

PART I

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ORATURES, ORAL HISTORIES,
ORIGINS

South Africa's indigenous orature is marked, on one hand, by its longevity, since it includes the oral culture of hunter-gatherer societies now known collectively as the San; on the other hand it is marked by its modernity, because oral performance in South Africa is continually being reinvented in contemporary, media-saturated environments. This range is fully represented in the research collected in Part I, as is the linguistic and generic variety of the oral cultures of the region.

These chapters bear out Liz Gunner's observation about recent research in African orature in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*:

the older model of freestanding oral genres, manifested in the often very fine collections of single or relatively few genres of 'oral literature' from a particular African society such as those published by the pathbreaking Oxford Library of African Literature series in the late 1960s and the 1970s . . . has been superseded by theories of orality that embrace a far more interactive and interdependent sense of cultural practices and 'text'.

(F. Abiola Irele and S. Gikandi, eds., Cambridge University Press,
2004, p. 11)

The research collected here demonstrates this trend, with each chapter paying particular attention to the ways in which prevailing social, cultural, economic and political conditions have shaped the genres under discussion. Whilst the chapters are organised on a linguistic basis in an effort to cover all the major

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indigenous languages of the region, the authors have been concerned to move away from notions of oral culture as tied to fictions of stable ethnic identities, or to an understanding of oral genres as being passed down from one generation to the next in a state relatively untouched by historical circumstance.

Our general introduction refers to the intensity and violence of the region's encounters with colonialism. The effects of this history on South Africa's oral cultures are marked, but two points need to be made clear. Firstly, instead of an implication that oral expression and performance have been rendered obsolete by aggressive modernisation, the opposite is in fact the case: oral cultures have proved to be remarkably adaptive, with their practitioners reinventing traditional genres and their forms of transmission in order to negotiate the rapid and far-reaching social changes taking place around them. Secondly, the region provides telling illustrations of the epistemic and aesthetic complexities involved in the recording, translation and dissemination of oral discourse through print and other media. South Africa's oral and print-based cultures interact in countless ways – often in the work of a single practitioner – and the history of cultural translation, beginning with nineteenth-century philology and folklore studies and continuing down to post-apartheid poetry's cross-cultural explorations is foregrounded in the research that follows.

The most striking example of colonial science's encounters with indigenous orality is undoubtedly the collection discussed by Hedley Twidle in Chapter 1, involving the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek and, in particular, his English sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd. Between 1870 and 1884, in conversation with convicts on parole from the Breakwater prison at the Cape Town docks, they produced over 150 notebooks of phonetic transcriptions with English translations of |Xam and !Kung language and folklore, in what is now regarded as one of the richest archives of its kind in the world. (Much of it has been digitised and is available at <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/index.html>) The appeal, but also the difficulty of the collection lies in the fact that although it is a product of a complex set of cultural forces, readers have assumed that it offers direct access to the language and culture of societies which had been in existence for thousands of years before settler encroachment and then genocide all but destroyed them. The loss of the culture itself (and with it, the disappearance of a supposedly premodern subject) has fuelled further waves of encroachment, as philology, ethnography, travel and fictional narratives, and finally contemporary poetry, have successively reinvented it on their own terms. The whole history, from the recording of San speech to its afterlives in South African literature, comprises a complex and moving cultural legacy.

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Chapters 2 to 5 discuss oral cultures in contemporary indigenous African languages. It has proved to be impossible to give equal weight to the oratures of all these languages because research amongst them is unevenly distributed. Historically, the most intensively researched of the indigenous oral cultures (and this pattern is generally true of written literature) are those in the Nguni languages, isiXhosa and isiZulu, the former spoken predominantly in the Eastern Cape (though increasingly also in the Western Cape and Cape Town) and the latter in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng (including Johannesburg). Sesotho orature is reasonably well served in the scholarship, but the oral expression of the languages spoken in the provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga, isiNdebele, Xitsonga, Tshivenda and siSwati, have been relatively under-researched and deserve further attention. Interestingly, this was recognised by Es'kia Mphahlele on his return from exile in 1977 when he embarked on a project to record and translate oral poetry in Tshivenda; however, the volume failed to appear in print (N. C. Manganyi and D. Attwell, eds. *Bury me at the Marketplace*, Witwatersrand University Press, pp. 344, 371, 400, 404, 443). Nevertheless, in Chapter 5, Manie Groenewald and Mokgale Makgopa seek to fill the gaps in their absorbing and wide-ranging account of the oratures in these languages, although the focus of their work is on poetry and performance in isiNdebele.

Despite the limitations on the linguistic range of existing research, the present collection goes a long way towards documenting the state of existing scholarship (which in the case of isiZulu begins as far back as the 1830s) and exploring how the country's indigenous oral cultures have developed under various historical pressures in the course of the past two centuries. In Chapter 2, Russell H. Kaschula discusses changes that have taken place in the Xhosa tradition of praise poetry known as *izibongo*. The genre became internationally visible through the performance of Zolani Mkiva at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela in 1994, but it has been a central taproot in Xhosa oral performance for centuries. In Xhosa literature, the oeuvres of early twentieth-century figures like Nontsisi Mgqwetho and S. E. K. Mqhayi, who performed as *iimbongi* while also publishing in the mission and commercial press, have recently been published and continue to fuel research. Kaschula uses the particular example of Bongani Sitole to explore the technical inventiveness of the contemporary *imbongi*, and he illuminates the ways in which the poet's craft is influenced by changing power bases and the forms of patronage associated with them, with a shift over time from praises of royalty to the concerns of ordinary citizens.

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This pattern, of diffusion and democratisation, is consistent across all the languages. In his discussion of Sesotho orature in Chapter 3, Nhlanhla Maake discusses a similar trajectory, with traditional songs and royal praises being adapted and transformed in *difela*, the songs of Basotho migrant workers travelling between Lesotho and South Africa. So pervasive a feature of Sotho culture have the *difela* become that Maake is able to show how they have been taken up in self-referential ways, including self-parody. In Chapter 4, Mbongiseni Buthelezi ranges widely across a number of genres in isiZulu, while also focusing on the development of praising – the *izithakazelo*, or kinship group praises, and the *izibongo* or praises of individuals. Buthelezi’s revealing account of how ‘new meanings have been created for old forms and new forms have mutated out of older ones’ follows the fortunes of traditional performances into the church, the mine hostel, the labour union rally and the political meeting. Particularly significant is the dynamic capacity of the *izibongo* ‘to unleash social energy in new directions’ and to facilitate new forms of public participation in the political process.

