

Miscast: Negotiating The Presence of The Bushmen

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## Introduction

Pippa Skotnes

There is now no Native past without the Stranger, no Stranger without the Native. No one can hope to be mediator or interlocutor in that opposition of Native and Stranger, because no one is gazing at it untouched by the power that is in it. Nor can anyone speak just for the one, just for the other. There is no escape from the politics of our knowledge, but that politics is not in the past. That politics is in the present.

Greg Denning *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (1992:178-9)

When foreign ships arrived in southern African waters, they brought with them cargoes of strange objects and strange people with alien ideas, unimagined practices and unintelligible languages. By then, the middle of the second millennium, the country had been settled for many thousands of years. In fact, some say the origins of modern humans are in southern Africa. Before 2000 years ago, the indigenous people had lived as hunters and gatherers, as medicine men or women, as painters or engravers, as storytellers; exploring an intellectual world that no doubt penetrated many complex levels of consciousness; and an economy that relied on concepts of inclusiveness and sharing.

Around 2000 years ago, farmers began to move into the country, bringing with them new concepts of space, amplified ideas of storage, and expanded settled villages; and pastoralism arrived in the Cape bringing with it animal domestication and ceramics. Soon after, metal working was introduced from the north. The European strangers who arrived at the Cape competed initially with those pastoralists, whom they called Hottentots or Strandlopers or, occasionally, Quena (though these later became known as the Khoikhoi). As their settlements expanded, the strangers became the colonists and they moved further inland, taking the land and using the resources of the people who lived by hunting and gathering, and who owned the water, but who had little to trade

and so not much with which to negotiate. Adopting a Khoi term, they called these people the Sonqua or Soaqua (which, perhaps became San), or the Bushmen.

For more than 130 years the San, or Bushmen, saw a gradual invasion of their land, and in some areas fought a desperate guerrilla war with the colonists. They resisted the seizure of their land and the depletion of their resources, often choosing death rather than offers of peace and compromise. They robbed the colonists of their stock, and filled them with fear of their poisoned arrows. In the 1770s, traveller Robert Gordon wrote that a famous "bullet-escaper", the "Bushman chief" Koerikei,

standing on a cliff out of range, shouted out to [Veldwagmeester Van der Merwe]: "What are you doing on my land? You have taken all the places where the eland and other game live. Why do you not stay where the sun goes down, where you first came from?" Van der Merwe asked why he did not live in peace as before, and why he did not go hunting with them . . . and whether he did not have enough country as it was? He replied that he did not want to lose the country of his birth and that he would kill their herdsman, and that he would chase them all away. As he went off he further said that it would be seen who would win. (quoted in Penn 1995b:243)



*Figure 1* Farini's "African Pygmies or Dwarf Earthmen", exhibited in England in the 1880s. Admission was advertised at one shilling and "viewing" was from 2.30 to 6.00 and from 8.00 to 10 p.m. The programme included "Stalking the Ostrich", "Shooting with Poisoned Arrows" and "Exciting Torture Dances over War Captives". PRM B11:4

This was a battle the San would not win and by the beginning of the twentieth century their culture and society was devastated and they were hunted, killed or taken into servitude. Many of those that escaped the genocide died of disease or starved to death because of the destruction of the land and the game that were their livelihood. By 1863 Louis Anthing, magistrate of Namaqualand, could write to the Cape Parliament:

during the last ten years a wholesale system of extermination of the Bushman people had been practiced. Corannas from the Orange River, Kafirs from Schietfontein, coloured and European farmers from Namaqualand, Bokkeveld, Hantam, Roggeveld, the districts of Fraserburg and Victoria, and doubtless Hope Town too, all shared in the destruction of these people . . . [and] that the killing of the Bushmen was not confined to the avenging or punishing of [stock] thefts, but that, with or without provocation, Bushmen were killed . . . sometimes by hunting parties, at other times by commandos going out for the express purpose. (Anthing CA A39-63)

San groups in Namibia and Botswana survived into the twentieth century and have since been the subject of major research projects by anthropologists, psychologists and linguists. But the patterns of exploitation that began hundreds of years ago are still a painful legacy in their lives today. In South Africa, however, the destruction of people and the death of San culture and language was almost complete by 1910. Much of this destruction was visited upon the Khoikhoi as well, and the widespread use of the term Khoisan today acknowledges the shared fate of the Khoi and San.

