

TRANSFORMING THE LEGACY OF LAND DISPOSSESSION: ARCHIVE, ORALITY AND HEALING IN THE CONTEXT OF SAN STORY-TELLING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which we engage the archive and orality to negotiate traumatic pasts in order to transform the legacy of land dispossession. It hones in on the silences of the archive and asks how we draw the inheritance of archival documents and materials into dialogue with living orality and places in the landscape. Who is remembering knowledges and meaning in the landscape of the Northern Cape and how is this being done against the poignant backdrop of the losses resulting from dispossession? How does inter-generational dialogue become an agent in shaping the inheritance of the future? Given the complexity of history and our reading of the past, what does it mean to become a good ancestor? What role could digital technology play in re-shaping identity and heritage among the storytellers, teenagers, ritual specialists and others who populate the region? This study examines the complex tensions between these questions in the context of specific oral history and storytelling projects that took place in previously dispossessed communities in the Northern Cape between 2003 and 2013.

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INTRODUCTION

Our professional and popular discourses hold the concepts of ‘archive’ and ‘oral history’ in an uncomfortable relationship. On the one hand, notions of stability, durability and evidence of the past accompany the word ‘archive’ and have been the domain of archival experts for centuries.¹ Recent academic thought (Hamilton *et al.* 2002) has seen ‘archive’ become institutional sites through which the configuration of power may be analysed (Stoler 2002).

On the other hand, the slippery concepts of oral history and memory have emerged as complex fields of specialist knowledge, particularly within indigenous groups, with their own company of experts in the fields of transitional justice, dialogue theory, psychotherapy, neuroscience and indigenous knowledge management. This article is concerned with the uncomfortable meeting between these two concepts: the emerging body of knowledge and oral practices on the one hand, and ‘archive’ on the other. Throughout this article, I signal my resistance to the notion of ‘archive’ as a solid, final, cohesive and unproblematic evidence base of the past by resisting the word ‘archive’ and using the words ‘material’ or ‘collection’ to emphasise that what is under discussion comprises papers, artworks, photos, public correspondence or private letters, interviews, oral traditions or other expressions of memory that are open to contextual interpretation, rather than a closed corpus. I will try to indicate my perception of ‘archive’ as a fluid process across time and space that requires close reading, one that the 20th-century scholar, Jacques Derrida, describes as an incessant movement of contextualisation, where deconstruction is perpetually at work within the texts, a process that exposes the assumptions, contradictions and hierarchies of unquestioned Western or colonial theories of thought (Derrida 1996). This approach may open up an intersection between the traditional notion of ‘archive’ and contemporary oral practices in the context of transforming the legacy of land dispossession.

I will focus on three of the oral history, verbal and visual arts projects I have been involved with in the Northern Cape Province between 1999 and the present. All three involve the generation and collection of oral histories, performance and documentation of traditional stories – for multiple purposes including research and community archive projects – within the !Xun and Khwe communities in Kimberley, storytellers and farm workers in the upper Karoo and teenagers in the Kalahari and Namaqualand region.

STORIES OF LOSS AND ABUNDANT MEMORY

To start with, I would like to describe two episodes in the narration and collection of oral histories in !Xun communities – set apart by 135 years.

The first episode took place in the Cape Colony between 1879 and 1881, when the English linguist Lucy Lloyd interviewed four !Xun boys who had been abducted from their homes on the banks of the Okavango River and were sent to her on a colonial trade vessel via Walvis Bay as language specimens.²

The 19th-century !Xun children's material is part of the celebrated Bleek and Lloyd collection of interviews, stories, paintings and photographs of and by !xam individuals from the upper Karoo region in the Northern Cape Province, assembled by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in Mowbray, Cape Town, primarily for linguistic purposes but also to collect folklore. The collection has until recently been accessible only to scholars who have been able to study the physical manuscripts at the University of Cape Town, the National Library and Iziko South African Museum. The collection is now readily available to the World Wide Web in a digital archive created by Pippa Skotnes and her team at the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town.³

The second episode took place shortly after in 1999/2000 in Schmidtdrift in the Northern Cape Province, after thousands of Namibian and Angolan !Xun people had immigrated to South Africa at the end of the war in Angola and Namibia in

1990. The contemporary !Xun and Khwe project's material consists of paintings and drawings, traditional and personal stories, photographs, interviews, music and sound recordings. Samples of this work may be viewed in the online exhibition, the San Memory House (<http://sanmemoryhouse.com/>), a digital project conceptualised by the !Xun and Khwe Councils of Elders and their children, the South African San Institute and Manyeka Arts Trust.⁴

These two archival projects, set apart by more than a century, have several features in common.