I

‘The Bushmen’s Letters’: |Xam
narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd
Collection and their afterlives

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In the special collections of the University of Cape Town library are over 150 notebooks filled with columns of Victorian handwriting: phonetic notations of the languages once spoken by southern Africa’s |Xam and !Kung peoples with English translations alongside that run to some 13,000 pages. The record of a unique instance of cross-cultural interaction within the history of the Cape Colony, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection is widely considered to be one of the world’s richest ethnographic archives, and the most important textual record of indigenous oral expression on the subcontinent. Indicative of the symbolic charge this particular culture has come to assume in contemporary South Africa, the national coat of arms unveiled by President Thabo Mbeki on 27 April 2000 carries as its motto a sentence written in |Xam, preserving the nineteenth-century orthography of the notebooks to record its various clicks. *!ke e:|xarra ||ke* is officially translated as ‘Unity in Diversity’; glossed more carefully from a language no longer spoken by any living South African, it can be rendered as ‘people who are different come together’.¹

The disparate assemblage of texts, correspondence, photographs, water-colour sketches and other material traces that make up the collection resulted from the convergence of two very different groupings of people in late nineteenth-century Cape Town. One was the unorthodox household of the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek, his English wife, and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd; the other was a succession of individuals from four extended families of |Xam-ka !ei, a people descended from one branch of the indigenous

The support of the NRF Research Initiative in Archive and Public Culture at the University of Cape Town, and the suggestions of its participants, are gratefully acknowledged.

¹ In the orthography adopted by Bleek, ! is the cerebral click now rendered (in written isiXhosa, for example) as *q* (‘iqhira’); | is the dental click written as *c* (‘nceda’); || is the lateral click written as *x* (‘amaXhosa’). Bleek gives a description of these in his *Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* (1862), pp. 12–13.

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inhabitants of southern Africa who had no collective name for themselves, but were known to the Dutch as *Bosjemans*, to the English as Bushmen, and to the cattle-owning Khoikhoi as Sonqua, Soaqua or San.² Like many others drawn into the violence of the colony's northern frontier, several |Xam men had been displaced from their homes and sentenced to hard labour in Cape Town's Breakwater Prison. Following a request from Bleek to the governor Sir Philip Wodehouse, certain individuals were transferred to the genteel suburb of Mowbray between 1870 and 1884. Here they were received first as convicts on parole, servants and 'native informants' for Bleek's abstruse philological enquiries, yet increasingly as valued teachers, storytellers, artists and (in Lloyd's phrase) 'givers of native literature' (Bleek and Lloyd, *Bushman Folklore*, p. x).

Transcribed, translated and edited with uncommon diligence and foresight by Bleek and Lloyd, the words of individuals like |A!kúnta (Klaas Stoffel), Diä!kwain (David Hoesar), |Han≠kass'o (Klein Jantje), ||Kabbo (Oud Jantje Tooren) and Kweiten-ta-||ken (Griet) reach us now as dense, digressive and often confusing fragments of text. 'The Mantis assumes the form of a Harte-beest', 'The Moon is not to be looked at when Game is shot', 'A Woman of the Early Race and the Rain Bull', '||Kabbo's Capture and Journey to Cape Town' – the titles given to the dictations are grouped under headings like 'Mythology, Fables, Legends and Poetry', 'Customs and Superstitions' and 'Personal History' in Bleek and Lloyd's reports to the Cape parliament of the 1870s and 1880s. Yet the narrators themselves seem to have made little distinction between the various *kukummi* they related in the drawing rooms and on the verandas of colonial Mowbray: it was a word which could refer to lively creation narratives as well as accounts of daily life in the northern Cape thirstrand, and which seemed to encompass 'anything told'. Occasionally the *kukummi* depart from the tales of the mantis |Kaggen, of rain animals, stars and hunting methods to record the brutal intrusion of settlers and pastoralists in an area which, according to recent genetic and archaeological evidence, had

2 Although both terms are in common use today, neither 'Bushmen' nor 'San' are words that can be employed without reservations. As well as its obvious sexist limitations, the former carries with it the racist overtones of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage, but has in recent decades been to some degree reclaimed, acquiring meanings associated with resistance and self-determination. Although initially used by the Khoikhoi in a pejorative sense for those peoples who 'gathered wild food' and did not possess cattle, 'San' (popularised by Isaac Schapera through his 1930 magnum opus, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*) is often preferred in that it is relatively free of colonial connotations. For a sense of the long and complex debate on terminology with regard to the Khoi-San (Khoi, Ju and !Ui-Taa) language families in southern Africa, see Gordon, *The Bushman Myth*, and the website of the South African San Institute (SASI), www.sanculture.org.za/body.htm, which states: 'Today San people prefer to be identified as San or by their ethnic community names' (accessed 1 October 2009).

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been inhabited by anatomically ‘modern’ humans for around 100,000 years when herder groups, pastoralists and *trekboers* arrived from the north and south.

The very names of the five principal narrators listed above embody a history of forced acculturation, genocidal violence and language death that resulted from colonial settlement meeting with a hunter-gatherer economy in the arid regions south of the Orange River. In 1863 the magistrate of Namaqualand, Louis Anthing, wrote of ‘a wholesale system of extermination’ being carried out against the Cape San by armed, mounted settler bands known as commandos (Report, p. 5). In 1910, while her aunt prepared selections of the |Xam and !Kung material for publication in *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911), Bleek’s daughter Dorothea visited the Kenhardt and Prieska districts where the narrators had once lived. Writing in 1929, she recalled that ‘Fifty years ago every adult Bushman knew all his people’s lore. A tale begun by a person from one place could be finished by someone from another place at a later date’; yet at the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘not one of them knew a single story . . . the folklore was dead, killed by a life of service among strangers and the breaking up of families’ (*Bushman Folklore*, p. 311).

