

Convening Context: Reading the Bleek and Lloyd !xun Collection Digitally

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the possibilities the digital offers in convening material across time and place, and the new insights into historical collections that are thereby enabled. Drawing on the 19th century Bleek and Lloyd Archive's visual works, notebooks, and dictionary cards of the northern San !xun language, I show that the convenor, Lucy Lloyd, devised a referencing system that allows the material to span across restrictive categories, and beyond the physical limitations of the page. Through two of my own digital curations of selected !xun material, and material beyond the collection, I demonstrate how digital affordances enable the material to be read together across time and place, and following Lloyd's referencing system, to be mutually informative, arguing that Lloyd organised the material in a way that almost anticipates digital affordances nearly 150 years later.

Keywords: Bleek and Lloyd Collection; digital curation; digital affordances; digitised archives

1 Introduction

The Bleek and Lloyd Collection includes about 160 notebooks, tens of thousands of dictionary slips, and other documents and objects, as well as more than 500 drawings and watercolours, embracing several indigenous click languages, including !xam of the arid Northern Cape of South Africa, and !xun of northern Namibiaⁱ. The collection was convened in Cape Town during the mid- to late 19th century by Lucy Lloyd and philologist, Wilhelm Bleek. It was listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 1997 – the !xam notebooks acclaimed as “the largest and most important part of the collection” (UNESCO: 3). The !xam texts, recorded by Bleek and, mostly, Lloyd, have received extensive scholarly attention. Lloyd convened the !xun material with four !xun youths – named !nanni,

Tamme, luma, and Da – from 1879 to 1881, after Bleek's death. However, this part of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection has been largely ignored. Even in Lloyd's own 1911 publication *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* – the seminal work in which her and Bleek's research culminated – the !xun material is consigned to an appendix.

The Digital Bleek and Lloyd, an edited website publishing the notebook and drawing collection of the archive, launched in 2007, is the only place (albeit virtual) where most of the collection's content is held together and is freely accessibleⁱⁱ. Since the 1930s, its analogue content has been distributed mainly between three institutions – the National Library's Cape Town campus, Iziko South African Museum, and the University of Cape Town – reflecting traditional fields of study attributed to parts of the collection (Weintroub 2006; Dubow 2006). The !xun visual works, however, have been haphazardly dispersed among these institutions, I argue, because they do not adhere to traditional forms of categorisation. The Digital Bleek and Lloyd and National Library's digitised collection echo these gaps and divides through the categorisations ascribed to the materialsⁱⁱⁱ.

In this paper, I show that Lloyd devised a referencing system for the collected materials that allowed its content to span across restrictive categories and beyond the physical limitations of the page. She constructed the Bleek and Lloyd Collection to be self-referential, and enabled the various kinds of materials to be read together in a way which might, today, be associated with hyperlinks. As part of a relaunch of the Digital Bleek and Lloyd^{iv}, I aim to highlight, through a digital reconstruction and curation of the !xun material, the knowledge obscured and disregarded as being of intellectual value. Using Lloyd's referencing system as a point of departure, this will include bringing together material separated by time and place, and creating intersections and confluences that the digital offers (Lloyd 1875; Lloyd 1881; Bleek and Lloyd 1911). Digital affordances facilitate such new insights into historical collections, and supported by interdisciplinary interventions, it is possible for

historically disregarded knowledge to be incorporated into present day studies.

2 Distribution between institutions

Lucy Lloyd received training in linguistics only from the renowned Bleek, yet he admitted to her having a better ear for the !xam language than himself and having conducted most of their project^v. Lloyd was a progressive individual for her time, and for the Cape Colony, advocating for the preservation of the land, language, and lifeways of southern African indigenous people, and occupying a space in the male-dominated scientific community^{vi}. Despite receiving half his salary, Lloyd also took over Bleek's respected position as curator of the Grey Collection at the Public Library after his death, as she was the only person with the necessary knowledge to do so (Schmidt 1996). In 1913, she became the first woman in South Africa to receive an honorary doctorate, awarded by the (then) University of the Cape of Good Hope (Schmidt 1996). After Lloyd's death in 1914, the materials relating to her and Bleek's research were left in her will to her niece Dorothea Bleek, and what had not already been consigned was distributed to the three institutions after her death in 1948 (Weintroub 2006). Objects were donated to the South African Museum as an ethnographic collection; manuscripts, correspondence, and unpublished material to the National Library; and the research materials – the notebooks and language studies – to the University (Weintroub 2006). Material deemed personal was retained by the Bleek descendant families.

