# Pots, Belts, and Medicine Containers: Challenging Colonial-era Categories and Classifications in the Digital Age

Töpfe, Gürtel und Medikamentenbehälter: Herausfordernde Kategorien aus der Kolonialzeit und Klassifikationen im digitalen Zeitalter

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#### Abstracts

With a specific focus on a material culture collection previously classified as Natal Nguni and Zulu at the Iziko South African Museum, this research article explores how digital spaces offer opportunities for changing the ways museums document and manage objects collected during colonial periods. This article draws attention to the highly constructed nature of museum documentation systems and the ways normalised colonial knowledge production practices are often replicated in digital versions of museums. Drawing on data I collected during workshops and interviews conducted 2016 – 2019 with descendent communities who self-identify as Zulu, I consider how their proposed, alternative categories, classifications, and information structures might take advantage of digital possibilities to change how museums construct knowledge about the people and cultures their objects are employed to represent. In conjunction with more rigorous repatriation and hiring policies, rethinking museum documentation systems is, as this article argues, an important step towards decolonising institutions.

Anhand einer Sammlung kultureller Artefakte, die im Iziko South African Museum zuvor als Natal Nguni und Zulu klassifiziert wurden, untersucht der Forschungsartikel, welche Möglichkeiten digitale Räume bieten, während der Kolonialzeit gesammelte Objekte auf neue Weise zu dokumentieren und zu verwalten. Dabei wird die Aufmerksamkeit auf den hochgradig konstruierten Charakter von Museumsdokumentationssystemen und die Art und Weise gelenkt, wie normalisierte koloniale Praktiken der Wissensproduktion oft in digitalen Versionen von Museen repliziert werden. Auf der Grundlage von Daten aus Workshops und Interviews aus den Jahren 2016 – 2019, die mit Vertretern und Vertreterinnen von sich selbst als Zulu identifizierenden Gruppen stattgefunden haben, wird überlegt, wie alternative Kategorien, Klassifikationen und Informationsstrukturen eingesetzt werden könnten, um die Art und Weise zu verändern, wie Museen Wissen über Menschen und Kulturen konstruieren. In Verbindung mit einer rigoroseren Rückführungs- und Einstellungspolitik ist das Überdenken von Museumsdokumentationssystemen ein wichtiger Schritt zur Dekolonisierung von Institutionen.

#### Keywords

Museum / Museum, Digitalisierung / digitalization, digitization, Ethik / ethics, Kulturgeschichte / cultural history, Kulturpolitik / cultural policy

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#### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Despite their initial 'keep calm and carry on' attitude to the coronavirus emergency, British museums eventually succumbed to the same fate as counterparts across Europe and North America and closed their doors indefinitely to visitors in late March 2020. In the wake of the global pandemic, museums worldwide recognized that their survival might now depend on going digital, at least in the immediate term (FEINSTEIN 2020). Several museums subsequently began directing their virtual visitors to the Google Arts and Culture project, a repository that holds digital documentation for more than 1200 international institutions. Larger institutions-like the Museé du Louvre in Paris-leveraged their more significant resources to produce impressive, high definition virtual tours of their wings and galleries. The British Museum responded to the "current extraordinary circumstances" by expediting the release of a new version of its collection online.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, it no longer mattered whether visitors were in Lhasa, Lusaka, or London: if they had access to the internet, they had equal access to the collection. Expensive air fares and complicated UK visa applications that once prohibited much of the world's population-particularly people in previously colonized countries-visiting the museum on the same terms no longer applied. From an access perspective, the COVID-19 crisis seemed to be a great leveler as more and more objects, along with their accompanying documentation, are made available to everyone online.

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- 2 The webpage can be found at <www.britishmuseum.org/collection/collection-online/ development>.

Wayne Modest (2018) is one scholar who is dismissive, however, of attempts to equate digitization with access and decolonization. Where such utopian visions fall short is in the details, specifically those included-and more importantly excluded-by the documentation systems. While online exhibitions and catalogues might make more of the collections more accessible to more people, this "one-dimensional transfer of knowledge" (KAHN 2020) does not change how knowledge about the objects is constructed or represented, or change the categories we use when talking about the past, something South African historian Mbongeseni Buthelezi (2016) identifies as essential in any decolonization process. The detailed and historically constructed categories-object type, production place, production date, for example-often listed below or alongside compelling digital images in online museums, are symptomatic of deeply embedded colonial legacies (CHRISTEN 2006, 2019; MA-SON 2006; TURNER 2020). They perpetuate the same insidious narratives used by museums to justify holding on to contested items in their collections (SANDERSON 2019: HICKS 2020). As the current escalation in the Black Lives Matter movement emphasizes, there remains an urgent need to confront these contentious histories and interrogate the institutional inequalities and systemic racism that emanate from them. Why museums are significant in this debate is-as Sharon MacDonald (2006: 15) succinctly summarizes-because they "inform not just how we see what is in them, but also how we see what is outside, and how we see ourselves."

This article explores how museum institutions might use digital spaces to engage more meaningfully in decolonization that goes beyond using technologies to simply replicate exhibitions, objects, and their documentation in digital form-a practice that arguably reinforces colonial narratives while simultaneously obscuring their historical origins so that they appear neutral purveyors of universal knowledge. I explore these issues through a particular group of objects that were once part of the anthropology and ethnography collection at the South African Museum (SAM), an institution established in Cape Town in 1825 by Lord Charles Somerset that is now part of the Iziko Museums of South Africa group. The objects-items ranging from baskets to pots to herbs and beaded headdresses that entered the museum in various ways and forms since the mid-nineteenth century-were classified as the Natal Nguni collection and primarily represented 'Zulu' culture; since South African Independence in 1994, Iziko has reclassified them as part of its Social History Collections (DAVISON 2005). Yet, as with many museum collections accrued in the colonial era, the Natal Nguni, or Zulu, collection is, unsurprisingly, still deeply imbued with a normalizing colonial epistemology that is not undermined by this broader reclassification. Like Iziko, many digital museum documentation systems still have their roots in the older, colonial-era paper-based systems.<sup>3</sup> Certain tools within the documentation systems, whether analogue catalogue cards or digital databases, obscure or "blackbox" (LATOUR 1999) the constructed nature of this knowledge so that it comes to be accepted as a Foucauldian type truth. Interrogating these museums' documentation systems reveals the very constructed nature of knowledge in their collections, catalogues, and classifications (TURNER 2015, 2020; GIBSON 2019). At the same time, cracks and fissures in the documentation offer opportunities for exploring alternative narratives, both within and outside the museum's walls.