!Khwe||na s’o !kwe: from ‘First Peoples’ to the
‘Early Race’

For almost a century these ‘Bushman researches’ received little scholarly attention from anyone outside of the Bleek family,³ but in recent decades steadily more of the archive’s narrative and visual material has been brought into the public domain by visual artists, curators, writers, anthologists and, most recently, digital scanning.⁴ Read in dialogue with contemporary fieldwork amongst Ju|’hoansi and Nharo communities in Namibia and Botswana, the nineteenth-century records have become a fragmentary, speculative yet vitally important means of reconstructing a wider indigenous expressive culture which once existed throughout the subcontinent.⁵ Yet as in so many contexts involving the recovery and representation of autochthonous or precolonial

3 The series of articles on ‘Customs and Beliefs of the |Xam Bushmen’ by Dorothea Bleek, which appeared in *Bantus Studies* in the 1930s, are collected in Hollman, *Customs and Beliefs*.

4 A large part of the archive, including all the |Xam and !Kung notebooks, was scanned and placed online by Pippa Skotnes between 2005 and 2007. See ‘The Digital Bleek and Lloyd’, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/> (accessed March 2010).

5 Major works here include Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland*; Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing*; Hewitt, *Structure, Meaning and Ritual*; Guenther, *Bushman Folktales*. For a comprehensive overview of the ways in which these different explicators approach the |Xam texts, see Wessels, *Bushman Letters*.

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identities, the process has been a contested and controversial one. Curators have been accused of appropriation and poets of plagiarism (Skotnes, 'Museum Display'; Watson, 'Annals of Plagiarism'); historians revealing Bleek's proximity to social Darwinism and his theories of racial difference have reacted against idealised visions of cultural exchange in the garden village of Mowbray (Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World*; Dubow, *Scientific Racism*; Moran, *Representing Bushmen*; Wessels, *Bushman Letters*).

'The Lost World of the Kalahari', 'The Harmless People', 'The Little People' – such well-worn phrases from the twentieth century reveal a recurring tendency to sentimentalise the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa as prehistoric, isolated hunter-gatherers in a way which obscures the complex cultural transactions of the frontier and masks a fierce resistance to colonial encroachment (Penn, 'Fated to Perish'). The 'Bushman', J. M. Coetzee remarked, is a literary figure 'whose romance has lain precisely in his belonging to a vanishing race' (*White Writing*, p. 177). As a result, when portrayed as a quaint, childlike presence, this personage somehow removed from the ambit of human history could safely be seen as 'the truest native of South Africa' by colonial writing from the travelogues of William Burchell and Thomas Pringle to the international bestsellers of Laurens van der Post. Perhaps even the commemoration of the |Xam-ka !ei on the coat of arms – the symbolic reinstatement of this and similar 'First Peoples' as part of the post-apartheid national project – risks ignoring a legacy of rural poverty and land disputes still all too evident in Namibia, Botswana and the resettlement camps of contemporary South Africa (Gordon, *Bushman Myth*; Robbins, *On the Bridge of Goodbye*).

Yet the painful autobiographical testimony contained in this archive and the particular circumstances of its creation mean that it can hardly be considered as a nostalgic access to a premodern existence or, as Bleek put it in his second *Report* of 1875, as 'pictures of the native mind in its national originality' (p. 2). Instead, it is most valuably approached as a language event of great complexity, difficulty, beauty and unexpectedness.⁶ As a collaborative enterprise of a depth, detail and material richness which has been able to support a wide variety of cultural afterlives, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection is best explored not as an ethnographic document evoking a vanished, mythic past, but rather as a body of work continually expanding to include adaptations, translations

⁶ See Barnard for an account of how a phrase used for the national motto, *!ke e:|xarra* ('people who are different'), appears coincidentally and cryptically in one of the kukummi related by |Han=kass'o in 1878, where it is translated as 'strangers' ('Multiple Origins', pp. 243–50).

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and literary recastings: diverse strands of writing and rewriting which do not so much explicate from a distance as become part of the archive itself.

In a context where the colonial register of occupation or the transplanted European forms of the nineteenth century hardly seem adequate points of departure given the age and extent of the earliest expressive cultures in the region, the complex interplay between the oral and the written which one finds in |Xam texts has led to their being explored as both a site of origin for, and a persistent presence in, South African literary history (Brown, *Voicing*, pp. 33–74; Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, pp. 21–37; van Vuuren, ‘Orality in the Margins’, pp. 129–35). They emerge as a fitting prologue to an irrevocably divided national literature, yet one in which, as Gray remarks, there emerges the recurring motif of writer cast in the role of transcriber, shaper and ‘amanuensis of the spoken word’: ‘the shift from the spoken to the written persists as our major event’ (*Southern African Stories*, p. 10).

As a result, this entry into the |Xam records attempts to balance the possible antiquity which they gesture towards against the specific, context-bound details of their transcription, and to suggest both the similarities and discontinuities between these narratives and the mythologies of those Khoi-San cultures, which have gone largely unrecorded. The unbridgeable historical distance between a modern reader and an individual like ||Kabbo (‘Dream’) is set against his own insistence that *kukummi* – news, stories, customs, gossip – owed their existence to being told and retold. He was a narrator who, Lloyd recalled, ‘much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books’ yet also voiced his longing to return to a part of the country where a story is ‘like the wind, it comes from a far-off quarter, and we feel it’ (*Bushman Folklore*, pp. x, 301). One of the most famous fragments in the collection, ‘||Kabbo’s Intended Return Home’, hauntingly evokes the universality of the impulse to narrate, setting its speaker’s confinement in a colonial household against the fluidity of spoken tales – their tendency to ‘float’ between people and places – all of it rendered in the deliberately archaic English of Bleek and Lloyd’s translation:

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 . . . Then I shall get hold of a story from them, because they (the stories) float out from a distance; while the sun feels () a little warm; while I feel that I must altogether visit, that I may be talking with them, my fellow men.

