Chapter **03**

Bulldozing and Violence Disguised in Preservation: Curating and Preserving the Confiscated Objects at the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History

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In recent years, with the proliferation of museums focusing on diverse themes, communities, especially indigenous communities, are increasingly questioning the purposes of museums, their collections, and the continuous obsessions with preservation. This is so because the bulk of collections housed by ethnographic and anthropological museums relates to rituals and ceremonies that sometimes occur at a certain time or are made for a specific event or people and destroyed at the end of that event. The anthropology and ethnographic museums were used as a 'weapon, a method and a device for the ideology of white supremacy to legitimise, extend and naturalise new extremes of violence within corporate colonialism' (Hicks 2020:15). The Staats Museum, later renamed, the Transvaal Museum then Ditsong Museums of South Africa was established at a time when there was an exaggerated belief that indigenous races were dying out, and would soon become extinct, thus it was critical to collect and conserve evidence of their existence as part of the natural history of the world (Rassool 2015:654). As an indigenous healer, black and curator of an anthropological collection, I often find myself overwhelmed by how museums have long disregarded the makers and communities from where objects originate and their meanings. To start with, I find the term 'object' problematic as these 'items' are more than just 'things' but symbols and strands of people's lineages. And in the case of spiritual objects, they too are mediums and mediators between the living and their ancestors, often accompanied by certain rituals or ceremonies. By reflecting on three objects in the anthropology collection housed at the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History (hereafter DNMCH), this essay seeks to underline the intentional efforts by colonial rulers to ensure that black history is hidden and disrupted and to enforce a dislocation of objects relating to spirituality from the source communities and individuals. This essay emphasises that preservation cannot just be concerned with conserving the physical fabric but also the meanings embedded in these objects. To this effect, I explore dissociation from source communities as a way of reimagining curatorship and conservation of intangible heritage in museum collections.

History of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History's Anthropology Collection

In 1892 the State Museum (Staats Museum) was established at the initiative of the State Secretary, Willem Johannes Leyds, for the Republic in Pretoria. It appointed a Board of Management or 'Curatoren'. During this period, no public collections of the fauna, the flora, or the ethnography of the Transvaal existed. Thus the first aim of the newly founded institution was to collect these objects as exhibits of historical and national interest. The museum later collected geological specimens and animals related to zoology within the Republic and beyond (Gunning 1908:1). In the initial stages, the museum occupied a building at Market Square, later known as Strijdom Square in the centre of Pretoria. A new building was installed at Boom Street in 1899, just before the Second Anglo-Boer War. However, the building soon became too small to house all natural and ethnographic collections. Subsequently, in 1913 a building was erected on Paul Kruger Street and would be named the Transvaal Museum. Only the natural history section moved to the new building, while the ethnology collections remained at Boom Street. It was only in 1964 that the separation was officially endorsed, and the National Cultural History Museum came into being (Van Schalkwyk 1996:83). Although the museum was officially founded in 1892, the anthropology collection predated the collection as objects belonging to black people began earlier. An example of the earlier acquisitions is a calabash with 'Bushman engravings' collected in 1894. Jan Willem Boudewijn Gunning[1], appointed as director of the Staats Museum in 1897, held that it was critical to collect ethnographic material as time was running out.

[1] Dr Gunning was a Dutch physician who was the director of both the Staats museum and the Zoological Gardens. Gunning acquired a collection of live animals which were kept in the Transvaal Museum garden. These live animals would later form part of the Pretoria Zoological gardens. When he was the director, Gunning also founded the Annals of the Transvaal Museum which was aimed at publishing research activities undertaken by museum staff. The first issue was published in 1908 (Gunning 1908:1).