While European colonists were, by and large, responsible for the destruction of Khoisan culture, they were also responsible for homogenising the many San and some Khoi groups into a single unit, a specific physical type, who lived a primitive life outside of history and were supposed to offer a view into a deep human past. This type became reified as 'the Bushmen' and included a diversity of peoples, speaking different languages, observing differing customs, participating in differing intellectual traditions, and sharing different histories. The /Xam, the //Xegwi, the /A'uni-Khomani, the !Xo, the Zu/hoasi, the Hai//om, the Nharo, the Hietshware, the G/wi and many others, were distinct groups, geographically separated, and yet they were forced to assume a common identity with one name: 'Bushman'.

This constructed quality of primitivism was to originate a tradition of exhibiting the Bushmen. Bushman families were taken to Europe for display on small shows and on great multi-nation exhibitions (Figure 1). Visitors were invited to view the "primitive pygmy savages" and a special emphasis of interest in these exhibits was on the Bushman body and its perceived peculiarities. Some individuals died in

Europe, the most famous of these being the so-called 'Hottentot Venus', Saartje Baartman, whose continued presence in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris is being made a symbol of oppression and an important part of the politics of identity in South Africa today.

Most South African museums include sections on the Bushmen. These are usually devoted to revealing them as timeless, ahistorical hunter-gatherers, cast all but naked and set in dioramas, which show a pristine landscape in which no foreign intrusion is evident. This image is further exploited by advertisers and popular film-makers, who perpetuate the image of the Bushmen as cast out of time, out of politics and out of history—miscast (Figure 2).

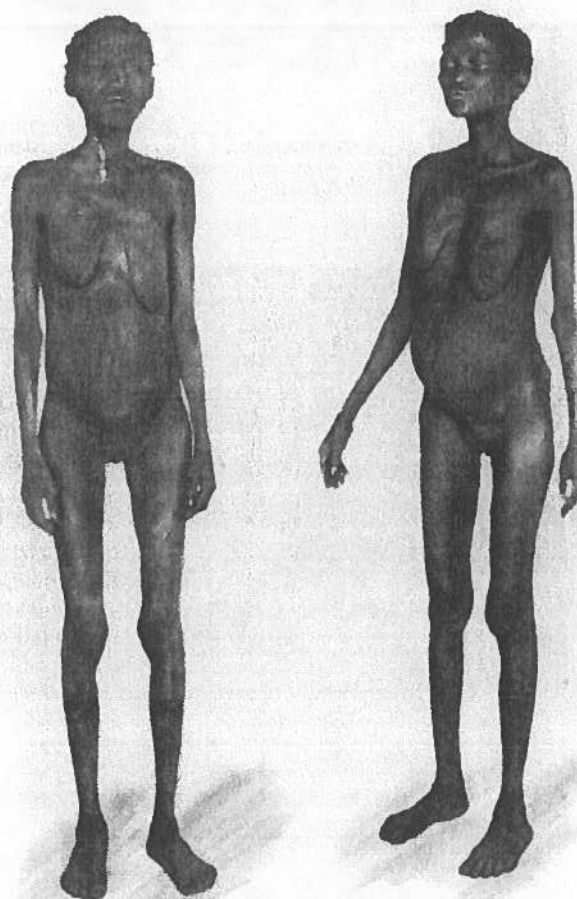


Figure 2 A collaged photograph of a malnourished woman from Sandfontein taken around 1910 by J. Drury as part of his casting project which resulted in the plaster body-casts of 'Bushman' on show at the South African Museum. Drury's endeavour was to find 'pure', 'wild' examples of 'the dying race', though he had to search the villages of dispossessed, often starving people, and strip them of their rags and tatters, to contribute to this stereotype. SAM 30b





