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Press Ombudsman of South Africa  
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**Complaint: 'Kat dalk in heksedaad bedwelm'** by Marlene Neethling. Published in Die Burger on 25 March 2009. [find appended article]

**Part One.** Fabrication of statements alleged by the reporter 'Marlene Neethling' to have been made by Mr. Andries Venter, Chief Inspector of the SPCA (mnr. Andries Venter, hoofinspekteur van die DBV).

Contact: Mr. Andries Venter - Chief Inspector of the SPCA  
[inspmanager@spca-ct.co.za](mailto:inspmanager@spca-ct.co.za)  
Contact: Ms. M. Neethling – Reporter for Die Burger  
[Marlene.Neethling@dieburger.com](mailto:Marlene.Neethling@dieburger.com)

**Part Two.** Denial of wrongdoing by The Ombudsman of Die Burger, Mr. Hendrik Coetzee.

Contact: Mr. Hendrik Coetzee – Die Burger Ombudsman  
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**Part Three.** Defamation against a religious minority through the publishing of false statements against Witchcraft.

## **Complaint**

### **Part One.**

In an article entitled '**Kat dalk in heksedaad bedwelm**' written by Marlene Neethling and published in Die Burger on 25 March 2009, Neethling alleges that Mr. Andries Venter - Chief Inspector of the SPCA, stated:

*Volgens mnr. Andries Venter, hoofinspekteur van die DBV, word vermoed die kat het deur heksery die dwelms ingekry, "veral omdat hy swart is, maar dié moontlikheid word steeds ondersoek".*

Translated as: *According to Mr. Andries Venter, Chief Inspector of the SPCA, it is suspected the cat's intoxication was caused through Witchcraft, especially because he's black, but the possibility is still being investigated.*

I have personally spoken with Mr. Andries Venter who denies having made such a statement to Marlene Neethling. Find accompanying proof with regard to this [see page 5], to wit, a written statement by Mr. Venter denying having stated that Witchcraft was being considered as a possible cause of the cat's intoxication on opiates. Ms. Neethling reaffirms this false allegation of Witchcraft involvement at the opening of her article.

#### **Article:**

Kat dalk in heksedaad bedwelm  
MARLENE NEETHLING  
25/03/2009 08:03:03 AM - (SA)

Kaapstad. – *'n Swart mannetjieskat wat bedwelm deur sy eienaars in hul huis aangetref is, is vermoedelik in 'n daad wat met hekserij gekoppel kan word, 'n dwelmmiddel ingegee.* Die kat, Siphon, van Kenilworth, is Vrydagaand deur sy eienaars na 'n dierekliniek gejaag nadat hy vreemd opgetree het. Volgens mnr. Allan Perrins, hoofbestuurder van die plaaslike Dierebeskermingsvereniging (DBV), het die kat opiaat ingekry, wat hy vermoedelik ingeasem het of wat by sy keel afgeblaas is. Opiaat is enige middel, soos morfien, heroïen of kodeïen, wat opium bevat of daarvan afkomstig is. Perrins het gesê hy het nog nooit met 'n geval te doen gekry waar'n kat opiaat ingekry het nie. *Volgens mnr. Andries Venter, hoofinspekteur van die DBV, word vermoed die kat het deur hekserij die dwelms ingekry, "veral omdat hy swart is, maar dié moontlikheid word steeds ondersoek".*

#### **Part Two. Denial of wrongdoing by The Ombudsman of Die Burger, Mr. Hendrik Coetzee**

A letter of complaint was delivered to Die Burger's Ombudsman [see page 4], Mr. Hendrik Coetzee, on 25 March informing the Ombudsman of Mr. Andries Venter's denial of having made such a statement to Marlene Neethling. Mr. Coetzee stated in his response to the South African Pagan Rights Alliance, *"I have just spoken to Mr Venter and he has confirmed that the SPCA suspected that witchcraft may be involved, as reported by Ms Neethling in this morning's paper. Her article is therefore correct."* [see page 4]

This response from Die Burger's Ombudsman is, given Mr. Venter's written denial, forwarded by Mr. Venter to the Editor of Die Burger Mr. H. Jeffreys at 10.58am on 25 March 2009 [see original correspondence page 5] , not only untrue, but also dismissive of the right to be reported with accuracy. Not only did Mr. Venter deny ever making such a statement to Neethling, he demanded in his letter to the editor a retraction of Neethling's allegation that he did make such a statement. Die Burger has chosen to ignore Mr. Venter's request for retraction, and to refuse remedy to the South African Pagan Rights Alliance in its complaint of defamation by Die Burger against Witches in South Africa.

### **Part Three. Defamation against a religious minority through the publishing of false statements against Witchcraft.**

In response to the South African Pagan Rights Alliance, the Ombudsman for Die Burger, Mr. Coetzee, also states, "*Nowhere in the article is there any reference to South African Witches or any other group, so there was definitely no defamation. No apology to anyone is therefore necessary.*" [see page 4] Given that Mr. Venter's right to be reported accurately has been deemed irrelevant by Ms. Neethling as reporter, the Editor and Ombudsman for Die Burger, Mr. Coetzee and Mr. H. Jeffreys respectively, this Alliance will argue that public apology is owed to Mr. Venter in as far as he is falsely alleged to have stated something he did not.

In respect of defamation, the word 'Witchcraft' was used twice in the article in question. In both instances the context of the use was prejudicial and, whether so intended or not, easily interpreted as attempt to portray Witchcraft, and by natural extension self-defined Witches in this country, the same country in which that poor cat was exposed to harmful opiates, as drug users and animal abusers. One need not identify any one particular Witch for the generalized libel against Witchcraft for such a written slander to be perceived by the general public as truly indicative of the characters and habits of self-defined Witches.

Self-defined Witches in South Africa, who call our religion Witchcraft, represent a small but visible religious minority. Two of our largest faith-based organizations are designated religious organizations in terms of the Civil Union Act and we have several religious marriage officers across the country. What the press reports about our religion affects us, our families and our religious communities and organizations.

The deliberate fabrication of hearsay to promote the idea that those who practice Witchcraft are probably to blame for the drugging of a cat constitutes the worst form of prejudicial stereotyping against a religious minority in this country. As citizens we Witches are not afforded the apparent luxury of being presumed innocent before being publicly accused by Die Burger of probably being the cause for animal abuse. As citizens of South Africa, we, Witches, demand the right to be assumed innocent before being defamed by Die Burger and its reporter as possible drug users and animal abusers. We demand the right to dignity and to live in a society that does not condone the prejudicial stereotyping of religious minorities by Die Burger.

The Alliance would draw your attention to Human Rights Resolution 2005/3 on '**Combating defamation of religions**' to which South Africa is a signatory, "*defamation of religions is among the causes of social disharmony and leads to violations of human rights.*"

This Alliance demands a published retraction of allegations made against Witchcraft by Marlene Neethling and a public apology to Witches in South Africa from Die Burger.

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