

## FORGOTTEN TERRITORY: THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE /XAM

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Notably absent in South African literary histories is consideration of the oral tradition of the Bushmen. In rethinking South African literature, one of the traditional forms which urgently needs recovery as part of our South African literary and cultural heritage, is the collected narratives and songs/poems of the /Xam (as represented in the Bleek & Lloyd collection, published in 1911, 1924 and 1931-37, and in Von Wielligh and Marais's collections in Afrikaans in the 1920's). These previously marginalised forms need reincorporation into what we consider to be the corpus of South African literature. The recovery of the Bushmen narratives - in a parallel with the recovery of the rock art, some of which dates back to 27,500 B.C. - has serious implications for a new conception not only of our literary history, but for South African history as a whole. At the conference 'People, Power and Politics: representing the Bushmen in Southern Africa' (4-6 August 1994, Wits university) David Lewis-Williams pointed to a need for a unifying 'seamless history' which would be inclusive of all the peoples of South Africa, as distinct from the fragmented 'white' and 'black' histories that we have at the moment.

The publication in 1991 of Pippa Skotnes's *Sound from the Thinking Strings* (containing reproductions of etchings inspired by Bushmen rock art), and Stephen Watson's *Return of the Moon* (a few months later) with the qualifying subtitle, *Versions from the /Xam*, focused the South African reader's attention anew on the culture of this southern Bushman group. I want to stress that the aim of this attempt to (re-)construct the oral tradition of the /Xam, is to rethink what constitutes South African literature. In describing this body of work, contaminated as it has become by endless mediating processes and translation from the oral into the written mode, one is also drawing afresh the borders of our literary history. It is a remarkable phenomenon that, apart from Bleek & Lloyd's extensive work in recording and studying the /Xam language and literature around the turn of the century, the /Xam's transcribed oral texts have received scant attention from South African literary scholars.

In 1987 Voss identified various myths concerning the Bushmen. At first there was Pringle's view of the Bushmen as a 'Noble Savage', followed by 'the dominant image of the Bushman

from about 1850 until the 1920s' as 'a barely human, duplicitous, cruel savage' (1987:26). This is superseded in the late nineteenth century by the neo-Romantic, 'modern' image of the Bushman - 'kind, noble, indomitable, independent, infinitely adaptable to Nature because infinitely wise in her ways. The rise of the modern myth coincided with the rise of industrialization and urbanization'(1987:26). Voss points out that Bleek's linguistic and mythological studies 'led to a conclusion on which the total rehabilitation of the Bushman (...) could proceed' (1987:33). It is clear from the work of anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of Bushman rock art that Bleek & Lloyd's publications form the cornerstone of any scientific work done in the field. Compare Vinnicombe's *People of the Eland* (1976), Lewis-Williams's *Believing and Seeing* (1981), Hewitt's invaluable *Structure, Meaning and Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San* (1986), Guenther's *Bushman Folktales* (1989), and Alan Barnard's *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa* (1992). All these authors, working in different disciplines, still make extensive use of Bleek & Lloyd's research.

However, Bleek & Lloyd's project in *Specimens* needs contextualizing. It is highly problematic that the only access we have to the oral tradition of the /Xam is through these rather archaically stilted and belaboured written English texts. The concept of one fixed text is problematic. In oral tradition plot structure is more or less fixed, but the same plot structure can exist in an endless variety of narratives, the nature of the narrative depending on the interest and ability of different narrators.

Wilhelm Bleek, the German philologist who came to South Africa with Bishop Colenso in 1850, became interested in the Bushmen and their language through newspaper reports published in *Natal* (on Bushmen raiders in the Drakensberg), where he was travelling around on horseback at the time to study Zulu. He was later appointed as librarian at the Cape, custodian of the Grey collection (now the South African Library). During his residence here, at Mowbray, he heard of a group of Bushmen who were brought from up country as prisoners for stock theft and murder, to the Breakwater Prison. He managed to have several of these unfortunate people released and handed over into his care in the role of domestic servants residing with him. Between 1870 and 1875 he and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd (both avid students of the Bushmen language, and in command of /Xam, the northern Cape linguistic group to which most of the prisoners belonged) interviewed and transcribed by hand the narratives and songs told to them by various 'givers of the native literature' (Bleek & Lloyd, 1911). They were /a!kunta (from the Strontberge), //kabbo (whose name means 'Dream'),