The year 1898 saw a large acquisition from the indigenous people of the Portuguese colonies. It comprised a variety of objects such as knobkerries, spoons, hairpins and horns. This acquisition was facilitated through a Portuguese state official named Mousinho d'Albuquerque in Lourenço Marques (Grobler 1996:1–11). The material obtained during 1910–12, through Rev William Govan Robertson, stationed at Kawimbwe in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia), was regarded as a more formalised and organised way of collecting than earlier acquisitions. Robertson's acquisition comprised more than 100 objects. It included material from the Bemba, Itawa, Lunda and Mambwe. Among others, Robertson collected raw materials for making bark cloth, the equipment for processing the bark, and the finished products. Other objects in this collection included drums, baskets, clay pots, leather objects and tools. Alfred Richard Radcliffe-Brown[2], honorary curator at the time, made his biggest contribution to the museum by contacting missionaries, magistrates, administrators and public members on behalf of the museum and requesting donations of objects. In turn, various objects were acquired. Other collections acquired by Radcliffe-Brown included archaeological items. One of the extensive collections he could obtain was put together by E. Dora Earthy from amongst the Chopi and Lenge of Mozambique, ultimately used to illustrate Earthy's (1933) book *Valenge Women* (Van Schalkwyk 2000:86).

After Radcliffe-Brown's departure, Wiets Beukes was appointed in 1932. However, he only stayed for six months and was asked to join the Department of Anthropology with Professor Gerald Paul Lestrade at the University of Pretoria. Beukes stayed on as Honorary Curator for Ethnology, and during his stay, he extended the collection. Some of the collecting field trips he undertook were journeys to the 'Transkei (Eastern Cape—Nguni speakers—twice), Lesotho (twice), Sekhukhuneland (Sepedi speakers), Vendaland and Mozambique (Tsonga speakers)'. During the mid-1950s, Tienie Jacobs-Venter was appointed as the next professional officer for anthropology. She had a BA degree with anthropology as a major. Although she did not conduct any fieldwork, she could still acquire numerous objects through writing to the various police stations, magistrate offices and traders, requesting any material they could contribute. Most of the material, however, arrived with little historical information (Van Schalkwyk 2000:87).

The Anthropology Department of the Randse Afrikaans Universiteit (today the University of Johannesburg) closed and sold its collection to the museum in the late 1980s. It mainly consisted of beadwork from the Transkei. During this time, the anthropology collection at the National Cultural History Museum moved towards a more social-historical direction by collecting the liberation and struggle material that Sam Moifatswane undertook. In 1996 the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria transferred their collection of ethnographic material to the museum but unfortunately, without proper documentation. This collection included material that belonged to Michael Daniel Christian de Wet-Nel, former minister for Bantu Administration and Development in the Nationalist Government. De Wet-Nel was much involved with the 'development' of the so-called homelands, officiated at many official functions, and was presented with many gifts (Van Schalkwyk 2000:90).

Colonial legacies in anthropological and ethnographic collections: Preservation and representation

Anthropological museums and collections materialise, embody and perpetuate 'traditions and styles of anthropological knowledge'. These collections are muddied in colonial trajectories and have turned into sites for the contestation and renewal of anthropology, from within and from without. Anthropological and ethnological collections were founded on the ideas of collecting, displaying, and learning, reflecting deep roots in societies that were under imperial rule or came under some Western sovereignty (Oswald & Tinus 2020:18). Although the history of most ethnological museums evolved out of prior histories of conquest, commerce, and political exploitation, the museum has struggled to redeem itself as a forum for the broadening and production of knowledge and to transform in its totality. Similar to the university, the scientific laboratory, the archive, and the church, the museum is viewed as a repository of Otherness or as a scientific laboratory for restoring, repairing, and recovering special materials, tools, styles, and forms (Appadurai 2020:45–47). Therefore, anthropological collections cannot be viewed universally but as a plural and complex part of anthropologies. These collections necessitate applying approaches highlighting various overlaps and engagement with sociology, history and museum and heritage research. At present, the pressure against the colonial history of anthropological collections is vital and warranted due to the formative role of colonialism in forming these institutions and the implications that continue to play out. Activists, artists, curators and academics are thoroughly reflexive to interrogating the

[2] Radcliffe-Brown is regarded as one of the founders of modern social anthropology and the main theorist of structural functionalism. In 1921 he joined the Staats Museum as the first professionally trained anthropologist. Dr Radcliffe-Brown worked for the museum for a short period from January to July 1921 and shortly afterwards he was appointed chair of social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. During his time as a curator at the Staats Museum he contacted missionaries and interested parties to sell and donate objects to the museum (Van Schalkwyk 2000:86)

coloniality in ethnographic and anthropological museums and collections toward a decolonised move (McDonald 2020:51–53).