Rather than trying to develop a definitive, anticolonial narrative that might make a futile attempt to fill these archival gaps, this research article explores the possibility of producing alternative stories about the Natal Nguni collection in new digital spaces, narratives constructed by descendent community members who self-identify as Zulu today. The findings are based on archival research, interviews, workshops, and participant observation fieldwork that I organized and conducted in both Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa's north-eastern province) between 2016 and 2019 (Figure 1). Constructing these narratives by challenging the core museum activities of collecting, cataloguing, and classifying-work that Ramesh Srinivasan et al. (2009: 164 - 166) describe as taking place at the museum's permanent level-means they might become more than "add ons" that simply supplement the prevailing colonial narrative. Challenging these knowledge production practices is not, in any way, a substitution for repatriating artefacts to originating communities, but it is part of a broader decolonization process aimed at the restitution of knowledge. What this information contributes to is an attempt at reimagining the collection of items once classified by the SAM as Zulu, at refiguring the language and categories, a process Buthelezi (2016) contends is necessary for serious decolonization where foundational level interventions provoke changes in how we construct knowledge, talk about the past, and so shape the future.

3 At the time of research, Iziko used the Logos Flow digital database system. AdLib Museum and Minisis are examples of other digital systems widely used by museums to document and manage their collections. They record specific information about the object, for example, object number and accession date.

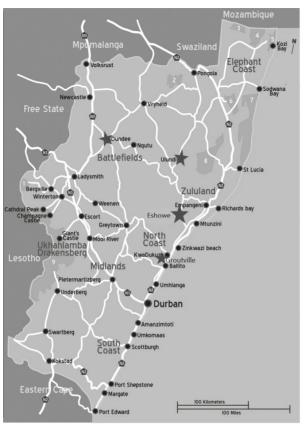


Fig. 1: Map of KwaZulu-Natal province showing workshop sites (source: author).

# 2. Alternative Categories and Classifications

The SAM, like many museums, employed a documentation system that prioritized certain categories of information—the 'tribe' from which objects were collected and the object's standard English name, for example—and presented them as a total, neutral narrative (GIBSON 2019). Formalized in the 1940s by Margaret Shaw, the SAM's curator and professional ethnographer, the catalogue card (Figure 2) embodies the many conscious decisions made by the SAM about what information to include on the catalogue cards—the donor's name and object's "tribe"—

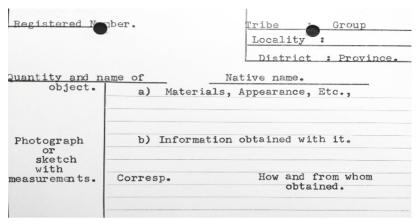


Fig. 2: The South African Museum's paper catalogue card, designed in the 1940s by the curator, Margaret Shaw (source: Iziko Museums of South Africa).

and what to exclude—the maker's name, for example.<sup>4</sup> These inclusions and exclusions do not merely reflect a colonial epistemology: they produced the colonial knowledge about people and cultures in a very specific, normalizing way. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (2007) point out, such rules of practice are often so standardized that they are very difficult to see or describe.

Over the course of several workshops and interviews that I organized and held with descendent community members across KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and at the Iziko Museums in Cape Town, my interlocutors revealed, however, that there *are* other categories of information about items that they consider highly significant. If nothing else, these alternative categories reinforce and reiterate how very constructed the SAM's system was. Many of these community categories were entirely absent from the SAM's system and, so, from current Iziko records. Responses about what else, exactly, participants thought should be included varied from workshop to workshop and even person to person. The only consistency was participants' agreement that including the object name in the isiZulu language was an especially important piece of information. In some cases, I surmised which categories of information were important to community members while I acted as a participant-observer in the

4 When information was moved from the catalogue cards to the digital system, certain fields were reclassified; for example, 'tribe' is no longer a field name. Two other codes developed by Miss Shaw and her colleague to authenticate information on the catalogue cards are also absent from the digital records (GIBSON 2019).

workshops. I drew on this data to construct my workshop feedback survey and these results supplemented my initial findings without me giving them equal weight. The table below reflects some of these research findings compared with the SAM's selected categories for documenting artefacts. It acts as a summary of the information my interlocutors in KZN would most like to know about items classified as Zulu in the museum collection, information that is either not prioritized by the current cataloguing system or is excluded altogether. The text that follows this table offers a more immersive account as to why some community members consider this information so significant, and how it contributes towards reframing our thinking about material culture and, in turn, the people it purportedly represents.

South African Museum	Descendent Community
Categories	Categories
Registered number of object, preceded by museum's initials Tribe or group number Locality where object was obtained Name of object according to agreed terminology Native name of object Photo or sketch of object Description including information obtained with the specimen and pertaining to it alone How and where obtained Object's location in museum	IsiZulu name of object Color of the item How the item sounds Who made the item Where the item was made What the item is used for How the item is produced

Table 1: *The SAM's item categories compared with an overview of community categories (source: author).* 

Presumably some of this desired information, such as 'who used the item,' could once have been easily obtained but, given lengthy periods of time passing between the accessioning of the item and the present day, as well as the effectiveness of the catalogue cards in flattening item histories, retrieving this is now often near impossible. Other information, such as who made the items, can be recovered, in some cases, by scouring the archives. Items classified as 'Grain and Food stores' by the SAM and described on the catalogue cards as 'Grain bin – model,' presented per Mrs. Nxumalo, were made by students of Mr. Sibisi at Mabedlane

school. This last detail is not included in the catalogue cards but was recovered by reading correspondence exchanged between the SAM curator, Shaw, and the donor, Mrs. Nxumalo, in 1961.<sup>5</sup> Item measurements, something for which the SAM's system does provide but which, like the isiZulu name, are rarely completed on the catalogue card, could be recovered more easily by various visits to the storeroom with measuring tapes. These details about size offer important clues as to an item's function since, for example, if the dimensions of a pot are considered small, it is more likely to be an *umancishana* than an *imbiza*, meaning the item should be treated quite differently, as I discuss below.

