

ANTHROPOLOGY, RACE AND EVOLUTION: RETHINKING THE LEGACY OF
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Introducing you to Dr. Jekyll

This paper emerged out of a conversation with my colleague Ciraj Rassool while we were putting together a course on representation called “Africa, Race and Empire”, offered to second-year history students at the University of the Western Cape last year. Ciraj questioned whether it was accurate to characterise Wilhelm Bleek as “South Africa’s first anthropologist” as one of my entries on our time line announced. This paper may be read as an attempt to justify and elaborate on that claim. It uses the figure of Wilhelm Bleek as a means of exploring ideas about race, anthropology and evolution in the Cape Colony during the second half of the nineteenth century. It also attempts to begin to provide a bridge between my own work on racial ideology in the first half of the nineteenth century and Saul Dubow’s detailed study of scientific racism in South Africa in the early twentieth century.¹

There has been a major revival of interest in Wilhelm Bleek in South African scholarship across a wide range of disciplines during the last two or three decades. Common to almost all recent writings on Bleek’s contribution, however, is a selective and highly romanticised interpretation of his work. The idealisation of Wilhelm Bleek owes much to the image presented in Lewis-Williams’s massively influential reinterpretation of San rock art. Lewis-Williams relies extensively on the Bleek-Lloyd ethnography as one of the major sources for his analysis of San rock art and locates his own work as a revival, after a century of quiescence, of Bleek’s symbolic interpretation of San rock paintings. In his 1981 study *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in southern San Rock Paintings*, Bleek is celebrated for appreciating that San rock art encodes “the ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind, and filled it with religious feelings” and for suggesting that an appreciation of this symbolism would lead to a “radical” reappraisal of commonly held stereotypes about the San.²

¹. S.Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1995).

². D.Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in southern San Rock Paintings* (London, 1981), 7.

Using this 1874 quotation from Bleek as his title, Lewis-Williams has more recently synthesised his eulogistic appraisal of Wilhelm Bleek's contribution to scholarship: "Bleek was a remarkable man in many ways, not least in his prescience. Long before the phrase 'oral literature' became common in anthropology, Bleek called his texts, not superstitions, lore or myths, but, uncompromisingly, 'literature'. In choosing that word he was putting the rich and varied San material on a par with Western written literature and thus challenging the conceptions of his time relating to what were regarded as 'primitive' peoples". For Lewis-Williams then Bleek was a man before his time: "Bleek saw beyond the paintings themselves and perceived the importance of San rock art in southern African history and race relations as no one had ever done ... At once Bleek saw down the decades and realised that San rock art very possibly constituted the most powerful argument against those who believed the San authors of these paintings to be simple, primitive and distasteful".³

Robert Thornton's investigation of Wilhelm Bleek's intellectual contribution, written in 1983, makes much more effort to locate Bleek within his ideological milieu but also tends towards idealism. As Thornton indicates, Bleek was an intellectual pivot in South Africa, a figure who straddled the European and colonial worlds of science. He was undoubtedly the leading figure in Cape intellectual life from the late 1850s through to the mid-1870s. He was at the centre of a tight colonial intellectual network which included Bishop Colenso and Governor George Grey, with whom he remained in close contact throughout his years at the Cape. He was also connected with the European scientific world as is indicated by his regular correspondence and exchanges with the leading evolutionists and scientists of his day, Charles Darwin and his disciples, the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, the British anthropologist Thomas Huxley and the British geologist Charles Lyell.

Thornton presents Bleek and Sir George Grey (his friend and patron) as jointly infused with "liberal universalism" as exemplified in the principles governing Bleek's organisation of the Grey Collection in the South African Library. Bleek, like Grey, is seen to have been animated by Carlylean romanticism and Thornton foregrounds the religiously inspired monogenism of Bleek, his belief in "a single common origin to all human languages and ultimately of the monophyletic origin of mankind". Thus he emphasises that Bleek took issue with the polygenetic theories of human origins espoused by his cousin Ernst Haeckel, the leading German zoologist with whom he remained in close correspondence throughout his decades of research at the Cape. Thornton also

³. D.Lewis-Williams, 'The Ideas Generally Entertained with regard to the Bushmen and their Mental Condition' in P.Skotnes, ed., *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town, 1996), 307-8.

places strong emphasis on the influence of the tradition of German Higher Criticism on Bleek and highlights the importance of his contacts with and defence of the heretical bishop, William Colenso.⁴

⁴. R.J.Thornton, '“This Dying Out Race”: W.H.I.Bleek’s Approach to the Languages of Southern Africa’, *Social Dynamics*, 9/2 (1983), 1-10.

While Thornton's romanticisation of George Grey has been destroyed by Jeff Peires's portrait of Grey as ruthless autocrat,⁵ Bleek's reputation as a visionary humanitarian has, if anything, been reinforced in recent years. In fact, Martin Hall overtly contrasts the humanitarian scholar Bleek with the ruthless, land-grabbing colonial governor that Peires exposed. According to Hall, Bleek and Grey may be characterised as the Jekyll and Hyde of nineteenth century South Africa: "Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* serves as a metaphor for the pairing of Bleek and Grey. Where their shared intellectual interests took Bleek into the ethereal realm of northern scholarly discourse, Grey instigated some of the most brutal colonial subjugations of the southern hemisphere".⁶

So too Pippa Skotnes, curator of the Miscast Exhibition and editor of the collection *Miscast*, presents Wilhelm Bleek as a counterpoint to a background story of colonial violence and oppression in southern Africa: "Bushmen-European relationships resulted in the tragic loss of thousands of lives and communities, in multiple language death and cultural genocide, evidenced by the images of trophy heads, hangings, prison victims and starvation. That these relationships also reflected the rarer moments of mutual respect and a common humanity is witnessed in the life work, for example, of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, which resulted in the closest thing we have to a 'Bushman voice' from the nineteenth century". The book *Miscast* itself is dedicated to Lucy Lloyd whose contribution "is all too often ignored in the face of the achievements of Wilhelm Bleek".⁷

In her work on San rock art, Janette Deacon reinforces this idealistic image of Wilhelm Bleek. Although Deacon and Dowson acknowledge that the Bleek ethnography raises issues of ethnographic accuracy and Western domination of indigenous peoples in their Preface to the collection *Voices of the Past: Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection*, based on a 1991 conference and published in 1996, they fall back on Lewis-Williams's appraisal of the emancipatory import of his researches: "Whatever shortcomings one may identify, however, the

⁵ J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nonqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-57* (Johannesburg, 1989), 45-77.

⁶ M. Hall, 'The Proximity of Dr. Bleek's Bushmen' in Skotnes, ed., *Miscast*, 146.

⁷ P. Skotnes, 'Introduction' in Skotnes, ed., *Miscast*, 18.

contributions to this volume show that the Bleek and Lloyd collection is still accessible after more than a century and provides much fuel for challenging the racial stereotypes and perceptions held about the San of southern Africa”.⁸

⁸. J.Deacon and T.A.Dowson, ed., *Voices from the Past: /Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection* (Johannesburg, 1996), 3.