In his analysis of Jacque Maquet's paper entitled the 'Objectivity of Anthropology' (1964), Archie Mafeje[3] points out that the anthropologist was not only a 'member of the white ruling oligarchy' but also served 'as a representative of the European middle classes who were architects of colonialism' (1998:3). Undoubtedly, today we are becoming more aware of that knowledge produced by disciplines such as anthropology 'acquired and used readily by those with the greatest capacity for exploitation' (Mafeje 1998:3). The reality is that pre-war social anthropology was a plausible and effective enterprise because of the power relations between the dominating Europeans and the dominated non-European cultures. Also, social anthropology provided proximity for the colonial authorities to gain access to the oppressed (Asad 1973:16–17). In South Africa, the largest collections of evidence of the South African human past in museums are those of ethnography. Although consisting of indigenous materials, these objects were appropriated by the white population. At the Staats Museum, for instance, the researchers and curators in the ethnology section later renamed the Anthropology Collection, comprised of white officials. These were individuals who were responsible for amassing objects through fieldwork and purchases. Also, donations from missionaries and magistrates came from white individuals presented to white museum officials (Van Schalkwyk 2000:2016). Indigenous artefacts were collected primarily to demonstrate the progress the settlers had made, as indigenous cultures were seen as primitive and inferior to European civilisation. South African museums were launched at a time of great interest in biological evolution, particularly with the spread of Social Darwinism in the later parts of the nineteenth century. They were interested in the early development of humans and other species. Indigenous Africans were seen as living examples of one of the earliest stages in the evolution of man (Gore 2004:31).

Curating objects of violence

One critical point in curating violent objects is their portrayal of power, powerlessness and resistance. Max Weber describes power as 'the ability to enforce one's will on others', thus making someone do something they normally would not have done had they not been overpowered (Eriksen 2010:166–67). Objects discussed in this essay were forcefully obtained from indigenous communities and individuals who, owing to their intrinsic use, ritualistic, historical and cultural significance, would not have been given away freely. Because of colonial structural and institutional powers, objects captured and hidden in anthropological collections are often presented or recorded as gifts (Hicks 2020:20). Colonial artefacts present an intricate layer in that ownership and how artefacts were collected have gloomy historical records. These artefacts amassed during colonial times took on many forms. Some were freely given or allegedly collected under reciprocal exchanges. 'While some of these objects are said to have been sold to explorers, colonists, and collectors' (Garsha 2020:46), many are looted objects taken from their owners under force. These artefacts travelled interwoven paths to reach the metropole and became displayed material and represented in such a way those who uprooted them saw fit. Indeed, it can be argued that even the most overt examples of materials considered to have been legitimately collected are still stolen items. Colonisation was founded on the oppressor having power over the oppressed. Thus, 'there was no fair exchange, and any transaction between colonisers and the colonised is an example of an acquisition taken under duress' (Garsha 2020:46–48). Objects discussed in this chapter display colonial authorities' power over black people. And that is depicted on object tags and accession records inscribing that they were confiscated, thus implying violence took place.