## 2.1 Translating and Renaming Items

Translating and renaming items in isiZulu is not as straightforward, however, as having a secure grasp of both English and isiZulu. One interlocutor, Siyabonga Mzobe, emphasized this succinctly during the first workshop in Groutville (2016) when he declared about object number 1164 (Figure 3), "this is *ukhamba*. It is incorrect to say it is a clay pot. It connects us to our ancestors and to us as a Zulu nation." Given the agency Mzobe and his group ascribe to the *ukhamba* in mediating these relationships, this object defies easy classification within a more Eurocentric documentation system, such as the SAM's or Chenhall's, which are based on an ontology that overlooks object agency.

In some sense, *ukhamba* can be translated as 'pot' since it is used to hold liquids and for drinking, and sometimes it is an item of decoration; but this term fails to encompass that it is *more* than this. Drawing a comparison with such items as the Tlingit crest hat, repatriated to the *Tlingit Dakl'aweidi* clan, Alaska, from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in 2005, is helpful here. This item is a culturally and spiritually significant original *at.óow*, meaning it embodies "*Haa Shagóon*, clan ancestors, the present generation, and future generation" (HOLLINGER et al. 2013: 202). Classifying this item simply as a 'hat' fails to differentiate it or capture these spiritual qualities or embodied agency by forcing it into a European way of ordering the world (GIB-SON and KAHN 2016: 42). Recognizing this, the Smithsonian has made significant efforts to ensure they highlight these important qualities in lengthier note sections in their online catalogue. Following repatriation, the Smithsonian holds a 3D printed replica of the hat, an item that now

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Nxumalo and Mr. Sibisi appear only by their prefix and last name in the SAM correspondence.

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Hortors	11 Barba 1 P28 1 Barta	A Min & Hoelth is

Fig. 3a: Catalogue card (source: Iziko Museums of South Africa).



Fig. 3b: Photograph of SAM item 1164, Zulu pot (source: author).

has three separate online records available in the Smithsonian EMu database, Q?rius web site, and Smithsonian X-3D. Each entry extends far beyond the discrete, standard catalogue fields to include details about the repatriation process, how it was replicated, and an explanation of *at.oow*. Given the *ukhamba*'s significant and numerous functions, I suggest that, like the clan hat, it deserves similar attention and explanation in the digital environment.

Providing a single isiZulu translation for an object's standard English name is, however, a potentially futile task, as the workshops demonstrated. While British colonialism-and, more recently, Zulu nationalism-constructed a narrative of a homogenous Zulu nation, this belies the many regional differences that persist within KZN (WRIGHT/MA-ZEL 1991; HAMILTON/LEIBHAMMER 2016b, c). These are evident in the variety of names proffered for items by interlocutors for the same item. One item, collected in 1962 at Tugela Ferry and classified as a 'belt' under the SAM's system, is a good example of this. Reflecting on one item collected in 1962 at Tugela Ferry and classified as a 'belt' under the SAM's system, the Eshowe (2017) workshop group explained that it had at least three names: *isibhamba*, *isifociua*, and *i-bandi*; at the Ulundi workshop. Busi Ntuli referred to the same item as *ixhama*. The names given vary from region to region. Fieldwork in other locations might produce even more names for this 'belt.' This is significant because the variations go some way towards challenging the colonial idea of a unified Zulu "tribe." Incorporating these various names into the digital catalogue record makes visible the differences subsumed by this convenient blanket classification.

There is a further ethical dimension to this renaming process. Classifications, such as pot and belt, have been employed too generically in the past so that items my interlocutors identify differently as *izinkhamba*, an *imbiza*, or *umancishana* are all classified as the same object type—pot under the SAM's system. This is misleading, especially if the catalogue card fails to also include the isiZulu name, as with object 1164 (Figure 3). These differences are important since each pot has a specific purpose, something Dr. Skhumbuzo Miya, a *sangoma* (traditional healer) explained in his interview with me when I showed him a photograph of this item. "There will be an earthenware one that is big," he said, "and then there will be a small one, called *umancishana*, which is used for the ancestors." The group at Eshowe further distinguished the role of *umancishana* and Nini Xulu explained how this makes it culturally significant: *Umancishana* is used [during] ancestral celebrations. So you talk to the ancestors over it and that's why it's not supposed to be given to outsiders. Or even some of the family members.

I tried to explore this point further, asking the group what would happen if an *umancishana* had entered a museum collection. The group was adamant that an *umancishana* could not be in a museum collection because no Zulu person would part with this item. Yet, given the little I know about how the SAM procured certain items, including human remains, in direct violation of cultural rules, we might be necessarily skeptical about this. The absence, however, of the object's isiZulu name and the way all differences are erased by the blanket classification pot makes it more difficult for us to begin identifying these items in collections, items which, if they are present, certainly speak further to unethical collecting practices and an urgent need to redress these.

