
Images and the archival trace: tracking colonial ethnographic photography at the NLSA

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The Bleek-Lloyd archive has become a ‘hot’ item in the post-apartheid and postcolonial moment. Why is this so? Is it because it offers a direct avenue into the minds of our (South African) ‘first people’; a redemptive journey into a past that has been fetishised in the West for its presumed rural simplicity, spiritual symbolism and intellectual complexity?

The proliferating books, productions, even tourist destinations, and so on, based on ‘the Bushmen’ are fair evidence of this. The Bleek-Lloyd project seems a made-to-order encounter between coloniser and colonised, and one in which the coloniser for once need not be ashamed of his contribution. As represented in academic and other publications, the record of the Bleek-Lloyd and /Xam encounter plays neatly into the industrialised world’s adoration of ‘first nation’ cachet, its need to believe in the prior existence of timeless and authentic pasts.

What has been the part of photography in contributing to contemporary fascination with images associated with the Bleek-Lloyd (and related) archives? How are colonial ethnological photo-images made in southern Africa during the closing years of the 19th century (in the course of the production of scientific knowledge around ‘race’ and ‘ethnology’) being re-presented in service of contemporary narratives of the post-apartheid nation? Has the archive been implicated in the construction of these knowledges?

This project of categorising and classifying images into an inventory has been my attempt to answer the questions above. For me, personally, it is part of a journey to discover what materially lies at the heart of the world’s fascination with Bleek-Lloyd and the /Xam archive. The solidity of the archive, with its distinctly Western embeddedness in structures such as classifications and chronologies, is implicated in a contemporary construction of the Bleek-Lloyd archive as a transformational body of knowledge with roots in an ancient, timeless past, and consequently, redemptive abilities for the present. It is this, I will argue, which sidelines a wider recognition of the Bleek-Lloyd archive’s role in servicing notions of racism and hierarchies of human development that were so germane to the colonial project. I base this on observations of the kinds of publications emerging in contemporary public discourse, which use as their base, particular readings of the Bleek-Lloyd notebooks and related archival material, including photography.¹

While images from the archive are reprinted in all sorts of public and published contexts, the images in these contexts generally derive their meanings from the accompanying text, and are unlikely to be read ontologically or heuristically in and of themselves. Most often, images are reproduced as head-and-shoulders illustrations to accompany thumbnail biographies of one or other /Xam informant. The motivation and details related to the making of the image in 1871 are seldom referred to. Thus, Lewis-Williams uses anthropometric images of //Kabbo, /A!kunta, and /Han=kasso, as illustrations in a publication that provides a generalised ethnographic view of the

/Xam past, in which Bleek-Lloyd transcriptions are used as a basis for the interpretation of rock art.²

In a similar vein, Anjie Krog uses the same (or similar, in the case of /Han=kasso) images alongside short biographies of the Bleek-Lloyd informants, to illustrate her poetic adaptations of transcriptions from the archive.³ As with her deployment of the images, Krog uses drawings made by the !Kung boys and /Han=kass'o in a similarly de-contextualised way. Both modes of illustration used in Krog's book reflect archival practice in which illustrations and photographic images tend to be separated from text and manuscript and stored separately.⁴ Szalay reproduces images of the !Kung boys /Uma and Da, but without the anthropometric context provided by the measuring stick, which has been left out.⁵

Bank, however, uses body marks visible in otherwise de-humanising anthropometric photography as an avenue into the photographic subject's particular (pre-colonial) past.⁶ Thus, the image provides us with a way of re-humanising (through a particularising and detailing of lived experience) the photographic subject, in a way that the mostly generalised ethnographic pasts associated with texts, do not. This focus on both image and text has the effect of providing multiple points of view to emerge in the narrative, so that events are interpreted not only from the point of view of those directing the Breakwater photographic project, but also from that of the photographic subjects.