/han=/kasso (or 'klein Jantje'; son-in-law to //kabbo), Dia!kwain (from the Katberge, near Calvinia), !kweiten ta //ken (a sister of Dia!kwain) and /xaken-an (an old Bushman woman). After Bleek's premature death in 1875 Lucy Lloyd carried on the transcription and translation till 1884. She returned to England thereafter, and ultimately published some of the material in 1911 in *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore*. Bleek's daughter, Dorothea, made an anthology of the animal stories which was published in 1923 as *The Mantis and his Friends*. Further material was made available in the journal *Bantu Studies* in the thirties under the title 'Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushmen'.

Clearly the absence of a tape recorder necessitated the mode of laborious transcription by hand, which also dictated the unnaturally slow pace. The narrating situation is also totally artificial: instead of a responsive audience of mother tongue /Xam speakers, seated around a fire, probably after a successful hunt and feast, the narrators had Bleek, the ageing, ailing German linguist and his English sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd. It is a simulated storytelling situation, one of dependency of the storytellers upon the transcribers, influenced by various mediation processes. Factors which play a role are race (black narrators and white listeners/recorders), language (/Xam, German and English) and the necessity of notation (to facilitate later translation).

Not enough is known of the mediation processes. Questions arise about the language proficiency of Bleek and Lloyd: with reference to /Xam (Bleek started a Bushman dictionary which his daughter completed and published in 1956; how much /Xam did Lloyd know?), and with reference to English. She was a mother tongue English speaker, Bleek a mother tongue German speaker who started learning /Xam in 1865. If Bleek translated, one wonders about his proficiency in English (since his *Natal Diaries* dealing with the years 1855-1856 were written in German). If most of the translations were by Lloyd, one wonders about her command of /Xam. It then also means that two mediators, with different language skills and different powers of understanding and different interpretations, were involved in recording the material.

Instead of spontaneous 'performance' in front of a communal /Xam audience, there is an artificial audience consisting of two white foreigners. An estranging new factor is the awesome presence of 'Master' Bleek, as //Kabbo calls him. Bleek changed the course of the narrators' lives by freeing them from the Breakwater prison and taking them to his house in Mowbray to aid him in his study of /Xam language and literature. They have their extremely

relative freedom because of him. But this 'freedom' still means incarceration in the so-called civilized Cape Town, more or less as possessions of Bleek. It is clear from //Kabbo's narratives in the 'personal history' section that Bleek explained to them why they were brought to his house: he was making a book of their stories and about their lives. Having him to thank for their freedom, they would clearly all cooperate in the project - he is the first white person who treats them humanely, and affords them marginal freedom, with promises of (ironically) boots and guns for when they intended to return to their far-flung home districts in the Katkop and Strontberge.

The issue of racial difference between narrator and interlocutor (between //Kabbo on the one side, and Bleek & L.loyd on the other) can be seen as the only plausible explanation for the strange element of racism that enters jarringly into //Kabbo's narrative of his first journey by railway train:

I have said to thee that the train (fire wagon) is nice. I sat nicely in the train. We two sat in (it), we (I) and a black man.

A woman did seize my arm; she drew me inside, because I should have fallen, therefore she drew me in. I sat beside a black man; his face was black; his mouth (was) also black; for they are all black.

White men are those whose faces are red, ( ) for they are handsome. The black man he is ugly, thus his mouth is black, for his face is black.

The black man then asked me: 'Where do thou come from?' I said to the black man: 'I come from this place.' The black man asked me: 'What is its name?' ( ) I said to the black man: 'My place is the Bitterpits.'

The only possible explanation for this racist attitude of //Kabbo in looking at other South Africans lies in a perverse inclination to please his white 'Master' and interviewer.