## 2.2 Highlighting Different Properties

Alongside discussions about the isiZulu item name, the object's color, and the sound it might make also commanded attention during the workshops. Undoubtedly, advances in technology make it far easier now to share these properties in high-resolution images or sound clips. Even the simple postcards of items that I shared with the group were in full color, unlike the few black and white photographs that adorn some of the SAM catalogue cards. The item's color, my interlocutors revealed, can indicate several important qualities bundled within it. Discussing the ukhamba, Xulu explained that a darker color is significant because it shows it was "well burnt" and so "strong." Xulu's observation is consistent with art historian Elizabeth Perrill's (2012) research findings on Zulu pottery. She argues that sometime between Shaka's rule (1787-1828) and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, Zulu artists also started blackening pots through a second firing process as a mark of respect for ancestors who prefer cooler, shadier spaces. The blackened surface may eventually wear off-as perhaps is the case with item 1164 in the Iziko collection-which allows the brown color to show through. Either way, this ukufusa (blackening) stage is never repeated. As Perrill points out, not all Zulu pots are either blackened or historically used for beer. Consequently, giving greater attention to this item's color history, whether it is blackened, has been blackened, or is merely brown, for example, offers better insights into individual object biographies, a notion which itself challenges a Western idea that objects are "inert and mute" (APPADU-RAI 2009: 4).

Bornwell Masuku posited that colors were even more significant in the past since they could communicate messages in an otherwise "illiterate" society. Masuku and his cohort were quick to point out, however, that messages conveyed by color choices and combinations are not always accessible to everyone—and intentionally so. Discussing item 11970 (Figure 4), classified as a 'medicine flask' by the SAM when it was accessioned in 1981, Masuku explained that the beads around the bottle neck indicate what is inside. Wilfred Mchunu supported this statement, explaining that the colors act as a key for the *inyanga* (traditional healer), who may have several containers like this, each filled with different kinds of *muti* (medicine). But, as Masuku explained, this knowledge would often be unique to that *inyanga*.

While this might mean it seems pointless to emphasize an item's color in the records if we don't all have the skills to interpret it, I argue that recognizing our own limitations is actually the first step towards taking seriously other ontologies. These interlocutors understood that someone in their wider community *does* possess the knowledge to interpret messages that are potentially being communicated by bead colors. Documenting this feature is thus understandably more important to these originating communities than it was to colonial officials who, not being versed in this knowledge system, failed to prioritize recording item color in the same way they did tribe or object number. Being able to reorganize how information is prioritized is, then, an incremental challenge to a colonial ontology.

Similarly, sound—a quality entirely absent from Shaw's system drew attention from the Eshowe group when studying the *ukhamba* picture. Xulu explained that when buying an *ukhamba*, "you test it. You do this [hitting side of her mug]. There's a certain sound that tells you this is quality." It is, admittedly, exceedingly difficult to convey this information through a two-dimensional catalogue card. That this aspect was overlooked by a colonial documentation system is, however, also indicative of a broader European preoccupation with privileging sight, something Johannes Fabian (1983) terms the "rhetoric of vision" and sees as yet another device used by anthropologists to deny coevalness. Tony Bennett (2006) expounds further on how privileging sight means Western museum exhibitions are arranged and interpreted in a particular way, an argument that my fieldwork data suggests might be expanded further to include the ways items are documented as well as displayed. As with col-



Fig. 4: SAM item 11970, Medicine Flask (source: author).

or, new technologies *do* make it possible to embed a high-quality sound recording in a digital catalogue record. That this is not common practice or a standard feature in museum databases is, I suggest, evidence of a lingering "rhetoric of vision" in the postcolonial period. Indeed, as Sarah Kenderdine (2018) points out, we are constrained in what we represent by the very visual language of the database. But it does seem that digital catalogue records can, potentially, better accommodate information about items that the community prioritizes, rather than meeting just the perceived needs of the museum. Importantly, incorporating other sensory details also challenges a colonial privileging of sight that fundamentally affected both the kinds of evidence collected and communicated, and, consequently, the narrative they seemed to support.

#### 2.3 Who, What, When, Where, and How?

The SAM documentation system was designed to capture provenance information about the items collected, but always from a particularly colonial viewpoint that paradoxically obscured the object's journey before the point of collection. The 'who,' for example, was concerned with who collected or donated the item, rather than who made it, and the museum was more interested in capturing where and when it was collected, than where and when it was made.

Interestingly, participants did not place as much emphasis on knowing the name of the individual who made the item as they did on the maker's gender. During the initial Eshowe workshop, for example, Thandi Nxumalo explained that, "for instance with the *isikhetho*, it's something that's made by women in general, not by specific people." Likewise, when I asked Miya (personal communication, January 26, 2017) if he knew who made his umancishana, Myeni interpreted his response simply as "there were mothers who came from Msinga. They were selling those." Nxumalo hinted at why this detail about gender might be so important when stating that, "because of joblessness," men are now "also involving themselves in such things" as making traditional items "that were done by women previously." Knowing the maker's gender alongside the dates of creation and collection would, arguably, allow us to better understand the timings of these socioeconomic shifts. Once again, this historicizes the item, placing it, and the people producing it, in a historical context so that they are no longer suspended out of time.

Information about where the item was collected is sometimes included in the catalogue card; however, as Miya's comment about the *umancishana* suggests, people sometimes travel significant distances to sell their artworks. This journey is an important stage in the object's biography. As these objects move out of their immediate production environment and through the cycles of exchange, Appadurai (2009: 43) recognizes that "large gaps of knowledge" appear. He argues that the system of circulation and exchange giving rise to these knowledge gaps ensures a situation whereby searching for reliable information is a preoccupation for an institution, yet it remains exceedingly difficult to gain reliable information about people and things. Whereas the SAM's cataloguing system presents object provenance knowledge in a complete form, I argue that including such details as where the item was made—as well as where it was collected—make it possible for us to think of these cards as incomplete records, as testimonies to the gaps of knowledge Appadurai proposes, and an idea that again provides space for other narratives.

South African historians Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (2016a: 24) coined the evocative term "marooned out of time" to explain precisely this apparently ahistorical, timeless nature of archival items collected and produced during the colonial era. As they assert, most museum items classified as Zulu are systematically denied a history after entering a museum. It is a situation, they argue, culminating from systems that divide items according to 'type,' that label them by 'tribe' or 'ethnic group,' that fail to record dates of origin or place of provenance, or that simply provide no space for other contextual details, so that these are lost in time (ibid.). These systems, of which the SAM's cataloguing scheme is certainly one, obscure the many events and transformations these items have endured so that their entry into museums becomes the definitive and final moment in their biographies.