(*Bushman Folklore*, p. 301)

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Rock, art, writing

‘Africa is everywhere inscribed’, writes Alain Ricard, remarking that ‘one needs a stubborn and narrow-minded commitment to alphabetic writing to deny that the continent has left graphic marks of its history everywhere’ (‘Africa and Writing’, p. 153). From the engraved pavements of the Orange River and pecked dolerite boulders of the northern Cape to the processions of ochre figures in the Cederberg and the shaded polychromatic elands of the Drakensberg, the rock art of South Africa bears out the truth of this observation. Drawing attention to its variation and extent, Brown describes some panels as possessing a ‘script’ of extraordinary beauty and complexity, one that ‘uses an array of symbols, signs, colours, shapes and images in making its meaning, and which demands intelligent “reading”’ (*To Speak of this Land*, pp. 21–2). So too, in a way that is suggestive of where a study of southern African ‘writing’ might properly begin, rock art researchers have explained their debt to the Bleek and Lloyd Collection not as a simple means of decoding the paintings, but as a source of apprehending the deep metaphoric structures of rain-making, trance and shamanic potency which run through the narratives and across the rock surfaces of what has been called the longest continuous artistic tradition in human history (Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing* and *The Mind in the Cave*).

Rock art in southern Namibia has been dated at over 27,000 years before the present, yet panels throughout the South African escarpment showing European ships, then wagons and soldiers could only have been painted in the last decades of the colonial era (Deacon and Deacon, *Human Beginnings*, p. 165). This immense time depth of cultural production remains a challenge in any attempt to consider what an ‘indigenous oral tradition’ might be, particularly when an archaeological label like ‘late Stone Age people’ seems inadequate for societies that worked in ochre, haematite, ostrich shells, animal skins and even copper. Historical and ethnographic accounts of the Khoi-San describe a social organisation based on small mobile bands in which an absence of stratification and an abundance of ‘leisure time’ afforded by the pattern of hunting, gathering or transhumance pastoralism allowed for the development of the highly verbal culture evoked by ||Kabbo, a culture which placed great value on ‘spokenness’ and the telling of stories. Without recourse to an idea of primordial hunters or herders, one can suggest that many of the *kukummi* emerge from and embody a distinctive cultural response to life in the arid and challenging environment of the southern African interior.

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The Bleek and Lloyd notebooks contain considerable amounts of zoological and botanical information, from the sketches of edible plants and animal spoor provided by the !Kung boys !Nanni and Tamme, to descriptions relating to the ritualistic sharing of vital resources like meat, water and *veldkos* (wild food). Yet quite apart from this, even in the most convoluted and (to a contemporary reader) most surreal narratives of the therianthropic (part-human, part-animal) beings of the 'Early Race', one can discern an oblique meditation on social interaction. The lawless, unmannerly doings of the *!Khwe||na s' o !kwe* – the 'First at Sitting People' – provide a medium through which to explore the importance of kinship bonds, rites of passage and the danger of incompetence in human relations. In his analysis of the collection's deep narrative grammar, Hewitt writes that 'this fictive early period is thought of as a formative one for the San', offering to the reflective performer a mass of motifs, plot structures and character galleries in which 'the raw materials of life, both cosmological and social, were constantly interacting, rearranging themselves, revealing social truths and the natural order of things' ('The Oral Literature of the San', p. 654).

Yet if folklorists and ethnographers have tended to dwell on the mythological plane of the narratives, other readers of the collection have been drawn to the evocations of specific sites in the northern Cape, depictions of the home territory of the |Xam informants which intimate a sense of place entirely different to the feminised landscapes or depopulated vistas of colonial writing (Deacon, 'Home Territory'; Martin, *Millimetre*). In an excerpt entitled 'Bushman Presentiments', ||Kabbo explained the 'springbok sensation': the 'tapping' or 'beating of the flesh' through which hunters identified with their quarry. It is a passage which suggests how an ability to read signs and auguries in the natural environment constituted an intimate and extensive corpus of knowledge, a form of cultural memory which revealed itself at an embodied, even somatic level:

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.

(*Bushman Folklore*, pp. 331–3)

Yet even as this metaphor of literacy is used to imagine the unwritten, it underscores the multiply translated, mediated form in which ||Kabbo's words

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now appear, and reminds us how any attempt to access the imaginative content of the narratives becomes inseparable from their textual history.

Khoi-San oratures: a comparative approach

As Bleek's wide-ranging philological enquiries prior to 1870 emphasise, the earliest written information about the Khoi-San language families is inevitably the product of colonial records: the word lists of seventeenth-century mariners (Herbert, 1638) and later the narratives of foreign travellers like Kolb (1719), Le Vaillant (1790), Barrow (1801), Lichtenstein (1810; English translation, 1812–15) and Burchell (1824).⁷ Between 1857 and 1859, Bleek worked to catalogue Sir George Grey's extensive library of 'traditional literature' in Cape Town, and in the process drew up a table of twenty-eight different orthographies which had been used to notate the oldest southern African languages. As well as being a summary of the linguistic information contained within early accounts of the Cape, it provides the spectacle of a colonial taxonomy trying to apprehend and codify the sheer foreignness of the Khoi, Ju and !Ui-Taa language families, all of them characterised by a complex array of clicks, gutturals and shifting intonations.

As Elphick remarks, their position at a vital stopping point on Europe's sea route to the East meant that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Western Cape Khoikhoi were perhaps 'the most frequently observed and intensively discussed' of all the preliterate peoples in the eastern hemisphere (*Kraal and Castle*, p. xvi). Scattered through French, Dutch and English accounts one finds occasional speculations about the Khoi deities 'Tsui-Goab', 'Gaunab' and 'Haiseb', but for the most part this is a literature of dismissal and disgust, often comprised of tropes recycled by authors who had never set foot at the Cape. Notable exceptions, however, include the more sympathetic travelogues of Dapper (1668), Tachard (1688), Kolb, Le Vaillant and Burchell, as well as (a text not listed by Bleek) the 1779 *Berigt* of Hendrik Jacob Wikar, a Swedish deserter from the Dutch East India Company who lived with societies of the Orange River. Within a journal unusual for its imaginative entry into the lifeways of various Khoi-San groups is perhaps the earliest recorded indigenous narrative of southern Africa: the fable explaining the origin of death among mankind. In most versions it is the Moon which tells the Hare to give a message to humans saying that they would come to life again after death. The Hare distorts the message, bringing mortality into the world, and

⁷ See Chapter 8 in this volume for a fuller account and bibliography of this travel and ethnographic literature at the Cape.

