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Most of the indigenous languages in South Africa owe their existence in written form to the efforts of the missionaries. With the San people, however, it was different. They had resisted religion, and attempts at converting them to Christianity proved vain. It was also considered not a worthwhile project, as they were also regarded as primitive savages who should be exterminated to make way for the more evolved races.

The preservation of San culture, with its large and fascinating body of beliefs, history, folklore and customs in written form, is thanks to the foresight, energy and dedication of a remarkable family: Wilhelm Bleek, his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, and his daughter Dorothea, who, in the late 19th century, took the trouble to learn their language and recorded what they had to say.

Wilhelm Bleek, a German philologist, emigrated to the colony of Natal in 1855, having been invited by Bishop Colenso to prepare a Zulu grammar and dictionary. It was while in Natal that Bleek first heard of the San people of the Drakensberg. He was intrigued by the fact that they had resisted all missionary efforts at conversion, and, as a result, it had been impossible to prepare a dictionary or a grammar of their language.

In 1856 he moved to Cape Town, where he was employed as court translator. While in Natal, he had met a young woman, Jemima Lloyd, whom he married soon after his arrival in Cape Town, and they set up home in a house in Mowbray, The Hill. Shortly after this, Sir George Grey, governor of the Cape at the time, donated his valuable collection of books and manuscripts to the South African Public Library, on condition that they would be catalogued by Bleek. In this way Bleek would be assured of sufficient income to enable him to pursue his linguistic studies. As librarian of the Grey collection, Bleek aimed to make it 'the most complete collection of material on aboriginal languages from all over the world'.

A year later, his interest in the San, first aroused while in Natal, was rekindled by the news that a number of San convicts was imprisoned in the Cape Town jail, and on Robben Island. He obtained permission to interview them, and began to study their language. Then in 1870, he visited the Breakwater prison, where, he had heard, there were 28 San prisoners. Realising that the San were on the brink of extinction, he wanted to study and record their language before it was lost forever. He believed this work to be more important than his work on the Zulu grammar, a view not popularly held. Generally, the colonists regarded the San as no better than vermin: 'degenerate savages who should make way for higher races.' Despite this attitude, he was able to persuade the governor, Sir Philip Wodehouse, to allow some of these prisoners to live in the family home in Mowbray, where they were employed as servants.

The first of these was /A!kunta, who arrived in August 1870, having been declared physically unfit for hard labour. A few months later he was joined by //Kabbo. /A!kunta was a gifted mimic, and loved music: with his first earnings he bought a cheap violin, with which he entertained the Bleeks. //Kabbo was known as the philosopher, and regarded himself more as Bleek's teacher than a servant. He is reported to have said that it would be good for the stories of his people to be known in books. When their prison sentences expired in mid-1871, both /A!kunta and //Kabbo stayed on for some time. From these two, and from other prisoners who came later, Bleek learned their language, and recorded the vast body of the !Xam *kukummi* which they related to him over the next few years. According to JD Lewis-Williams, there is no adequate English translation of the word *kukummi*, which encompasses 'stories, news, talk, information, history and what English-speakers call myths and folklore'.

The work was painstaking and laborious. Assisted by his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, Bleek developed a phonetic script to accommodate the clicks and other complex sounds of the language, and using this script, Bleek and Lloyd recorded the *kukummi* in quarto notebooks. Sentence by sentence, the text was entered in columns, with a translation alongside. Often the stories were acted out, or pictures were drawn. The /Xam themselves also picked up English quite quickly. The result of all this effort was The Bleek and Lloyd Collection, now housed in the University of Cape Town (UCT) library archives, comprising more than 12 000 numbered pages of text, word lists and notes.

Round about the same time, a British geologist, George William Stow, was making copies of rock painting in the Free State and Eastern Cape, and in 1875 he sent a number of these to Bleek, who recorded the interpretations of these by his San guests.

In August 1875, Bleek died while still at work on his Bushman dictionary. His work, however, continued. Lloyd arranged for the relatives of the original guests to travel to Cape Town to be interviewed, and later also for visits to Cape Town of some young boys from the Kalahari, from a group known as the !Kung.

In 1884, Lucy Lloyd left Cape Town for Europe, where she remained for twenty years, returning some time between 1905 and 1907. On her return, she concentrated on managing and publishing the huge collection of work which she and Bleek had accumulated. In the 1870s, Bleek had prepared two reports, published by the Cape Government. In 1889, a catalogue of Lloyd's part of the collection was published as **A short account of further Bushman material collected**. The most important publication, however, appeared in 1911, entitled **Specimens of Bushman folklore**.

In 1912, at the age of 78, Lucy Lloyd was awarded an honorary D Litt by the University of the Cape of Good Hope, (now UCT), the first South African woman to receive an honorary degree. She died shortly afterwards, in 1912.

Plagued by ill health during the latter part of her life, she had trained her niece, Bleek's daughter Dorothea to take over the work which had first been begun more than forty years previously. Dorothea Bleek proved to be a worthy successor to her father and aunt, dedicating herself to the preservation and publication of the collection entrusted to her. She travelled to Prieska and Kenhardt, where she met the relatives of the people who had lived with the family in Mowbray, and also to Botswana, Angola and East Africa. She arranged for the publication of a selection of *kukummi,* entitled **Mantis and friends** in 1924, and in the 1930s a series of nine extracts from the collection in the journal **Bantu studies** (now **African studies**). When she died, she was working on the monumental Bushman dictionary, begun by her father nearly 80 years before. This was eventually published in 1956, exactly one hundred years after Bleek's interest in these peoples had first been kindled. As JD Lewis-Williams expresses it, 'A truly remarkable family endeavour thus ended.' According to Lewis-Williams, these transcripts of Bleek and Lloyd are 'one of the most important collections of information on 19th century hunter-gatherers in the world'.

In recent years there has been considerable interest in the work of the Bleek family and the huge body of folklore which they recorded. Professor Lewis-Williams has made a number of them available to modern readers in **Stories that float from afar**: **Ancestral**

folklore of the San of Southern Africa. Some of the stories have been arranged as poetry by Stephen Watson in **Return of the moon**: **versions of the /Xam**; by Pippa Skotnes in her art book **Sound from the thinking string**; and most recently by Antjie Krog in **Die sterre sê tsau** and **The stars say tsau**. Recently, **Customs and beliefs of the /Xam** appeared - a collection of Dorothea Bleek's articles from the 1930s, edited by Jeremy Hollman. It contains the /Xam transcripts edited by her, with English translations, and her /Xam grammar sketch, along with notes and photographs. Another recent publication is **Voices of the San**, compiled and edited by Willemien le Roux and Alison White, a collection of oral testimonies by San elders, with photographs and art from various San art projects.