Deacon's contribution to *Miscast* presents Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd as "the only two out of the tens of thousands of Europeans in southern Africa who took the trouble to learn a San language and then to write down what the San had to say". The Bleek-Lloyd records are described as "the result of remarkable mutual respect and co-operation between interviewers and interviewees". Deacon introduces her article, titled "A Tale of Two Families", as a miraculous story of mutual friendship: "The 1870s saw the unfolding of a remarkable relationship between two families who, in the ordinary way, would never have met each other, much less come to know intimate details about each others' lives. On the one hand was a German immigrant and philologist Dr. Wilhelm Bleek, his wife Jemima and their four daughters, and Jemima's unmarried sister, Lucy Lloyd. They lived at their home The Hill in Mowbray and moved in 1875 to Charlton House ... On the other hand was an extended family of the /Xam San from the north-western Cape, some of whom had been arrested for stock theft and had been sent to the Breakwater prison in Cape Town for the duration of their sentences. The patriarch was Jantje Tooren, or //Kabbo, his son-in-law Klein Jantje or /Han=kass'o, //Kabbo's nephew, David Husar or Dia!kwain, and Dia!kwain's sister Griet or !Kweiten ta //ken and her husband Klass Katkop or /Kasin and their three small children".⁹

The romantic image of Wilhelm Bleek is thus a powerfully consensual view in the existing literature and one which, if anything, has gathered force in recent years. My problem with the portrait of Bleek as Dr. Jekyll, as a lone (or assisted) counterpoint in a tale of colonial oppressions is not so much that it ignores the obvious relations of fieldwork inequality between Bleek and the Bushman in his home or that it denies the very real ambiguities in Bleek's racial ideology (which to be fair Hall and others do point out), or even that it fails to see in Bleek's ideology an expression of what scholars have recently referred to as the "Janus face" of South African liberalism.¹⁰ Nor would I attempt to deny that the Bleek-Lloyd Collection is remarkable and did generate cross-cultural sympathy and a vast ethnographic resource.

⁹. J.Deacon, 'A Tale of Two Families' in Skotnes, ed., *Miscast*, 93.

¹⁰. See C.Crais, 'Race, the State and the Silence of History in the Making of Modern South Africa' (Africa Seminar, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, July 1992); M.Legassick, 'The State, Racism and the Rise of Capitalism in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony', *South African Historical Journal*, 1993, 28, 336-9.

My charge is a more fundamental and serious one: that this highly selective reading of Bleek's life and contribution, geared almost exclusively towards his "Bushman period" of the early 1870s essentially misses the point about Bleek. It fails to understand that Bleek's legacy was both less comfortable and more profound. I will argue in this paper that Bleek was pivotal in a much more far-reaching way than as the first person to notice the symbolic importance of San art or as a pioneering scholar of the San. He was in many respects the author of a modern understanding of race, South Africa's first systematic theorist of racial difference. This can only be appreciated if we take a broader, more wholistic and in-depth view of his *oeuvre* which includes analysis of his extensive writings in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* from the 1850s through to the 1870s, his 1869 treatise *On the Origin of Language*, his *Comparative Grammar of Southern African Languages* as well as a closer reading of his private correspondence.¹¹

My reappraisal of Bleek's legacy relies on a detailed reading of his theory, for Bleek was above all a theoretician rather than a creator of counter-stereotypes, as Lewis-Williams suggests. It is in the theory of Wilhelm Bleek that we can see the beginnings of serious thinking about race in South Africa and it is therefore no exaggeration to see Bleek as the figure who marks the transition from the hardened racial stereotyping of the early-mid nineteenth century to the intellectual racism of the twentieth century. In the sections that follow I argue for the centrality of the theory of evolution in Bleek's writings; his role in creating a system of classification based on comparative research into language, but one which he linked closely to racial classification and was subsequently taken up by physical anthropologists in South Africa; his use of language as a way of exploring the workings of "the native mind"; his active involvement in anthropometric photography; and his influence in entrenching the idea of "dying races" as an organising theme in contemporary racial ideology.

The importance of Bleek's ideas in the formulation of intellectual racism is surprisingly only touched on in Dubow's recent study. Although Dubow recognises that Bleek's thought was less egalitarian and more influenced by evolutionary assumptions than authors like Thornton have allowed, the intellectual influence of Bleek is scarcely given the attention it deserves. This is perhaps because Bleek's ideas were articulated before the creation of the institutional structures, notably universities and scientific societies, in which Dubow locates the rise of racial science in modern South Africa.¹² It is arguably at the deeper level of the structures of knowledge, the archaeology of knowledge in Foucault's terms, rather than the institutional level that we may see the extent of Bleek's influence on intellectual racism in modern South Africa.

¹¹. Lewis-Williams et al rely far too heavily on his two published reports of 1873, 1875 and the Bleek-Lloyd Archive, 1911 collection.

¹². S.Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, 32, 51, 66, 78-9, 81, 118. Bickford-Smith's book on *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge, 1995) bypasses Bleek in its analysis of emerging racial prejudice in the mid-late nineteenth century.

“Universal Philology” in an Evolutionary Paradigm

My own interest in the history of anthropology and racial ideology was stimulated by my reading in 1991 of George Stocking’s fascinating study of Victorian anthropology. Stocking makes a very powerful general argument for the centrality of Darwin and the theory of evolution in prompting a shift in paradigm in the study of “savagery” from, what he terms, “ethnology” to “classical evolutionism”. As Burrow’s earlier work on *Evolution and Society* indicates, there were certainly evolutionary models of societal development that predated Darwin. These models were rooted in the writings of French and Scottish Enlightenment theorists like Adam Smith and Turgot and traced human social development from hunter-gatherer societies to feudal structures and thence to industrial, modern societies based on the economy of the loom and the forge.¹³

But Darwin’s theories, Stocking argues, represented a major break, a disjuncture in the history of British anthropology. The dominance of an older monogenetic Prichardian framework of thought with its strong biblical moorings gave way in the wake of the Brixham Cave discoveries and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published in 1859, to a new and more dynamic framework for the comparative study of societies: “Although there had been a cultural push in the early 1850s toward a developmental view of European civilisation, and there were important intellectual precedents for such an inquiry, it was only when Brixham Cave established the antiquity of man, and Darwinism linked man to some antecedent primate form, that this interest was translated into a systematic investigation of human sociocultural origins. In this project, the comparative study of the evidence of contemporary savagery - which had been the subject matter of the preevolutionary discipline of ‘ethnology’ - became critically important”.¹⁴

In my subsequent reading into nineteenth century South African history, I was greatly surprised at the complete lack of attention paid to Darwin and what seemed to me to be the crucial issue of evolution. The closest that the local scholarship came to addressing the issue was a single chapter in Rob Turrell’s Honours thesis on the *Cape Monthly Magazine*, which provided some analysis of debates around Darwin in the intellectual journal during the early 1870s, but came to the surprising conclusion (in the light of Turrell’s quite extensive evidence of local engagements with Darwinian theory) that colonial intellectuals showed very limited interest in evolutionary theory and remained too committed to biblical ideas to take Darwin seriously.¹⁵

It is in the writings of Wilhelm Bleek from the 1850s through to the 1870s that evolutionary

¹³. J.W.Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1966).

¹⁴. G.W.Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987), 172.

¹⁵. R.Turrell, ‘A Cape Periodical: The Cape Monthly Magazine, 1870-1875’ (University of Cape Town, B.A. Honours thesis, 1975), 39-57.

theory was most clearly and consistently articulated at the Cape, albeit primarily through the lens of philology rather than biology. In a review of 'Grout's Zulu Grammar' written for the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1860, Bleek acknowledges his intellectual debt to the leading contemporary evolutionary philologist, Max Muller. Here he cites an extract which sets out the contours of the universal framework on the origins and evolution of language espoused by Muller and his followers. It is worth citing at length because it provides the broader philological context within which Bleek located his own exploration into the origins and evolution of the languages of the "races" of southern Africa:

The earliest type of language is supposed to have been monosyllabic .. The Chinese and other monosyllabic languages of Asia went off from the main stock while it was yet in a rude or inorganic state. These languages have been called family languages. Some cause, to us unknown, seems to have stereotyped these languages in this early stage of their existence, and to have prevented their further development. At a subsequent period, when the main stock had assumed somewhat of an organic character, the Tartar or Turanian languages detached themselves on one side and Hamitism, or the language of Egypt, on the other ... These languages are called nomad languages, as having advanced further than the family languages. At a still later period the Shemitic and Iranian or Indo-European languages developed themselves in opposite directions. These are called political or state languages, as exhibiting the highest degree of refinement. To complete this view, the languages of America and Oceania are thought to be connected with the Turanian, and the African are united conjecturally with the hamitic or Coptic, and perhaps, far southward, with the Turanian.

