

# Debunking the colonial myth of the 'naked Bushman'

March 4 2019, by Vibeke Maria Viestad

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Naron women and children wearing ordinary dress - the photograph was taken in 1919. Credit: Fourie collection/ Museum Africa

To dress is a unique human experience, but practices and meanings of dress are as different as the people populating the world. In a Western cultural tradition, the practice of dressing "properly" has for centuries distinguished "civilised" people from "savages" .

Through travel literature and historical ethnographic descriptions of the Bushmen of southern Africa, such perceptions and prejudices have also made their mark on the modern research tradition.

The Bushmen are the indigenous hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa. Today approximately 100 000 live in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Angola. Very few still live a life of primarily hunting and gathering.

"Bushman" or "San" are both umbrella terms for what constitutes a great variation of different groups and languages. Unfortunately, both terms holds [negative connotations](#) and there's no proper consensus to which term is the less problematic.

Early travellers, adventurers and colonial administrators wrote about the indigenous inhabitants they met on their journeys, from the 17th century onwards. Alongside the increased colonisation of the area and the subjugation of the natives, the popularised discourse evolved into "Bushman research", using the terms of scientific means and methods.

The developing discourse continued and ultimately formalised and cemented a myth of the "naked Bushman". It's a myth that had its origins in a Western understanding of what it means to dress and a strong focus on the Bushman body as a subject of research.

Because Bushmen were widely considered to be nearly naked, the study of dress formed a limited part of the many later academic efforts at understanding Bushman culture. In [Dress as Social Relations – An interpretation of Bushman Dress](#) I challenge this myth.

I provide a study of Bushman dress as it's represented in the material culture of historical Bushman communities. I used as my source material collections of the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town and Museum Africa in Johannesburg, as well as the better known Bleek &

Lloyd archive of /Xam Bushman narratives. This [archive](#) is the result of an impressive recording project of the /Xam language, initiated in the 1870's by the linguist Wilhelm Bleek.

So what were the different worlds of dress and how did they affect social relations?

## **Social relations**

The Bleek and Lloyd [archive](#) contains 138 notebooks, of kukummi – or news, stories, talk, information, personal histories, day-to-day practices as well as myths and folklore. These myths are often stories about the Early Race, the people that inhabited the world of the /Xam before the /Xam proper. They tell of the world before the present order, when people were animals and animals were people.

In my research I used a broad definition of dress. This allowed me to look for signifiers of dress – such as aprons, bags, karosses, tattoos, cuts and fragrances – as I read through the stories in the notebooks. In this way I was able to identify different contexts and situations where elements of dress seem to have been of particular relevance.

Typical situations were associated with hunting practices and practices related to rain and water. For example, a hunter, before he tracks his prey, must cut himself and rub the cuts with a root called *ssho /oa*. And he must rub his body with it and wear *ssho /oa* in a band around his shoulders. This is to get the game to "run foolishly", not knowing that it is afraid, and to approach the hunter as an equal.

## **Nice smelling herbs**

In the narratives I was also able to read about the "New Maiden" – the

pubescent girl, who rubbed herself with nice smelling herbs – or buchu. She did this to calm and sooth the angry rain and to ensure a life-giving quiet rain and prosperity of the community.

Other examples tell of the transformation of items of dress back into what they were initially made of. A shoe became an eland antelope, the skin bags transformed back into hartebeests or springbok antelopes.

What all of these examples indicate in different ways is that important relations between people, animals and other beings were mediated through the bodily practice of dress.

Body modifications (such as tattoos, cuts, fragrances) initiated important social relations between the hunter and his prey, and the new maiden and the rain. Whereas body supplements, in these examples the actual skin clothing and the tortoiseshell containers carrying the buchu, maintained and continued these relationships in the present, material world.

The stories about the transformation of skin clothing back into the animal they were made of indicates that the association between the skin and the living animal was never completely broken. When the hunter killed the animal and made his own and his family's clothing out of it, they dressed in that animal and were required to act respectfully so that the animal didn't turn back into its animal identity again.

Qualities of the [living animal](#) were therefore continuously present in the made clothing. They formed part of the embedded properties of the clothing and maintained and created links and relations between humans and animals. The narratives of the /Xam show us how the bodily practice of dress was an essential part of how to live life in a communal world, between people, [animals](#) and other fellow beings.

Far from being naked, or nearly naked, the Bushmen of colonial

southern Africa had a complex and meaningful practice of dress. It was intimately related to subsistence, identity and their perception of how to live life in the world as they knew it.

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