Constructing the Road to Digitisation at the University of Cape Town Libraries

While it may be almost routine in the United States or Europe, digital imaging is an emerging initiative in South Africa. Although South Africa is one of the wealthiest and most technologically progressive countries in Africa, digital imaging is not yet considered as high a priority for academic libraries and archives as it may be at similar calibre institutions elsewhere in the world. The University of Cape Town (UCT) Libraries inaugural effort into digital imaging is the San (Bushman) Photographs of Dorothea Bleek, a collection of unique world significance listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.
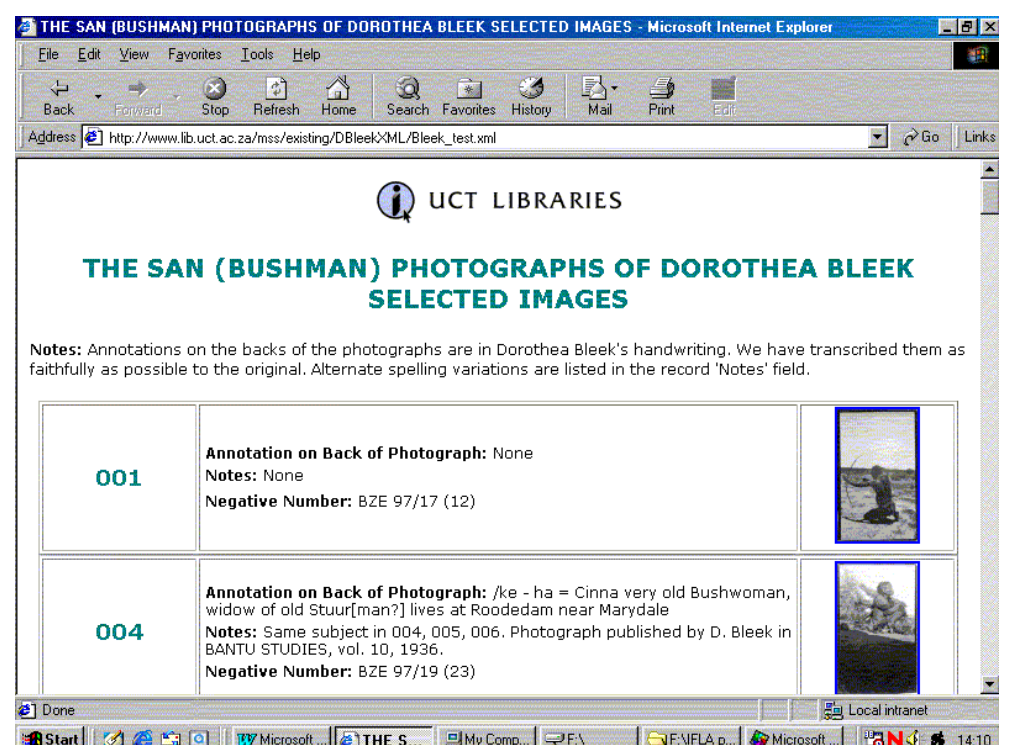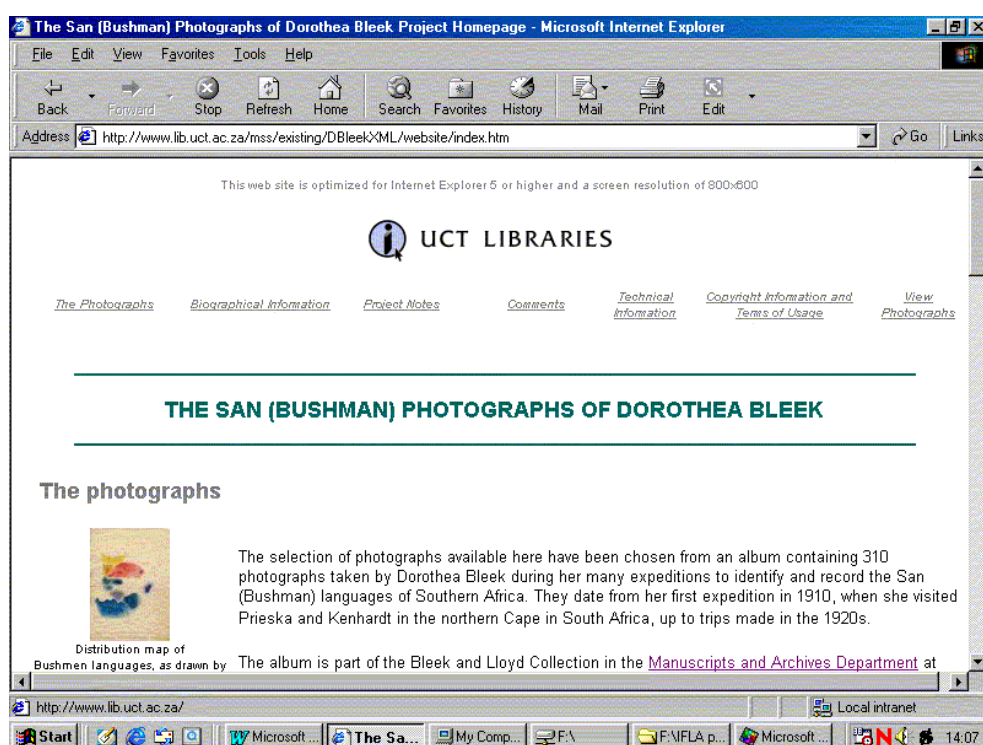
This poster project graphically represents the process of undertaking a digital imaging project in a developing country. Some of the challenges encountered during the project are common to many institutions world-wide such as coming to grips with the complex issues of metadata, the unfamiliarity with similar projects elsewhere to use as project guides and realising the importance of overall project planning and management. Other issues are more specific to the developing world, such as the lack of local peer-to-peer working groups, bandwidth limitations making access to high image-content sites difficult, high costs and long delays in obtaining cutting edge hardware and software as well as fluctuating prices of training and reference materials resulting from unstable currency levels.