The researchers are thus the empowered ones, representing the empire's ethnographic and linguistic interests. From Bleek's *Natal Diaries* and his description of Durban as 'an improved edition of a West African town', where 'the streets are covered with drift sand, into which one sinks up to one's knees and which gives many people unpleasant boils' (1965:12) and where 'an unhealthy irritability is the general state of mind' (1965:36), it is clear that he sees South Africa as an exotic, wild and uncivilized habitat. Africa and African languages are his study objects. He is fascinated by what he considers an exotically strange and foreign place, which he wants to comprehend and approach through the medium of its languages. This attitude is reflected in the later situation at the Cape. Bleek is not directly part of the colonizing power game in process. (He was brought to Natal in 1855 by Bishop Colenso). But

he is white, educated, relatively well-off as opposed to //Kabbo, the /Xam Bushman (described in contemporary newspaper reports as 'lower than vermin'), who has no power, is illiterate, uneducated in the western sense, a stranger in the so-called world of civilization, with no political power - totally dependent on the goodwill of Bleek. The narrators are the study objects, the disempowered, the last representatives of a colonized and vanquished minority group, having obtained their amnesty from Bleek in exchange for what must have seemed like endless and tortuous narration. In terms of the relative power relation between researcher and subject, even the relative modesty (by white standards) of Bleek's position leaves unaffected his omnipotence over //Kabbo.

But if there is disjunction, there is also parallel. The position of the /Xam oral narrators versus Bleek and Lloyd as recorders-in-writing and translators is that both parties are from worlds other than the one in which they find themselves during the period 1870-1884 at the Cape. //Kabbo is a man of 60, describing in his oral narratives a precolonial era before the encroachment of the white settler or the African pastoralist into his hunting fields. This world was invaded with violence, by commandos raised in the eighteenth and nineteenth century for the extermination of Bushmen. For //Kabbo the colonial period represents an inversion of the customs and the lifestyle he was accustomed to. He is introduced, through contact with these settlers, to death, extermination and captivity. He is forcibly introduced - via an inverted Great Trek from his home at Bitterpits in the Katberge - to the so-called civilized world: a train journey in what he calls the 'fire wagon', prison ('where the nights are spent in stocks'), other races (a white magistrate and black Koranna policemen), and finally the journey ends at the Breakwater Convict Station (he disdainfully narrates how he has to do 'women's work' there). Soon afterwards he and some others are taken to Bleek's estate and introduced to the world of literacy and education. Thus he was taken from an oral hunter-gatherer community, living in the open veld and mountains, and introduced violently to the confines of city life, literacy, and so-called civilization.

Bleek is at the peak of his career, aged 43, and comes from a highly sophisticated, educated background in Berlin. From this metropolis he moves to the colony, the periphery of the 'civilised world' - from the familiar to the exotic unfamiliarity of Africa.

Bleek is not a local colonist. I have remarked that he is not strictly speaking part of the colonizing power game at the Cape. They meet at a point where the power division is ostensibly totally unequal: the empowered Bleek and those handed over into his power. Yet

from Bleek's point of view //Kabbo and his companions possess intimate knowledge of nature, are the survivors of a society of which the last signs are the language, the rock paintings, and the oral narratives. Bleek is powerless without //Kabbo and company as guides into this world.

This raises a central question. How does one deal methodologically with the /Xam's oral tradition, passed on to us in fixed form in the written circuit? Where does one begin with a reconstruction of the /Xam's oral tradition?

In essence this is a project which is doomed to failure before one even starts. If the /Xam's collected narratives are described as 'oral tradition', it is highly paradoxical that we do not have any possible entry into the 'orality' of the tradition, except by way of analogy with the role of oral tradition in African languages in southern Africa. The project would have to build on an imagined reconstruction of what has been translated by Bleek & Lloyd into a written mode. The elements to be reconstructed would normally have been (a) the narrating situation: where, when, how? (b) the participants, (c) their interaction, the nature of the interaction, (d) the aim of the narratives, (e) the function of oral tradition within the now extinct /Xam society.