The narrators speak closely related dialects belonging to the !Xun language family; they come from the same geographical region close to the borders of Angola and Namibia; both contain !Xun narratives of loss and trauma that accentuate the abundance of memory associated with the dispossession of land. Both employ visual methods as research methodology and both collections have an extensive visual component of drawings, paintings and photographs.

During digital storytelling workshops, the teenagers contributed their documentation, family scripts and photographs they took with disposable cameras at the time, with paintings and drawings that explain aspects of their lives. The e-exhibition was inaugurated in the Kfm community radio station on the farm Platfontein in 2009, where the youth introduced their contributions to the e-exhibition to their elders on a large computer screen. The San Memory House has had hundreds

of international visitors to its website and is being updated as more stories and work are generated, while simultaneously functioning as an archive-making project where digital literacy for San storytellers becomes a reality.⁵

While the |Xam part of the Bleek and Lloyd collection has been the subject of intense research over the past two and a half decades, the !Xun children's part of the collection has laid in silence. In fact, scholars have declared their material as having no 'information on their families or origin, or the conditions they had previously lived under, or the reasons why they ended up in custody' (Szalay 2002: 21). At first glance, the children's material indeed appears to be the scattered paintings and drawings by !Xun boys accompanied by the language exercise Lloyd intended when she began the project.

This article allows a different assessment and highlights the role that the contemporary !Xun speakers' oral histories and paintings have played in lifting the children's voices from silence, while providing research keys with which to unlock the children's collection, re-discover it as a source of knowledge and information about a place and time we know very little about. By examining the 19th-century children's work alongside the oral and visual narratives of contemporary !Xun speakers, we are able to bring the past into the present and identify the four children as individuals with stories of their own, name their families, reconstruct aspects of their lives including the days on which they were violently abducted from their homes, how they were sold and re-sold, map the routes they walked while following a succession of masters across the Namibian desert and finally, to the Swedish trader and elephant hunter's boat, the *Louis Alfred*, docked in Walvis Bay waiting to set sail for the Cape Colony.⁶

I will focus on one of the figures in the children's material to illuminate this claim. Lucy Lloyd recorded many fragments of stories about an enigmatic shape-shifter called |Xue from the children, and although she referred to |Xue as a trickster figure,⁷ researchers have not made any further sense of this enigmatic character whose presence permeates the children's textual and visual material in fragmented bits and pieces, snippets and images.

The children explained to Lloyd that |Xue's other name was 'Huwe' and meant 'the first Bushman'. The literature of folklorist Sigrid Schmidt tells us that Huwe is also known as Haiseb and Dima (Schmidt 2011: 24–27).

In 2005, contemporary !Xun speaker resident in the Northern Cape Province, Kapilolo Mahongo, identified the word |Xue as meaning 'hunter' in an old !Xun dialect; he described |Xue as the quintessential hunter, able to change his human form in order to blend into the environment while hunting his prey.

In 2003 I recorded the artist Thaalo Bernardo Rumao's translation and extensive retelling of a traditional !Xun story about Dima during that same year. In brief, it belongs to the genre of origin tales about the early time when humans acquired fire. Dima plays the role of culture hero who, through his various transformations, brought

light to the world by stealing fire, sun, moon and water from his adversary, Jahe, the owl. The central idea of the old world and system of thought in San cosmology was that long ago in deep time, animals and humans shared characteristics, they lived in a world where creatures were part human, part animal and could speak to one another, and where the present laws of nature did not exist. |Xue, also called Huwe, Haiseb or Dima, was the main representative of this old order of the world. |Xue has multiple sides to his character; he is at once an unpredictable trickster, the great liberator of humankind and the great transformer of the primeval into the present world and, as such, the culture hero who introduced the laws of the present world. Yet, he is not confined to the old order of things; he moves in fluid time and space and is always present in some form or another as a simultaneous representation of the relationship between the past and present.

