



# DECOLONISING MUSEUMS IN A DIGITAL AGE

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University of Antwerp Lecture

29<sup>th</sup> October 2019

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# BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

Decolonisation is a process...we may never reach a point where we can declare an institution “decolonised.”

-Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Indigenous scholar, The Sociological Review Annual Lecture, October 2019.

Decolonisation requires slower, more painstaking work than, for example, mounting interesting, attention-grabbing exhibitions or tearing down statues of colonial icons...It means looking in detail at the past and engaging with the very categories and classifications we use to talk about it.

-Mbongeseni Buthelezi, South African historian, 2017.



# Decolonising South African Museums in a Digital Age: Re-imagining The Iziko Museums' Natal Nguni Catalogue and Collection

# Iziko Museums of South Africa

- South African Museum, est. 1825.
- Iziko Museums Flagship (12 institutions), est. 2001.
- Three collection streams:
  - Art
  - Natural History
  - Social History
- Iziko Social History Centre, open 2010



South African  
Museum  
(left)

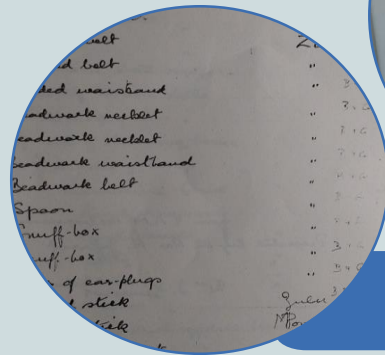


Social History  
Centre  
(right)

# Research Phase 1: In the Museum- Archives and Collections



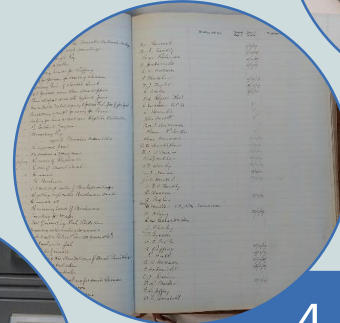
1. Annual Reports



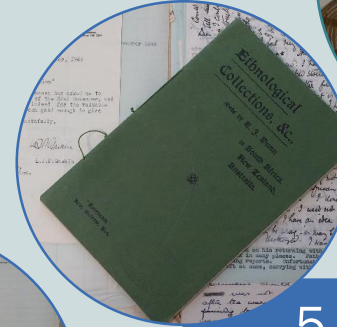
2. Accession Registers



3. Catalogue Cards



4. Correspondence



5. Other Docs



6. Objects

Classification	Object number	Object name	Accession year	Tribe or Group	Place	Correspondence no.	Collector
Axe	9453		1968	Zulu	Eshowe	1286	Miss Koch
Bag	5831		1937	Zulu	Nongoma	252	Romanus Pally
Basket	8397	imbenge	1961	Zulu	Eshowe	734	Bought from maker (SAM 1961 Exp.)
Basket	8399	imbenge	1961	Zulu	Eshowe	734	Bought from Potter near Eshowe (SAM 1961 Exp.)
Basket	8412	imbenge	1961	Ximba	Mahlabatini		Bought from Nxumalo (SAM 1961 exp.)
Basket	8413	isiqabetho/ iqoma/ isihelo	1961	Ximba	Mahlabatini		Bought from Nxumalo (SAM 1961 exp.)
Basket	10051		1971	Ximba	Mahlabatini	1413a	SAM 1971 Exp.
Basket	10930	imbenge	1977	Buthelezi	Mahlabatini		Bought by Shaw (Made by an old man)
Basket	8428	imbenge	1961	Mabaso	Msinga (Tugela Ferry)		Pool, Church of Scotland Mission Hospital
Basket	10220		1973		N. of Tongaat		Mrs Watts
Basket	5813	isichumo	1937	Zulu	Nongoma	252	Romanus Pally

# Archival Research Findings:

## ➤ Timeless and Authentic Items

These are “mission goods...things made by natives under European tuition or influence and not at all representative of their original handicrafts and ways of life” (Gill, SAM Director, to Romanus Pally, Missionary, 1937).