Within the framework of Muller's broad map of human linguistic development, Bleek presented his own theoretical contribution in a book *On the Origin of Language*, which was published in Germany, England, France and the United States in 1869. This important study, hitherto almost completely overlooked, clearly demonstrates the extent of Bleek's commitment to the theory of evolution as it pertains to human development as well as to man's place in nature. It also indicates how Bleek attempted to apply evolutionary theory to the Bushmen by comparing their language with the communication of primates.

On the Origin of Language is introduced by a Preface by his cousin Ernst Haeckel. In private correspondence Bleek expressed his gratitude to his cousin for promoting the book's publication and for agreeing to "write more about the descent of man in the foreword. It would be a valuable 'asset' to my attempt".¹⁶ In the Preface, Haeckel contextualises Bleek's enquiries within a hierarchical evolutionary paradigm: "As is well known, the tribes of South Africa, the Hottentots, the Bushmen, the Kaffirs and others, branches of the woolly-haired long-headed (dolichocephalic family), and usually looked upon as belonging to the negro stock, have remained, down to the present day, at the lowest stage of human development, and made the smallest advance beyond the ape. This is true not only in respect of their entire physical and moral characteristics, but also

¹⁶. Bleek to Haeckel, October 1867, BC 151, C12.2.1.

in respect of their language”. He went on to refer to Bleek’s close acquaintance with “those lower races of men, who in every respect remind us of our animal ancestors, and who, to the unprejudiced comparative student of nature, seem to manifest a closer connection with the gorilla and the chimpanzee of that region than with a Kant or a Goethe”.¹⁷

¹⁷. W.H.I.Bleek, *On the Origin of Language* (Weimar, London, Paris and New York, 1969), iv.

In the study itself, which bears the full title *On the Origin of Language as a first chapter in a History of the Development of Humanity*, Bleek provides a conception of what he terms “universal philology” within a broad evolutionary framework. He emphasises that he uses the terms “philology or history ... with a much more general signification than that in which they are usually employed” and that philological research should complement “Natural Research” and “should not confine itself to a few peoples .. [nor] merely political development but all human evolution generally”. The issues of human development which Bleek sees as the province of philology are explicitly located in terms of a wider Darwinian framework: “the history of human development is merely a part of the history of the development of the universe, and can be comprehended only in connection therewith. The essential nature of the course of human development can become clear to us only when we endeavour thus to discover the origin of our race, and to arrive at the characteristics which distinguish it and mark it out”.¹⁸

As a study into human origins and development, philology (Bleek insists) needs to adopt a far more ambitious agenda than the often archaic and antiquarian pursuits of European scholars, and their porings over the texts of ancient authors. It needs to dedicate itself to the study of living languages at the lowest as well as at the most refined levels of development: “Only when every peculiarly developed member of humanity is considered worthy of attention, and investigation turns with as much zeal to the conditions of those peoples which have stopt [sic] short at the lowest phases of development, as to those of the most cultured nations - which it can properly understand and comprehend only by a comparison with those less developed ones - only then may we speak of a universal philology in the true sense of the term, and place it on an equal footing alongside natural research”. “Universal philology” is therefore not simply an exercise in “pursuing the development and growth of each particular race”, but “must endeavour earnestly to obtain a picture of the whole course of human development, must examine how the conditions of the individual nations ... arose out of a former undistinguished existence, of which no monuments or written records remain to us, and attained their present distinct and variform character”.¹⁹ This was not simply a statement of monogenesis, but a motivation for an exploration of human origins and development.

Bleek goes on to explain that philology and biology, though not identical, are clearly complementary. The study of language and race are not identical in so far as the original conditions and modes of thought may be influenced by the fusion of different peoples, by mutual influences and there is “in the contest between them, a reaction of the vanquished [human]

¹⁸. Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁹. Ibid., 37,40.

condition upon the stronger aggressive one”, but “there is certainly a relation between the conditions of a people and the proportions of the different bloods that enter into the constitution”.²⁰ Such phrases resonate strongly with the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest.

²⁰. Ibid., 42.

Following the theorists of evolution, Bleek located his study of linguistic development within an ape-human continuum. He actively promoted the idea of comparison between apes and more primitive human forms: “we cannot arrive at a knowledge of the rise of humanity, the ascent of human nature from animal existence, save by a comparison of the lowest conditions of humanity with those of the highest formations in the animal world. We must examine and see what there is in animal nature analogous to that which is characteristic of man; from which of the faculties of the former, human life could arise, under favourable circumstances”.²¹

Bleek’s advocacy of an ape-human continuum was no mere abstraction and this is perhaps where my reading of Bleek most strongly contradicts the image of Wilhelm Bleek presented in recent San scholarship. Bleek was explicitly interested in comparing the Bushman languages with sounds produced by apes as is evident both from his published writings and private correspondence. Thus, for example, a letter written by Bleek’s relative Auguste to Haeckel in September 1866 reveals that: “Wilhelm is very busy learning the Bushman language from Bushman prisoners in Cape Town. He is trying to find out more about this yet almost unexplored language with its various click-sounds. He asks us to contact Ernst Hubel or one of the zoologists for information or a book on the sounds made by apes: a description of the sounds and how they are produced. He specifically wants to know whether apes also make click-sounds with their tongues and lips, and how they make those sounds”.²²

In his published work *On the Origin of Language*, Bleek overtly indicates his interest in exploring the links between the primitive language of the Bushman and the sounds produced by apes: “Among all the languages with which I am acquainted that of the South African Bushmen far excels the rest in respect to the strength of mechanical exertion necessary for its pronunciation. A language like this, in which the majority of the words are pronounced with one of the clicks (the number of different clicks amounting at least to six), and several with very energetic gutturals, must be made an object of special attention if we would arrive at even an approximate idea of the original vocal elements from which human language sprang ... [I]n how far a system of sounds like that of the Bushmen shows points of coincidence with sounds produced by the apes resembling man, is a question which seems to me well deserving of closer investigation. On this subject, the Jena professor of zoology, Dr. Haeckel, writes to me (15th September 1866) the following: `... Perhaps it will be interesting to you to learn that three years ago there appeared a work by the great English zoologist, Huxley, and soon after another and more extensive one by the German, Carl Vogt, in which the evidence of the descent of the human race from the apes,

²¹. Ibid., 46.

²². BC151, C12.33.1 No. 4.

founded on embryological and palaeontological investigations, was stated with such pointedness, that no scientific zoologist any longer has doubt on the subject”²³.

²³. Bleek, *On the Origin of Language*, 53.

Bleek sent copies of his book to Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Charles Lyell and Max Muller, the leading contemporary theorists of evolution. In his private correspondence of 1871 he indicates his interest in Darwin's recently published book *The Descent of Man*²⁴ and there is little doubt that Bleek's advocacy of the ape-human continuum and his attempts to locate his studies of the Bushman language within that broad evolutionary framework would have greatly impressed Charles Darwin. It is within this broad evolutionary context that we need locate his much romanticised Bushman research in the early 1870s. Remarks, such as those made in his correspondence to Sir George Grey that "We have now [1871] two Bushmen with us, an old one and a young one, and they are constantly chattering in their monkey like speech"²⁵ should not be dismissed as a temporary lapse, an unusual example of negative stereotyping by Bleek. They carried the full weight of evolutionist assumption and referred implicitly to his location of the Bushman language as an intermediate stage on an ape-human continuum.

Classifying the Peoples of Southern Africa: The Invention of "Primary Types"

Bleek's intellectual importance extends beyond his pioneering interests in Darwin's theory of evolution and its application to the indigenous peoples in southern Africa. He was also responsible for setting up a system of classification based on language but one which intersected closely with race. This system of classification was based on clear distinctions between Bantu, Hottentot and Bushmen linguistic types and proposed that the study of these primitive languages was of universal importance in so far as they held the key to the understanding of the historical evolution of the three major branches of language spoken worldwide.