Figure 3 Trophy head reproduced from Fester, C. 1914. *Rassenanatomische Untersuchungen an 17 Hottentottenkoepfen*. In: *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie*, vol.16:95–156. Photograph courtesy Rob Gordon



Figure 4 Trophy head with glass eyes, mounted on wooden base. The circumstances of its collection are unknown. Photograph courtesy Duckworth Collection, Cambridge

The exhibition that this book accompanies, is not, strictly speaking, about 'Bushman'. The exhibition is a critical and visual exploration of the term 'Bushman' and the various relationships that gave rise to it. These relationships were conducted on many levels, between strangers and indigenes, between colonists and resistance fighters, between researchers and their objects, and, more rarely, between individuals whose mutual respect for each other brought about mutual understanding. Although the category 'Bushman' is a European construction, it does not necessarily follow that the images and representation of Bushmen which survive are all merely products of the European imagination. It is true that an examination of these images tells us more about the Europeans than about the people they sought to represent. But what they tell us most about is those relationships that existed between Khoisan individuals and white settlers: relationships that were fluid and changing, governed by differing needs and criteria, to which both parties contributed, and by which each party was irrecoverably altered. As much as the Bushmen of the colonial period can be seen only through European eyes, so too, do we understand the Europeans differently because of the way their relationships with the Khoisan influenced their actions.

The representations that form the substance of this exhibition, and the images and articles that constitute this book, are representations of relationships. That these relationships were severely imbalanced in terms of power is witnessed by the extreme objectification of many individuals in, for example, the anthropometric studies of the late nineteenth century. That these relationships resulted in the tragic loss of thousands of lives and communities, in multiple language death and cultural genocide, is evidenced by the images of trophy heads (Figures 3 and 4), hangings (Figure 5), prison victims (Figure 6), and starvation (Figure 7). That these relationships also reflect the rarer moments of mutual respect and a common humanity is witnessed in the life work of, for example, Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, which resulted in the photographs of /Xam and !Kung individuals, and an archive which is the closest thing we have to a 'Bushman voice' from the nineteenth century (Figures 8 and 9).

Each of these sets of representations, like those Stephen Greenblatt has discussed in his study of early European responses to the New World, are "relational, local and historically contingent" and reflect "not knowledge of the other but practice upon the other" (Greenblatt 1991:12). This project, then, is about how different people encountered each other, and about some of the consequences of those encounters.

Numerous challenges have attended the mounting of this exhibition, and the compiling of this book. Most of these centred on my attempts to present a Bushman or San voice (or, better still, many voices). However, the processes of dispossession and marginalisation have been so successful that this was exceedingly difficult to achieve

In the end I worked through various organisations which represent San interests in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, through legal advisers and through anthropologists.

Another issue I was at pains to decide upon was which of the hundreds of images I had collected were "unsuitable" for publication or exhibition. All institutions I approached for photographic material (with the exception of the Natural History Museum in London) gave me unqualified access to their material and permission to reproduce images. In the end, and despite the horror of some of the images, I decided to include examples of the full range of the material I have collected, believing that these images are the material evidence of the attitudes people held toward each other, and that this evidence should be exposed for all to see. One exception, was the decision not to feature any of the many photographs of women's genitals.

Of all the institutions I approached, the British Museum (Natural History) was alone in its decision to withhold images of human remains in its collection, and, for me, this attitude foregrounded some of the important issues this project is attempting to highlight. In its collection of human remains, the museum has a small group of dried heads. The flesh of each head has been preserved, the skin of the neck cut and wrapped under the jaw, the hair disguising at the back the stitched scalp which was cut apart to remove and clean the skull. Glass eyes were inserted between the lids in the sockets, though now, most of the eyes have been lost, and those remaining have the appearance of owls' eyes, too small to fill the cavities and surrounded on each side by the darkness of the interior of the cranium.