The San (Bushman) Photographs of Dorothea Bleek digital imaging project was a learning process for UCT Libraries. Lessons learned from this initial project will help not only with future digital imaging projects at UCT but will also contribute towards capacity building in South Africa.

The San (Bushman) Photographs of Dorothea Bleek on the Internet

View the project overview web site at:
http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/existing/DBleekXML/website/index.htm

View the Selected Images and Metadata in XML at:
http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/existing/DBleekXML/Bleek_test.xml

Project Outcomes

Future projects will take into account the lessons learned from this initial project including:

- Carefully consider all aspects of future projects from the outset
- Concentrate on overall project planning
- Build in quality controls
- Plan file names and structure at the outset
- Learn more about metadata and XML

Capacity building efforts will include:

- Create a local peer-to-peer working group to discuss problems and promote collaboration
- Spread the word in South Africa about the importance of metadata and benchmarking for digital imaging projects
- More interaction and collaboration with international and national digitisation efforts like DISA (Digital Imaging Project of South Africa)
- Encourage the sharing of project information and samples on the Internet

Upcoming planned digital imaging projects include:

- A collection of large format vibrant posters depicting the unique social and political history of southern and South Africa
- A rare collection of political ephemera from the 1980s Youth Movement in the Western Cape including one-run and small press flyers, leaflets, and pamphlets, many of which were banned upon publication
- A collection of early 20th century glass plate negatives and lantern slides taken by Frederick Cornell
- Future phases of the San (Bushman) Photographs of Dorothea Bleek digital imaging project will investigate possibilities for linking the images to related resource materials. These include digitising recordings of the spoken /Xam language (currently contained on their original Edison wax cylinders) as well as transcribing Dorothea Bleek's notebooks.

Author Information

Kate Murray: Master's Student, Centre for Information Literacy and Department of Information and Library Studies, University of Cape Town.
mrrkat004@mail.uct.ac.za

Lesley Hart: Manager, Special Collections Information Services, University of Cape Town.
lesley@uctlib.uct.ac.za

Janine Dunlop: Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town.
janine@uctlib.uct.ac.za

Margie Struthers: Acting Head, African Studies Library, University of Cape Town.
margie@uctlib.uct.ac.za

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