Confiscated objects at the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History

Curatorial practice presents intricate paradoxes of being viewed as a productive space for engagement, understanding, and interaction and, at the same time, the inescapable partiality of redemption and reconciliation, often in contexts that knew no prior conciliation (Patterson 2011:21). In 2014, I was appointed by Ditsong Museums of South Africa as the curator of the anthropology collection at the DNMCH. Among other duties, I was responsible for the safekeeping and preservation of around twenty-five thousand artefacts, mainly from different African regions, a few from the Australian Aborigines, South America and Asia. This preservation I was to be responsible for is for future generations, or so my job description outlined. Over the years, as I interrogated this anthropology collection such as accession registers and letters, the silences of the source communities and artists that created the objects grew even louder. I grappled with the issues of representation and identity in this collection. Through this continuous interaction with objects, their accompanying

[3] Archie Mafeje was a professor of Anthropology born in the Eastern Cape South Africa in 1936. During his time as an exiled intellectual, Mafeje wrote on revolutionary theory and politics. He was a Marxist and by the 1960s and 1970s he had managed to reconcile both his political and academic work (Nyoka 2020).

documentation, tags and labels, I realised how much of a responsibility I have towards contributing to the redemption and transformation of a problematic collection such as this anthropological one. As Laura de Harde appropriately put it in one of our discussions, curating a collection mudded in colonial origins is, to some extent, a 'burden as it is inherited obsessions' of those that cared for the collection before my time (pers. comm. 2022). Unlike objects with little or no information regarding their original location or acquisition method, the confiscated objects in the anthropology collection tell us not just about the history of the objects or their cultural or ritualistic usage but also the country's history at the time they were collected.

Figure 3.1.
Bambatha blacksmith bellows handle, length 39cm. The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History collection. Photograph by Julia Montlha, 2022.

Bambatha rebellion bellows

When the Natal administrators imposed a poll tax on unmarried Zulu men, there was a general objection by many Zulu people against this tax. An uprising of a bloody armed campaign to challenge British colonial rule ensued. The uprising, which intensified in January, led to what would later be known as the Bambatha Rebellion in the middle of 1907 (Reeding 2000:31). In 1914, the Transvaal Museum received a donation of 'AmaZulu bellows collected from the Piet Retief District' (Figure 3.1). As detailed in the accession register, the bellows were 'confiscated from a native smelter delivered in the act of manufacturing 'assegai' for sale to the Zulu rebels during the rebellion of 1906–7 on the farm that was under Chief Mtshekula in Piet Retief District'. This donation was received from the resident Magistrate in June 1914. Although today only one handle of the bellows marked 4464 remains, it is not surprising that an object associated with what is considered one of the best-known examples of resistance against colonial rule in Africa, namely the Bambatha Revolt, found itself in an anthropological collection. The impounding of the bellows, which were later donated to the Transvaal Museum, served several purposes. Firstly, to obscure a part of the Bambatha Revolt history, the manufacturer was referred to only as 'native smelter', with nothing mentioned about the estimated number of assegais that might have been produced and how they were collected from the manufacturer during the revolt. Concurrently, the bellows symbolise the British conquest of the Zulu people. As noted by Rassool (2015:658), a museum cannot be viewed as an institution of modernity and ordered citizenship but is a primary institutional form of empire. It was made and is being remade and adapted through both sides of the empire's history: by a rapacious and violent empire of plunder and

conciliation and by empire as 'benevolent colonisation', humanitarianism and trusteeship over people and things.

The Nyabela Stick

An object with accession number 4495 is described in the anthropology collection accession register as 'a club or knobkerrie made out of rhinoceros' horn (Figure 3.2). It was the symbol of dignity for Chief Njabel (Nyabela) and was taken out of his hands by General Joubert after he had conquered his tribe (Mapoch tribe of AmaNdebele). This club was 'presented to the museum by Piet Joubert', op Julie [in July] 1883'. The club was confiscated from Nyabela after refusing to surrender Mampuru to General Piet Joubert, leader of the Transvaal commandos.