Paradoxically the most direct entry into knowledge of the oral tradition of the /Xam (the function of the stories and insight into the nature of the society) is through the narratives recorded in writing by Bleek & Lloyd. By way of analogy one may look at the function of oral literature in other societies, such as those researched by Parry and Lord, Opland, Finnegan and Okpewho and Bieseles's recent study on the Ju/'hoan of the Kalahari. She argues forcibly that oral tradition is central to an understanding of hunter-gatherer societies. It functions as the storehouse of knowledge in an oral, non-literate society:

What I am suggesting is that folklore, far from being a kind of cultural froth, may actually represent an important phase in the systematics of the knowledge of hunter-gatherers. Blurton Jones and Konner (1976:326), writing about the role of expressive forms in the transmission of information among Ju/'hoan hunter-gatherers, make the evolutionary point that successful habits of mind connected with learning, storing, and communicating survival information will have been strongly selected for. This selection pressure has left an imaginative legacy in the expressive forms, strongly imprinted with the attitudes towards work, social life, and the supernatural which all along have been adaptive in the foraging milieu (1993:43).

Related to Bieseles's reading of the narratives as having a serious informative content, Peter Buchholz points out that 'recent publications in literary theory (Santerres 1990, Derive 1993)

emphasize that in many oral or predominantly oral literatures, there exists, contrary to earlier views, 'des théories littéraires locales', a meta-discourse on that culture's own verbal production' (27/4/1994:2). He alerts us to the possible presence contained in narratives themselves of indigenous literary theory.

In *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* there are two especially relevant passages containing what may be considered 'indigenous literary theory': metatextual comments about the role of letters, or books and stories in /Xam society. Under the heading 'Customs and Superstitions' //Kabbo explains the notion of 'Bushman Presentiments':

The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies. They (the letters) speak, they move, they make their (the Bushmen's) bodies move. They (the Bushmen) order the others to be silent; a man is altogether still, when he feels that ( ) his body is tapping (inside). A dream speaks falsely, it is (a thing) which deceives. The presentiment is that which speaks the truth; it is that by means of which the Bushman gets (or perceives) meat, when it has tapped (1911:331).

Bleek explains in a footnote that 'the word !ghwe was used by the Bushmen to denote both letters and books (...) the beatings in their bodies (...) resemble the letters which take a message or an account of what happens in another place' (1911:331).

Lloyd sheds some light in the introduction to *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* on //Kabbo's attitude to the recordings. He was an excellent narrator, and patiently watched until a sentence had been written down, before proceeding with what he was telling. He much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books (1911:x).

It seems that //Kabbo's use of the concept of 'letters' or 'books' (!ghwe), very unusual in an illiterate person, must have come from his interaction with Bleek & Lloyd and their explanation about what they were aiming to achieve - recording the stories of the /Xam in book form for prosperity. The foreignness of the technology of literacy to him, however, is illustrated in the astounding and strikingly poetic statement: 'The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies'. He has comprehended the concept of communication through literacy - literally through 'letters' and 'books'. But his application can at the same time be read as a definition of and translation back into the oral mode of literate communication. How else can one understand these Bushmen's letters which are speaking, moving and making the Bushmen's bodies move, but as a concretization of the process of oral communication? The letters which 'speak' refers to the oral communication process, the actual narration by word of mouth, and gesturality is referred to by the fact that 'they make their bodies move'. Here is a description

of an oral performance in the words of //Kabbo. He also insists on the truth value of such a performance and oral communication: 'The presentiment is that which speaks the truth; it is that by means of which the Bushman gets meat, when it has tapped'. Although //Kabbo (whose name means 'dream', and who was a medicine man, a shaman, according to Hewitt, 1986:125) is also referring to the powers of intuition, this passage can be read on a secondary level as a 'local literary theory', a meta-discourse on the function of oral narration in traditional /Xam society.

In contrast with our modern tendency to view oral narratives as 'stories', to the Bushmen they impart true knowledge, necessary for their survival. If the above interpretation is correct, it confirms the 'evolutionary view of hunter-gatherer communication' which Biesele put forward (1993:43).

