

THE CONVERSATION

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Stone mason Fergus Wessel carves the |xam words on a new building at Rhodes House. Courtesy Elleke Boehmer

Africa's 'sleeping' language, |xam, has been written in stone at Oxford university

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A response to the legacy of the imperialist and mining magnate [Cecil John Rhodes](#) is being written into the fabric of the refurbished Rhodes House at the University of Oxford in the UK.

A statement “remembering and honouring the labour and suffering of those who worked to create this wealth” has been translated into the southern African language |xam and carved into the stone parapet of a new convention centre within the building.

Rhodes studied towards a degree in law at Oxford from 1876, taking eight years to complete it as he kept having to return to South Africa to look after his mining interests. He set up the [Rhodes Scholarship](#) in his will, so that [male graduates](#) from around the empire might benefit from an Oxford education. Women were included from 1977.

At the same time, his diamond mining enterprise rested on black land expropriation, which is why his legacy has been contested in recent years.

!xam is now a sleeping language, meaning that it is no longer used by any group as a mother tongue. It was spoken until the early 1900s by descendants of the Khoesans peoples and Afrikaners of the Northern Cape. It was famously recorded by the linguists Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd at the end of the 1800s in Cape Town, where a number of !xam men were incarcerated at the Breakwater prison, itself a symbol of colonial conflict.



The new building at Rhodes House, !xam words carved at the bottom. Elleke Boehmer

Khoekhoegowab and other languages of northern South Africa, southern Namibia and Botswana, still spoken today, share complicated histories with !xam. The language lives on in the work of several leading South African authors, like Antjie Krog and Sylvia Vollenhoven. It's found in the motto on the South African coat-of-arms where it reads "diverse people unite" – and now in the Oxford inscription.

We are scholars of literary and storytelling histories including those of Afrikaans and !xam. Rhodes House tasked us to find ways of translating the inscription into !xam, in consultation with speakers and teachers of related languages that are still used.

With its marked click consonants like ! and ǀ, the !xam inscription brings an unmistakable African presence to the heart of Oxford. The carving signifies resistance to the takeover, control and possession of other lands and people that underpinned the colonial project.

Latin meets !xam

Built in a monumental style by British architect Herbert Baker, Rhodes House is the home of the prestigious Rhodes Scholarships and stands as a memorial to Rhodes' memory. Baker worked extensively in South Africa, where he designed the Union Buildings, the seat of the country's government.

Read more: [Rock art: how South Africa's coat of arms got to feature an ancient San painting](#)

A line in Latin honouring Rhodes and acknowledging his love for Oxford runs along the top parapet of the building, at the rear. The new inscription appears in parallel lower down, but also closer to the viewer on the ground.

It can be seen as being in dialogue with the Latin writing. Latin, too, is a sleeping language.

How |xam came to be used

The decision to sculpt words honouring those who worked to generate Rhodes' wealth emerges from five years of legacy and inclusion conversations held across the worldwide Rhodes Scholar community.

These rewarding but often tough exchanges were conducted in the awareness of important initiatives exploring histories of empire, like the [#RhodesMustFall](#) and [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movements.

The wording was collectively chosen. Representatives from all generations emphasised the importance of recognising that the Rhodes legacy was built on southern African people's suffering and labour.



A statue of Cecil John Rhodes is removed from the University of Cape Town campus amid student protests dubbed [#RhodesMustFall](#) in 2015. Rodger Bosch/AFP/Getty Images

The idea arose at an early stage to use a southern African indigenous language that could not be immediately translated or decoded. As one of us, Boehmer, explains in her [research](#), it is important that the experiences of people marginalised by history are voiced if at all possible in their own languages. That their labour is, literally, put in their own words.

In this way, we question and resist ideas of frictionless cultural exchange around the world – exchange that is always dominated by the global north through the medium of English.

The translation

Translating the text that emerged out of the conversations we had was an exercise in balancing languages, worldviews, and even translators. Although !xam was recorded in the late 1800s, it is no longer spoken.

Therefore, the lead translator, Staphorst, approached the new inscription as an opportunity to work with and highlight the various entanglements between the !xam recorded by Bleek and Lloyd, and other related languages.

After Staphorst's preliminary translation, South African linguist Menán du Plessis provided a retranslation based on her extensive work on compiling !xam's first reference grammar.

Staphorst revised and edited further in line with reflections on the links between !xam, on the one hand, and other southern African languages (N!uu, Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans), on the other.

The new inscription moves beyond the fixation on the so-called "extinct" nature of the language, and rather embodies a point where the various histories, cultures and languages of the Cape meet each other.



Staphorst (left) meets with Ouma Katrina Esau (next to him), translators and advisors. Elleke Boehmer

We then worked together from October 2024 to develop and test the translation. This crucially included a visit to the Kalahari, a formative landscape of the Bushman peoples, and a consultation with Ouma Katrina Esau and her granddaughter, Claudia du Plessis. Both teach N!uu (N!huki), a language related to !xam.

Grappling with legacy

It's significant that the language is tied to the South African region whose history Rhodes profoundly shaped, and where he lived and died. Two stones bearing translations into English of both the Latin and the !xam messages will appear near to the inscriptions, so that viewers will be able to engage with the meaning and the symbolism of both.

The |xam inscription was carved by UK stone mason Fergus Wessel, who works in response to a longstanding English [Arts and Crafts tradition](#). The inscription's handcrafted aspect responds to the saying's reference to the difficult labour of southern African peoples that produced the Rhodes wealth.

Read more: [San and Khoe skeletons: how a South African university sought to restore dignity and redress the past](#)

At a time when educators and activists have grappled with the legacy of imperial figures like Rhodes, the new inscription is an effort to deal in the present with the colonial past and its legacies.