



# Bushman Letters: Interpreting /Xam Narrative

*Michael Wessels*

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The Bleek and Lloyd Collection consists of the notebooks in which William Bleek and Lucy Lloyd transcribed and translated the narratives, cultural information and personal histories told to them in the 1870's by a number of /Xam informants. It represents a rare and rich record of an indigenous language and culture that no longer exists. The /Xam materials have exerted a fascination for anthropologists and poets alike. They are compromised, mysterious, and yet essential. How does one begin reading texts that are at once so compromised and so unique? *Bushman Letters: Interpreting /Xam Narrative* is an unusual and important book for it examines not only the /Xam archive but also, and in the first instance, the critical tradition that has grown up around the archive as well as the hermeneutic principles that inform that tradition. It critiques these principles and offers not so much alternative readings as alternative modes of reading. The book accomplishes two things: it shows the problems with the ways that the materials in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection have been approached by previous critics, and it suggests what their interpretations have left out in the course of its own detailed and poetic readings of a number of narratives. The book must be described as metacritical: it is criticism about the critical tradition that has grown up around the /Xam archive and in the fields of folklore and mythology more widely. *Bushman Letters* addresses a curiously neglected area in the burgeoning literature on the Bleek and Lloyd collection: the texts themselves. In doing so, the book makes a substantial contribution to the study of oral narratives in general and to the theoretical discourse that informs such studies.

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