Bleek's study of southern African languages began before he arrived in South Africa. Thornton indicates that it was during his doctoral studies at the University of Bonn which he completed in 1850 that Bleek became interested in the languages of southern Africa as an adjunct to his studies of Hebrew and Oriental languages.²⁶ From the outset Bleek saw his research into African languages as casting light on Indo-European philology. He indicated in his private correspondence shortly after arriving in South Africa that: "Men begin to feel more sensibly how essential is a

²⁴. BC151, C12.59, 18 December 1867 and C12.12.1, 18 April 1871.

²⁵. BC151, C10.9, Bleek to Grey.

²⁶. R.Thornton, 'This Dying Out Race', 2.

comparison of the branches of humankind spread over Africa to an investigation of the earlier developments of our race. Men now begin to anticipate from African studies, new lights upon many difficult questions in these sciences, such as were produced by Oriental studies in the early part of this century”.²⁷

²⁷. W.Bleek cited in O.Spohr, *The Natal Diaries of Dr. W.H.I.Bleek, 1855-1856* (Cape Town, 1965), 24.

The outlines of Bleek's system of the classification of the indigenous peoples of southern Africa were evident from his writings of the late 1850s where he distinguished very clearly between "Kafir" and "Hottentot" on philological and racial grounds and introduced the notion of "primary types" (or "original forms") of language. Bleek explained to the readers of the *Cape Monthly Magazine* that: "[W]e enjoy here, at the Cape, very great and rare advantages for ethnological enquiries. It is probable that there are not two more distinct varieties of the human species than the two races which were the original inhabitants of South Africa - the Hottentots and the tribes of the Kafir kindred. And the very primitive stages in which both nations have remained render them peculiarly fit to serve as safe bases for ample comparative ethnological and philological researches. This is more peculiarly true, inasmuch as the higher advanced stages of the development of our race can only be properly understood by tracing them from their original forms, which cannot have been very dissimilar to the primary types, as they are, in great measure, preserved in the customs, habits, languages and the ideas of the Kafirs on the one side, and the Hottentots on the other".²⁸

Bleek elaborated his system of classification during the 1860s and early 1870s. He characterised both "Hottentot" and "Bantu", a term he coined, as sex-denoting languages, but suggested that they were clearly structurally distinct in so far as "Bantu" languages were prefix-pronominal and "Hottentot" languages were suffix-pronominal. In other words, the pronouns in the "Bantu" languages are borrowed from derivative prefixes to the nouns, whilst the pronouns in the "Hottentot" languages are borrowed from the derivative suffixes to the nouns.²⁹ It was on the basis of these structural features that Bleek regarded these languages as "primary forms" of two of the world's major philological branches, accounting for three-fifths of the languages known on earth: "Kafir, as giving us the key to the great mass of kindred Negro (Prefix-pronominal) languages which fill almost the whole of South Africa and extend at least as far to the north-west as Sierra Leone; and the Hottentot, as exhibiting the most primitive form known of that large tribe of [Suffix-pronominal] languages which is distinguished by its Sex-denoting qualities, which fills North Africa, Europe and part of Asia, which includes the languages of the most highly cultivated

²⁸. W.H.I.Bleek, 'South African Philology', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 3, Jan.-June 1858, 23-24.

²⁹. W.H.I.Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* (Cape Town and London, 1862), 3-4.

nations on earth".³⁰

³⁰. W.H.I.Bleek, 'Scientific Reasons for the Study of the Bushman Language', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 7, July-Dec.1873, 150.

The connections Bleek established between the Bantu languages of southern Africa and those elsewhere in Africa are, as far as I am aware, relatively uncontroversial. Bleek's hypothesis that the "Hottentot" language was a primary form of North African and Indo-European languages was more speculative and is seen by Dubow as an early expression of the pervasive Hamitic myth of African origins. Bleek had formulated his theories about the North African origins of "Hottentot" languages well before arriving in South Africa. Thornton indicates that his doctoral study compared the gender systems of "Kafir", Herero, Sechuana and Nama with Berber, Galla, Coptic and Ancient Egyptian in order to substantiate claims that the Nama ("Hottentot") language was related to North African languages.³¹ In the first volume of the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1857 he expressed his intention of backing up his theory with research in the field:

The peculiar characteristics which distinguish the Hottentots and Bushmen from the other South African nations, are such as range them with the nations of Northern Africa and Western Asia, as the Egyptians, the Semitic tribes and their widespread North African relations (e.g. the Tuarick, Galla &c) and probably also the Indo-European or Arian nations. ... Since the Hottentots ... have in general retained, most faithfully, the primitive and original state of their race, in customs, manners, language &c, a study of their peculiarities must be regarded as eminently important, nay, indispensable for attaining a knowledge of the pre-historical condition and unrecorded history of their kindred nations; and as these comprise, in many cases, some of the most advanced and civilised nations, should we not be entitled to infer that such researches, if once properly made, will prove of great interest for the history of mankind in general?

The remaining two-fifths of the world's languages, according to the schema Bleek had developed by the early 1870s, were defined as genderless languages, that is, languages which possess no classes (or genders) of nouns. Here again Bleek presented southern Africa as the laboratory for research into the "primary type" of this branch of the philological tree and here it was the Bushman language which represented the original form: "If we want to solve this question, we must study those members of this genderless class of languages which appear to be the least advanced in culture, and among these none is prima facie scientifically more promising than the Bushman language ... The solution of this question will probably not only throw light upon the origin of a good many of those languages now included in the genderless (or, as Professor Max Muller calls it, Turanian) class of languages, but will also elucidate early stages in the formation of language, and lay bare the most primitive methods of structural arrangement and modes of thought".³²

³¹. R.Thornton, 'This Dying Out Race', 5.

³². The more precise linguistic characteristics of these primary types (the Bantu, Hottentot and Bushmen languages) were elaborated in great detail elsewhere in Bleek's writings, especially in his *Comparative Grammar of South African Languages*, published in 1862. The detailed breakdown of the categories into which different dialects fell were expounded in Bleek's philologically guided organisation of Sir George Grey's library. (See W.H.I.Bleek, *The Library of Sir George Grey* (London: Trubner, 1858-9). But my emphasis here is on the way in which Bleek

set up a system of classification of “Bantu”, “Hottentot” and “Bushmen” as distinct and primitive types.

Although Bleek's system of classification was based on linguistic structure, it is evident from his other writings that he saw close connections between language and race, between philology and biology. A letter to Haeckel written in 1869, for example, suggests that there was a close correspondence between the way in which Bleek classified language and race in southern Africa: "As regards the 'tree of the origin' of human races, you will not be surprised that I believe that you are mistaken in some details. I believe, for example, that it is an error to give the Malayan race such an outstanding position. I believe they are only a 'mixture of a race' between Blacks, the kind of peppercorn Negroes, and white or yellow races ... Furthermore, I would not place Hottentots and Negroes so closely together - at least not originally, although it cannot be refuted that the Hottentots have 'soaked in' much Negro blood through mixing. Originally these Hottentots would be connected to the North African tribes ... The Bushmen I would separate from the Hottentots, although they of course have also mixed often with the latter".³³

There are also hints at Bleek's endorsement of the idea of racial types in his published writings. In reviewing Gustav Fritsch's book on "The Natives of South Africa, described ethnographically and anatomically" for the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1873, Bleek wrote: "We especially assent to the author's opinion that there is no essential difference between those natives [nations of the Bantu race in southern Africa] and the general Negro (or, as he prefers to call it, Nigritian) type. Many modern anthropologists have here been led into the error of distinguishing the Bantu nations from the so-called Negroes. They arrive thereby at the to us (who dwell at the uttermost ends of Africa) absurd notion of excluding the Negro entirely from South Africa".³⁴

³³. Bleek papers, BC151, C12.7.1, W.Bleek to E.Haeckel, 25 May 1869.