My project, involving constructing an inventory and detailed bibliography to accompany each image (where possible), is an attempt to make this kind of 'situated reading' of the image available to library users – as well as to archivists. It is also aimed at facilitating the use of photography as a primary resource or research tool which provides a nuanced, contingent avenue into the past. Edwards makes a case for photographs having a special relation to the past in that they relate both to the 'little' narratives as well as the 'grand' narratives of history, and thus Edwards frames photographs as 'tools to think with' in as much as they provide empirical, evidential inscription.⁷ She argues that photographs embody/materialise a complex relation within museums and archives, which she sees not only as sites of disciplinary regulation, but also as places with potential, which could be open to new historical frames of reference.⁸ Her strategy is to read the image as performative, as this allows the tensions, fractures and complexities contained, yet uncontainable, in the frame, to be engaged with.⁹ Edwards also examines in detail the photographic project involving Breakwater Prisoners, as well as other projects undertaken at the same time in other colonial centres.¹⁰

I undertake this research into these particular collections of colonial ethnographic photography at a particular moment in their trajectories as images in the colonial/postcolonial structures in which they are visually embedded. In the post-apartheid context, much intellectual work is being done around reading images such as these in ways that attempt to record resistance, in ways which recognise a need to reconstitute the photographic subjects and return agency to them.

My objective is to probe the many layers of meaning that have accrued to the images over the years. On one hand, this involves a study of the ways in which the images have circulated within the archive itself, a process involving layers of naming, delineating, and classification in the interests, initially, of an emerging racial science and, now, of public accessibility. On the other, it

involves engaging with the images as social objects with specific and particular social trajectories or ‘life’ histories that contribute to their meanings.

The photography collections I have inventoried have been identified as those images ‘most heavily used’ by researchers and members of the public, and therefore those images most at risk of damage or loss.¹¹ The library now has a definitive list of its acquisitions in which images are described in terms of their dimensions, condition (state of repair) and subject matter. The database is cross-referenced to texts/academic papers written about particular images or collections, and to duplicated (or similar) images in other collections/archives. Now, librarians can exercise better control over when and how the images are accessed, and provide researchers who wish to reproduce images for publication with materials to assist in the interpretation of the images.

On my side, I hope that these images, annotated with as complete a context (of photographic occasion as well as provenance) as possible, can now be interpreted and re-presented in as contingent a manner as possible. By providing this inventory to the NLSA, my aim has been to suggest ways in which to try to cohere, to an extent, the uncontainability of images, by historicising each photographic occasion as far as possible, or to suggest avenues through which this can be done. However, I cannot in the end control the ontology of the image as heuristic device, and its affective power in the world. It seems fitting, in light of this, that many fields are likely to remain blank/empty (because so little is known about the photographic subjects under discussion) in the inventory that I produce.

The following image collections are inventoried in the accompanying database:

- The Grey ‘ethnological’ album (Album 167) comprising the major part of my archive is now made up of six ‘units’ of original photographs arranged according to donor and source.¹² The ‘units’ were made up in June 1996 by SAL librarians who removed the original photographs from the original album (Photographs: Grey Library) and rearranged them into protective slipcovers in six individual albums entitled according to donor/source.¹³ In terms of content and subject matter, the albums contain group and individual portraits taken by different photographers at various locations throughout southern Africa during the closing decades of the 19th Century. The images were donated/presented to the Grey Library by various donors/photographers. They comprise *carte de visite* and snapshot format. Some contain original inscriptions that have been subsequently written over. The arrangement of the original album is attributed by the SAL librarians either to Lucy Lloyd or Wilhelm Bleek.¹⁴
- San Portraits Album 165 is a group of five original *carte de visite* photographs that came into the NLSA collection in September 1991 when they were donated by Auckland City Libraries, New Zealand.¹⁵ The first page of the album summarises its contents as “San portraits annotated by WHI Bleek”. Each of the images is stamped on the reverse with the imprint “Free Public Library, Auckland, Sir Geo. Grey’s Collection”. The *carte de visite* had originally been part of the library’s picture collection.¹⁶ The album comprises *carte de visite* images of two young boys. Following text inscribed on the back of two of the four original *carte de visite* in the album, SAL archivists have described the photographs as “portraits of two San youths from Damaraland”, and dated the images from about 1870 to about 1880. The inscriptions are said to be in the handwriting of WHI Bleek.¹⁷ The final image in the

collection is a photocopy of a full-length photograph of two children, carrying an annotation at the top of the photocopy: "Original: SA Museum".¹⁸

- Album 189 is titled San Portraits (W. Hermann) and is described as "ethnological portraits by W. Herman".¹⁹ This is an album made up by SAL archivists. It contains original 'cabinet' portraits mostly by the German-born photographer Hermann, which are described as being of "westernised San men and boys, many posed next to measuring stick".²⁰ Of the 18 images in the album, (17 original and one photocopy of "Mr Bleek's friend", original said to be at SA Museum), two are inscribed on the reverse with the notations "*Photographed in 1877 at Cape Town*" (all handwritten), and "W. Hermann. *Photographed at Cape Town in 1877*" (date handwritten, with photographer's name and city printed). These inscriptions note the names of each photographic subject (both in English, and the second notation includes a genealogy of the photographic subject's parentage). A third portrait at the end of the album is inscribed on the front with the name "Makua", while its reverse side bears the stamped imprint of the photographer Hermann.
- Album 188 contains images photographed by Dorothea Bleek in the Prieska and Kenhart districts in 1910 and 1911. Most of the images appeared in *Bantu Studies* 10 (1936). The photographic subjects became part of the casting project which was undertaken at the same time by the South African Museum. The lifecast figures thus obtained were on show in the South African Museum's 'ethno-wing' until the early 2000s.