During the 1930s, when donations of parts of the Bleek and Lloyd archive began, the custodians of the national estate included the South African National Gallery, where art was consigned; the National Library which was a legal deposit institution also including manuscripts; the South African Museum which held natural history and anthropological collections; and the University of Cape Town which housed research collections. Parts of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection held at the University have received extensive scholarly attention (see Bank 2006; Bennun 2004; Deacon and Dowson eds. 1991; Deacon and Foster 2005;

James 2001; Hewitt 2008; Hollman 2004; Lewis-Williams 1981; Skotnes 1991; Skotnes 2007; Szalay ed. 2002; Vinnicombe 2009; Watson 1991; Wessels 2018) yet its !xun drawings and watercolours, most of which have been held at the Iziko South African Museum and the National Library's Special Collections, somehow evaded study almost altogether. Regarding the works' content, the institutional split appears entirely haphazard; thus, it may be fair to assume that these materials were not considered to adhere to either institution's traditional scholarly interests entirely. It may be that the !xun materials, which were not presented as central to Bleek and Lloyd's "Bushman Researches" project, were seen as neither anthropological enough for the museum, intellectual enough for the university, nor literary enough for the library.

The Digital Bleek and Lloyd, edited by Pippa Skotnes and launched in 2007, is the only place where the majority of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection is held together and can be navigated freely. Not unlike their physical and geographical separation between the three institutions, however, the !xun notebooks, and drawings and watercolours are presented separately, giving the appearance of two distinct collections. The keywords describing the visual works do not lead to the notebooks, and vice versa. The visual works under the custodianship of the National Library are displayed in the library's own digital collection named The Bleek Collection, where each work is tagged as "children's drawing^{vii}", sustaining the notion that the collection's makers were too young to be able to contribute to an intellectual project. !nanni and Tamme, however, were teenagers in 1879, and in !xun society would be active contributors to their communities.

3 Research on the !xun collection

The scholarly attention that the !xun collection has received, albeit very limited in comparison to the !xam collection, has primarily been focussed on the !nanni, Tamme, luma, and Da's personal histories and attempting to ascertain where they were from. Little attention has been paid to what it was they shared with Lloyd and the intellectual

value thereof. After the publication of *Specimens* in 1911, their drawings and watercolours were again considered in some earnest only in 1970 by archaeologist Ione Rudner, who was dismissive of their knowledge and ability to represent actual plants or animals, frequently describing the visuals as “blobs” or as “crude” (Rudner 1970:148-154). Then, in 2002, anthropologist Miklós Szalay curated an exhibition around the drawings and watercolours named “Moon as Shoe: Drawings of the San”, followed by a publication of the same name. Szalay claimed that no contextual evidence around the !xun boys’ past or their families existed (2002: 21). Although it is noted that !nanni, Tamme, luma, and Da’s drawings and watercolours are “a testimony to [their] knowledge and skills” (Szalay 2002: 24), the intellectual value of their works is ultimately reduced in being presented as subject to individual interpretation^{viii}. The first thorough investigation into the !xun collection was by Pippa Skotnes in her publication *Claim to the Country* (2007:237-270), where she disproves previous assertions that the four boys were from an “extremely remote area [that] had been visited by few literate travellers of any kind” (Bieseke 2002: 55), an “undisturbed Bushmen world of northern South West Africa” (Schmidt 1996: 71), by drawing attention to the many different groups and traders they came in contact with in northern Namibia. In Marlene Winberg’s 2011 MA thesis and essay in *Uncertain Curature* (2014:130-153), she reconstructs the !xun materials to suggest a reading of one of the boys’ personal histories.