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is struck a blow across the face which results in its split lip. In Wikar's version it is the deity 'Tzoekoab of God' ('Tsui-Goab or God') who gives 'een bood-schap aan den haas' ('a message to the hare'), recorded in a language that was already moving some way from Dutch towards a proto-Afrikaans (Mossop, *Journals*, p. 139).

Recorded in over seventy variants throughout southern Africa, this narrative is one of the most compelling suggestions that a pan-Khoi-San myth complex once extended throughout the region (Schmidt, 'Folktales', 'Relevance' and *Catalogue*; Guenther, *Tricksters and Trancers*). A version of it appears in the first significant collection of 'Hottentot Fables and Tales', compiled in 1864 after Bleek wrote to missionaries like Theophilus Hahn, J. G. Krönlein, H. Tindall and C. F. Wuras requesting collections of 'Native Literature'. Bleek's sycophantic dedicatory preface to Sir George Grey remarks that the various animal and mood songs interspersed through the collection will be of little interest, yet it is just such chanted refrains which are excerpted by Jack Cope and Uys Krige for their 1968 *Penguin Book of South African Verse*:

Hyena's Song to her Children

The fire threatens
The sling-stone menaces me
The assegais threaten
The gun points death at me
Yet you howl around me for food
My children!
Do I get anything so easily?

(p. 254)

Among evocative narratives of 'Fish-Stealing' and 'Cloud-Eating', the tales in the 1864 collection concerning the exploits of Jackal and the 'Heitsi-Eibip' (Haiseb) reveal two incarnations of the trickster figure who forms the second major link between the different oratures.

An embodiment of ambiguity who is, according to Guenther, 'as ubiquitous as he is multifarious' (*Tricksters and Trancers*, p. 97), this favoured antihero of Khoi-San folklore assumes a bewildering array of identities. The Haiseb and Jackal figures of Hei||om, Nama and Damara oratures find their closest analogue in the |Xam *kukummi* as |Kaggen, or 'Cagn' as J. M. Orpen transcribed it from his 'Maluti Bushman' informant Qing in 1874 ('Mythology of the Maluti Bushmen'). Although most often portrayed as a flying Mantis with magical powers, |Kaggen was also associated with the large, revered antelopes like the hartebeest or eland, and simultaneously personified as a foolish, cowardly

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and lascivious old man (some of whose lewd catchphrases remain tellingly untranslated in Bleek and Lloyd). As with the Ju|'hoansi narratives recorded by Biesele (*Women Like Meat*), in the Nharo and G|wi folktales collected by Guenther in Botswana the exploits of the trickster Pisamboro – which include the ‘flashing’ of young women – suggest how the bawdy elements of oral performances might have been largely effaced during the making of the Bleek and Lloyd records.

In compiling the most comprehensive twentieth-century archive of folklore from Namibia, Schmidt also tracks the changing identity of the more sinister !Kung figure of !O!otsi|dasi (who appears in the |Xam narratives as !Goe|weiten), a protagonist with an eyeless face but eyes between its toes or on the back of its ankles. Sometimes a trickster-being, and at other times his victim, ‘Eyes-on-his-Feet’ is in turn conflated with the man-eating ogres of Nguni folklore by some storytellers, and enters the Afrikaans folk tradition as the bogey-man ‘Voetoog’ (Foot-Eye) (Schmidt, *Märchen aus Namibia*; ‘The Relevance of the Bleek/Lloyd Folktales’). At other moments in the Nama and Dama records, it is evident how an infusion of biblical narratives concerning ‘Jesso Kreste’ and the Devil began to alter Khoi-San narrative performance at the very moment when it was first being recorded by missionaries; certain stories even seem to appropriate and recast figures like ‘Till Eulenspiegel’ and ‘Reineke Fuchs’ from Dutch and German folk traditions.

‘How the alphabet was made’: the creation of the archive

Viewed against this history of constant borrowing, bilingualism and cultural barter, the title of Bleek’s 1864 collection, *Reynard the Fox in South Africa*, signals his comparative ambitions – an attempt to see the figures from southern African oratures as local embodiments of universal mythological ‘types’ – even as it reveals the impossibility of identifying ‘pure survivals’ in such oratures. Yet although such overweening comparative philology is an obsolete discipline, and despite the representational and all too actual violence that permeates so many of the colonial records from which he worked, the attention devoted to vocabulary and orthography was to prove vital when Bleek and Lloyd came to recording the words of skilled narrators like Diä!kwain, |Han≠kass’o and ||Kabbo. In 1866 a series of interviews in Cape Town’s Roeland Street jail served as a kind of dress rehearsal for the dictations of the 1870s; the words and short sentences transcribed and translated from Adam Kleinhardt, son of a Bushman woman and a Korana man, make up the first page of the notebooks:

|Xam narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection

heart of ox;
thy heart;
my heart is;
 sore
ox lungs;
ox lung;
my lungs are
 sore;
...
the Bushmen
eat the cattle
of the Boers;
the Boers take
the children of
the Bushmen
(Bleek Collection,
151 A1 4)

By the time |Alkunta arrived in Mowbray in August 1870, Bleek had combined further work on Bushman vocabulary and orthography with a recording method which he had first experimented with when collecting Zulu folklore in Natal as far back as 1855. Right-hand pages were divided into two columns, with the |Xam text entered in one and the other reserved for translation, which was done over a period of days, weeks or even months, then checked with the narrators. Further observations or clarifications offered by them during this process were entered on the left-hand pages of the notebooks, becoming in the printed text a bewildering array of asterisks and footnotes which make the accounts confusing and sometimes contradictory, yet also greatly richer and more nuanced.