³⁴. W.H.I.Bleek, 'Dr. Fritsch's Natives of South Africa', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 6, Jan.-June 1873, 173.

A final point regarding Bleek's philological classification is that he saw language and mythology as keys to the understanding of "the native mind". Different language structures were associated with different mythological notions and belief systems and also with different mental characteristics. In an article 'On Resemblances in Bushman and Australian Mythology', Bleek proposed a very close connection between philology and mythology: "The idea that mythological notions, or the outward forms of religious beliefs, are primarily dependent upon the manner of speech, is now generally allowed to be one of the most fertile and efficient for the purpose of understanding rightly the natural history of religion and mythology ... African researches have given confirmation to this theory: nations who speak Prefix-pronominal languages, in which divisions of the noun into classes are not related to sex, possess no true mythology, but are addicted merely to ancestor-worship". He hypothesised that "Kafirs, Negroes &c are almost entirely devoid of the myth-forming faculty" and proposed that the Bushmen, like the Australian Aborigines, have well developed mythologies and "by their general mental and physical characteristics they lay claim to a nearer kindred with ourselves than do many more civilised nations, especially those of the Kafir and Negro type"³⁵.

In his preface *On the Origin of Language* Bleek explicitly linked linguistic structure to scientific achievement: "Is it ... a mere accident that nearly all the nations which have made any progress in scientific acquirement speak sex-denoting languages?" Those speaking sex-denoting languages "include Egyptians, Phoenecians, Hebrews, Arabs, Greeks, Romans and Germans" and are contrasted with the mass of nations who do not speak sex-denoting languages, and of whom "not one has added any noteworthy contribution to scientific knowledge; and not a single individual who could be called as thinker, inventor or poet has risen among them ... The grammatical form of their languages does not allow their imagination that higher flight which the form of the sex-denoting languages irresistably imparts to the movement of the thought of those that speak them".³⁶

Dabblings in Anthropometric Photography

Bleek's active involvement in an anthropometric project initiated by Thomas Huxley, one of Britain's leading anthropologists and proponents of evolution also provides evidence of his scientific racism and undermines the romantic image of Bleek presented by San scholarship. This aspect of Bleek's research has been documented in Michael Godby's exciting article in the *Miscast* edition, which provides a more balanced and critical perspective on Bleek.³⁷

Recent studies in visual history have emphasised the close convergence of photography and

³⁵. W.H.I.Bleek, 'On Resemblances in Bushman and Australian Mythology', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 8, Jan.-June 1874, 98.

³⁶. W.H.I.Bleek, 'On the Origin of Language', xxiii.

³⁷. M.Godby, 'Images of //Kabbo' in P.Skotnes, ed., *Miscast*, 115-127.

anthropology during the second half of the nineteenth century. Photography, like anthropology, had its origins in the 1830s and 1840s and in the era before field work became anthropology's primary method of research, photography was to play a crucial role in the development of the discipline of anthropology. At a time when photographs were simply viewed as records of reality, there is evidence of a major collective anthropological project based on photography in Europe: "[C]ommittees were established to coordinate and circulate material of anthropological interest and photographs were collected, swapped and archived for the common scientific good as part of the collection of 'raw data' from all over the world for analysis at the metropolitan centre". These raw materials were typically organised within an evolutionary schema, given that "the encompassing intellectual model during the period was evolutionism, embracing ideas such as progress, regression and 'archaic' survival".³⁸

The genre of anthropometric photography was one wing of this wider collective project. In 1869 Thomas Huxley called for "a systematic series of photographs of the various races of men within the British Empire", photographs that are "measurable and comparable with one another and that give precise information respecting the proportions and conformation of the body". Huxley insisted that the subjects be photographed naked and outlined exact criteria that would render the bodies comparable by universal standards of measurement:

³⁸. E.Edwards, 'Introduction' in E.Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (New Haven and London, 1992), 4, 6.

[E]ach view [must] be accompanied by a plainly marked measuring scale placed in the same plane as the subject. To further ensure constant scale it was recommended that the subject be placed at a fixed distance from the camera. Specifically, this system called for the production of two full-length photographs of each subject: one frontal and the other in profile. In the former position, the subject was required to stand upright with 'heels together' and with 'the right arm ... outstretched horizontally, [and] the palm of the hand [turned] towards the camera'; while in the latter, the subject was positioned so that the left side of the body was presented to the camera with the left arm bent in a manner that did not interrupt the contours of the trunk ... Huxley also recommended the supplementation of these photographs with full-face and profile portraits of the subject's head.³⁹

Based on Huxley's vision, Lord Granville, the Secretary of State for Colonies, sent out an official circular in September 1869 requesting photographs of "Ethnological value as illustrating the peculiarities of the various Races within the British possessions". Having returned to the Cape Colony from London, where he might have met up with Huxley at the time of the project's conception, Bleek took up Granville's mission with positive enthusiasm. As Godby indicates:

Bleek's *Notes to Accompany the Photographs* reveal an obvious interest in the anthropological purpose of Lord Granville's project. And on several occasions he involved himself in what might appear to have been the distasteful task of collecting the photographic evidence for it. Although only fragmentary, his surviving correspondence shows him to have been involved in the stages, first of having //Kabbo and !Gubbu [two of Bleek's San informants] photographed in an improved style, based on the example of yet more photographs that were taken for him by S.B. Barnard ... Moreover, on his own initiative, Bleek had several group photographs posed in such a way as to invite inspection of the subjects primarily as physical beings. He also complied with the Governor's suggestion that measurements be taken of the subjects that were still available.⁴⁰

³⁹. T.H. Huxley cited in F. Spencer, 'Some Notes on the Attempt to Apply Photography to Anthropometry during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century' in E. Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography*, 99-100.

⁴⁰. M. Godby, 'Images of //Kabbo', 120.

In a "Report on the Photographs Done in Response to Prof. Huxley's Request, c. 1869-71", Bleek recorded that "four Bushmen have been photographed by Messrs. Lawrence and Selkirk in conformity with Professor Huxley's instructions, three of them in four pictures each (viz. full figures and heads, in profile and in full face)". He provided an accompanying inventory which gave details about the biography and physical features of the photographic subjects in the following categories: "Dutch Name; Native Name; Original Residence; Probable Age; [Prisoner] Numbers at the Breakwater; Height; Eyes; Hair; Complexion; Intelligence". Entries in the latter category were either "Cheerful Intelligent", "Intelligent" or "Dull". Parcels of hair were sent for the each subject though in the case of three of the Bushmen, Bleek indicated "No hair procurable".⁴¹ Bleek also included full tables of the ancestry of the Bushmen subjects since "To the anthropologist it will be of interest to know exactly the kind of relations or blood consanguinity which exists between the different Bushmen here photographed".⁴²

In addition to the photographing of Bushman subjects, Bleek reported that Messrs. Lawrence and Selkirk had also taken anthropometric photos of "2 Damaras, 1 Koranna, 1 Colonial Hottentot, 1 Kafir". He commented that these represented "the three distinct races of men (and families of language) extant in South Africa; viz. the Bantu, the Hottentot and the Bushmen". Here Bleek explicitly indicates the overlap between his philological classification of the languages of southern Africa and the classification of Bantu, Hottentot and Bushmen into distinct racial categories. He evidently envisaged that this anthropometric project would be part of a wider potential mission: "[U]pon the whole the photographs here given must only be considered as a first attempt which will shew what can be done. A complete collection would not only require that females and children should be included; but also that several of the nations as yet wholly unrepresented, as Bechuana, Fingos, Zulus, Namaquas, should be added; and some others of whom only one individual is represented here (as Koranna and Kafir) should be portrayed in several individuals of different ages and sexes".⁴³

⁴¹. The Bleek Collection, BC151, D1.12.3, D1.12.5.

⁴². 'Dr. Bleek's Report regarding the Photographs sent to England by the Government, December 23 1871' in W.H.I.Bleek and L.C.Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* (London, 1911), 437.