With this insightful information about |Xue from contemporary storyteller Rumao and other germane material, we are able to reconstruct the children's portrayal of |Xue's character and gain insight into a continuous thread of !Xun thought between 1879 and the present. We discover an oral tradition that has been passed on by word of mouth throughout southern African San communities for at least the past 135 years. This essential key to an aspect of the children's material illuminates a central thread in their collection and enables us to perform a closer reading of the material. This research methodology reveals how the young hunter-gatherers measured themselves against !Xue, 'first bushman', who moves fluidly between the old and present worlds, while offering deeper insight into a central theme of San cosmology; the concept of transformation that runs throughout the children's material and links previously disparate phrases, sentences and drawings into meaningful history.

One out of more than 570 drawings and paintings made by the !Xun children consists of a series of symbols, dots, circles and crosses in charcoal, with scant annotations by Lucy Lloyd which indicated a scene between a healer and a sick man. Since the oldest child

!Nanni had sketched it in 1880, the drawing had never been published, examined or discussed. It turns out that this seemingly obscure sketch is one of our earliest records of the San's famous healing or trance dance. A close reading of this visual record reveals that the dots are in fact the footsteps of the healer as he or she danced around the sick person lying among a series of small fires while 'pulling' out the sickness from the body – a healing process and dance still practised by contemporary ritual specialist Meneputo Manyeka. The child !Nanni had explained to Lucy Lloyd that clapping, drumming, dancing and singing were part of the healing performed by

!Xun doctors and his community. He specifically referred to the death of his little sister, Karuma, whose grave he sketched and indicated how he sat beside a little fire and cried when she died. Lucy Lloyd had made notes of this information in her notebooks.

I have given only two among numerous specific examples of how contemporary !Xun orality and visual records intersect with the 19th-century collection. This, and other meaningful contributions, has enabled us to open up that ‘closed’ archive in order to re-figure it, re-assess it, re-construct the children’s lives, honour their legacy and declare an end to their subaltern status in the archive. By providing us with keys to unlock aspects of that closed archive, contemporary !Xun researchers have helped identify a unique 19th-century collection of trauma, loss and memory of childhood in pre-colonial northern Namibia, before its borders with Angola were drawn – a time and place we know very little about. Recent research has brought an end to the marginalisation of the children’s voices in an archive that was deemed unworthy of closer reading.

I will move to the |Xam part of the Bleek and Lloyd collection and discuss the research of scholar and folklorist Jose de Prada-Samper, who has been researching the 19th-century Bleek-Lloyd Collection of |Xam ethnography since the late 1980s, taking for granted the general assumption that |Xam oral literature and its bearers were completely extinct. In 2011, while he was a post-doctoral scholar at the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town, he brought to me his recordings of field research done in the upper Karoo region of Brandvlei, where the 19th-century |Xam storytellers were captured before their imprisonment in the Cape Colony and residency at the Bleek home in the village of Mowbray during the 1870s. De Prada requested me to transcribe and translate a few of the stories from Afrikaans into English. He explained to me that the version of the story, *Ouma and the Lion*, told to him by Magdalena Beukes, a domestic worker from the Brandvlei area born in 1955, appeared to be a 21st-century version of a story he had only encountered in the Bleek and Lloyd collection before, told by the Xam prisoners to Wilhelm Bleek.

De Prada’s close reading of the text revealed Beukes’ story to be a true version of the |Xam tale that has survived by word of mouth in the upper Karoo region over this time. Magdalena Beukes’ version has since been entered into the *Catalogue of the Khoisan Folktales of Southern Africa* compiled by Sigrid Schmidt, the foremost authority on Khoisan traditional narratives, with number KH 1325.

This story is a poignant tale of the tragic consequences of growing old; an elderly hunter-gatherer woman, Ouma, can no longer move with her family in search of food and water and undergoes several dramatic experiences before she finally dies. The story explores, with a touch of comedy that is more Khoisan than European, the timeless and universal calamity that old people face when they can no longer contribute to society and it weaves together complex moral dilemmas, human emotions and the choices that come with the responsibility of providing for the younger generation, throughout its imaginative literary structure.