In a finely detailed reconstruction of the recording process, Bank shows how this attempt to record every aspect of the circling, digressive performances constitutes a 'thick description' that is as much script as transcript: a 'grammar of performance' or diary of daily life and learning (*Bushmen in a Victorian World*, p. 83). Far from being a perfect exchange of words for things in a colonial garden, the process of establishing vocabulary using household objects, children's books, illustrated travelogues and even a visit to the natural history museum was a procedure characterised by partial recognition, misrecognition and constant negotiation. Yet despite an ongoing reluctance to claim credit for her primary role in the making of the archive, Lloyd's aptitude for the work soon became apparent, and it is her less theoretical, more empathetic approach that elicits the personal testimony which now seems more

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compelling than Bleek's abstract catalogues of mythology. [A!kunta's remark in the notebooks that 'de bushman tal praat is baie swer die noi' ('speaking the Bushman language is very difficult for the young lady') reveals too how a broken form of Dutch was often used by the narrators and transcribers (BC 151 L124, cited Bank, p. 84) making the notebooks a complex tissue of linguistic registers. Farmyard animals appear as 'beest' (cow) and 'huhness' ('hoenders' – chickens) and even in the evocation of 'the Bushman's letters' in the printed volume of 1911, ||Kabbo explains that ||gu means 'de bloem tijd' ('the flowering time') of the northern Cape (*Bushman Folklore*, p. 337).

No doubt, the entire collection could in one sense be regarded as an extended example of the observer's paradox; as Chapman remarks, 'it is difficult to decide whether the circularity of the tale betokens the style of the oral imagination or the patience of the tellers in accommodating themselves to the laborious process of . . . longhand transcription . . . The emphasis, one way or another, is probably a fine one' (*Southern African Literatures*, p. 23). Is the aberrant grammar (where present tense fragments are embedded in longer past tense narratives) an example of inbuilt dramatisation, evidence of the seamlessness of a pre-Cartesian cosmology, or merely a result of problems in transcription? Abstracted from the living, communal context of oral performance, a fidelity to the process of story dictation must often have worked against the larger narrative arc: Lloyd describes in her preface how ||Kabbo 'watched patiently until a sentence had been written down, before proceeding with what he was telling' (*Bushman Folklore*, p. x). Nonetheless, as many of those who have worked with the texts remark, the contributions of the different 'givers of native literature' do emerge as distinct, each with a set of narrative traits all of their own (Hewitt, *Structure, Meaning and Ritual*). Even as twentieth-century anthologists and poets have drawn on the collection, seeking to make its lengthy transcriptions more readable and accessible, the very stiltedness and archaism preserved in the records perhaps serves as a necessary reminder of the artificial circumstances in which they were created, and also of the singularity and awkward delicacy of this linguistic encounter.

The breaking string: the archive and the poets

People were those who
Broke for me the string
Therefore,
The place () became like this to me,
On account of it,

|Xam narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection

Because the string was that which broke for me.
Therefore,
The place does not feel to me,
As the place used to feel to me,
On account of it.
For,
The place feels as if it stood open before me,
() Because the string has broken for me.
Therefore,
The place does not feel pleasant to me,
On account of it.

Reproduced as it appears on page 237 of *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, across from the notation of the |Xam words spoken to Lucy Lloyd by Diä!kwain in July 1875, 'The Broken String' is a language event that has reverberated in the poetic imagination even when the Bleek and Lloyd Collection was all but forgotten. A version of it appears in Cope and Krige's 1968 anthology, and again in that edited by Stephen Gray in 1989, though classified here as a 'traditional' San song, a label which does not indicate the painful, personal circumstances of its telling. Asterisks in Bleek and Lloyd explain how !Nuin-|kuüten, a !giten ('sorcerer' according to the original transcribers, now more accurately rendered as 'shaman'), had been on an out-of-body journey in the form of a lion and had killed 'a Boer ox'. The farmer raised one of the local, mounted bands known as a commando, pursued and shot him in reprisal. Mortally wounded, he limped back to the camp and described with his last breath how these people had destroyed his connection to the water bull resident in the sky, urging Diä!kwain's father Xa:ä-tin to continue singing the old songs, making rain in the old way: 'Now that "the string is broken", the former "ringing sound in the sky" is no longer heard by the singer, as it had been in the magician's lifetime.'

How can such a distanced and delicate fragment be approached? Enlisting the aid of structural anthropology and rock art research developed from the 1970s onwards, one could note its blend of real and non-real components, or the conflation of ancient and modern as narrators' attempts to relate 'traditionary' material for Bleek and Lloyd became ineluctably entangled with the violence of the colonial frontier. Perhaps one could attempt to chart the horizontal and vertical axes of |Xam cosmology, from camp to hunting ground, and earth to the heavens, 'mediated by water which both wells up in waterholes and falls from the sky' (Lewis-Williams, "'A Visit to the Lion's House'", p. 126). Or describe it instead as that 'great and complex web of signs that

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wrote themselves across the landscape and into the lives and bodies of those capable of understanding them' (Bennun, *Broken String*, p. 234). Yet at the same time a fragment like 'The Broken String' cannot but suggest the disruption to |Xam culture created by the very breakage or breach through which we have entered. As with the Aranda song cycles adapted by the likes of Theodor Strehlow and Bruce Chatwin, the Bleek and Lloyd material throws into relief the technical challenges and ethical dilemmas of bringing such material into modern literary currency.

For an English-speaking readership both within South Africa and abroad, the most influential interpreter of 'Bushman' culture during the twentieth century was undoubtedly Laurens van der Post. His often fabricated but immensely influential works drew heavily on the archive: in *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961) he described *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* and Dorothea Bleek's whimsical 1924 collection for children, *The Mantis and his Friends*, as 'the authorised version of what is a sort of stone age Bible to me' (p. 12). Van der Post's imaginative entry into the world of the myths and his evocations of rock art in the Tsodilo Hills have in recent years been revisited as an early attempt to treat San cultures with a requisite attention and empathy, and also as an anticipation of the post-apartheid national identity fashioned from notions of indigeneity by a political project like Mbeki's African Renaissance (Masilela, 'White South African Writer').