⁴³. 'Dr. Bleek's Report regarding the Photographs sent to England by the Government, December 23 1871', 434, 439.

His enthusiasm for anthropometric photography is also borne out by snippets from his private correspondence. In May 1872 he sent a package to George Grey in Auckland which included: “1. Photographs of Natives (mostly done according to Professor Huxley’s instructions), which I beg you to accept as a birthday present for your sixtieth birthday”. Some years earlier he had sent Ernst Haeckel a few photographs with accompanying comments: “Take note of the seating position of the Kaffir, with his legs stretched out .. This ape-like negro in Malay dress will appear strange to you .. If you would like to have more photographs or anything else, let us know”.⁴⁴

His published writings also testify to an interest in anthropometric photography. In 1873 he wrote a very favourable review of “The Natives of South Africa, described ethnographically and anatomically by Gustav Fritsch M.D”. He heralded Fritsch’s work as “an indispensable compendium for any one who may in any way occupy himself with the anthropology and ethnology” of southern Africa and commended his German colleague as “an excellent photographer” of indigenous peoples. The book contained “illustrations from Fritsch’s photos and drawings; 20 lithographed plates, exhibiting parts of the skeleton, specimens of different colours of skin and Bushman drawings - Together with an Atlas, containing portraits of 60 Natives sketched in copper - 30 plates giving 60 heads of Natives - each in profile and en face”.⁴⁵

The ten sets of anthropometric photographs commissioned by Bleek ended up in that famous repository of anthropological artifacts, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The photographs probably entered the Museum from the collection of H.N.Moseley, Professor of Human Anatomy at Oxford, who most likely acquired them when he visited the Bleek’s house in December 1873.⁴⁶ It is uncertain how these photographs were displayed, but they may have been used to represent the “Bushmen” in an evolutionary sequence of display. According to Coombes, the Pitt Rivers Museum was explicitly organised along typological and evolutionary lines, and it was not

⁴⁴. The Bleek Collection, BC151, C10.11, C12.10.1.

⁴⁵. W.H.I.Bleek, ‘Dr. Fritsch’s Natives of South Africa’, *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 6, Jan.-June 1873, 173-4.

⁴⁶. Godby, ‘Images of //Kabbo’, 115.

uncommon for museums like the Pitt Rivers to use “photographs, casts of the face or of the figure, or even skeletons and skulls” to enhance anthropological exhibits.⁴⁷

Mythology, Racial Extinction and the Preservationist Paradigm

⁴⁷. A.E.Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 112.

It was mythology rather than photography that was the focus of Bleek's anthropological efforts during the the early 1870s. Bleek became intensively involved in the collection of Bushmen stories during the final years of his life based on interviews with Bushmen who had been incarcerated in the Breakwater Lodge and later stayed with the Bleek family in their Mowbray home. On the basis of these interviews he had collected some 6,600 half-pages of "Native Bushman Literature" in the form of "Mythology, Fables, Legends and Poetry". Bleek praised the richness of these Bushman stories and divided his findings into categories like "I. The Mantis II. Moon and Sun III. Stars", mythological stories in which animals and heavenly objects are personified.⁴⁸ The posthumous publication of *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* in 1911 provided a synthesis of these efforts and Bleek's research into Bushman mythology has been well documented in recent scholarship.⁴⁹

He repeatedly motivated his studies of Bushman mythology in terms of their pending racial extinction and the necessity to preserve what remained of their stories and culture while that was still possible. In an article written in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1873, Bleek explained his sense of urgency: "Whilst in Kafir and the kindred languages of Setshuana and Otyiherero, as well as in Hottentot, a large amount of missionary literature exists, there is next to nothing in Bushman, and if this language, and its very curious literature is not to vanish almost unknown, the work must be done now". Bleek had hoped for the creation of some scientific society to be established for this purpose: "But as there appeared to be no real prospect of the work being done in this manner, and as the Bushmen in this Colony seemed to be rapidly dying out, I thought that it was not right to neglect an opportunity which had offered itself for preserving what I could of the language and literature of this curious people".⁵⁰

In the second of the governmental reports that Bleek published on his Bushman Researches, written in the year before he died, Bleek explained: "We may, indeed, congratulate ourselves that we are still in the position by prompt and energetic measures to preserve, not merely a few 'sticks and stones, skulls and bones', as relics of the Aboriginal races of this country, but also something of that which is most characteristic of their humanity, and therefore, more valuable - their mind, their thoughts and their ideas".⁵¹ In his will he called for Lucy Lloyd to continue his work and appealed to "all friends of science to assist her [Lucy Lloyd] in such ways as they can in her work

⁴⁸. W.Bleek, 'Report concerning his Researches into the Bushman Language and Customs' (May 1873), 8.

⁴⁹. See especially Deacon and Dowson, ed., *Voices from the Past: /Xam Bushmen and the Bleek and Lloyd Collection*.

⁵⁰. W.H.I.Bleek, 'Scientific Reasons for the Study of the Bushman Language', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 7, July-December 1873, 153.

⁵¹. W.H.I.Bleek, 'Report concerning Researches into the Bushman Language and Customs', 1875, 2.

of collecting, working out, and publishing the records of this dying out race - the accurate knowledge of whose language and ways seems destined to solve some exceedingly important ethnological questions".⁵²

⁵². Cited in Thornton, 'That Dying Out Race', 8.

If his Bushman researches of the early 1870s were consistently motivated by this idea of a vanishing race, Bleek used the notion of vanishing cultures to support a wider preservationist project. In the 1875 Bushman Report he extended the notion of extinction to vanishing cultures: “Fortunate as we may consider ourselves in having been so situated as to be able to collect even thus much of the world of mind of a dying-out, and in many ways an exceptionally primitive nation, the thought cannot but strike us that there are also several other aboriginal nations of South Africa, which although probably not doomed to such quick extinction as the Bushmen, yet cannot under the now fast-increasing sway of civilisation, stimulated by our mineral wealth, but lose rapidly much of that originality of their life and ideas which is of such great scientific importance. And is it to be assumed that nations such as the Kafirs and their kindred races (Betschuana, Damara &c.) and even the Hottentots, who all generally-speaking so far exceed the Bushmen in civilisation, in political organisation and in forensic oratory, should possess a traditional literature so inferior in value to that of the Bushmen, as not to be worthy the trouble of being taken down and preserved? Nay...”⁵³

Although Bleek seldom explicitly indicates how he explains the vanishing of races and cultures in his later writings, there is a sense of inevitability about this process and evidence from his earlier writings suggestive of Darwinian ideas of the survival of the fittest. Concepts of race struggle and the inevitable extinction of the weak, of the type expressed by Robert Knox in his *Races of Men* in 1850,⁵⁴ are unusual in Bleek’s later writings but are explicitly articulated in an early article in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* on ‘Researches into the Relations between the Hottentots and Kafirs’. Here Bleek makes the now familiar argument (taken up by Theal and subsequent settler historiography) that the “Hottentots” were the original inhabitants of the north-eastern parts of South Africa and were forcibly evicted by the Xhosa: “Several hundred, perhaps a thousand or more years ago, they [the Hottentots] occupied probably the whole of the present Kafirland, most likely as far as Natal. The numerous black population of the tropical parts pressing upon them, they were driven from one position to another, their kraals destroyed, their cattle captured, their tribes routed, their males mostly killed and their women and girls taken prisoners”. He continues in a language reminiscent of Knox: “It was in this conquering warfare, going on for many

⁵³. W.H.I.Bleek, ‘Report concerning Researches into the Bushman Language and Customs’, 1875, 1.

⁵⁴. On Robert Knox see P.Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London, 1964); G.Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 64-5; S.Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 27-28.

centuries, that the warlike spirit, the independent character and the military organisation of the Kafir nation were formed. [T]he southernmost outposts of the black races [were thus] fighting in a fierce struggle against a nation of different blood, either making conquests or defending themselves against the most exasperated enemies”.⁵⁵

⁵⁵. W.H.I.Bleek, ‘Researches into the Relations between the Hottentots and Kafirs’, *Cape Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, 1857, 204-5.