The !xun drawings and watercolours have been seen as poignant and beautiful, and considered for their aesthetic and almost sentimental attributes, but not as obviously generative of scholarship, nor of intellectual value, whereas the !xun texts were understood to be contributing to the important work of recording language and compiling the dictionaries Lloyd, and then Dorothea Bleek, were working on. Tamme, !nanni, luma, and Da’s drawings and watercolours are one of the earliest collections, if not the earliest, of visual works on paper made by southern African indigenous people, and are richly diverse in visual content and subject matter. Using charcoal, pencil, and

watercolours, they carefully portrayed and described the uses of the trees and plants of their countries, habitats and growth patterns, and the ways these were prepared and consumed. They drew intricate maps of their countries in relation to one another’s^{ix}, of the way they travelled to the Cape via Walvis Bay, and of the layout of their family huts and fires. Lengthy narrations about a shape-shifting character named !xue are accompanied by detailed drawings of him in various states of being, and wildlife scenes are shown with each animal’s tracks and footprints. Lloyd captured their explanations in detailed annotations on each work.

4 Lloyd’s referencing system

In addition to her detailed transcriptions, Lloyd devised a referencing system that allowed the knowledge and narrations related to her by the !xam and !xun instructors to span across restrictive categories, and beyond the limited capacity of paper and notebooks. Her meticulous system of organising thousands of pages of content point to a standardised methodology. Her approach may have been influenced by the academic and scientific milieu at the Cape in which she was involved. She was a founding member of the Folk-lore Journal, which was active during the !xun boys’ first two years at Mowbray – 1879 and 1880. The Folk-lore Society, of which Lloyd was also a member, make clear the scientific intentions for their journal in the preface of their first edition, stating that the journal is aimed at “philologists, ... ethnologists, and those students of Comparative Folk-lore for the benefit of whose branch of science it is chiefly intended” (Folk-lore Journal 1879:3).

In her report to the Cape Parliament which had provided some funding for Bleek and Lloyd’s “Bushmen Researches” since 1872, Lloyd clearly intended to present the !xam narrations as interrelated to one another, and to be of scientific interest. She concludes her report by thanking Misters Roland Trimen (entomologist and curator of the South African Museum at the time); Harry Bolus (a well-known botanist); and H.W. Oakley (naturalist and acting curator at the South African Museum during Trimen’s periods of leave) whom

she consulted for the scientific names of plants and animals (1889:28).

Working within the boundaries and limitations of the typed page, and according to categorisations Bleek had established in his first report to the Cape Parliament in 1873, Lloyd made use of her referencing system to be less restrictive of the content. She would point the reader to different parts of the same narration, listed under different categories, to invite multiple understandings on the same topic. For example, “107. The song sung by Bushmen to the *Phyllomorpha paradoxa*, or ‘Withered-Leaf Insect’, §196” under *poetry* refers the reader to “196. A game played with the *Phyllomorpha paradoxa* or ‘Withered-leaf’ Insect” under the category *customs and superstition* (1889:12,18). In such cases, Lloyd would extract particular pages of the narration in the notebooks concerning the respective categories under which it was placed.

Through this careful organisation and cross-referencing, Lloyd set out to go beyond the physical limitations of the page and employed a manner of thinking and reading that we, today, might associate with hyperlinks. In her preface to *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, she addresses the limitations of the printed book failing the content by stating, “in the arrangement of [the illustrations], it has not been easy to place them appropriately as regards the text, as anything standing between text and translation would materially hinder the usefulness of the latter” (1911: xiv-xv). The majority of the images, which were primarily by Tamme and !nanni, had to be placed toward the end of *Specimens*.