My interlocutors found other ways, however, to illuminate the historical nature of items they examined, not least by drawing them into relationships with 'modern' versions that many still encounter in their everyday lives. Once again, the ukhamba became a focal point of such discussions. During our first workshop in Groutville, Bongeka Tshingana shared that she had an *ukhamba* at home. She recognized it as belonging to the same group of objects as 1164, despite being made of plastic and beads, not clay, and used for decoration, rather than beer drinking. Nxumalo explained that the market is now flooded with such versions. What is interesting is that despite their apparent prevalence, there is no example of a plastic ukhamba in the Iziko collection. A reasonable explanation for this is that these plastic, Chinese-produced versions only flooded markets in KZN in more recent years. Since the SAM and Iziko have not expanded this Natal Nguni collection since the 1980s, plastic izinkhamba are not included. My argument is, however, that if museums are serious about decolonizing their collections, they must include and record such items as plastic *izinkhamba* and link them with earlier versions, since this tells a powerful narrative about a dynamic culture. Steve Kotze, Research Officer at Durban Local History Museums (DLHM), similarly notes that the DLHM ceased collecting before Chinese influence was keenly felt in his community and so the collection is silent on this.6 While several interlocutors were obviously disgruntled by increasing Chinese influence in their community and the adverse impact it is having on their local economies, Kotze suggests that while the museum's role is not to condone or praise Chinese influence, it should at least record its impact on a dynamic Zulu culture.

During the Dundee workshop (2017), Norman Leveridg shared his view that digitization and new technology can enhance the provenance documentation because they offer "a chance to photograph the product at the collecting site and you can even videotape the ceremony and then attach all that information to the record to make it more [...] alive." During the Eshowe and Ulundi meetings, interlocutors were keen to provide meticulous descriptions about how the items were made. Nxumalo shared that she had direct experience making an *ukhamba* and Xulu vividly remembered her grandmother creating *izinkhamba*. Their descriptions were rich in detail. It became clear that the process is intensely place based, that the item embodies deep knowledge about the landscape from which-and in which-it is formed, and that these women considered this aspect as important as knowing what shape these vessels should ultimately take. Likewise, the *isikhetho*, classified as a 'beer strainer' under the SAM's system, speaks to the geography and seasons of that region. As Khosi Shange explained, the grass only grows near certain swamp areas and you can only harvest it at certain times of the vear to make the isikhetho.

Recording such intangible knowledge is not only significant because the community places value on it, but also because, as further discussions revealed, recent developments such as mass-produced, Chinese manufactured replicas of these items perceivably undermine the economic viability of these local processes and threaten their extinction. Embedding video clips of the local creation processes in a digital catalogue does, then, seem to offer an opportunity to preserve knowledge that the older generation values so highly. Yet, there are potential ethical issues with capturing production in this way, as Bongani Ndhlovu, Executive Director: Core Functions at Iziko, explained (personal communication, April 10, 2017). While in the field in KZN, his research team would video such processes as making the *ukhamba* from scratch. Thereafter, the community might invite the researchers to record how the item was used in a ceremony.<sup>7</sup>

7 Ndhlovu did have reservations, however, about filming something so sensitive: on the one hand, members of the community were giving express permission by actively inviting the team in, but on the other hand Ndhlovu questioned whether those community members had the right to grant permissions on behalf of the wider community.

Shaw was insistent that the SAM's catalogue cards did not include this kind of "more general" object information that might be found in secondary literature. Since the item's use is rarely specific to individual items, this was not documented in the catalogue. However, the absence of isiZulu names for many of the items means it is often more difficult to determine its intended use since such broad categories as pot and belt, as discussed above, conceal the item's more specific purpose. An isifo*ciya*, for example, is not merely a decorative waist adornment; it plays a significant role in a mother's recovery after giving birth. In almost everv instance of asking groups to tell me something about the item in the photograph, the first information they provided, other than its isiZulu name, was about its use. Moreover, during the workshop feedback survey, nine people identified this information category as very important when describing an item. As such, I suggest that this information should be more readily available and, if it is not stated directly on the catalogue card, obvious links to further information should be given. Forcing items into siloed and singular classifications reflects a very colonial way of interpreting cultures, the horrifying consequences of which-especially when things do not fit exactly-are most evident in the implementation of apartheid race classifications.

## 3. New Relationships: Alternative Assemblages, Hierarchies, and Power

3.1 Assemblages and Relational Objects

Of all the information categories already included on the paper cards, 'object type' determines how they are physically ordered within the Iziko Social History Centre filing cabinets. The Natal Nguni catalogue cards are still organized alphabetically according to Shaw's system so that 'bags' are separated from 'baskets' and from 'breastcloths' by neatly labelled cardboard dividers. This arrangement makes it easier to draw relationships between objects sharing the same 'object type' classification. Indeed, we know that Shaw certainly focused her research according to object type, with pottery and basketry occupying her attention for numerous years (GIBSON 2019). Interestingly, my interlocutors seemed to draw different kinds of relationships between items so that assemblages, or collections, of objects were instead linked through ceremonial and other uses, rather than type. Specifically, participants drew connections between items used in beer drinking ceremonies, a highly significant part of Zulu belief systems. As discussed above, the *umancishana* plays a crucial role in mediating relations with the ancestors, but it does so in the company of other items. The significance of these items can only really be understood if they are considered as part of an assemblage in which they are intrinsically connected to other items and agencies. Speaking about the *isikhetho* at the Eshowe workshop, for example, Nxumalo explained that this item, as well as a stirrer and cover, must be present during these beer-drinking ceremonies: "When you serve beer, you must have this item."