Towards the end of 1882, the Transvaal Boers continued their military expeditions against African communities residing within what they considered the parameters of their state. This time the expedition aimed at Nyabela's Ndzundza clan of Ndebele people that occupied hilly terrain bordering the ZAR's Middelburg district. Nyabela's royal headquarters, KoNomtjarhelo, was built by his father Mabhogo (whom the Boers referred to as Mapoch) in the 1830s, whereby he recruited and commissioned distinguished land surveyors, hunters and military experts, who were subjects of the Swazi King, Mangwane, to lay out his capital. Other features at KoNomtjarhelo included laying out 'large cattle pens, terraced agricultural fields and irrigation ducts fed by water springs. An interlocking system of fortresses, subterranean tunnels, rock barriers and underground bunkers was constructed for defensive purposes' (Saks 2008). When Nyabela took over as regent chief in 1875, the Ndzundza kingdom population was 15 000. The Boer and Ndzundza maintained a cordial truce in the 1870s and even collaborated to fight Sekhukhune of the Pedi people. However, the relationship took a different turn in 1881 when Nyabela resisted colonial control. In July 1883, Nyabela, the son of Mabhogo, was captured by forces of the Transvaal state after Mampuru[4] took refuge with one of Nyabela's subordinate chiefs, Makwani. Subsequently, Nyabela was summoned by the Government to give up the fugitive that was Mampuru, but he refused. During this period, the Transvaal was a disorganised state. A serious expedition against a powerful 'native tribe' would not have been undertaken by the Volksraad had it not been considered advisable to demonstrate to the British Government that they were better able to cope with the 'native tribes' (Hunt 1931:304; Boeyens & Van der Ryst 2014:40).

Figure 3.2.
Nyabela rhino-horn stick, length 48cm. The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History collection. Photograph by Motsane Getrude Seabela, 2022.

[4] Mampuru was a Pedi chief who for years was in a power struggle with his brother Sekhukhune. In mid-1882, Mampuru's followers attacked Sekhukhune and killed him, subsequently Mampuru fled to Nyabela's land. On two occasions the ZAR authorities had attempted to arrest Mampuru for resisting and causing disorder but did not succeed, and so the murder allegation was the last straw (Saks 2008).

In October 1882, Nyabela was given an ultimatum to avert war. He had to hand over Mampuru to the Republican authorities for a murder case of his brother Sekhukhune, but Nyabela refused to comply with the ultimatum. Nyabela told the authorities that he had swallowed Mampuru, and to get to him [Mampuru], they would have to kill him [Nyabela] first (Saks 2008). Indeed, a war that would take nine months followed between Nyabela and the Transvaal commandos. Nyabela was defeated and subsequently surrendered to Mampuru. The two were arrested on 11 July 1883, Nyabela's headquarters was burnt down, and his people, the AmaNdebele of Ndzundza, scattered across the country. Nyabela was sentenced to life in prison but released in 1898. Mampuru was sentenced to death and hanged on 22 November 1883 in Pretoria (Hunt 1931:304). The imprisonment of the two and the death of Mampuru took place at the old Pretoria Central Prison, close to the site where the DNMCH is situated and where Nyabela's royal stick is housed. In 2012 a street close to the museum was renamed from Potgieter to Kgosi Mampuru Street. This was followed by renaming the Pretoria Central Prison in 2013 to the Kgosi Mampuru II Prison.

It is apparent that the royal stick taken from Nyabela was a deliberate act to demonstrate the colonial conquest of another black group by Republican authorities; hence it was placed in a museum to feed the colonial gaze. The stick having been removed from Nyabela resulted in a tradition loss and the history of the AmaNdebele disrupted. Conversely, this royal stick became an object of contention in that the different groups of AmaNdebele have laid claim to this object. These frictions about whom is next in line to inherit the stick may have been averted had it been returned to Nyabela upon his release from prison in 1898.

Figure 3.3.
Mankgwanyana, divination thongs used in indigenous healing, height 49cm. The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History collection. Photograph by Motsane Getrude Seabela, 2022.