Lloyd’s 1889 report to the Cape Parliament is a simple example of the system she devised to accommodate the !xam and !xun narrations. She constructed the Bleek and Lloyd Collection to be self-referential, and enabled the various kinds of materials to be read together. The page numbering, always referring to the notebooks, is consistent throughout the projects that stemmed from them, including the construction of dictionaries. Lloyd’s method was to copy words from the notebooks onto dictionary cards with the

English translation and the notebook page numbers on which the word occurred. The word would then be underlined in the notebooks as an indication that it had been entered into the dictionary.

It is therefore possible to use the !xam and !xun dictionaries not merely as wordlists, but as indicators of a greater intellectual project. Words in the dictionaries are linked to pages in the notebooks. In the !xun collection, Lloyd at times refers to a corresponding visual work in a notebook entry, and vice versa, by noting the date on which the work was created, or the narration entered. Following Lloyd’s intermittent referencing between the notebooks and visuals, I propose, through my digital reconstruction, an integrated reading of the !xun collection. The dated and annotated drawings and watercolours will be organised chronologically and linked to corresponding dates and subject matter in the notebooks, revealing the materials as mutually informative.

5 Digital affordances and curations

The !xun collection, consisting of the self-referential notebooks, visual works, and dictionary, can therefore be visualised as a web. Through digital curations and a reconstruction, I aim to show its constituent parts as integrated, mutually elucidating, and of equal importance, and thereby bring the previously disregarded knowledge of !nanni, Tamme, luma, and Da to the forefront. Digital affordances allow for the collection’s self-referential construction to be mobilised and to be expanded upon, something Lloyd had no way of achieving in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through print publication. Subject matter and dates can be read seamlessly across the archive, and interdisciplinary interventions can introduce new insights and understandings.

By digitally collating and curating material from the !xun collection, I aim to highlight the botanical knowledge of plants, trees, and the landscape the boys represented in their narrations and visual works, and to draw attention to its intellectual value. I have selected material from outside the

collection to show connections beyond the drawings and watercolours themselves, thereby illustrating the reach of Lloyd's botanical and zoological interests, and her system of classification. Drawing on material beyond the collection also further elucidates what it was the boys were trying to convey to Lloyd in their works, narrations, and explanations.

However, I would be separating the content, once again, by creating a curations for identified plants, trees, and animals. The collected materials are inherently entangled – multiple species of trees, for example, could be represented in the same visual work (as they would occur in the landscape) and relate to the notebooks in various ways – through corresponding dates of creation and entry, and various corresponding or related subject matter. Digital affordances accommodate the entangled materials by suggesting a guided path through the separate curations, but not enforcing it. Users could move through the collection and curations as they wish, and be encouraged to forge new paths in reading and understanding the material. The curations would be provisional, too, and subject to editing and the addition of new content.

As part of a relaunch of the Digital Bleek and Lloyd, my digital curations bring together visual works and notebook entries of related subject matter, and include further reading, images, sound clips, video material, and maps, with the aim of contextually enhancing the materials. The curation of the *!nin* tree – *Pterocarpus angolensis*, or wild teak in English (König and Heine 2008: 55), for example, will present all visual works of this tree chronologically alongside notebook entries corresponding to the works' date of creation, and other entries relating to the annotations. To illustrate such a curation, !nanni's first drawing of this tree, made on 2 February 1880^x, serves as a good example (!nanni 1880). Following the notebook entry of the same date^{xi}, Lloyd translated her annotations in !xun as, "tree bearing a red flower and yellow fruit which is eaten by the *!gui* and *!gaxa*, not by the Bushmen" (!nanni, Tamme and Lloyd 1880). On the opposite page, the translation for *!gui* is given: hyena. The

dictionary cards further clarify *!gui* as "spotted hyena, *Crocuta maculate*" and *!gaxa* as Hyena Villosa, commonly known in English as a brown hyena (BC151 Series A).