Rodney Harrison, Sarah Byrne, and Anne Clarke (2013) draw on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of assemblages, as well as on archaeological concepts, to explain connections between museum items that sometimes depend on broader ontologies. Their ideas demand that we think differently about relationships between things and the agencies embodied within them, as Nxumalo implies. Taking these seriously is another way of challenging a deep-rooted colonial ontology in museum collections. The current paper-based catalogue card arrangement does not easily facilitate these other connections, but, I suggest, a digital database might address this situation by embedding links that connect records to produce alternative digital assemblages. Suddenly, this opens possibilities for arranging collections differently and in ways that more closely resemble how originating communities might determine relationships between things. Indeed, Haidy Geismar (2012) persuasively argues that the strength of digital technologies lies in their ability to expose and reveal a form of sociality that museums historically obscured in terms of how collections were compiled, organized, and displayed.

Digitally encoding the collections can reveal these invisibilities and simultaneously give occasion to reorganize both display and access, which, Geismar argues, seriously challenges the museum's authority. There is, however, a concurrent risk that digitization leads to content being "atomized" and treated simply as data (BORGMAN 2015: 50). Simon Tanner (2006) and Christine Borgman (2015) both suggest that this atomization permits opportunities to aggregate and disaggregate knowledge in new ways, but caution that it also means neglecting the content's original form and context, something that allows us to overlook how the data was originally curated as an "evidentiary record" (BORGMAN 2015: 53). In seeking to decolonize the collection, it is important that these original museum connections are still visible in the digital domain, alongside other assemblages. As well as preserving a record of the institution's collections management practices, the connections attest to a collection's always highly constructed nature and so, in revealing these inherent biases, expose them as complex and fragile evidence, regardless of purpose.

#### 3.2 Hierarchies of objects and information

While these alternative networks and assemblages of items might enhance the status of objects included within them, my data does not suggest that community members considered all items equally important. As became obvious in my archival research, certain communities historically considered some items more culturally significant than others. Regardless of the questionable reasons collectors gave for their difficulties procuring certain objects-such as milk pails and circumcision outfitsthere is certainly evidence that Zulu communities were historically more willing to part with some items than others. This notion was reinforced during both workshops and interviews, particularly when discussing Zulu pots. As the group at Eshowe explained, the umancishana is so culturally significant that it should never leave the family. Izinkhamba also retain a special significance, since they too are integral to the beer drinking ceremony, but it seems they have slightly more freedom of movement. According to Nxumalo and the group at Eshowe, however, izikhetho (beer stirrers) are not protected so fiercely and can be freely exchanged and sold, despite being part of this same assemblage.

What these conversations suggest, despite the small sample size, is that some items *are* more significant than others to these communities. Moreover, incorporating alternative hierarchies that challenge a colonial ordering effectively highlights the constructed nature of *all* hierarchies, thus undermining any sense that decisions made by the SAM curators or other communities—were either natural or objective. I do suspect that an item's perceived place in any hierarchy might vary from region to region, as the isiZulu names do, but accommodating this more subjective information in a catalogue record might better reflect an originating community's relationship with their material culture.

## 3.3 Powerful Objects and Secret Knowledge

There are, my interlocutors suggest, other items in the Iziko collection that are so culturally significant they either should not be there in the first place, or they should be treated very differently once a museum is aware of them. These are objects that the communities consider power-

ful, primarily for the roles they play in mediating relations with the ancestors. The umancishana is one example of such powerful items where current, Eurocentric classification schemes fail to capture more esoteric qualities. Several interlocutors also identified the medicine flask (Figure 4) as potentially powerful. Leveridg succinctly explained its power as depending on more than its contents since, "not only could the medicine inside be dangerous, so could the spiritual connection to it." When I showed Miya (personal communication, January 26, 2017) the pictures of the Iziko items, he pointed to the medicine flask and explained that he also had one that he uses to store "umuti," his medicine. He was quick to emphasize that the item is so powerful that the container should not be handled by just anyone. During our visit to the Iziko Museum storerooms as part of the Cape Town workshop in 2019, Miya expressed dismay at the number of powerful items he perceived as being stored incorrectly and dangerously by the Museum. That the SAM records do not identify or include handling instructions for these powerful items is, again, indicative of a colonial ontology that denies agency to nonhuman actors.

The SAM was not the only museum to collect such powerful items. The Smithsonian also holds potentially powerful Zulu items, including a 'Witch Doctor's Charm' (item no. E412795) and a 'Witch Doctor's kit' (item no. E412796). According to the accession file, these were "taken from a witch doctor killed by donor [Fred Pinnick] in the Zulu war, 1905, Mome Gorge." This provenance detail was not copied from the Smithsonian's paper catalogue card to the digital record, although a copy of the paper version can be viewed in the online record. While researching these items, Mkhuluwe Cele (email message to author, November 13, 2015), an expert in traditional South African medicines based in KZN confirmed that this was likely a medicine bag belonging to an inyanga (healer). He and Kotze, believe the bag is made from the skin of an uxamu (water monitor). Cele suggests that the choice of uxamu skin reflects the personal preference of the owner since medicine bags are not conventionally made from this material. Given the uxamu's natural strength and single-mindedness of purpose, people ate parts of it to ingest its strength; consequently, parts of the *uxamu* are a fairly common ingredient in intelezi (war medicine). Cele says the pouch would increase the strength of the medicines inside because it was made from uxamu skin, highlighting again an understanding that agency is dispersed, rather than resting only with human actors (Steve Kotze, email message to author, November 10, 2015).

It would be too easy to dismiss these interlocutors' concerns about powerful items as grounded purely in superstition. Yet, object agency is the subject of significant studies, particularly in anthropology (STRATH-ERN 1988; GELL 1998; LATOUR 1999; KÜCHLER 2002; KREPS 2003; WERE 2014; WATTS 2013; TODD 2014). Leveridg and Miya's interpretation of where power lies recalls Bruno Latour's (1999) work on the construction of knowledge in chemistry labs by studying practices of purification, which dismantles the subject-object dichotomy. Latour refers to humans and non-humans, rather than subjects and objects, exploring the way each exerts agency in relationship with the other. The new proposition or "hybrid actor" that develops out of this relationship blurs the boundary between human and non-human (180). Considered as one such proposition or hybrid actor, neither the healer nor their medicine item is fixed as either subject or object; responsibility for the outcome is shared. Latour concludes that we must recognize that artefacts are not extra to social relations but integral to them, a point many current cataloguing and classification systems fail to capture.

