

CARING FOR A SOUTH AFRICAN TREASURE: PRESERVING THE BLEEK AND LLOYD COLLECTION AT UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN LIBRARIES

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Abstract

In the papers of Dr Wilhelm Bleek, Lucy Lloyd and Dorothea Bleek we have a unique record of the San peoples, in particular the /Xam people, of whom none now remain. The importance of the collections held at University of Cape Town Libraries (UCT), the National Library of South Africa and the South African Museum is recognised by their listing in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Increasing use of the records by scholars, as well as the need to preserve this valuable South African heritage demands that we find ways both of making it more easily accessible and of preserving it. The collection includes notebooks (over 12,000 pages of the stories and histories of the /Xam and /Kung informants), artworks, photographs and correspondence. A project has recently been completed at UCT Libraries to digitise an album of photographs taken by Dorothea Bleek on several expeditions between 1910 and the late 1920s. While a selection of the photographs has been made available on the web, a major advantage in having the album accessible in electronic form is that the originals no longer have to be handled. The paper deals with the digital imaging project, as well as other work that has been done or is planned regarding preservation of the collection.

Bleek and Lloyd Collection

In the best of all possible worlds, every collection in our repositories would be stored in perfect conditions and we would have a team of expert conservators with the facilities, time and budget to deal with each individual document or item. There are but few of these elite repositories and the rest of us are forced to make choices. We look after our collections as a whole in the best way we can, by housing them in as best and as stable an environment as our organisations can provide and we ensure that we employ good housekeeping practices. There are some collections, however, that are of such importance that they demand more specialised attention.

At the University of Cape Town, in the Manuscripts and Archives Department, we are privileged to be the custodians of a collection that has been recognised by its inclusion in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register as being documentary heritage of international significance (UNESCO 1997). We are very conscious of our responsibility towards this important and unique part of South African heritage, regarding the enabling of access to it by scholars, but particularly with regard to its preservation. In this case, we are making reference to the Bleek and Lloyd Collection which comprises records of Wilhelm Bleek, Lucy Lloyd and Dorothea Bleek and their work with the language, culture and folklore of the San peoples (University of Cape Town Libraries). Though the largest part of the collection is at UCT, the SA Museum and the National Library in Cape Town also have some Bleek and Lloyd records.

For those unfamiliar with the work of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, perhaps I should describe it briefly. Dr Wilhelm Bleek was a German philologist, who came to

South Africa in 1855 at the request of Bishop Colenso, to assist him in compiling a Zulu grammar. After completing this project, Bleek moved to Cape Town in 1856 at the invitation of the Governor, Sir George Grey, to work as his interpreter. It was while working in this capacity that he came to hear of San (Bushman) prisoners at the Breakwater Prison. Knowing that the San people were under threat of extinction, and their languages with them, he obtained permission to meet with some of the prisoners. It was there at the prison that he started recording the /Xam language, formulating an orthography to record accurately the numerous clicks that are a feature of that language.

He soon requested – and was given – permission to have some of the /Xam stay at his home in Mowbray. He trained his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, in his methods. The two of them recorded in over 140 notebooks the language, folklore, genealogies, hunting methods and life histories of their informants. When Bleek died in 1875, after a long period of ill-health, Lucy Lloyd continued the work and, in fact, the bulk of the work was done by her.

Bleek's sixth child, Dorothea, who was 2 at the time of his death, later continued the work of her father and aunt. She travelled extensively to the regions where the different San peoples lived, recording in particular the languages, in preparation for a Bushman Dictionary, which was published shortly after her death. Her records, too, form part of our collection, and the collection at UCT was presented by her. Later deposits by her niece, Dr K Scott, supplemented the collection.

All but a few of Wilhelm's and Lucy Lloyd's records are of the /Xam people, of whom there are no longer any in existence. The records in this collection therefore constitute the only record of this vanished people. They also had a few /Kung informants and Dorothea met other San groups on her travels and so there are records of importance to the San in general.