## ➤ Collections curated around staff preferences

“On each of field trips before 1973 in what is now KwaZulu (1961,1962, 1970, 1971) we had the greatest difficulty in finding any basketry at all” (Shaw, SAM Curator, to Preston-Whyte, Professor, 1982)

## ➤ Unethical circumstances surrounding acquisitions obscured

SAM item 6733 Zulu “Sweatscraper” Dunn Collection (1948): “*Kaffir. Rib of an Antelope carried in the hair. A friend in the Kaffir war of '76 shot the Kaffir who wore this.*”

## ➤ Indigenous informants excluded from records

Miss Shaw consulted the University of Natal about the “native” name of a basket because she was unsure that *imbenge* was the right term since it was “*merely the maker*” who supplied this information.



Registered Number.

Tribe : Group

Locality :

District : Province.

Quantity and name of  
object.

Native name.

a) Materials, Appearance, Etc.,

b) Information obtained with it.

Photograph  
or  
sketch  
with  
measurements.

Corresp.

How and from whom  
obtained.

# Shaw's A-K Code for Authenticating Information

**A:** Information supplied by donor, seller or collector and known to be authentic

**B:** Information supplied by donor, seller or collector but not certain

**C:** Conclusion from known collecting field of donor, seller or collector

**D:** Conclusion from evidence in record book or on label on specimen

**E:** Conclusion from correspondence or conversation

**F:** Conclusion from comparison with other authentic specimens


**G:** Conclusion from nature of materials or technique used

**H:** Conclusion from native name given

**I:** Conclusion from place name given

**J:** Conclusion from tribal name given

**K:** Conclusion from literature

SAM 8399		ZULU 13 <sup>A</sup>
BASKET + lid		Eshowe <sup>A</sup> Natal
	Imbenge <sup>B</sup>	
195134	Bght. from potter nr. Eshowe. S.A.M. Expedition May 1961.	
HORTONS, C.T.	Stone 927/a	



# RESEARCH PHASE 2: FIELDWORK







# Participant observations:

- Some items classified as Zulu might not be Zulu
- Other items are incorrectly classified e.g. *ukhamba* is not just a pot
- Information should be given in isiZulu
- We don't know who made the items we're looking at, or where they were made
- We have experience making and using some of these items
- Our material culture has changed over time and the collection doesn't reflect this
- Our young people have lost their connection with their material culture
- There are other items that should be included in a collection about 'Zulu' people
- Our grandparents probably know more about these items than we do

## Miss Shaw's 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

## Community Categories

IsiZulu name of object

Colour of the item

How the item sounds

Who made the item

Where the item was made

Who used the item

What the item is used for

How the item is produced

# OBJECTS, CULTURES AND STORIES IN MUSEUMS



The KwaZulu Cultural Museum, 4 April 2017



## Objects, cultures and stories in museums

Luthull Museum, 9 December 2016



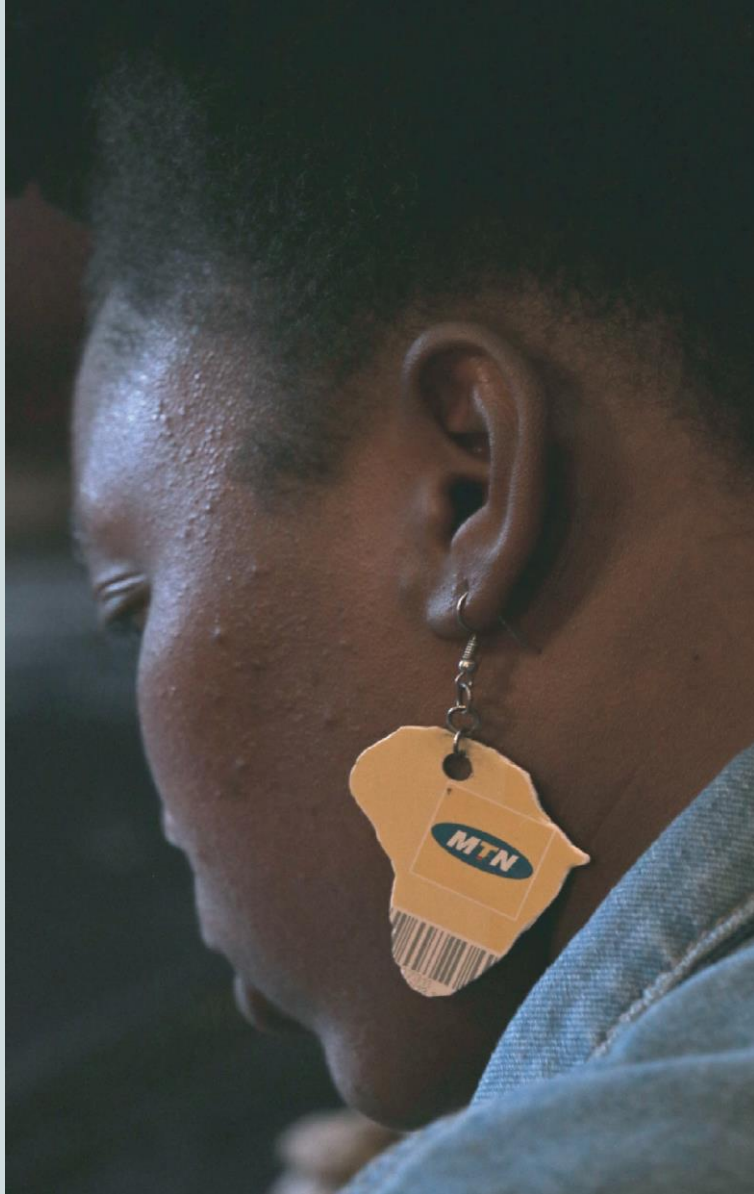
# OBJECTS, CULTURES AND STORIES IN MUSEUMS



