

‘... speak that I may see thee’: Bushmen, Bleek, Language and Race in South Africa¹

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Representing Bushmen: South Africa and the Origin of Language. By Shane Moran. Rochester: University of Rochester Press. 2009. 210 pp. ISBN 978-1-58046-294-5.

In historiography and folklore the Bushmen are South Africa’s autochthonous founders, and the Bleek archive is a key document in the country’s ongoing attempts to forge an identity. Representing Bushmen offers a critique of this enterprise, but the central argument of Shane Moran’s book is that hierarchical ideas of language and its history have been central to the genesis of racial attitudes in South Africa. Bleek was a linguist before he was an ethnographer and Moran gives a careful account of Bleek’s On the Origin of Language and of the global context of Bleek’s scholarship. Invoking the broadest humane perspective, requiring the closest attention to textual detail and facing up to the evasions and disappointments of early twentieth-century South Africa, Moran’s book concludes with a recognition that we have room for action and grounds for hope.

In the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 16 August 2009, Alan Snitow reviewed *Heart of Dryness: How the Bushmen Can Help Us Endure the Coming Age of Permanent Drought* by James G. Workman (San Francisco: Walker Books, 2009). Workman is a ‘San Francisco ... journalist and water adviser to a number of international agencies and African governments’ who has identified with ‘the Kalahari Bushmen’s often heroic resistance ... an implacable foe ... to the Botswana government’s effort to drive them from their remaining homes and traditional ways’ (7). Here the Western journalist and water adviser is aligned with the Bushmen against the African government of Botswana. Both the imagery and triangulation recall G.W. Stow’s nineteenth-century account of the Bushmen’s resistance to the intruding ‘stronger’ races. As Shane Moran demonstrates in *Representing Bushmen*, the Bushmen have long been important ‘to the question of origins, culture and race’ (2), to which one might add survival or continuance, and have haunted the European (Enlightenment, imperialist, colonialist, modernist, post-colonial) imaginary for centuries.

The Bushmen are our originary humans, taking us back as close as we can get to origins, and yet always ‘tied to global forces’ (5) and in southern Africa also implicated in local politics. In South Africa the San are invoked in the rehabilitation of the post-apartheid community: ‘indigeneity is called upon to play its part in

¹ The quotation is from Ben Jonson. I have omitted the gendered opening words: ‘Language most shows a man ...’

grounding the nation' (6). The South African national coat of arms carries a motto in /Xam, one of the !Wi group of Southern Bushman languages. Now thought to be extinct as a spoken language, /Xam survives only in colonial philological transcriptions, most notably those of W.H.I. Bleek, Lucy Lloyd and Dorothea Bleek. The situation is typical: the Bushmen's power lies partly in their extinction.

Bleek, Moran's 'universal philologist', arrived in South Africa with Bishop Colenso in 1855 to work on the Zulu language, but his interest soon shifted to the Bushman languages. His doctoral thesis (Bonn, 1851) had dealt with the noun classes of southern African languages, Coptic, Semitic and other languages with sexual genders, and formed the basis of *On the Origin of Language as the First Chapter in the History of the Development of Humanity*, published in German in 1852 and in English translation in New York, with a new author's preface written in South Africa, in 1867. Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd conducted their interviews with Breakwater Bushmen between 1870 and 1875.

Bleek was widely published – politics, folklore, grammar – in South Africa, Europe and the USA and from the outset his work had global implications and an extensive readership. His immediate intellectual network linked him with Grimm, Humboldt, Haeckel, and further with Hegel, Marx, Engels and others. In 1870 Bleek was granted a pension from the Queen's Civil List, supplementing his stipend as librarian of the Grey Collection in Cape Town. The influence of Sir George Grey had been backed by Darwin, Lyell, Huxley and Bishop Gray among others. Since his death Bleek's work has been important, not without controversy, in both southern African and universal linguistics, invoked by politicians, historians and social scientists, and is at present deeply implicated in South Africa's attempts to come to terms with its past, manage its present and plan for its future. Shane Moran's argument is that the key to the understanding of the Bleek Archive lies in *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*.²

Representing Bushmen is less concerned with recuperation of the Bushmen ('the heroism of the unvanquished remnants') than with 'the negative structure of colonialism's power ... to problematize the nostalgia for lost origins and to reflect upon the post-apartheid sense of the present as a departure and a new beginning' (11). The question of the origin of language 'takes us to the heart of what we call humanism', since 'language provides the very definition of man', serving both to distinguish the human from the animal, and to construct a hierarchy of the human. The aesthetic capacity, imagination, metaphor and tropism are central to these articulations, and as Moran shows, literary studies play an important role in re-thinking 'the narrative and poetic modes in which we imagine the relation between past, present and possible futures' (11). But 'the aesthetics pass through semiology and ethnology' (29) and the system in which the Bushmen figure 'despite all the intricate complexities is invariably related to the material advantage of a particular dominant group' (30). We can sustain neither a nostalgic Africanism for a 'pre-colonial essence' (12) nor a naive liberal faith that racism is a demented straying from basic Western principles.