The faces are well preserved. The ears have shrunk a little and the noses pinched, the hair of one head is falling away from its scalp, and the skin exfoliating. One of the heads, with no number, has pierced ears and must once have worn earrings. The incisors of another, possibly a woman, are sharply worn on the front and lower surfaces, as if she once drew long sinew through her clenched teeth to cure and stretch it into thread or twine. Her lips are drawn together slightly, the lower lip protruding forward, as if articulating a gasp. Her skin is deeply sunk beneath the cheek-bones, her eye sockets empty and her number, Af62.415, is painted in ink on her forehead.

These individuals are part of a collection of Khoisan heads and skulls described by George Williamson in 1857. They came to the Natural History Museum via the Department of Anatomy at Oxford University and before that were part of the collection in the Museum of the Army Medical Department at Fort Pitt, Chatham (Williamson 1857). I was first alerted to the existence of these heads by Alan Morris, who suggests that they were more than likely trophy heads, collected in military action or after executions. Indeed, many of the other skulls in the collection are documented as such (Morris 1987:14). But



Figure 5 Undated photograph (probably taken around 1914) of Bushman executions. SAN 7579



Figure 6 Bushmen prisoners of war in Windhoek. Wenke, SAN 1876



Figure 7 Undated photograph, c.1912, of emaciated women and a child. SAN 7025

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Figure 8 David Lewis-Williams, who, in the 1980s, pioneered a new understanding of southern African rock art, lays flowers on the grave of Wilhelm Bleek at the Wynberg Cemetery in Cape Town, after a conference to honour the contribution made to the understanding of San culture and intellectual traditions by Bleek and Lucy Lloyd. Photograph courtesy of Alan Barnard



Figure 9 A !Kung boy, !Uma with musical bow, photographed in Cape Town in the 1870s. Part of the Bleek Collection SAM 1957

the current custodians have no evidence that can testify to their provenance, nor the circumstances under which they came to be collected and preserved.

I saw the heads in the museum in London, but was not allowed to draw or photograph them. To this date the museum still refuses to release photographs of the heads. Their curators have stated that they may yield DNA and therefore have scientific potential, and at the same time have stated that they will not release images of the heads since they "wish to avoid the offense that may be caused" (letter dated 2 November 1995 from Dr R. Cocks, Keeper of Palaeontology).

Apart from the more obvious issues of power and control over the material evidence of the past, the attitude of the Natural History Museum points to a perceived hegemony of knowledge; one that values scientific enquiry (the value of the heads for DNA sampling, for example) over other kinds of knowledge (the value of the heads as symbols, as material evidence, or as means to encode knowledge in visual form in the attempt to understand the past). In suggesting that images of the heads may cause offence, the Natural History Museum is not suggesting that the heads should not be 'used'. On the contrary, it asserts the rights of science to use them. What is denied, however, is the value of any other context in which the heads might provoke insight or stimulate understanding.

One of the important assumptions of this installation, and of the parallel text, is that knowledge is powerfully embedded in the visual, and in various forms of representation; but that the nature of this knowledge requires careful scrutiny. The drive by science to describe, measure, record and dissect Khoisan bodies in the nineteenth century found expression in diagrammatic drawings, anthropometric photographs, casts and collections of body parts. The image conjured up by the term 'Bushman' is generally not one which is contextualised by a specific history, or by heroic acts, by literature, or by political or power struggles. The image is one of physical type or specimen, defined under the rubric of science and of physical anthropology, and then rendered immutable through photography, museum exhibits, popular films, advertisements, novels and popular histories.

The contributors to this book were each invited to produce an article that would reflect an aspect of their research. My intention was to include scholars working in a variety of disciplines, so as to suggest some sense of the complexities of this subject, and the value of multiple approaches. My hope was that the intersections between disciplines would provoke new insights. The article that begins this volume, Stephen Greenblatt's *Mutilation and Meaning*, may at first be read as an alien ship in the murky waters of the Khoisan past, but it is crucial in doing two things. The first is to identify a shift, in the early Enlightenment, from a reading of the marked body in terms of an opposition between the sacred and the abominable, to a reading of the same marks in terms of a

distinction between the natural and the unnatural. The second is to make a link between this shift and the origins of ethnography, where, on the one hand, there was a disgust at the 'unnatural' bodies of the barbarians, and, on the other, the recognition that these same 'unnatural' marks or practices had their equivalents at home. It therefore provides some deep background to the European impulse to collect information about strange bodies or parts of bodies. David Chidester's parallel article, *Mutilating Meaning*, brings some of these issues into a focus on the Khoisan body.