Yet his incorrigibly mystic turn of phrase, and a dedication of the 1961 volume to Jung – 'because of his great love of Africa and reverence for the life of its aboriginal children' – suggests how this was an approach intent on collapsing very different cultures into a single entity, one which was then infantilised and rendered as a source of spiritual rejuvenation untouched by modernity. In later books, van der Post would place the stories in the mouths of fictional creations and living individuals whom he claimed to have met, transferring the folklore and narrative from its point of origin to an entirely different location in the Kalahari. A similar transposition occurs in the 1956 and 1971 collections compiled from the Bleek and Lloyd records by Arthur Markowitz, who acknowledges a large debt to the archive in his introduction, yet does not seem to realise that its narrators had little to do with the Nharo, !Kung, G|wi or G||ana peoples further north (*With Uplifted Tongue* and *The Rebirth of the Ostrich*).

By contrast, Stephen Watson's 1991 collection of 'Versions from the |Xam', *Return of the Moon*, brought together colonial historiography, ethnographic information and scholarly accounts of rock art in an attempt to situate the |Xam narratives within their particular, disturbing historical moment, while

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at the same time making their aesthetic more accessible to a modern audience. Whilst Markowitz limited himself to recorded ‘Bushman vocabulary’ in compiling his volume, and while Alan James’s scrupulously contextualised 2001 collection *The First Bushman’s Path* was praised for the degree to which its author allowed his versions of |Xam texts to resist his own voice, *The Return of the Moon* is a selection where the transcriptions are carefully brought into a modern idiom, interacting with the ‘framing device’ of Watson’s own poetics and enabling him ‘to cast into relief certain features which would almost certainly have been lost even in the best prose translation’ (*Return of the Moon*, p. 16).

In a detailed introduction, he remarks how what seemed the purely technical challenges of the source material – a verbal surface of shifting tenses, syntactical spirals and ‘word-salads’, the ‘natural surrealism’ of many of the extracts – led to a more acute sense of what Skotnes called the ‘perceptual abyss’ between received twentieth-century ideas about the ‘Bushmen’ and the rich detail of the |Xam records (“‘Civilised off the face of the earth’”, p. 312). Of all the stereotypes which threaten to fill such absences, the most insistent temptation for the contemporary poet, he suggests, is a tendency to wistfulness and melancholy that results from knowing the historical fate of the |Xam, so that the elegiac mode ‘comes to have the force of gravity whenever one sets to work’ (p. 17). In his version, ‘The Song of the Broken String’ is given as a series of overlapping variations in four stanzas, where the explanatory glosses of Bleek and Lloyd’s 1911 volume are incorporated into a single poem that accentuates a subtext of psychic and cultural dislocation:

Because
of this string,
because of a people
breaking the string,
this earth, my place
is the place
of something –
a thing broken –
that does not
stop sounding,
breaking within me.

(pp. 59–60)

A different approach is taken by Lewis-Williams in his 2000 volume, *Stories that Float from Afar*, a more sober, stripped down anthology which includes ||Kabbo’s account of watching a procession in honour of the Governor of the

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Cape of Good Hope, Sir Bartle Frere, at Cape Town's Grand Parade in June 1879. It is a previously unpublished extract which offers a rare reversal of the colonial gaze, and an oblique perspective on the city as a seat of high empire. Concerned to emphasise the historicity of the records, the editor suggests that it is prose which best brings out their difficulty and digression, and that versification risks a 'prettification' of the texts (pp. 36–8). Yet in her 2004 volume of 'selected and adapted' |Xam poetry, *the stars say 'tsau'* (published simultaneously in Afrikaans as *die sterre sê 'tsau'*), Antjie Krog describes how she employed 'the natural way in which the narratives "fell" into verse' (p. 10), preserving the found poetry of the Bleek and Lloyd transcriptions: a jagged *vers libre* created as the English translation was strictly aligned with |Xam dictation, never able to evolve into grammatically coherent sentences, punctuated at random by commas which create drifting clauses and adverbial phrases.

As a result, 'the song of the broken string' which opens her (English) collection remains virtually unchanged from its original incarnation, appearing alongside a sepia photograph and short biography of its narrator, the man sentenced for killing a farmer who had threatened his family, yet known in suburban Mowbray as the Bleeks' 'pet murderer' on account of his gentleness. With Krog's Afrikaans version of 'die gebreekte snaar' however, one witnesses another link in a far-reaching chain of translation and retranslation: the words of the collection have now passed from the |Xam via broken Dutch into Victorian English and now into the Afrikaans of a South African author who writes and publishes simultaneously in two languages:

mense was dit
wat die snaar vir my gebreek het
daarom
het die plek vir my só geword
as gevolg daarvan (p. 13)

The stilted diction of the nineteenth-century texts – 'as gevolg daarvan' (on account of it) – is retained here, and in her introduction Krog claims to identify with an Afrikaans substructure present in convoluted phrases like, 'Hold thou strongly fast for me the hartebeest skin' (*Bushman Folklore*, p. 3). In the plagiarism scandal which ensued after she was accused by Watson of barely altering Lloyd's transcriptions, Krog asserted that her prime motivation for the collection had been to bring the poems back into Afrikaans, pointing to the work of Eugene Marais and a long history of drawing on Khoi-San orality in its literature.

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‘The Bushmen’s letters’: literary afterlives and beyond

Marais’s preface to his *Dwaalstories* of the early 1920s leaves one in no doubt that the Bleek and Lloyd Collection is a major presence at a formative moment of Afrikaans lyric poetry, yet even before this a writer of the *Eerste Taal Beweging* (First Language Movement), Gideon Retief von Wielligh, had translated and anthologised excerpts in his *Boesman-Stories*. Published in four volumes between 1919 and 1921, the last of these makes explicit reference to Bleek and Lloyd and translates into early Afrikaans passages entitled ‘Boesmans in die Breekwater’ and ‘Uit die Breekwater huis-toe’. So too, his recollections of totally bilingual |Xam narrators in Namaqualand, Bushmanland and the Hantam between 1870 and 1883 bear out Marais’s claim of how ‘when the Bushman language was dying out, the narrators transferred the stories into their own *eienaardige* (idiosyncratic) Afrikaans’ (*Dwaalstories*, p. i).