In '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home' he explains something of the communal nature of storytelling, and how the essence of storytelling for him is tied up with the close-knit society he wishes to return to:

Thou knowest that I sit waiting for the moon to turn back for me, that I may return to my place. That I may listen to all the people's stories, when I visit them; that I may listen to their ( ) stories, that which they tell(...) For, I am here; I do not obtain stories; because I do not visit, so that I might hear ( ) stories which float along; while I feel that the people of another place are here; they do not possess my stories. They do not talk my language; for, they visit their like(...)

The Flat Bushmen go to each other's huts; that they may smoking sit in front of them. ( ) Therefore, they obtain stories at them; because they are used to visit; for smoking's people they are. As regards myself I am waiting that the moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward in the path. For, I verily think that I must only await the moon; that I may tell my Master (lit. chief), that I feel this is the time when I should sit among my fellow men (...)for, I do think of visits; (that) I ought to visit; (that) I ought to talk with my fellow men; for, I work here, together with women; and I do not talk with them; for, they merely send me to work.

I must first sit a little, cooling my arms; that the fatigue may go out of them; because I sit. I do merely listen, watching for a story, which I want to hear; while I sit waiting for it; that it may float into my ear (1911: 301-303).

//Kabbo expresses his estrangement and alienation in the Cape Town environment where he misses his people and their stories. He is surrounded by strangers who talk a different language, and because he is absent from his people, he does not hear their stories. He feels it is his duty to return to them: 'I ought to visit' and 'I ought to talk'. The absence of regular oral communication in story form with those who speak one's language, is alienating //Kabbo from his environment. He is expressing deep longing for the communal and verbal community



he left behind. In a footnote Bleek notes '//Kabbo explains that a story is 'like the wind, it comes from a far-off quarter, and we feel it' (1911:301). This explanation bears a remarkable resemblance to the description of presentiments in the later passage ('resemble letters that take a message or an account of what happens in another place' - 1911:331). The close proximity in meaning between a 'story' (which 'comes from a far-off quarter and we can feel it') and a 'presentiment' ('an account of what happens in another place' is significant, for it suggests something of the function of story-telling in /Xam oral tradition. They carry information about distant happenings, and they inform about far-off places. The central function of the narratives and songs can thus be described both as instinctive and intuitive knowledge (presentiments), rather than as pure entertainment. Most importantly, //Kabbo knows they have this dual function and can articulate this knowledge.

Hewitt stresses that '**the fundamental context of the tales as we have them is as written texts**' (1992:82; my emphasis). In addition there are the inevitable distortions and loss of the precise spirit of the original, through the process of translation from /Xam into rather archaic English (compare the frequent use of 'thee' and 'thou'). What we have in the Bleek & Lloyd records are but an approximation, albeit the closest we can come, to knowledge of the original. The reader must imagine the original which is always deferred into the mediation of the translation-transmission.

The oral material originated in, and largely represents, the pre-colonial period in Southern African history, before the advent of European settlers (from 1652) or the encroachment on their hunting fields by African tribes (from about 500 A.D., that is 1,500 years ago). Through archaeological research the presence of the Bushmen in Southern Africa is dated to 100,000 to 50,000 years ago. The earliest rock art in Namibia has been dated to 27,000 to 25,000 years ago. Fourteen thousand years ago the Bushmen were widely distributed in Southern Africa. As such they represent the oldest part of South African history and cultural heritage. Parkington observed that:

The history of human settlement in southern Africa is as yet only partly understood. In the absence of written records until a few centuries ago most of the (...) story has to be compiled from the archaeological record of behaviour implicit in assemblages of stone artefacts, bones, ceramics and rock paintings (in Skotnes, 1991:12).

He cautions that although archaeology constructs 'a past form of what has survived into the present, using analogies and models from the present', one should avoid the danger of simply

reading the present back into past, or merely 'presenting the past', because the past 'must have been different from the present' (1991:12).