² W.H.I. Bleek, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Weimar: Herman Boehlau, 1868).

Chapter 2 is devoted to the problematic of the colonial intellectual. Moran is thus not concerned simply to point to the contradictions and limitations of Bleek's method and vision, but to show 'how the colonial archive is assembled and read' and 'What has been suppressed in the appropriation of Bleek's researches' (12). The 'guiding thread is the link between the account of the origin of language and [European/white] ethnocentrism' (14). The process exposes 'a mobile hierarchy that articulates the refinements within a common humanity that will ultimately be deployed to determine the status of African thought-forms' (15). Languages are graded on how they conform to imperial models, on the basis of whether their grammars use sexed-based gender, on the relative simplicity of their pronunciation, on their cultivation of metaphor. This leads to a distinction between ancestor-worship and god-centred religions. Ultimately the primacy of writing is invoked to maintain European supremacy in the hierarchy of languages. Reading 'the texts of colonialism' involves interrogation of their origins, of the historical sense, of the genres of historiography, of narrative itself.

Bleek cannot be dismissed as a mere 'colonial collaborator' (26). The colonial situation itself forces or tempts both coloniser and colonised to involve 'the intellectual imagination with the question of origins' (26). Yet Moran characterises the Bleek family archive as melancholic in its attempts to preserve a disappearing language from the inroads of colonial writing, the very script which gives European languages primacy over the tongues of the colonised.

In Moran's argument Bleek's research offers a lesson 'about the nature of intellectual production'. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of *Representing Bushmen* are devoted to a close reading of *On the Origin of Language*. In his philosophical opening Bleek relates the more refined conception of human nature to 'a theistically conceived origin', which involves consciousness as both self-reflective and self-determining: 'knowledge of language and thought entails knowledge of God's nature' (39). The possible divine origin of human language may suggest that the human is 'the aim of the world's development', but it does not follow 'that such a being can grasp out of itself the final goal of all knowledge' (39). Still, to have language may be to know the limits of language. That God is ineffable is not in itself ineffable, and we cannot go back to a world without words. The anthropomorphic God is a creation of metaphor and those languages are superior which rely on the tropism of a nominal 'sex-based gender' distinction and give rise to theistic religion rather than ancestor-worship. Tropism is a distinguishing feature of civilised man: 'Animals stick at the level of particularity' (47).

The question of the origin of language is one issue which necessitates a distinction between human and animal intelligence. Language is one boundary between human and animal. Is it a permeable membrane? Are human and animal contiguous, almost merging points on a spectrum, or does the proximity mean an unbridgeable gap? *On the Origin of Language* sets first the distinction between human and animal, to establish 'the proper nature of man' (49), which raises further the hierarchy within humanity.

Language begins with intuition and advances to concept, establishing 'the privilege of analogy' and developing 'the power of abbreviation' (49). Bushman languages achieve the first, but their elaborate clicks deny them the second. Bleek

recalls the Epicurean theory of human development through a natural phase and one based on active human reasoning. ‘As for the various sounds of *spoken language*, it was nature that drove men to utter these, and practical convenience that gave a form to the names of objects.’³

The process itself gives rise to the animal–human distinction and the hierarchy of humanity. Our understanding of ‘the rise of humanity’ from animal existence relies on ‘a comparison of the lowest conditions of humanity with those of the highest formation in the animal world’ (50). For example, Bleek implies a proportional relationship between animal speechlessness and the Hottentot language, and between that language and its ‘Indo-European relations’. The search is for the ‘life-giving power of volition’ which emerges in self-consciousness, distinct from the immediate sensuous life, and arising not simply from the instinctive affinity of solitary individuals but from the reciprocity and interaction of a speech community. As Lucretius asked, whence would ‘one man derive the power in the first instance of seeing with his mind what he wanted to do’?⁴

Thus the linguistically grounded capacity for organisation into larger unities ‘separates humanity from animality’. This is a move from ‘expression to representation and intention to communicate’ and there is a radical difference between interjection and speech, between ‘emotional and propositional language’. Nonetheless, the evolution of the word from sound remains uncertain, a transition which Bleek does not account for. The philosophical and emotional result, which has deep implications for the universal philologist and his colonial archive, is ‘the insecurity of possession’. The conventional nature of language, it seems, must eventually give rise to the Saussurean arbitrary.