Unlike those of von Williegh, Markowitz or van der Post, the *Dwaalstories* are not simple relocations and retellings of the Bleek and Lloyd material. They are, however, permeated by its metaphors and narrative structures: in footnotes we are told about ‘dinksnaar’ (the ‘thinking strings’ through which the narrators expressed a model of consciousness), ‘Die Rëenbul’ (‘the Rain Bull’) and the belief that each individual was associated with a particular wind which would efface their footsteps from the earth after death (p. 29), a belief related by Diä!kwain in August 1875 in one of his many *kukummi* concerning mortality during that year. As Kannemeyer suggests in his history of Afrikaans literature, it is this flexible, transformative attitude to the tradition of the *Boesmanvertelling* (Bushman tale) rather than any quest for folkloric purity that gives the collection its unity, and makes it such an important influence on later writers: the graphic language, ‘irrational’ imagery and spoken feel are regarded as a foreshadowing of the experimentalism of Jan Rabie, Uys Krige and Breyten Breytenbach in the 1950s and 1960s (*Geskiedenis*, p. 234).

Whilst the shifting incarnations of specific fragments can be tracked through the twentieth century and up to the present, it is more difficult to give a sense of the residual orality evoked by Marais, an infusion of linguistic and narrative energy which extends from the earliest Afrikaans poetry to the post-apartheid novels of André Brink. In works such as *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993) and *Praying Mantis* (2007), Khoi-San narrative modes and mythology interact with a South African strain of magic realism to create playful, postcolonial rewritings of the country’s various contact zones. So too, there have been many poets who do not explicitly rewrite the material, but rather elaborate

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on or weave it in to their own work. Cope's 'Rock Painting' (included in his 1968 Penguin anthology) joins a literary strand of rock art *ekphrasis* that runs from Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) through the short fiction of William Plomer to meditative poetry like that of Peter Sacks's *In these Mountains* (1986), the 'parched, cryptic ones' of Douglas Livingstone's 1991 collection *A Littoral Zone* (p. 45), as well as Jeremy Cronin's imaginative inhabiting of archaeological sites in a 'Venture into the Interior' entirely unlike that of van der Post:

mouth or
cave-site of word
root, birdbone,
shells of meaning
left in our mouths
by thousands of years of
human occupation.
(*Inside*, p. 37)

More recently, the verbal suggestiveness of isolated fragments inspires poems in P. R. Anderson's *Foundling's Island* (2007), while an historical novelist like Yvette Christiaansë acknowledges her debt to the archive as a means of recreating the texture of nineteenth-century Khoi and Afrikaans diction in *Unconfessed* (2006).

Yet of course, such literary afterlives constitute only one medium through which the Bleek and Lloyd Collection has been extended and celebrated. The varied work of the graphic artist and curator Pippa Skotnes attempts to convey not simply the textual matter of the archive, but also its materiality, its striking imagery and entire aesthetic. The three-year process of digitally scanning not only the content of notebooks but also their marbled covers, as well as drawings, watercolours, landscapes, blotting papers, slips for the 'Bushman Dictionary' and all manner of other material traces is offered not as an interpretation of indigenous thought, but rather as an attempt to present (as far as this is possible) 'the archive itself' (*Claim to the Country*, p. 41). This, she adds, should not be thought of as a dusty, forgotten repository but a dynamic, even chaotic space 'in which one can never be a passive participant, where one must constantly be alert to new possibilities, to different insights, to other ways of understanding the complexities of the past' (p. 41). As in her installations for the South African National Gallery and Museum – where an absence of information panels and the lack of any prescribed route meant that the viewer was required to adopt a personal, non-linear way

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through – there is in her publications a sense of merely bringing objects into relation and allowing them to stand for themselves. The notion of editor as curator enables an array of historical artefacts to be left intact and immanent to a remarkable degree given the limitations of a two-dimensional page.

In another publication attuned to the visual grammar and intense formal beauty of this archive, *My Heart Stands in the Hill* (2005), film-maker Craig Foster and archaeologist Janette Deacon project photographic portraits of the narrators on to the land where they once lived: one sees images of Diä!kwain, |Han≠kass'o and ||Kabbo superimposed on aloes, kokerbooms, tortoiseshells and the cracked mud of the Bitterpits in an environment where, as the authors remark, the uneven surfaces transform the anthropometric photographs into distended, layered images not unlike the hallucinatory visions of rock art. Several others who have worked with the archive have spoken of the need to visit the homes of the informants in the northern Cape, reimagining the lone quest of colonial romance in terms of pilgrimage and silent vigil.

One hopes that such diverse, ongoing afterlives fulfil the wishes of the master-narrator ||Kabbo, who in his testimony evoked so powerfully how *kukummi* borne by the natural conduits of wind and water and felt almost as a bodily presence by those attuned to them, provided the most vital links between the dispersed, dispossessed bands of the |Xam-ka !ei. The truth of his historical experience and that of his extended family is surely all but irrecoverable in the multiply translated language through which we now approach it. Yet the embodied understanding of place that so many of the extracts intimate perhaps finds a distant correlative in the unforeseen workings of its poetry on the readers of today, material that, once it has begun to act on the auditory imagination, cannot easily be forgotten:

I must go together with the warm sun, while the ground is hot. For a little road it is not. For, it is a great road; it is long. I should reach my place, when the trees are dry. For I shall walk, letting the flowers become dry while I follow the path.

Then, autumn will quickly be (upon) us there; () when I am sitting at my (own) place. For, I shall not go to other places; for, I must remain at my (own) place, the name of which I have told my Master; he knows it; he knows, (having) put it down. And thus () my name is plain (beside) it.

(*Bushman Folklore*, p. 317)

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