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¹ See my paper "Cutting and Pasting: Text, context, scholarship and the Bleek-Lloyd notebooks, paper submitted for History of Social Anthropology honours/masters course, UWC, in which I analyse treatment of the Bleek-Lloyd transcripts in publications, both academic and popular, dating from the mid 1980s to 2000. My finding is that texts are influenced by the thinking of their times, but that most texts attempt to insert the transcripts into a transformational project of saving links to our ancestral past.

² Lewis-Williams, J.D. (ed). 2000. *Stories that Float from Afar: Ancestral Folklore of the San of Southern Africa*. David Philip, Cape Town. //Kabbo's image is on p2, /A!kunta's on p15, and /Han+kass'o's on p25. Romanticised images of Dia!kwain and !Kweiten-ta-//ken, in which both are dressed for the camera, appear on p20. As I page through the Lewis-Williams book in the course of my research, I am suddenly struck by the juxtaposition of clothed versus unclothed bodies, especially on p25, where /Han=kasso faces Lucy Lloyd dressed in severe buttoned-up Victorian collar.

³ Krog, Antjie. 2004. *The stars say "tsau": /Xam poetry of Dia!kwain, Kweiten-ta-//ken, /A!kunta, /Han=kass'o and //Kabbo*. Kwela Books, Cape Town. See pages 12, 20, 28, 30, 38.

⁴ The NLSA in Cape Town has recently completed a project in which all the !Kung drawings in the Bleek collection have been individually mounted and catalogued separately from the notebooks. This has been done for various reasons including ease of accessibility, conservation and insurance considerations. (Personal communication, Special Collections Librarian, Sept 2004.). Photographic images from the collection are stored in albums in a special shelving area (more or less open to the public). These albums have undergone re-arrangement at various times.

⁵ Szalay, Miklos (ed). 2002. *The Moon as Shoe: Drawings of the San*. Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich: 55-57.

⁶ Bank, Andrew. 2004. "Photographs and body marks: Wilhelm Bleek's Breakwater Project, Nov 1870-Dec 1871". Paper delivered to the South African and Contemporary History Seminar, UWC, 19 October 2004.

⁷ Edwards, Elizabeth. 2001. *Raw Histories – Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Berg, Oxford.

⁸ Edwards, Elizabeth. 2001. *Raw Histories – Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Berg, Oxford: 4.

⁹ Edwards, Elizabeth. 2001. *Raw Histories – Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Berg, Oxford: 16-22.

¹⁰ Edwards, Elizabeth. 2001. *Raw Histories – Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Berg, Oxford: 131-155.

¹¹ Personal communication, Special Collections librarian Melanie Geustyn. At the moment, researchers and members of the public have direct, hands-on access to albums containing the original prints. Ultimately, it is hoped that the images will be scanned into the database so that they are no longer at risk through direct access. This, however, is beyond the scope of the present project.

¹² See first slipcover, Album 167: Ethnological Album: Bleek. National Library of South Africa, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹³ See first slipcover, Album 167: Ethnological Album: Bleek:. National Library of South Africa, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁴ See first slipcover, Album 167: Ethnological Album: Bleek:. National Library of South Africa, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁵ Marc Printout dated 6 Jan 1993, inside title slipcover, Album 165: San Portraits Album, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁶ Marc Printout dated 6 Jan 1993, inside title slipcover, Album 165: San Portraits Album, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁷ Marc Printout dated 6 Jan 1993, inside title slipcover, Album 165: San Portraits Album, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁸ Final slipcover, Album 165: San Portraits Album, Special Collections photograph shelves.

¹⁹ Title slipcover, Album 189: San Portraits (W. Hermann), Special Collections photograph shelves.

²⁰ Marc Printout dated 11 Jan 1995, inside title slipcover, Album 189: San Portraits (W. Hermann), Special Collections photograph shelves.