Taking alternative ideas about object agency seriously, and then documenting them differently as non-human actors with a capacity for agency, can have far-reaching implications for museums. This is certainly evident at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian Cultural Resources Center (NMAI-CRC) in Suitland, Maryland, where more than 800,000 artefacts are stored, many of which have spiritual significance. Recognizing these items as living means the building is architecturally designed to integrate museum curatorial concerns with those of Native custodians. Items in the NMAI-CRC thus enjoy space to breathe in a "safe, comfortable home" fashioned "to protect the objects and their spirits" (SMITHSONIAN 2005). Likewise, the Tlingit clan crest hat discussed above is stored according to Tlingit guidelines as well as museum best conservation practices (HOLLINGER et al. 2013). These and other actions have gone some way towards ameliorating relations between the Smithsonian and Native communities.

There was a shared feeling amongst interlocutors that museums are currently ignorant about how to care for items considered powerful by Zulu communities, and this was a matter of immediate concern. Remedying the situation demands taking alternative object ontologies seriously in ways that fundamentally change not only how museums classify and catalogue these items, but also policies that govern how they house and handle them; Miya, for example, advocates storing medicine containers in bowls of oil to protect staff and visitors against their power,

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and ensuring certain items are isolated from one another, possibly while waiting to be repatriated. Actions such as these, I argue, are not merely a step towards building trust between museums and communities but reflect a genuine commitment to decolonizing the museum's core collections management and conservation activities. These are certainly less visible interventions than exciting exhibitions but, as Martha Lampland and Star (2009) and Buthelezi (MCKAISER/WRIGHT/BUTHELEZI 2017) point out, the most profound changes often come out of the more boring and painstaking types of work.

# 4. Misidentified: "This isn't Zulu!" – Challenging Colonial Classifications

So far, this article has focused on reimagining items that my interlocutors broadly accepted as Zulu belongings. Two items in the SAM collection-the 'Game' and 'Doll'-however, gave them cause to challenge even this classification. The SAM accessioned the 'Zulu Game' in 1948, along with other items from the Dunn Collection. E J Dunn-who so crudely described how he collected another item in the same collection, a Zulu sweat scraper, from a friend who had shot and killed the owner-explained the game as, a "Puzzle. K\*\*\*\*r. The sticks have to be taken off the string. Zululand." Even without this accompanying information, the reactions to this photograph at both the Groutville and Eshowe workshops were unanimous: this item was not Zulu. Speaking on behalf of his group in Groutville, Mzobe shared that, "we have not seen something like this. It's definitely not South African." Similarly, when I showed the group in Eshowe the same item a couple of months later, Xulu declared, "It's not Zulu" and Ntuli, at Ulundi, supported her assessment by explaining, "... it has nothing to do with the Zulus. We don't see things like this." A Zulu 'Doll,' accessioned by the SAM in 1905, elicited similar questions about provenance. The groups in Groutville and Ulundi expressed reservations about its classification, agreeing that it was not a "normal Zulu doll" and that most dolls made at this time already looked like the Zulu dolls seen more commonly today.

Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (2016a) offer a plausible explanation for the proliferation of items (mis)classified by museums as Zulu in the late nineteenth century. They argue that following the final defeat of the Zulu kingdom at Rorke's Drift in 1879, distinctions between the northern and southern regions of the Thukela river were increasingly blurred when the British implemented a common "native policy" (15). Moreover, people now saw it as beneficial to identify with Zulu nationalism when resources became more limited. Grant McNulty, South African historian (personal communication, July 7, 2017) argues that in the nineteenth century, Zulu became almost synonymous with Black African, which might also explain why so many museums in Europe and North America also classified items this way. Either way, once this classification was cemented as fact by its entry in the museum records, it remained unchallenged.

Yet, by categorically rejecting certain items, like the doll, as "not Zulu," these results also highlight a commonly held notion that there is a Zulu culture to which these objects do not belong. Indeed, the same interlocutors who rejected the doll confidently asserted that other items in the SAM collection were most definitely Zulu and that they are proud of this fact. While challenging these colonial cultural classifications is undoubtedly important, I recognize that it is possible to over academicize this issue to the point of undermining people's self-identities. It is not my intention to suggest my interlocutors incorrectly imagine and associate with a Zulu identity, especially given South Africa's history whereby the ability to openly self-identify with one or multiple groups is a relatively new phenomenon. It is an issue deeply entwined with Indigenous identity politics, something Michelle Harris, Martin Nakata, and Bronwyn Carlson (2013) argue needs more nuanced attention globally. It is important to bear this in mind so that decolonization can be conducted more respectfully for those most affected by the process.

Nevertheless, we should remain prudent about the reasons some groups still advocate for the idea of a broader, all-encompassing Zulu culture of the kind constructed during European colonialism. Kotze (personal communication, September 14, 2017) suggests the last decade has witnessed a resurgence of Zulu nationalism that has significantly influenced museums in the KZN province. He argues that museums persist with a narrative that reinforces old colonial ideas about Zulu culture being rural, "traditional" and warlike because it now suits influential Zulu nationalists to present it this way. Buthelezi (2016) likewise highlights former President Jacob Zuma's frequent calls for a return to a "pure" "African" culture and demonstrates the ways supporters of the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini often frame royal activities as "traditional" and so pitted against anything urban and modern. Both Wright and Mazel (1991) and, more recently, Buthelezi (2016) and Kotze (personal communication, September 14, 2017) emphasize the perceived significance museums and cultural institutions have for these nationalist ideologues in propagating this story of a coherent Zulu nation. As Buthelezi (2016: 598) demonstrates, it is often material culture that is mobilized as evidence of a timeless, tribalized past. Thus, research such as this is anathema to these twenty-first century Zulu nationalists' interests, since they "would want that category to remain" despite its colonial roots (Dr Grant McNulty, pers. comm., July 7, 2017). It remains crucial to remember that evidence, whatever its purpose, can be fragile.