Bleek goes on to justify European colonisation as a more benevolent form of assimilation, preferable to the loss of identity through brutal racial conflict. In a passage that echoes the political philosophy of his close friend Sir George Grey, Bleek opined: "Certainly one would be mistaken to think that it was in any way an inauspicious event for the Hottentot race when the white man first appeared at the Cape, or subsequently settled there; and I think that in most, if not in every case, we may with truth say that any well-conducted colonisation by a civilised nation is a benefit for uncivilised tribes, even if it should (as most generally is doubtless the case) destroy their nationality and incorporate them individually into the body of the dominant race. We need not now ask the Scottish Highlanders whether they would think themselves more benefitted if they had remained under the rule of their native clanships".⁵⁶

Regardless of the extent to which Bleek's idea of vanishing races and cultures was informed by Darwinian ideas of the survival of the fittest, his concept of racial extinction came to permeate the intellectual culture of the Cape Colony in the late nineteenth century. There is abundant evidence of a flowering of the discourse of dying races in colonial writings from the late 1870s onwards. There were direct echoes of Bleek in an article on the 'South African Tribes' by H.C.Schunke in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1878: "No part of the world offers such a rich field to ethnologists, comparative philologists and anthropologists as South Africa, and it would indeed be a credit to the country if some of its people, and especially the young men who have now so many advantages in the way of obtaining the preliminary knowledge necessary, would interest themselves in these subjects, and try wherever opportunity offers to preserve for the future anything of the languages and dialects spoken by many different tribes, together with their very rich folk-lore. It would not only be useful to science, but also elevating in a certain degree to know what passes in the mind of the native, what his ideas, conceptions &c are, and in what state of development he is. With many tribes it is already too late, for they are either extinct or in a state of abnormal rapid mental development, which is their destruction".⁵⁷

A more emphatically social Darwinist piece was written by V.Sampson on 'Our Relations and Responsibilities to the Native Races' in the same edition: "[I]t seems a sad and fearful experience that at the approach of the white the native should gradually disappear and ultimately become extinct. In America the splendid type portrayed by Fenimore Cooper is now the miserable specimen of Butler or Mark Twain. In New Zealand the Maori - that Achilles of savages - is

⁵⁶. W.H.I.Bleek, 'Researches into the Relations between the Hottentots and Kafirs', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, 1857, 204-5.

⁵⁷. H.C.Schunke, 'South African Tribes', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 12, Jan.-June 1876, 180.

retreating like the Centaurs of ancient Greece. In South Africa the Hottentot is daily disappearing, the Bushman all but extinct. And it should be remembered that in every instance the permanent invader has been the British ... Of all the barbarous races, the African negro has alone thriven side by side with the white; and it wants but little acquaintance with the negro character to be struck by its pliability - its amenity to civilised law and habit. The secret of his success has been the ease with which he has passed from one state to another and the survival of the Kafir will depend on the degree in which he can fulfil the same condition”.

Sampson continued: “It may seem an extravagant philosophy to bewail the loss of the Bushman and Hottentot and to deplore in his place, for instance, the villas and vineclad slopes of Wynberg and its surroundings; but if it be a particular case of a general law, it cannot fail to touch every humane mind”.⁵⁸ He proceeded to push the preservationist paradigm to its segregationist conclusions. He proposed for the Native “a nursery for his kind ... To preserve him therefore *as a race* [his emphasis], closed locations are necessary. And by closed locations we mean some such territory as shall be governed by European magistrates, set apart for native interests, and barred to any promiscuous white population”.⁵⁹ This was an early articulation of ideas of segregation and protectionist justifications which emerged in more fully fledged form in the liberal segregationism of the early twentieth century.⁶⁰

While Bleek was unlikely to have shared Sampson’s segregationist sentiments, his view that the Bushman were a “dying out race” had a protracted life. Philip Tobias has recently claimed that the myth of the Bushmen as a vanishing race, which was largely Bleek’s invention, remained pervasive until the middle of the twentieth century. In the 1930s the anthropologist Grafton Elliot Smith was still insisting that “in a few years the world will know them no more” and as late as the 1950s an American physical anthropologist described the San as “nearly extinct”. Tobias’s own research suggested that some 55,000 San were still living in Botswana, Namibia and Angola at the time and he therefore concluded that: “It was true that tens of thousands of San had been wiped out in about three hundred years by other peoples and especially the European settlers. We were nevertheless able to dispel the myth, prevalent in the middle of the twentieth century, that the San were few in number and a dying population ... [I]t was not the people who were in imminent danger of extinction, but their way of life”.⁶¹

⁵⁸. V.Sampson, ‘Our Relations and Responsibilities to the Native Races’, *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 12, Jan.-June 1876, 328.

⁵⁹. V.Sampson, ‘Our Relations and Responsibilities to the Native Races’, *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 16, Jan.-June 1878, 28.

⁶⁰. S.Dubow, ‘Race, Civilisation and Culture: The Elaboration of Segregation Discourse in the Inter-war Years’ in S.Marks and S.Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London, 1987), 71-94.

⁶¹. P.V.Tobias, ‘Myths and Misunderstandings about Khoisan Identities and Status’ in A.Bank, *The Proceedings of the Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference* (Cape

Conclusion: The Legacy of Wilhelm Bleek

This paper has sought to challenge the highly romanticised image of Wilhelm Bleek that has dominated San scholarship during the last three decades and especially in recent years. I have tried to emphasise that it is highly misleading simply to cast Bleek as a counterpoint to the colonial oppression of George Grey or the extermination of the Bushmen or to uphold Bleek as the nineteenth century figure who ran most powerfully against the conservative colonial currents of his day. For such decontextualised and selective readings of Bleek ignore the extent to which he was steeped in the intellectual milieu of the mid-late nineteenth century and that far from challenging the concept of “primitive peoples”, as Lewis-Williams, Thornton, Deacon and others claim, his intellectual contribution was emphatically premised on this notion and remained rooted in the hierarchical, evolutionary theory that became the encompassing intellectual model of Victorian anthropology.

Town, 1998), 22-23.

There are continuities between the racial debates of the 1830s and the 1840s and the researches and writings of Wilhelm Bleek from the late 1850s through to the early 1870s. In general terms, Bleek's overarching monogenism and its theological basis, which Thornton foregrounds, suggest affinities with what Stocking characterises as the Prichardian paradigm of ethnology. Bleek would have felt comfortable with the guiding metaphor of Prichardian ethnology: "All of Prichard's work may be viewed in terms of one implicit visual metaphor: that of a tree with contemporary tribal twigs linked by major racial branches to the trunk of a single human species, rooted - for this metaphorical tree had a precise location - near the point where Noah's ark had come to rest in southwest Asia".⁶²

There are aspects of Bleek's intellectual contribution which resonate with both liberal and conservative positions of the early nineteenth century. Cape liberals like John Fairbairn and John Philip espoused a Scottish Enlightenment-derived theory of socio-economic development, which traced development through clearly defined stages from hunter to pastoralist to modern industrial societies. As Burrows indicates this sociocultural model of development was a forerunner of Darwin's theory of evolution and in this general sense the liberal developmentalism of the early nineteenth century may be seen to anticipate Bleek's evolutionism of the 1860s.

⁶². G.Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 52.