Many of the articles in this volume reveal the extraordinary European fascination with the Khoisan anatomy. Some deal with neglected aspects of history. Others expose some of the richness of the intellectual traditions constituted by the art, the language, and the symbolic and ritual practices of the Khoisan. In a number of papers, the contribution of linguist Wilhelm Bleek and linguist and ethnographer Lucy Lloyd is powerfully felt.

I have constructed this book as a tribute to Lucy Lloyd. All too often ignored in the face of the achievements of Wilhelm Bleek, or cast into the role of his sister-in-law assistant, Lucy Lloyd was responsible for the creation of an archive which is both extraordinary for its scholarship and

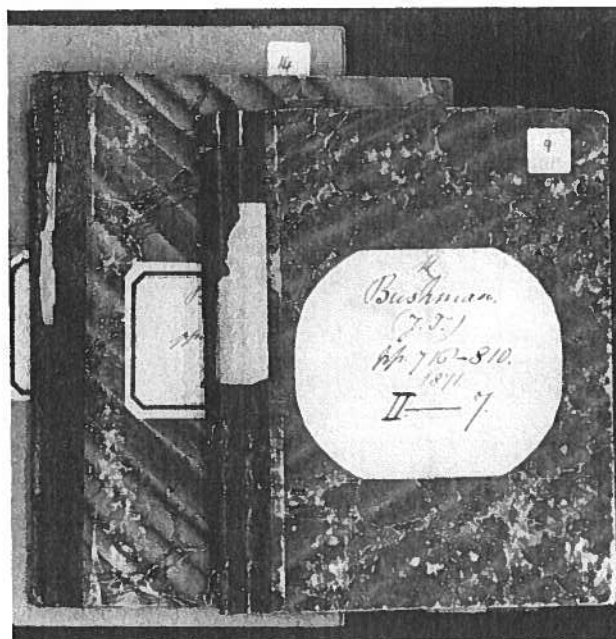


Figure 10 A few of Lucy Lloyd's notebooks which are part of the Bleek and Lloyd Archive at the University of Cape Town. UCT BC 151