Human language similarly moves away from indistinct heterogeneity toward consciousness of difference and conceptual precision. Humans become distinguished from animals by what is ‘deposited within language’ (63). Feeling may provoke us to act upon nature via the negation of feeling – work, while language moves from the articulation of feeling as the living process of the singular individual to the thinking consciousness that language makes possible. So there is a move from feeling (and work) to art. Writing becomes the summit of linguistic development in Bleek’s scheme. Chapter 5 expounds the ‘graphocracy’ and ‘ethnographism’ of Bleek’s scheme.

Chapter 6 moves from ‘the infrastructure of Bleek’s theory’ to his complex complicity in ‘the formation of South African racism’ (80). Moran shows, for example, that Bleek’s work only partly conforms to Martin Bernal’s analysis of the nineteenth-century shift in Western philology from the Ancient to the Aryan, towards a model which privileges Europe; Greece over Egypt, for instance. Bleek challenges the Aryan model. Much depends in Bleek’s argument here on the notion of ‘sex-denoting languages’, in which ‘the substantives are divided into classes or so-called genders, which have a certain relationship to the natural gender differences’ (90). Hottentot, together with Egyptian, other North African, Semitic and Indo-European languages, is of this group. The priority of Hottentot and Bushman,

3 Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe* (1951) tr. Ronald Latham, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966, V, 1028-1030: 202.
4 Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*, 203.

as close to the origin of language, must be acknowledged, yet their distance from the West must be maintained.

Bleek defends colonialism – ‘any well-conducted colonisation by a civilised nation is a benefit for uncivilised tribes’ (91) – and to that extent commits to the model of ‘development’, and the practices of labour and property to which it leads. While ‘the emerging idea of race is a response to the contradictions of development’ (131), Bleek’s concepts are not thoroughly determined biologically, but the potency (both aggressive and defensive) of racist discourse, even when it is not explicit, lies in its latency; ‘race’ can shift among blood, language, social structure and culture, and, as current South African politics shows, can be invoked at any time.⁵ History can change the status of a people (tribe, nation): Bleek speculated that the Australian Aborigines had ‘fallen’ from a higher stage of civilisation, as Thomas Pringle had thought of the Bushmen. Progress may stumble over ‘retrograde moments’.

Chapter 7 is concerned in some detail with Bleek’s linguistic and anthropological study of Zulu. In the basis of Zulu community in ‘genealogical blood-relationship’ Bleek identified what he saw as a characteristic shortcoming of such African societies. Ancestor-worship can only balance hope and fear, and a non-sex-denoting language cannot generate the tropism necessary for a humane ethics. ‘Lacking original personification, they [the Zulu] are denuded of mythology and bereft of theology, and ultimately the fully developed power of reason’ (98). Bleek’s almost visceral evocation of such a civilisation – patriarchal, polygamous, speaking a prefix-pronominal language, to which the head of the tribe stands as a rightful father – may bring to mind some aspects of the South Africa of Jacob Zuma.⁶ Although, in Bleek’s argument, the Zulus live in and are imprisoned by ‘a reality permeated with the supernatural’ (100), they lack imagination. They have not been capable of the transcendence of feeling which takes the human being into self-consciousness.

In Chapter 8 (‘Bushman Literature’) Moran addresses the attempt to utilise the Bleek and Lloyd Bushman research to promote ‘a humanist alternative to South Africa’s racialized past’ (115).⁷ Bleek argued that ‘both Bushmen and Australians ... are nearer akin to ourselves in their language and intellectual life than other races who far exceed them in point of civilization, e.g. the Negroes of Africa’. Yet in identifying with the Bushmen as artists Bleek had to gloss over the fact that their languages are genderless, so that ‘animating the inanimate with human qualities’

5 Salim Mukkavil argues that ‘racism persists in the Obama era, the supposedly post-racial world’, and, quoting Henry Giroux, reports that the new racism implies ‘that individuals should be judged by the content of their “character” and not by the colour of their skin’. Mukkavil observed ‘a new tactic of the right to broadly accuse those struggling against racial bias as racist’ and his account of the USA’s ‘cultural reservoir of racial biases’ and ‘race-specific, compensatory policies’ may have some South African resonance (S. Mukkavil, ‘The Paradox of a Black President’, *The Week-ender: Weekend Review*, Johannesburg, 24-5.10.2009, 1-2).