The significance of this accidental discovery by De Prada-Samper contributes to a sense of opening up the closed corpus of the Bleek and Lloyd collection, generally

accepted as belonging to a people and language that have vanished. It highlights a question at the heart of this discussion about archive, orality and transforming the legacy of land dispossession: what else could the verbal art of Magdalena Beukes and her family of the upper Karoo tell us about the material in one of our foremost national archival collections, the acclaimed Bleek and Lloyd, entered in the UNESCO Register of the World Memory in 1997. How may this collapse the boundaries between archive and orality? What happens when a people considered culturally (and even physically) extinct, suddenly turn out to be very much alive on both counts?

LEARNING TO LISTEN, AGAIN

The third project I wish to refer to took place in various schools in the Northern Cape Province between Namaqualand and the Kalahari region during 2006, spearheaded by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.⁸ The project employed a number of teenagers who were trained in oral history research methods to interview the elders in their communities. The aim of the inter-generational project was to expose the children to the value of their elders' indigenous knowledge and oral histories. The project eventually yielded a handbook for teachers in Northern Cape schools, in which the previously unpublished traditional stories documented by the youths were published in Afrikaans, English and Khoekhoegowab. I was the writing coach and editor for this project and therefore had access to the primary audio recordings made by the teenagers – as told by their elders who could not have read these stories as they are alphabetically illiterate.

Years later, my academic research with the Archive and Public Culture research initiative at UCT led me to realise that many of these tales were contemporary versions of stories that have survived for centuries in the tradition of oral storytelling; an old oral literature that was still alive and well among the survivors of dispossession. By reconstructing the biographies of the individual tales and consulting germane sources, we can identify their histories and those versions that have been collected in written form from the storytellers over time, often scantily, by missionaries, anthropologists, writers and folklorists.⁹ We are able to map the geographical space across which these tales have travelled in the minds of the people who have adapted them to their socio-economic circumstances and, through them, find numinous threads of oral literature that weave the past into the living present.

I will draw on one story from this collection because I think it encapsulates the idea of healing the legacy of land reform – it speaks to the heart of the arid Northern Cape's most precious resource – water. It testifies to the reverence in which a water source is held in the minds of the people who have sought and guarded their water resources over centuries of knowing their land. The depth of their loss is symbolised by the underlying meaning of this tale from Desiree Rhyn, who

recorded it from her grandmother, whose family were forcefully removed from their land by the apartheid regime to make way for military occupation of the area. During Mandela's post-apartheid era, they returned to their ancestral land close to the Molopo River region in the Northern Cape Province. I will summarise the Rhyn family story here.

Early one morning, a mother sends her two daughters to the river to fetch water in their calabashes. One daughter, who is pregnant, is sucked into the water by a mysterious force. Her sister runs home to call her mother, who alerts the neighbours and village healer. The healer performs a ritual next to the river reeds in which he consults his ancestors to ask for a solution. They reveal the nature of the daughter's disappearance. She was taken by the water snake. She gave birth to a baby beneath the water. He commands the villagers to make a sacrifice in the form of an animal to the water snake. This, he assures them, will appease the snake and ensure the return of the daughter. In the meantime, her family should clean their hut in preparation of her homecoming and renew it with a fresh dung floor.

A whirlwind announces the return of the daughter to her family. When she emerges from the river, she tells them that she has been transformed into a healer and that from now on, she will tell them stories about the invisible life beneath the water. She asks them not to be afraid when her son, who has stayed behind with the river snake, visits her from time to time.

In remembering Desiree and her grandmother's story, I am moved to think about the spiritual meaning of what was left behind when people were forced to leave their places in the landscape. In the context of this story and the traumatic loss that accompanies the dispossession of land, healing is accompanied by the work of memory. Fractured by historical injustices and dispossession, generations of families have lost much of their sense of belonging and identity, yet, despite the loss of language and sense of home, the making of meaning by way of story-telling has survived the ravages of dispossession in numerous families like Desiree's, providing a legacy that has been impossible to erase. These family stories fill the silences in those 'official' archival records that claim to be humankind's definitive memory, and in doing so, open up possibilities for transforming the legacy of land dispossession into an act of healing.