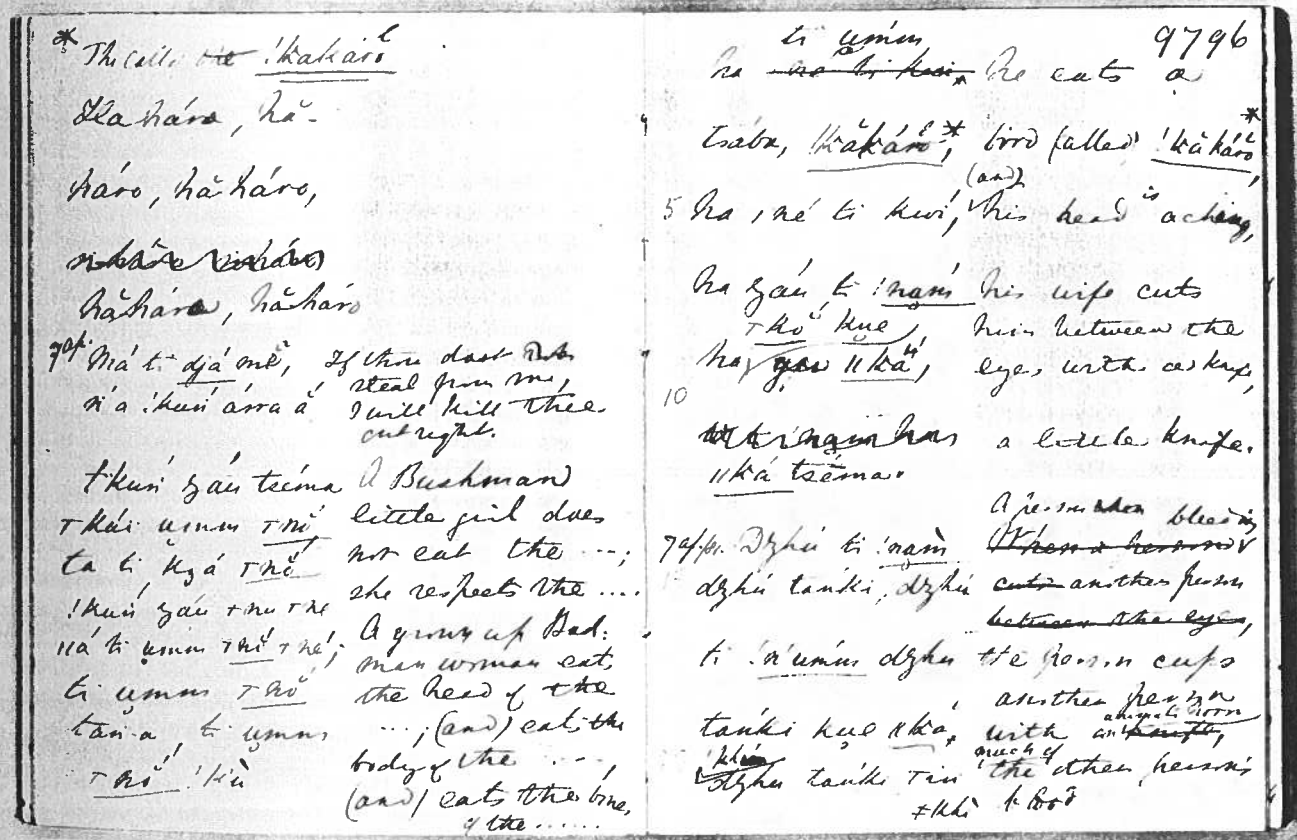


Figure 11 An open page from one of Lucy Lloyd's notebooks. UCT BC 151 Book 114 1880