Interest in this collection has grown enormously in recent years. It serves as wonderfully rich research material for archaeologists, historians, linguists, anthropologists, artists and others. This interest means that the material is being handled more than ever.

Our holding the only records of the /Xam people brings with it a burden of responsibility and an awareness of the need to be sensitive to the use to which these records are put and how they are made available to the public and, in particular, to other San peoples. The first responsibility, I believe, is to continue to preserve them as best we can.

The core of the collection consists, without a doubt, of the notebooks of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, and it is these notebooks that researchers invariably consult. Up to now they have been able to consult the originals, though the books were microfilmed some years ago. Fortunately, the books are fairly robust. However, the increasing use of the books is inevitably starting to cause some wear and tear, particularly of the marbled paper on the covers. This is showing signs of abrasion, caused mainly by the sliding of the books in and out of the pamphlet boxes in which they are housed. About half of the books have received attention from the staff in our

Conservation Department. This consisted of strengthening of the inner hinges and replacing worn leather on the spines with skiver leather. Although this treatment has not significantly changed the essential nature of the notebooks, we will probably not treat the remainder of them, even if the spines are a little shabby, because of the importance researchers attach to their remaining just as they were when handled by Bleek and Lloyd.

Caring for the collection and making it accessible

We have two strategies in mind to prevent further damage. We plan to place each notebook in an acid-free phase box. This will provide individual protection for each notebook and prevent further wear and tear of the covers. We are also obtaining a suitable fabric to place on desks when the books are in use, in order to prevent damage to the marbled covers. The other strategy is one that will allow for the notebooks themselves to be handled less often. Funding has been obtained to digitise the notebooks (as well as other items in the collections) and, once they are available on the internet, researchers will consult the digital records rather than the originals. This project is already under way.

Preservation reformatting, to an electronic format, has already been done in respect of another part of the collection, namely 310 photographs of San peoples, taken by Dorothea Bleek in the course of her many expeditions in Southern Africa. She travelled to (I use the names in use at the time) South West Africa, Bechuanaland, Portuguese West Africa and Namaqualand, as well as to the Northern Cape and to Lake Chryssie in the eastern Transvaal. These photographs are in a large album. The pages are of black paper, with the photographs fixed in place by slits in the pages. There are annotations by Dorothea Bleek on the verso of each photograph that identify subject, place, etc. It is difficult to take a photograph out and to replace it without damaging it in some way, especially by catching the corners on the edges of the slits. We have scanned each of these photographs and recorded with each image the notes on the back of each photograph. These are available on CD-ROM, with all descriptive metadata. In addition, 50 of the images have been placed on the departmental website. (University of Cape Town Libraries 2002)

It has recently come to light that there is at the South African Museum a collection of wax cylinder recordings of San songs and tales, recorded by Dorothea Bleek during her expeditions. We do not know if we will be able to retrieve any sound from them, but an attempt must be made to do so. A joint funding request from Iziko Museums and the University of Cape Town has been submitted to copy these wax cylinders, together with those recorded by Percival Kirby, which are in the UCT collections. It is unfortunate that it appears that there is no South African institution able to do the reformatting. It is probable that the British Library will do the work.

Wax cylinder recordings were invented by Thomas Edison in 1877 and were the first medium on which sound was recorded. The first versions were made of tinfoil wrapped round a cylinder, but this was unsatisfactory and soon wax versions were being produced. Edison's National Phonograph Company continued making cylinders of wax until late 1912 when they started using a plastic material instead. The cylinders are a very fragile medium. They are brittle and easily broken; they are

susceptible to mould and the grooves are quickly worn with use (Sage 1996). Many of those in our collection show definite signs of mould. Although a few are broken, fortunately most are intact.