Alongside the !xun words for two respective hyenas, Lloyd noted the two names for the lion: *xam* and *!ne*. The lion's name (*xam*), Tamme explained on 20 October 1880^{xii}, is generally avoided for fear of offending it, and *!ne* is used instead (Tamme 1880). More than a year after !nanni created his first drawing of *!nin*, on 7 June 1881, both he^{xiii} and Tamme^{xiv} painted the *!nin* tree again, but this time in greater detail and with more annotated descriptions (!nanni 1881). Tamme painted a detailed "whirring instrument", as Lloyd called it, which he and !nanni said was made from the wood of the *!nin* tree, and called the "whirring instrument" *xam*, meaning 'lion' (Tamme 1881). Included in the curation would be Tamme and !nanni's first mention of *xam* instrument: "*!ne* which makes such a loud noise, used at night, that the lion answers, believing it another lion. Then the !kun desist"^{xv} (!nanni, Tamme, and Lloyd 1879). Here, they called the "whirring instrument" by its other name, also meaning 'lion' – *!ne*. !han#kass'o told Lloyd of a similar instrument used by the !xam called a *!goin!goin*^{xvi}, although this was used to attract bees to provide honey for people to eat, in contrast to !nanni and Tamme's explanations of using it as protection against lions (!han#kass'o 1878). In English, both these instruments are known as bullroarers.

Accompanied by a sound clip of a bullroarer in action^{xvii}, which indeed simulates the roar of a lion or the sound of a buzzing swarm of bees, and links to digitised collections of musical instruments^{xviii}, the digital realm allows a deeper understanding of the content through a curation that offers context. Tamme and !nanni's detailed knowledge of the tree's appearance and use is highlighted and further supported by linking digital botanical collections and data sets, such as the Global Biodiversity Information Facility^{xix} and Flora of Caprivi^{xx}, which provide photographs of plant specimens in situ and maps locating their occurrence. Further context and understanding is

provided to the viewer by images of the spotted hyena^{xxi} and brown hyena^{xxii} – which were said to eat the fruit of the *#nin*.

Another example of a digital curation is that of the *xam tsaba*, literally meaning ‘lion bird’. Tamme painted a lion bird and woodpecker on 8 July 1881^{xxiii}, and on 30 September that year^{xxiv} he and !nanni drew detailed pictures highlighting the use of the lion bird’s feathers. Tamme drew “!xue’s head, adorned with the long feather of the lion bird” and !nanni drew^{xxv} a detailed description of “what the Makoba wear on their head, when going to hunt elephants; and hang up in the house after returning home”, indicating the significantly longer feather as that of the lion bird (Tamme 1881; !nanni 1881). The identification of the *xam tsaba* has been ascertained as the Long-tailed Paradise whydah^{xxvi} (König and Heine 2008: 51), thus !nanni and Tamme’s accounts of this bird are further elevated and bolstered by links I have selected to images, the bird’s call, and maps of where it has been sighted. Tamme’s first painting could also further be expanded upon by following links to curations of the *!yu* tree and *#gua* tree – likely a *Combretum* species (König and Heine 2008: 32), of which the leaves were used in purification rituals to cleanse a person who shot another. In this example, Tamme’s watercolours are activated not only by the sounds and photographs of the Paradise whydah, but by the

additional curation of the *#gua* tree stemming from it. This offers a more robust understanding of the environment and context which Tamme experienced back home in northern Namibia and represented in his painting.

Conclusion

These insights into !nanni and Tamme’s rich understanding of their cultural and physical environment, marooned from context and its mutually informing parts – both physically and on the Digital Bleek and Lloyd – are drawn into sharp focus through the discussed curatorial strategies. Digital curations present the collection’s content as interrelated and web-like, and therefore as non-hierarchical, and suggest new and multiple entry points to the collection, positioning all its constituent parts of equal importance and value.

In this paper, I have aimed to demonstrate the possibilities the digital offers in bringing together materials separated by space and time, and the new insights into historical collections that can result from it. Despite the various splits the !xun collection has been subjected to, digital affordances enable its constituting parts to be read seamlessly – as Lloyd likely intended – and bring the previously disregarded knowledge held within it to the forefront through digital curations and augmentations.