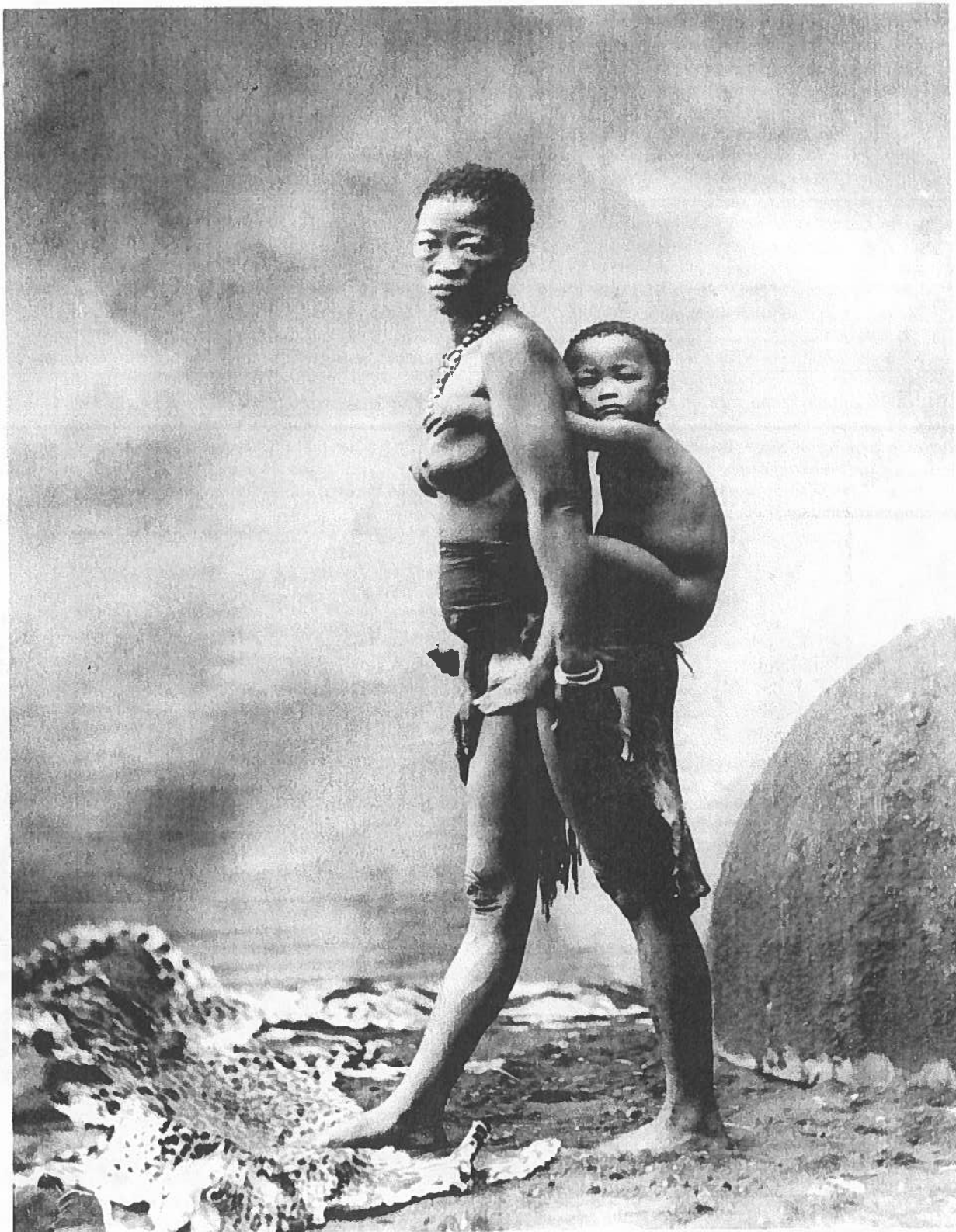


Figure 12 N'Arbety and her son, N'Arki, two of Farini's "African Pygmies or Dwarf Earthmen" exhibited in England in the 1880s. PRM B11:4

ethnography, and remarkable for its formal innovation in the face of intellectual traditions of people that were fundamentally different from her own. The Bleek and Lloyd archive is a 13 000-page record of a series of relationships between two European scholars and a group of /Xam and !Kung individuals whose common aim was to preserve the memories of cultures and traditions which were fatally threatened.

But the archive is much more than that. It has a visual presence, and its structure requires that it be read, not as a narrative or a set of narratives, but as a complex network interweaving ideas and stories that link one with the other, that confound a sense of chronology, that throw into doubt one's sense of time and, ultimately, one's sense of what is real.

On the surface, the books in which Lloyd recorded her interviews are ordered and linear. A /Xam text runs down a right-hand column of the page, and an English translation accompanies it on the left. But the stories she was recording were not linear, and neither was the method of measuring the time frame of their occurrence. To accommodate the qualities of these oral traditions, she would often introduce a parallel text which would run alongside the

story on the left-hand page (Figure 11). The result was to give a new dimension to the story, to make the process of reading an active and mobile one, and to give a materialising life to the notion of //Kabbo, one of her principal informants, that stories his people told were like the winds that came from far off, and could be felt.

In the construction of her archive, Lloyd gave substance to the idea that meaning is present in the formal arrangement of things, and it is through that arrangement that knowledge which cannot be realised by the written word is to be found. In the exhibition, the articulation of the gallery space is crucial in the exploration of that knowledge. In this book, the parallel text functions in a way that implies that there is much that lies beyond the pages of the book, and that images and representations serve less to illustrate texts, than to irritate the boundaries of the knowledge those texts are capable of encrypting. But it also serves to suggest, as Lloyd's archive does, that there is not just one narrative, nor one history, nor even one past, but that our knowledge of other realities is most severely limited when we limit the formal frameworks that we choose to employ in understanding them.



Figure 13 Photograph taken c.1910 by Dorothea Bleek in the Prieska area of the northern Cape. Bleek reported that of all the relatives she met of the /Xam who had worked with her father and Lucy Lloyd in the 1870s, none remembered any of their stories. "The folklore was dead," she said, "killed by a life of service among strangers and the breaking up of families." (UCT BC, 15)