## 5. Conclusion

Will Gompertz (2020) argues that when museums reopen with the easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, they will be entering "a different cultural epoch" informed not only by social distancing measures but by the global protests that followed the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in May 2020. While many museums have issued statements of solidarity with the protesters, Gompertz asks, "but what actions will follow the words for those institutions with links to…imperial pasts?"

While being criticized for their failure to decolonize the knowledge held and produced within their institutions is not a new experience for many museums in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand (MACDONALD 2006; BOAST 2011; BOAST/BRAVO/SRINIVASAN 2007; CHRISTEN 2006; SRINIVASAN et al. 2009; BOAST/ENOTE 2013; PEERS/BROWN 2003), Dan Hicks, Curator of World Archaeology at the Pitts Rivers Museum, suggests that the kinds of policies and programs employed previously to meet these demands are now "outdated" (GOMPERTZ 2020). Certainly, calls for the return and repatriation of both knowledge and objects—particularly items with such cultural significance as an *umancishana*, a *sangoma*'s medicine container, or Witch Doctor's Kit—to descendent communities have intensified as part of the Black Lives Matter movement and these must now be of central concern for museum policy makers.

Likewise, museums are being called upon to change their hiring policies to address a lack of diversity in senior positions.<sup>8</sup> An absence of

<sup>8</sup> One serious failure of my research was not financially compensating my interlocutors for the knowledge they shared, a situation that dangerously mimics colonial relations since it undermines the value of their contributions. Since grant funding guidelines currently make it difficult to pay people directly for their time—and instead allow only

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) leaders in curatorial and collection management departments certainly means normalized categories and classifications—core knowledge production practices—pass more easily from the analogue to the digital realm where they reproduce colonial systems for constructing knowledge and talking about the past. As Buthelezi (2016: 590) argues, the danger of this lies in how deeply embedded colonial ideas are perpetuated in the terms and categories we still use when describing people and societies, which then frame how we address such urgent, present-day issues as repatriation claims.

Cataloguing and classifying are always problematic tasks. As Bowker and Star (2000: 41) convincingly argue, "no one classification system organizes reality for everyone." My research on the Natal Nguni collection certainly supports this contention, highlighting as it does the many silences incorporated in the colonial SAM system that are equally present in North American and European documentation systems. These exclusions have too frequently been overlooked, since categories are blurred when differences are either melded or eliminated (230). As is the case with the SAM, what is included or excluded in the classification scheme reproduces and reinforces power structures as part of a universalizing strategy that allows us to draw and communicate comparisons across vast distances (241). This was certainly one of Shaw's intentions while curator at the SAM (GIBSON 2019). Yet, such universalizing systems lead to a loss of local understanding, as with the SAM's Natal Nguni collection, which makes them determinedly inflexible.

In terms of my research, revealing that the notion of a homogenous Natal Nguni tribe is a colonial invention is certainly a first step towards decolonizing the collection. This requires interrogating the classification system and producing a more nuanced understanding of regional differences within this group through, for example, incorporating the various regional names for objects, even when these are contested. It also demands recognizing that there is no 'traditional' Zulu culture, because movement and migration in this region means people here have always exchanged ideas and techniques and then adapted and incorporated them with their own so that 'mission goods' are no more a break with the past than digital tools are today. Historicizing items by building links and connections between objects is one way of drawing them back into time in ways that demonstrate a dynamic culture that challenges the

complicated stipends—changing financial policies so that Indigenous interlocutors are paid as expert researchers and employed as staff is another way in which museums might begin decolonizing their broader practices.

colonial narrative of the SAM. Furthermore, the community can create links between items that they consider important, for example, between items associated with the significant beer drinking ceremonies, rather than simply by object type or area, as the SAM previously did. And within these assemblages, there is scope for developing new hierarchies of objects, constructed according to the community's way of organizing the world, so that the *ukhamba* is perhaps prioritized over the *isikhetho*. Decolonization is impossible without taking seriously alternative ontologies, which means, in the case of museums, respecting a less dichotomous division between subject and object and an acceptance that agency can be distributed. This should not only impact how such items are (re) classified and (re)catalogued, but must also impact the ways they are stored and handled and the information that needs to be available on the item's associated records.

Most urgent is developing this catalogue in isiZulu because failing to do this means continuing to exclude those people most marginalized by colonialism and apartheid. Language cannot be dissociated from power, since it is not simply the form in which knowledge is produced; it determines *what* knowledge is produced (MUDIMBE 1988). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2000: 3) likewise argues persuasively that producing knowledge in one's own language is fundamental to a community's "spiritual strength" and ability to constantly renew itself through culture, in renegotiating power relations and through its relationship with its entire milieu. As such, persisting with a purely English language cataloguing system, regardless of how effectively it curates collections according to community needs, undermines a serious decolonization project.

Digital spaces undoubtedly offer possibilities for holding, as well as revealing, multivocal narratives, which is an important step towards decolonizing knowledge. Rather than simply replicating existing information, if carefully constructed, digital catalogues might simultaneously expose and disrupt rigid classification and cataloguing systems. In its potential capacity to accommodate multiple fields, and facilitate different links between them, the digital space seems to offer possibilities for alternative documentation. This reveals the ways museum practices constructed knowledge and then allows them to reorganize information in ways that contest the museum's former authority. Working with such digital collections that encompass and encode Indigenous ontologies and concerns has profound implications for other museum practices, not least exhibitions and programs that produce and interpret knowledge drawn from the museum's collections. My research offers a detailed study of one material culture collection within a single institution, but its value lies in its implications for other museums with imperial links where decolonization projects involve thoughtfully investigating the catalogue. Reflecting on anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011: 152) notion of the ideal postcolonial collection, we must remember that the task of a postcolonial archivist, or curator, cannot simply be gathering subaltern histories so that these new artefacts tell a "different, subjugated" history. Decolonized, postcolonial histories, as Povinelli makes clear, must challenge the very epistemological and ontological assumptions on which knowledge is based. As museums evolve digitally in response to our current crises, they have an opportunity to do exactly that.

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