Mankgwanyana

I often find myself confronted with objects I inherited from my predecessors to curate in line with museological practices. But as a healer, I also encounter spirits and energies that will sometimes not even allow me to open cupboards or touch the divination apparatus and other ritualistic objects. Some of these spirits are just lost or hurting. I am constantly confronted with the presence of objects relating to divination which would not have been given freely to anyone unless they were a healer. For those reasons, I continuously have to ask for permission from the indigenous ancestors dragged from different parts of Africa and imprisoned in a museum collection. One of these objects is a divination

instrument called *Mankgwanyana* (Figure 3.3). This instrument would either have been passed down by another healer within the family or made by its owner as per the ancestors' directive through dreams. For continuity and perpetuity, a descendant of the healer within the lineage would inherit the indigenous healing gift through which they would use the instrument for healing and foretelling. The one side of a note on a tag attached to object ETH8592, *Mankgwanyana,* reads thus: 'Lazy tongs type of divinatory instrument confiscated at Sibasa 1939 from Venda diviner, Venda name libeshu (comparatively modern), not a Venda object, but Sotho'. On the other side of the tag, the note continues to read as follows: '… mankxgwanyana, repaired by me. Note two catholic pendants at the tip. Photographed by me NJ van Warmelo 5.5 1944'. This demonstrates identity loss and trauma incited on descending generations due to the displacement of a symbol serving as a medium between healers and those (ancestors) they walk with.

Conversely, Van Warmelo also demonstrated a form of invasion by restoring a divination tool, handled only by those to whom it was bestowed. While museums continue to preserve in the name of future generations, the perpetual conservation is also an act of taking away and depriving or disturbing a future generation from preserving their traditions and spirituality bestowed upon them by their ancestors. Engagement and co-curation with source communities and individuals then become critical about handling objects such as *Mankgwanyana* that possess divination values. In essence, the move should be toward an indigenous form of conservation inclusive of indigenous ways of preservation that is also inclusive.

Dissociation from source communities

Four months after assuming the position as curator of the anthropology collection at the DNMCH, I went to China, where I spent three months on a Conservation Training Programme, then later a Heritage Management Programme. One of the things that stood out during the Conservation Training Program was the Chinese's combination of modern advanced technologies and indigenous methods in conservation. In 2015, I enrolled for a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies with the University of Pretoria to gain more insight into the practices of museology, or at least I hoped. Although restoration was my least favourite part of the program, the conservation module was important as I learnt practices such as handling objects and their storage, which came in handy in my curatorial work. After all, that is part of collection management. Of course, this handling and storage of artefacts were of Western methods that totally disregarded the indigenous ways or even considered the people who made and handled the objects before they were brought into museums. Preventative conservation is considered a critical component of preservation within a museum environment. Also, it stresses the need to align with best international practices to ensure that objects do not deteriorate. There are ten agents of deterioration in conservation practices that museum officials working with collections must pay attention to: physical forces, theft, vandalism and displacers; fire, water, pests, pollutants, light; incorrect temperature; incorrect humidity and dissociation. Dissociation 'is when an item becomes separated from information about why it is valuable' (Lacombe Museum and Archives 2022). The challenges I face in curating the anthropology collection, which depicts colonial conquest, are not unique to the DNMCH as other museums and curators in Africa, Europe, and Australia, among others, face the same difficulties.

The development and ratification of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) have resulted in significantly increasing international debate about the nature and value of intangible heritage. The gaps found in available heritage literature have come to be filled by intangible heritage and represent an important cross-section of ideas and practices associated with intangible cultural heritage (Smith & Akagawa 2009:1). Cultural heritage preservation has become even more complex and politicised than it was when 'preservation institutions restricted their interest to monuments and artefacts' (Blake 2009:46). Whether in intangible or tangible forms, heritage symbolises identities of people (McLean 2006:3–4). Recognising intangible heritage as an important component of conservation in a practice that heavily emphasises materiality is a shift towards redressing the imbalances that have existed for a long time. The underlying notion is that objects do not necessarily have fixed meanings but that meanings are attributed to the social contexts through which the objects pass (Herle 2003:194). The dissociation that museums should emphasise is the intangible knowledge lost when objects were dislocated and disconnected from their places of origin to serve a colonial gaze and paralyse their existence as living objects.

