibliographic references and ideas. Among his friends was Simon Vinkenoog, Poet Laureate of the Netherlands (2004), while he enjoyed personal meetings with Arthur Koestler, Jacques Vallée, Guy Lyon Playfair and other 'alternative' thinkers. With some delight he noted that his ideas regarding the earth's overturnings were too extreme even for Andrew Collins and Robert Schoch.

Among the myriad unorthodox opinions he championed – some untenable, some frivolous, some original – were the suggestions that the boomerang was a divine invention; that the Wise Old Goat is seen perusing the Internet in a comic strip of Rupert Bear from the 1920s; that tapeworms, not humans, top the food chain; that the Indo-European language is fictitious (a view he later retracted), unlike many of his own free-style etymological connections between global languages; that the persecution of witches and werewolves only gained traction after the Middle Ages because at that time not enough Jews remained west of Warsaw; that the late 20th century had its own witch-hunt in women's false accusations of sexual abuse by their fathers obtained under hypnosis; that it was under collective hypnosis that the Germans could commit their atrocities during the Nazi regime; that anti-Zionism is simply a disguised reincarnation of anti-Semitism; that Christianity and 'Islām are not religions, but control systems; that life evolves through 'psycho-Lamarckism' instead of Darwinian evolution, meaning adaptations supervised by spiritual entities; that the great founders of religions and political systems lacked a sense of humour; that gossip is essential in determining what is really going on, thus enabling adequate responses; that the academic system of peer review is tantamount to the censorship of the erstwhile *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, while the anonymity preserved in it was based on the hooded judges of the Inquisition, an invitation to corruption; that the academies of science need the equivalent of a Freedom of Information Act for the benefit of science historians; that the second half of the 20th century saw the apparent return of animal speech, such as in chimpanzees, dolphins and parrots, and the arrival of animal painting; that long-lasting traumas are more likely to be transformative to oneself than short ones of greater intensity; that the higher self or *alter ego* of each of us determines the plot of our lives; and that a scientifically advanced civilisation had existed during the Ice Age. Far out though some of these contentions may seem,

Kloosterman remained a critical thinker throughout, who was wary of astrology and would vent his spleen regarding absurdities such as the denial of the Apollo landings on the moon. As a matter of principle, he would refuse to offer advice on anything and always recommended a healthy dose of scepticism.

Kloosterman made no secret of his belief that he was destined to become a latter-day shaman, failing which he at least became a prophet. This conviction serves as an underlying template joining many strands of his life together.

First, Kloosterman would compare the remarkable ‘resurrection’ following many months on his ‘deathbed’ to the symbolic calling and initiation of many a shaman. During the depression which immediately preceded the disease, his body had felt like an aggregate of 7 separate fragments instead of a single whole – a description reminiscent of the classic shamanic *rite de passage* of dismemberment. The cancer was only one in a long series of serious ailments, including 28 cases of malaria, 6 bouts of amoebic dysentery, leishmaniasis and bilharzia. Kloosterman would often flippantly remark that he had ‘already died’.

Second, Kloosterman claimed to draw energy from heavenly bodies. When stricken with malaria in 1969, he was flown to a nearby hospital in a Cessna aircraft, which crashed into the Amazonian rainforest due to engine failure. Forced to walk back to civilisation, Kloosterman felt that the disease had suddenly lifted when the magical interplay of sunlight with the river communicated such to him spiritually. Depressed because of the collapse of his marriage, he would observe Venus as evening star. And back in rainy Holland, he practised solar yoga for 6 years, gazing directly at the sun for 1 or – in one sunny month – 2 hours, typically at sunrise or sunset.

Third, Kloosterman preferred to live a simple life, close to the wilderness, entirely at ease with the elements and as a primitive outside observer of the western world. While his survival of the Dutch hunger winter (1944-1945) as a child had trained him to live on little food, his many years prospecting in the outdoors and his sojourn among the Guaraní had taught him to sleep rough in a hammock or sleeping bag, without the benefit of a tent. Upon his return to Europe Kloosterman prided himself on being a professional vagabond, hitchhiking across 10 European countries for 3 months on a small amount of money borrowed from a friend and even refraining from personal hygiene. On that occasion, he taught himself never to think of a place to sleep before 11 pm. When he was so found sleeping in Milan’s central station, he was transferred to a 4-star hotel on account of the Italian government. Bureaucracy was to blame, however, for his homelessness in the first year of his return to Holland, as the powers that be demanded a fixed address for a pension and *vice versa*; the Salvation Army hosted him in this period.