I want to return to De Prada-Samper's research on the |Xam of the upper-Karoo – not far from where I heard Desiree's story about the healing power of water in 2006. He tells us that in most of the 19th -century |Xam country, water was a scarce and unpredictable resource, a powerful and creative substance. Waterholes were places of danger where unpredictable supernatural events could occur (Lewis-Williams 2002)

De Prada-Samper's states that the |Xam saw the Rain, or Water, for which they had only one word, !khwa, as a fearful living being, in most cases male, that lived in deep wells and waterholes that had water all year round. !khwa occasionally took

the form of a great animal, such as an eland. In the |Xam stories, rain is a fearful creature not to be dealt with lightly. One of its functions is to punish young girls who have violated the taboos around the first menstruation.

In both the 19th -century and contemporary stories, water, rain, water-holes, rivers, clouds and wind were interchangeable aspects of the same phenomena, they could contain supernatural creatures and cause havoc or healing among people. This theme of transformation in the landscape opens up the boundaries between contemporary orality and archive, while providing a sense of continuity between the past and present. This concept of one holding the same essence as the other, is poetically expressed by contemporary !Xun storyteller Wenne Dikuanga:

The hunter went out into the bush to look for a good tree. He wanted to cut branches from which to make an arrow for his bow. He found a good tree and cut the top branches off. Suddenly, he noticed that the tree's heart started bleeding. The tree bled from its branches. The tree grew feet and hands and they too, started bleeding. The blood flowed onto the ground. Then, the hunters fingers grew into branches. He grew another arm that looked like a wooden club. Then the hunter started to fade. His soul left him. His spirit flew up. Then another hunter appeared from this spirit. The spirit hunter became the greatest of all hunters.¹⁰

Over 135 years ago, Lucy Lloyd recorded a piece of oral narrative from a |Xam storyteller, Kabbo, that embraces related themes of simultaneously being man and tree. In this story, a young maiden transforms a man into a tree by looking directly at him and therefore breaking the taboo of averting her eyes during menstruation. Here is a short extract.

... while he is a tree, he is a man,
he is a talking tree, which talked standing, for he was a man, the maiden looked at him, and
it is so that he became a tree; and it is so that he talks, for he was a man,
and it is so that he became a tree which talked, for he was a tree.¹¹

CONCLUSION

This article highlights a sense of inter-generational and ancestral storytelling as an oral tradition that transcends time and space, requiring us to re-figure our notions of archive as a closed corpus that holds exclusive access to knowledge of the past. It has tried to show how our material records may be opened up, re-assembled and re-patterned to honour the legacy of centuries of dispossessed human beings and address the healing of those whose stories are imbedded in the landscape.

It has looked at what it may have meant to those youths in Namaqualand and the Karoo to listen to their elders' stories of their landscape, giving a sense of how inter-generational dialogue contributes towards healing the fractured identities of generations of dispossessed families.

By focusing on a handful of specific storytellers from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries whose names and places of origin we can identify, this article has presented a view on the tension and fluidity between archival documents and living orality, how one informs the other and collapses previously closed boundaries. It cited examples of how this process lends itself to creating digital content for our youth, opening up the possibility of digital literacy in an age where historical information is no longer a series of facts in the closed books of the past.

In this context, our ideas about becoming good ancestors may be further informed by the concept of transformation that is so luminously transmitted through the practice of story-telling; that we are simultaneously the past, present and future; ourselves and the other – and in this paradigm of multiple possibilities, we have the power of transforming the traumatic legacy of dispossession through the healing art of story.

NOTES

1. Verne Harris (2012). in *Genres of the trace: Memory, archive and trouble*. Paper presented to the Archive and Public Culture UCT Seminar 2013.
2. To avoid confusion I have chosen to use the standard contemporary spelling of the language family !Xun throughout this article rather than Lucy Lloyd's spelling of the language name, !kun.
3. See <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za>
4. See <http://sanmemoryhouse.com>
5. See www.kalaharipeoples.net for further information on progress in digital literacy across the region.
6. The !Xun children's collection formed part of the authors thesis.
7. For a discussion on the trickster figure in San mythology, see Guenther, M.G. 1989. *Tricksters and trances: Bushmen religion and society*. Bloomington: Indiana Press.
8. In 2007, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (UCT) published this collection in an in-house booklet called *Stories op die Wind*.
9. Sigrid Schmidt is a leading scholar on Khoisan oral literature whose field work in Namibia has resulted in extensive research and essential data on the subject. I owe her my considerable gratitude.
10. Author, personal communication.
11. In Skotnes (2011: 40).

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