Some efforts to transform have been made by my predecessor, Johnny

van Schalkwyk who presented a paper at the South African Museums Association (SAMA) proposing, in 1991, that museums should cease the display of sacred and sensitive materials such as those concerning initiation. Following the 1991 presentation was an exhibition he curated on the *BaHananwa* from the Limpopo Province, wherein they were invited to the museum to open the exhibition. The group in attendance was also taken on a tour of the anthropology collection storeroom specifically to view the crocodile sculpture associated with *koma,* the male initiation of *BaHananwa*. Upon viewing the sculpture, the group resolved that it should remain in the museum (Van Schalkwyk pers. comm. 2016; 2022). In an attempt to move from merely acknowledging the colonial traces in the anthropological collection towards a reinvented and transformed museum and curation, in 2017, the DNMCH had an exhibition entitled *Dipitša ke Bophelo/Pots are Life,* curated by Johnny van Schalkwyk to commemorate the artists that created pots from different cultural groups. This exhibition opposed the norm of highlighting the cultural group when displaying objects rather than individual artists. Certainly, van Schalkwyk's gesture is commendable toward transformation in curation, but the community were still on the periphery and not included in the curation and creation of the exhibitions. Certainly, an exhibition is not enough; hence Ditsong Museums of South Africa continue to engage in projects that seek to be transformative and towards a co-curation and co-production of knowledge with source communities. Through a project funded by the John Ellerman Foundation, I recently partnered with Dr Njabulo Chipangura, curator of the Living Cultures at the University of Manchester Museum, on provenance research of the Zulu beads housed by both DNMCH and the University of Manchester Museum. We also were interrogating the social biographies of these beads by engaging with community members in Nongoma and Durban, South Africa.

Ditsong Museums of South Africa have joined in on the global efforts of transforming and decolonising by taking stock and interrogating acquisition methods of its collections to engage with source communities and source countries regarding new forms of curating and knowledge production that are inclusive. This also includes provenance research on objects held in the museum but without stories of the makers. Dissociation in museum conservation concerns any data linked to an object, such as accession registers, photographs and movement forms. Thus, any loss or separation of the data associated with a specific object is considered to contribute to its deterioration. I propose that in addition to separating data from the object, dissociation should also include separating objects from their source communities, which resulted in misrepresentation and obscured provenance or the lack thereof. Due to colonialism, the silenced voices of indigenous communities in museum collections have separated the intangible from the tangible heritage of objects. It makes no sense to encourage the continued preservation of such objects merely for preserving them (because it has always been done so). This chapter and the exhibition co-curated with Laura de Harde seeks to deal with the challenges of curating 'inherited' collections embedded in colonial origins and the 'obsession' of preserving.

Conclusion

In recent times, indigenous groups have been increasingly raising concerns which are essentially religious and political. These concerns should be viewed within the context of an overall renewed awareness of their culture and identity. Museums worldwide still house numerous objects of spiritual, ritualistic and traditional values. For indigenous groups, objects taken from their ancestors surpass the legitimacy of scientific research – the issue for them is a perceived continuation of their cultural degradation and racist conduct. Museum objects are not just physical representations of tangible heritage but are also symbols of the loss of autonomy and culture and histories through military, legal and demographic processes (Tymchuk 1985:389–90). While only three objects were discussed in this chapter, the DNMCH houses far more objects confiscated during the colonial and apartheid eras. Ethnography has been used to represent the people colonised by Europeans and provided the 'scientific' justification for much of the colonial projects in the Americas and Africa. Even though the strategy emerged more than two hundred years ago, it incessantly continues to influence how indigenous peoples are represented in museums and related cultural institutions (Silverman 2009:9). Unlike objects alleged to have been presented to museums as gifts, the method of acquisition of objects under discussion in this chapter is apparent as they have been recorded as confiscated, thus the intention of the collection was clearly to display overthrow and violence. Alongside monuments, memorials and statues, 'museums can today also be viewed as potent, celebratory reminders of colonialism' (Giblin, Ramos & Grout 2019:471) disguised as preservation institutions.

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