The Vukani Museum, 3 February 2017

Amagugu Ethu Research Team  
Cape Town, South Africa  
April 2019

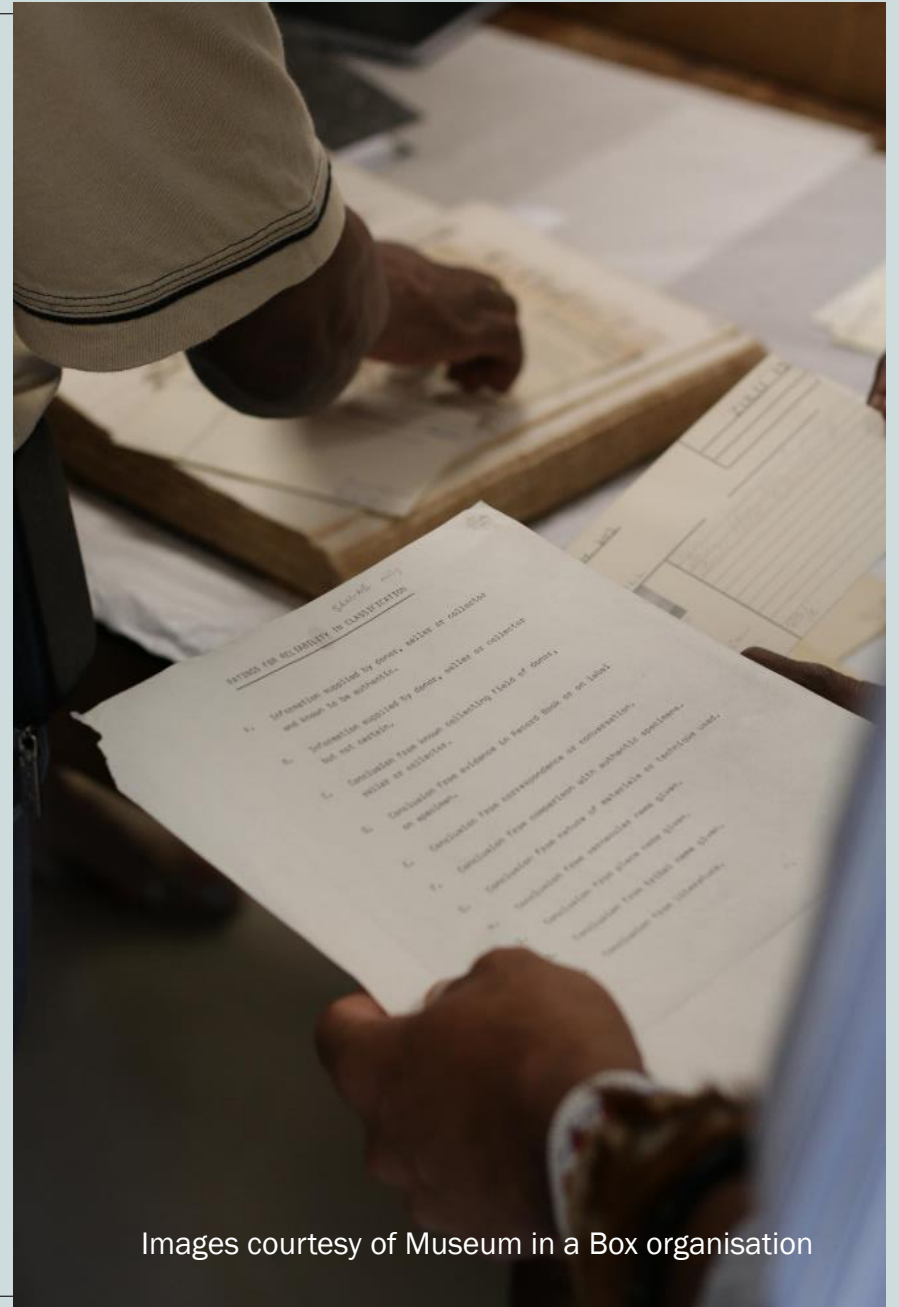
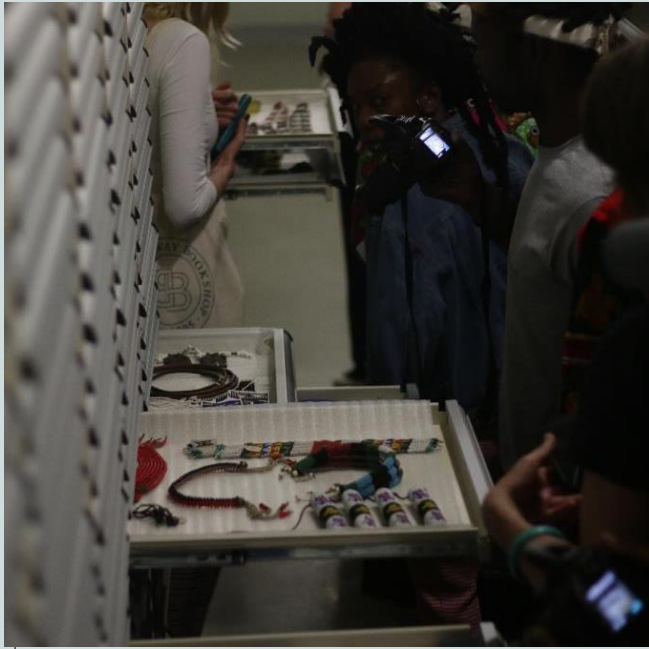