Part of this problem is that all of our knowledge of hunter gatherers and their worlds comes from archaeology. They (the hunter gatherers) enter the written record in the phrases and sentences of others, often people with whom they are in conflict or with whom they share little ideology or world view (1991:13).

Historical overviews also tend to ignore the prior presence of the hunter gatherers, concentrating instead on the 'dominant notion of white and black settlers arriving in southern Africa more or less simultaneously' (1991:13). When historians fleetingly refer to the presence of the Bushmen, it tends to be within a mythical utopian framework, as of some paradise lost, as is clear in Mostert's descriptions in *Frontiers* (1992:27) of 'these delightful people' and 'the Gentle People'. He describes them in lyrical terms as having lived in 'simple cycles, of continual mobility within their territorial limits to hunt or gather, of close-knit harmonious sociability around the hallowed well-being and good fortune of the communal fire - these cycles maintained millennia after millennia' (1992:29).

In contrast to Mostert, Parkington warns against seeing the Bushman as 'a fossilized reflection of an unchanging past, for such people do not exist' (1991:20). Neither should someone like //Kabbo be seen as an aspirant pastoralist encountered by literate observers at a time when his luck and fortunes were down. Rather he and his family were hunter gatherers struggling to maintain their links to land and other people, using a system of values not shared by their competition. The clash of cultural values is embedded in //Kabbo's comments on his arrest, his journey to Cape Town and the urgency of his anticipated return to the land (1991:20).

The narratives Parkington refers to, gathered in *Specimens* under the heading of 'Personal History', are more clearly located in the colonial period, referring to the disintegration of their pre-colonial life-style after the advent of the colonizers. //Kabbo is the main narrator in such emotive tales as '//Kabbo's Capture and Journey to Cape Town' (told in two versions, and thus accentuating the momentous turning point in his life that captivity signified), '//Kabbo's Journey in the Railway Train', and the elegiac '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home'. The twenty eight-page narrative in *Specimens* in which //Kabbo tells his personal history is one of the first South African oral autobiographies (compare also the death cell conversations of Rooizak

and the missionaries, recorded at Lydenburg at 1876 and published recently by Peter Delius), and as such alone deserves critical attention.

It needs to be stressed also that Bleek & Lloyd did not merely record. Bleek's powerful intervention in his narrators' lives (freeing them from prison), his presence as listener (//Kabbo repeatedly addresses him as 'Master') and //Kabbo's consciousness of the project of recording his people's and his own plight in 'books', influenced the nature of the material.

There are narratives which can be identified as situated in and referring to the pre-colonial period, comprising creation myths, tales from everyday occurrences and practices, such as rain-making, the role of sorcerers and hunting practices. They are juxtaposed with the narratives referring to and set in the later colonial period, dealing with the disintegration of the /Xam hunter-gather society. Characteristic of the difference between the two types of narratives is the use of the first person plural 'we', referring to the communal nature of pre-colonial society, in contrast with the use of the first person singular, 'I', which //Kabbo reverts to in the telling of his personal experiences during the colonial period. Watson takes the title of his 'versions from the /Xam', *Return of the Moon*, from one of the last group of narratives, '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home':

I am waiting that the moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward in the path (...)that I must only await the moon; that I may tell my Master (lit. chief), that I feel this is the time when I should sit among my fellow men... (1911:303).

Reconstructing the /Xam's oral tradition necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, taking into account anthropological, historical, economic and linguistic studies, as well as those on Bushmen rock art. Parkington clarifies succinctly the relationship between rock art and the collected oral tradition:

the repeated depiction of eland on the cave wall recalls the repeated phrases of a story. The almost ubiquitous use of metaphor permeates both the written and the painted or engraved documents. The fragile, even permeable distinction between people and animals appears in each context. The stories, poems and songs do not, however interpret the paintings, nor do the engravings illustrate stories. Rather they stand as a body of work in which the components reflect on and off one another (1991:20).