Fourth, the savant was the recipient of a range of spontaneous paranormal experiences. The chloroform used in a tonsillectomy at the age of 6 induced an out-of-body experience, of which he had many more in his middle age, invariably upon waking up, though once after having worked for hours with bromoform in a laboratory. In 1962, Kloosterman’s passport ran out of space for stamps due to projects in Ivory Coast while based in Rio de Janeiro. Distressed because his self-imposed exile from The Netherlands meant that he might end up stuck in that African land, he experienced *x-ray* vision, seeing people’s skulls through their heads and their entire lifelines, from birth to death; with the aid of chemicals obtained in Abidjan, he was able to wipe 4 pages clean. During his 3-month tour of Europe, he sensed the guidance of a personal ‘daemon’, who would communicate a positive answer to any raised question by an involuntary shaking of his shoulders, not unlike the ‘sign’ of

Socrates. The daemon urged him on from behind with a whip, but restrained itself when Kloosterman told him he could not hitchhike in the rain. And following a dream in which a she-bear had rescued his life, he came to view the bear as a sort of shamanic ‘familiar’ and erected a home altar to pay homage to this mammal.

Fifth, Kloosterman cultivated a deep, active interest in the spiritual world, fostering his animistic outlook on life. He frequently experimented with psychotropic and especially hallucinogenic substances, including ayahuasca and marijuana. A memorable incident was a three-day trance induced by his ingestion of the fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*). And on an intellectual level, he embarked on the psychological studies mentioned above, with a special emphasis on the notions of a ‘guardian angel’ or ‘higher self’, reincarnation, the ‘silent majority’ willing to tolerate even the most extreme injustice as well as ethology, specifically the consciousness and conscience of other animals than the human species. Wearing a cultural-historian hat, he developed the theory that a ‘materialist coup’ and *Kultursturz* had occurred in 1860, which purged the sciences of all catastrophist elements, banished the Romantic movement to the margins of society and stripped Mesmerism of all spiritual and paranormal elements, which it had hitherto embraced, including the full range of altered states of consciousness.

Sixth, Kloosterman’s prophetic efforts are perhaps best gleaned in the prospect he offered of a new apocalyptic end of the world and in the many Persian quatrains he composed since the 1990s as a self-styled *poète maudit*-who-did-not-die-young and ‘Europoet’, in no less than 6 languages – of which he claimed the Italian ones to have been directly dictated by a muse, as he did not speak Italian; this would happen after an hour of Venus-gazing in the evening or during a hypnopompic state in the morning, when he would see the verse inscribed in fat black letters on a large whiteboard. Entirely in the style of Omar Khayyám’s *Rubā‘iyāt* (Fitzgerald version), except for the allowance of an iambic tetrameter in the third line, the verses convey the cynical message that immoral, manipulative gods designed life on this ‘science-fiction planet’ of food-chains in the fashion of a concentration camp, a farm or a school – ‘doing time’, as the title of one bundle had it. Fort’s winged words “we are property” found a sympathetic ear with our poet. Content to subsist on the fringe of society, Kloosterman profiled himself as a pacifist, walking the talk with his avoidance of military service in 1961. In 1990, he smuggled to England a Brazilian youth who was staying illegally in Holland and had a job lined up in London, by obtaining a tourist visa for him in France, whence they could take the ferry from Brittany to Ireland, hitchhike north and cross the border at Derry.

And finally, even Kloosterman’s disinclination to put pen to paper, other than for poetry, can be seen in the light of mystics such as Pythagoras and Parmenides, who were loath to write.

People close to Kloosterman often described him as a ‘man of coincidences’. I myself was introduced to him by two people in different countries who did not know each other, one being Peter James, familiar to *FT* readers. Weeks after my first meeting with Kloosterman, my wife and I bumped into him in the Louvre, although we had at no point discussed each other’s travelling plans. It seems only fitting, then, that Kloosterman gave the ghost on the day of the closest supermoon since 1948, while a double rainbow was photographed over the funeral building just before his final dispatch.

Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs

Johan Bert Kloosterman, geologist and mineralogist, born Nijmegen 9 July 1931; died Amsterdam 14 Nov 2016, aged 85.