Bleek's benevolent view of colonisation and his insistence on the separation of the Khoikhoi and San (on philological as well as historical grounds), however, indicate his affinities with the anti-liberals of earlier decades. There are hints of connection between Bleek and the Moodie-Theal school of settler historiography in his private correspondence with Moodie and his overt siding with Moodie on the issue of Bushman origins. The issue of Bushman origins was one of the major areas of disagreement between the liberal missionary John Philip and Donald Moodie, whose historical debate of the 1830s and 1840s has been seen to represent the origins of South African historiography.⁶³ Bleek emphasised that his researches into the Bushman language contradicted the views of Philip and reinforced the interpretation of Bushman origins proposed by Donald Moodie.⁶⁴ It is also not entirely coincidental that Theal wrote the introduction to the Bleek and Lloyd's study of Bushman folklore.⁶⁵

But my overwhelming impression is of disjuncture and discontinuity between the anthropology of Wilhelm Bleek and the racial debates of the early nineteenth century. Following George Stocking's claims for the revolutionary impact of Darwin and evolutionary theory in the history of British anthropology, I have suggested that the Darwinist Bleek initiated a new theoretical direction in thinking about racial difference in South Africa. Bleek was a firm proponent of the theory of evolution and applied the concept of an ape-human continuum to his linguistic study of the Bushman language. He explicitly expressed an interest in exploring the links between the language of the Bushman and the communication of primates and emphasised such links in his private correspondence and evolutionary study *On the Origin of Language*. It is arguably in Bleek's writings that we see the beginnings of the shift towards the structures of thought that informed the intellectual racism in modern South Africa: its evolutionary assumptions and ideas of rigidly demarcated stages of human development, physical as well as cultural.

Bleek's comparative studies of the languages of southern Africa led him to classify indigenous peoples into three discrete categories: "Bushman", "Hottentots" and "Bantu". Although based more firmly on philology than biology, the threefold classification of the "races" of South Africa was fundamental to the system of classification which was later developed by physical

⁶³. See A.Bank, 'The Great Debate and the Origins of South African Historiography', *Journal of African History*, 38, 1997, 261-81; R.Ross, *Beyond the Pale: Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa* (Hanover and London, 1993).

⁶⁴. "Thirty or forty years ago a philological knowledge of the Bushman language would have been a matter of a good deal of political importance in this Colony; for it would at once have decided the question brought into such loud and violent discussion by the publication of Dr. Philip's Researches, as to whether the Bushmen were originally Hottentots who had been robbed of their cattle by the Boers. A very slight knowledge of the two languages (Hottentot and Bushman) would at once have negated this proposition". (W.Bleek, 'Scientific Reasons for the Study of the Bushman Language', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 7, July-Dec. 1873, 49.)

⁶⁵. W.H.I.Bleek and L.C.Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (London, 1911).

anthropologists in South Africa like Mathew Drennan. As one of the leading racial scientists of the early twentieth century, Drennan divided the “South African Native Races” into “the tall, brownish-black Bantu-speakers generally grouped as Bantu negroes”, “the small yellow Bushmen and the somewhat taller Hottentots” who “have somewhat larger and higher heads. Their physical features are in fact exactly intermediate between the Bushman and the Bantu”. Drennan went on to distinguish between the skulls of these three different races: “The true Bushman type of skull is mesaticephalic, shorter and wider, but the Hottentot type is dolichocephalic, longer and narrower .. The cranial capacity is microcephalic, the average being 1300 cc. This should be compared with ...1350 for a large number of Kafirs; and an average for Europeans of 1400”.⁶⁶

⁶⁶. M.R.Drennan, *A Short Course on Physical Anthropology* (Cape Town, 1924), 60, 61, 64.

While Bleek was far less interested in skulls than Matthew Drennan (his efforts in this field being confined to the sending of a Koranna skull to Haeckel),⁶⁷ he did show a keen interest in the colonial project of anthropometric photography initiated by Thomas Huxley in 1869. Bleek became actively involved in commissioning anthropometric photographs of Bushman informants like //Kabbo and other examples of the “races” of southern Africa for the European anthropological archive. He went to some lengths to provide additional biographical and physical details about the photographic subjects to assist metropolitan anthropologists in their classification of these anthropometric subjects.

Bleek’s preoccupation with “the native mind” may also be seen to anticipate later developments. He saw the study of the languages and mythologies of indigenous peoples as a key to the understanding of their “general mental characteristics”. There is clearly a sense of what may be termed linguistic determinism in Bleek’s assertions that the structures of language define differential degrees of imagination or scientific achievement. In particular, he suggested that it was only those speaking sex-denoting languages (Europeans and their philological ancestors) who could demonstrate higher flights of imagination and levels of scientific advance.

The quest to understand “the native mind” was to become a central thread of the intellectual racism of the early twentieth century and, according to Dubow, involved several lines of inquiry: “the question whether the structure of the African brain was physiologically different from that of whites; attempts to determine the distinctive nature of ‘native mentality’; investigations in the place of magic and witchcraft in African cosmology and issues of intelligence testing”. Bleek’s concerns have more resonance with the qualitative distinctions that were later to be drawn between the African and European mind by anthropologists like H.A.Junod, the Swiss missionary amongst the Tsonga, who wrote in 1920 of the “fundamental difference between the European and the Bantu mind”, contrasting the “scientific spirit” with “the magic conception of nature” than with the quantitative measurements of native intelligence based on IQ testing.⁶⁸

⁶⁷. In August 1870 perhaps at Haeckel’s request Bleek sent a Koranna skull to his cousin, (The Bleek Collection, C12.11.1.), but this is the only evidence of his involvement in furnishing metropolitan racial scientists with skulls and Bleek was far less interested in the traffic in human remains than many of his colonial contemporaries. (See A.Bank, ‘Of “Native Skulls” and “Noble Caucasians”’: Phrenology in Colonial South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22 (3), September 1996, 401-402.)

⁶⁸. S.Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 197, 204.

There were also elements of what Dubow describes as the Stow-Theal paradigm in the early writings of Bleek. He too offered a legitimising narrative of South African history by emphasising that Bantu speakers were relatively recent migrants from the north who displaced the true aboriginal inhabitants of southern Africa, the Khoikhoi. Like Theal, Bleek based his ideas on a tripartite division between “Bushmen”, “Hottentots” and “Bantu” ranged on an evolutionary scale. Dubow also points to the connections between Bleek’s study of southern African languages and the later comparative studies of Bantu languages and grammar by another German philologist, Carl Meinhof (1857-94). Meinhof’s quest to uncover an original primordial Bantu language which he called Ur-Bantu is anticipated by Bleek’s concept of “primary types”, as is his view of clear linguistic distinctions between Hottentot and Bushman languages and his theory regarding linguistic affinities between Hottentots and the Hamites of North Africa.⁶⁹

Bleek’s concept of the Bushman as “a dying race” was, as I have indicated above, another significant aspect of his legacy. For the notion of the racial extinction of the Bushmen emerges as a dominant motif in Bleek’s writings in the 1870s and through him permeates the intellectual culture of the late nineteenth century Cape and continued to be articulated by anthropologists into the middle of the twentieth century. It also raises questions concerning the relationship between extinction and evolution in Bleek’s writings and there are suggestions of a sense of inevitability regarding the vanishing of the Bushmen race which probably reflect Bleek’s acceptance of Darwinian precepts about the survival of the fittest.

To return then to the question that I posed at the beginning of this paper: in what sense can we describe Bleek as South Africa’s first anthropologist? The sense in which Bleek was a pioneer fieldworker in his researches into living languages in southern Africa from his Zulu period of the late 1850s to his Bushman period of the early 1870s has been relatively well documented, especially by Thornton. So too have his efforts in the collection of Bushman mythology from informants living in his Mowbray home. This paper has attempted to make a case for such a designation in the broader sense that Bleek was a pioneering theorist of difference, deeply concerned with questions of human development and origins, primarily on linguistic grounds but in ways that intersected closely with race. Far from shunning concepts of “primitivism”, Bleek’s theories were rooted in the overarching hierarchical evolutionary model of contemporary Victorian anthropology and his writings, in particular his study *On the Origin of Language* contributed to the evolutionary theory espoused by his metropolitan friends, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Ernst Haeckel.

⁶⁹. S.Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 80-81.