Lewis-Williams's *Images of Power* illustrates that shamanism and the centrality of the trance-dance in the shaman's activity was one of the typical aspects of Bushman life. Lewis-Williams claims that the experiences of the shaman-in-trance are the key to understanding their rock art. Only further research will test this hypothesis. It is, however, clear from

surveying the subject matter of the /Xam narratives that the sorcerer, rain-maker or medicine-men did indeed play a central role in their society. Hewitt describes the stability of the oral tradition, as evidenced by the comparison of two or more narratives, told by different narrators, but dealing with the same plot structure. He has also drawn up clear characteristics of the style of the different narrators, based on the narratives in Bleek & Lloyd. At the beginning of each narrative Bleek & Lloyd clearly identified the narrator's name - something regrettably absent in Watson's versions. The lack of identification of the specific narrator speaking in Watson's texts, creates the impression that the texts form a homogenous whole, with anonymous sources. It also foregrounds his name, even if this may be unintentional. Hiding the names at the back of the collection, before the footnotes, is not very helpful. He is literally colonizing the translated /Xam texts.

Typical of /Xam language and speech, according to Hewitt, is 'the marked infrequency of adjectives, and the tendency to repeat sentences and phrases several times with minor modifications in wording' (1986:237). When Watson extensively removes repetitions, he is damaging the character of the original.

A comparison of the original song of 'The Broken String' (- told by Dia!kwain (Bleek & Lloyd, 1911:237) with Watson's version (1991:59), illustrates that the poet has taken some liberties with this text which change the meaning considerably. He has imported into his version new concepts - the words 'earth' (in stanza one and two), 'country' and 'dead' (in stanza three) and the phrase 'this earth my place' (in stanza four).

In part VIII of 'Customs and Beliefs' (1937) the context of 'The Broken String' is given in a narrative told by Dia!kwain. The song was sung by the sorcerer, !nuin-/kuiten, while dying of a gun shot by a Boer on commando. The Boer had shot him in revenge for killing the Boer's ox while in the form of a lion. This sorcerer had wanted to teach Dia!kwain's father, Xaa-tin, the secrets of his magical powers, i.e. how his magical 'strings' worked. But after the death of the magician the 'string' was broken and the 'ringing sound in the sky' was no longer heard. 'Thinking Strings' are equated by Patricia Vinnicombe in *People of the Eland* (1976) with all forms of 'conscious and subconscious perception', the channels of invisible power (1976:352) or 'gi', as possessed in heightened form by the shamans or medicine-men.

The /Xam song, 'The Broken String', thus refers in the first instance to the dying art of the shaman. It is also true that the song comes from a narrative set in colonial times (cf. the

'commando' and the Boer with his gun who avenges the killing of his ox). Therefore Watson's interpretation and the imported concepts of 'this earth' and 'the country' lying 'dead before me' are justified. These new imports do not betray the tone of lament present in the original song, but they make explicit what was implicit in the original. 'The Broken String' is a significant and eloquent text in its own right.

The same can be said for the changes Watson brings about in his almost literal rendering of Dia!kwain's remarks about presentiments (in part VII: Sorcerors: 31;). Dia!kwain said that 'a presentiment is a thing which we feel'. Watson changes this to 'a thing which we fear'. There is a vast difference between the two concepts. The translated text is subtler, builds up from things we infer the /Xam 'feel' to the knowledge through presentiments of 'danger'. Watson's version takes away the progression, and gradual building up which was part of the /Xam text.

Jan Vansina pointed to the importance of oral traditions 'where there is no writing or almost none' in reconstructing the past and recovering historical evidence (1985:199). We need to set aside our neo-romantic obsession with the so-called impurity of the Bleek & Lloyd collection because these texts have been preserved in a fixated form in the written circuit. Oral and pure, or transcribed and therefore impure in form, these texts do belong to the corpus of what we understand by oral tradition (Van Gorp, 1986:288), and we need to recover them as part of our South African literary history. Bleek & Lloyd's *Specimens* and Von Wielligh's *Boesmanstories* (four volumes, 1919-1921) are valuable and as yet little explored collections of South African narratives and poems which may help us to greater understanding of our own prehistory.

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