6 ‘...do we endorse our president’s polygamy because we take the Zulu tradition as a guideline to law or because our laws encourage the freedom to choose the values of our tradition? There is a difference between honouring tradition and cultural chauvinism, and liberation from anyone’s history need not be equivalent to denying it.’ (S. Shear, ‘Lost and found in translation’, *The Times*, Johannesburg, 13.10.2009: 17)

7 The bibliography of *Representing Bushmen* includes 50 books and articles (from archaeology to poetry) by 36 writers (mostly South African) on Bushman themes, all published since 1989. To these one could add Workman’s *Heart of Dryness* and the translations of Diä!kwain by Harold Farmer, the ex-Zimbabwean California poet. (His version of “The Broken String” is in *Poetry* magazine, April 2009.)

and the tropism, mythology and poetry that follow are not ‘the structural peculiarity of the sex-denoting languages after all’ (124).

Still, identification with the Bushmen has a long history and has been exploited in opposing ways. G.W. Stow made an epic story of the Bushmen’s resistance to the ‘stronger races’ (the Nguni) and implied a sympathy between San and settler as artists, whereas Alex La Guma and Mongane Wally Serote identified the Struggle with the Bushmen as ‘the first to fight’.⁸ In and since the work of Bleek, Bushmen continue to be distinguished as a ‘nation’,⁹ from, for example, the Hottentots, and representation of the Bushmen relies on a literary historical project to which ‘the tropism of personification, anthropomorphism, metaphor, and the category of mythology’ are central, as they were to Bleek’s ‘discriminations’. We cannot unambiguously use the Bushmen to counter ‘cultural racism’. In due course no doubt, ‘the textual remains [will] become tributary to another mythology sewn together from the remnants of colonialism’ (127).

In his closing chapter (‘Conclusion: Presentiment’) Shane Moran argues that while other ‘representations of the primitive’ could stand in for the Bushmen, Africa (perhaps particularly South Africa in its recent history) has ‘a singular signature within the concert of globalizing colonialisms’ (130). To understand the contradictions of both Bleek’s theory and the ambivalent complicity of our own time, ‘when the language of racial essentialism is in the process of being reinvented’ (132), we need to explore the ‘narcissistic economy’ (133) which mines the Bleek archive, ‘an apologetics of white researchers’ (137), a rite of pathos and piety, ‘loss and reconciliation ... contact and recognition’ (Carli Coetze cited 134). We simultaneously identify with and mourn the Bushmen: ‘the first people [are] grasped as the last people’. But we cannot stand outside our own history: ‘Inadvertently force is transformed into right ... unable to make what is just strong, we have made what is strong just’ (135). For Moran the challenge is to ‘interrogate rather than affirm the appeal of the colonial intellectual’ (138) and to recognise that the restoration of balance between the settlers (black and white) is left undisturbed by the idealisation of the autochthonous South Africans and their identification with the /Xam, as in the national motto. The ‘singular signature’ of South Africa is readable not in its search to revitalise a lost community, but to bring ‘erstwhile colonisers and colonised into a single political community *for the first time ever in history*’ (Mahmood Mamdani quoted, 139).

Have we heard ‘Racism’s Last Word’? Is racism a betrayal or a fulfilment of capitalism? In South Africa, ‘Poverty has worsened since 1994’ (7) and ‘class divisions have intensified, but not always along racial lines’ (146). In this context, Shane Moran’s ‘Presentiment’ arises from a meditation on //Kabbo’s feeling ‘that ... his body is tapping inside’. In the idea that ‘The Bushmen’s *letters* are in their bodies’ (140-1, my emphasis), did the translator incorporate /Xam beliefs into his Western schema? ‘Thinking about metaphor’ by ‘thinking through metaphor’, Moran recalls the Socratic analogy of the wax tablet of memory and concludes that

8 The ‘Groot Ode’ of N.P. van Wyk Louw, who asked why a Bushman should know more about South Africa than a modern Afrikaner, was inspired by a visit to the Altamira caves in Spain.

9 But ‘Including, as they did, the descendants of slaves and so-called “mixed” marriages and unions, the lines of descent became so tangled that even the possibility of a /Xam inheritance was lost’ (Pippa Skotnes quoted in note 42, 185).

‘the Bleek and Lloyd translations of *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* echo the first major Western treatment of memory and perception ...’ (143) It is at this level of humanity that Shane Moran is asking us to think. Our recognition of our own complicities ‘should not be taken to mean that wonder is cancelled, or that there are no options left’ (144).

Representing Bushmen is a very impressive book: carefully argued, rhetorically impressive, wide-ranging in its reading and sense of context, written with commitment and conviction, candid about the complexity of its subject, often moving, timely, and elegant in its eloquence. Shane Moran’s is an academic monograph that can go to work in the world. It should be recommended to students as an educative example of the processes of academic study in its combination of historical sensibility, scholarship and close reading.¹⁰

10 I remarked some proofreading lapses but generally the production qualities are good. The binding of my review copy is coming apart: but that may be because of the time I have spent reading.