Another part of the collection that has recently received a great deal of attention is a collection of drawings in watercolour or charcoal, executed by the San informants. We have 39 of these in the collection at UCT; the SA Museum and the National Library have many more. I imagine that Dr Bleek or Lucy Lloyd would often have asked their informants to draw something, such as a plant or animal to explain something that they were narrating. The drawings are almost all annotated, to show the subject, and are an invaluable source of information.

Over 200 of the drawings were shown at a major exhibition at the Völkerkundemuseum in Zürich (Szalay 2002). The work of mounting them was entrusted to our excellent conservator at UCT, Johann Maree and his assistant, Keith Seafort. The mounting presented a challenge in that the pieces of paper on which the drawings are, are of differing sizes and, in many cases, the annotations reach to the very edge of the paper. Some of the drawings are in charcoal, which brings with it problems of smudging if not handled carefully. Mounting them by the usual method would mean that some of the text would have been concealed. Johann Maree, therefore, decided to use the hinge-mount method of mounting. Two hinges of Japanese tissue were affixed to each edge of the papers. Slits were then cut into the mount and the hinges slipped through them and affixed in place. This method allows the entire artwork to be visible through the 'window' of the mount. This was an enormous undertaking, as it is a very labour-intensive method, but it does mean that the drawings are now in a stable format and are far less likely to suffer any further damage by handling. This is particularly beneficial to those drawings that have a layer of gum or varnish, as the mount will prevent bending and subsequent crackling of the varnish.

A by-product of this exhibition is that each institution has received a disk with the scanned images, which were copied for the catalogue. The scanning was done on site at each institution, at the insistence of each repository and so we were able to ensure that the drawings were handled correctly.

Perhaps other institutions could learn a few lessons from our experience with aspects of our lending of material to this exhibition. While the borrowing museum, quite correctly, paid for the material costs related to the conservation work and met all our requirements regarding the safe transport of the artworks to Europe, we did not charge for the time spent in doing this work. We would take that into account next time. We were also dismayed to find that, despite all our careful arrangements for safe transport, at the last minute South African Airways unloaded the crates containing the artworks and they travelled to Zürich a day later than the people who were supposed to have accompanied them. The transport company has, up to now, failed to provide a written report, and I would urge you to choose your company carefully and to draw up a very careful and detailed contract.

It is not only the San records in the collection that are of importance. The Bleek family themselves are worthy of study. They must have been a remarkable family to

devote so many years to this scholarship, at a time when the San were generally considered to be a very primitive people, and to so win the trust and commitment of their San informants that at least one of them returned to continue narrating the tales. The papers that relate to the lives of Wilhelm, Lucy and Dorothea are of importance in their own right, not only because of the light they throw on the San studies. There is a good deal of Wilhelm Bleek's correspondence in the collection, much of it in the German language. His correspondence with his mother is on thin, very fragile paper and has been preservation photocopied, so that only the photocopied surrogates are handled.

The way ahead

The three institutions holding Bleek and Lloyd material have met to discuss ways of collaboration. Fund-seeking to preserve the collections will be one of our priorities. Together, Johann Maree, the conservator at UCT, and I have assessed the physical preservation needs of the collection. On the basis of these identified needs, we shall use the money that is available to better house the collection. Besides putting the notebooks into individual phased boxes, we will also place the oversize items into separate folders. At present they are in 2 large oversize folders and this causes stress when items of different sizes are one on top of the other. The correspondence, reports and other papers will be put into acid-free folders. At present they are in ordinary manila folders, because acid-free card tends to be expensive. We will also continue to look for ways of making the material more widely available, for two main reasons: to protect the originals from unnecessary handling and to try to satisfy the demand for access to these records.

How many other languages and cultures have disappeared without a trace? Were it not for the diligence of the Bleek family and Dorothea Bleek's foresight in bequeathing them to an institution such as UCT, there might be now no record of these peoples with their rich heritage. It is our privilege and responsibility to be good custodians of this wonderful collection, which is truly a South African treasure.

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