Notes

ⁱ Linguist Bernd Heine has shown that !nanni, Tamme, luma, and Da spoke a !xun dialect (written by Lloyd as !kun) of its north-western branch, from the Kavango area. By comparing extracts of Lloyd’s phonological !xun, and by process of elimination, Heine confirmed that they spoke the Kavango dialect, spoken in the Western Rundu District of northern Namibia and bordering areas of southern Angola (Heine 2012). The botanical identifications correspond to Heine’s assessment yet show that the boys spent enough time further east, in now-Botswana, and in lush riverine areas, likely that of the Zambezi region, to have had detailed knowledge on the

plants and trees of the area and of the MaYeyi people.

ⁱⁱ <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Following Skotnes’ argument, disrupting the disciplinary conventions ascribed to archival material “compel[s] the inclusion of more diverse elements”. From a curatorial standpoint, the objects donated to the South African Museum by Dorothea Bleek can be understood as archival texts, and the texts held by the University of Cape Town and National Library can be studied as objects (Hamilton and Skotnes 2014:3-4).

^{iv} As an edited digitised collection, the Digital Bleek and Lloyd is in the process of being relaunched to include essays and curations by several authors, aiming to highlight connections that demonstrate contemporary issues relating to the Collection, as well as its historical inheritances.

^v In the first draft of his first report to Cape Parliament, Bleek wrote, referring to Lloyd, “my knowledge of the language would be far smaller than it is, if I had not found kind and efficient help in my house from one who having at the same time a sharper ear and more leisure for these studies, has become far better practically acquainted with the language, and has collected more than double as large an amount of their native lore” (MSC 57 13(2)). Bleek’s acknowledgement of Lloyd’s knowledge and skill was ultimately not published.

^{vi} See Lloyd’s article published in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* of June 1878. She addressed those contributing to the preservation of indigenous languages in Africa as the “little band of workers” (1878: 350), emphatically advocated for the collection of traditional lore, and deplored those who deem it “of no practical value or importance” (1878: 351).

^{vii} <https://cdm21048.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p21048coll8/search>

^{viii} The publication concludes with contributions by two artists – Frédéric Bruly Bouabré and Keith Dietrich – who added or superimposed captions, commentary and reinterpretations “in [their] own idiom” and “in [their] own fashion” (Bouabré 2002:294; Dietrich 2002:299) of the !xun boys’ works.

^{ix} !nanni, !amme, !uma, and Da referred to areas in which groups of people lived as “countries”, or *!nuerre*. This term does not relate to sovereign states.

^x http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/NLLB_D_!n012.html

^{xi} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/books/BC_151_A2_1_112/A2_1_112_09283.html

^{xii} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/books/BC_151_A2_1_118/A2_1_118_09759.html

^{xiii} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/Iziko_SAMLB_!nBook3_005.html

^{xiv} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/Iziko_SAMLB_TaBook1_012.html

^{xv} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/books/BC_151_A2_1_109/A2_1_109_09042.html. This mention of the “whirring instrument”, however, is in reference to a different wood source – a bush named *!un !gua*. By the same method, this bush can be located in the notebooks and visual works to further inform an understanding of the instrument.

^{xvi} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/books/BC_151_A2_1_076/A2_1_76_06108.html

^{xvii} <https://vimeo.com/378528641>

^{xviii} <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/pkmi/find>. Dorothea Bleek gave two bullroarers to Percival Kirby for his collection of southern African musical instruments (Kirby 2013: 101). His collection was purchased by the University of Cape Town after his death, and much of it has been digitised by UCT Libraries Digital Collections and is freely available to the public. Images and metadata of the bullroarers, however, are still to come.

^{xix} <https://www.gbif.org/>

^{xx} <https://www.capriviflora.com/>

^{xxi} <https://eol.org/pages/311569>

^{xxii} <https://eol.org/pages/925983>

^{xxiii} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/Iziko_SAMLB_TaBook3_012.html

^{xxiv} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/Iziko_SAMLB_D_Ta003.html

^{xxv} http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/drawings/NLLB_D_!n094.html

^{xxvi} <https://ebird.org/species/eapwhy1>

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