**Thulisiwe Mtshali** was born and raised in Etete KwaDukuza, KwaZulu-Natal. In 2015, she obtained a National Diploma in Fine Arts from Tshwane University of Technology. She is now Programme director for the Creative Creations Arts in schools programme in partnership with the Luthuli Museum. Her work focusses developing young people's skills.

She designs beautiful jewellery made from recycled objects, such as plastic caps, with the intention of keeping our environment clean and protecting our plants and animals.





Images courtesy of Museum in a Box organisation

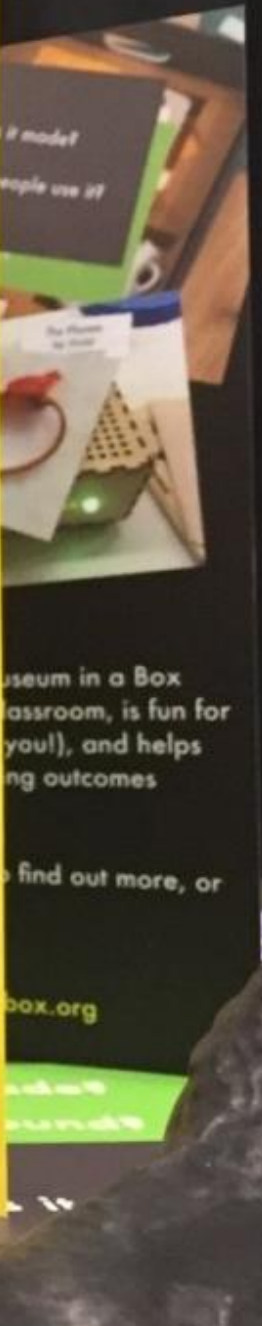


Image courtesy of Museum in a Box organisation





Handwritten note on a teal sticky note, partially obscured.

glass reaching  
paperly

wooden pipe  
②


Handwritten note on a teal sticky note, mostly illegible.

Handwritten note on a teal sticky note, mostly illegible.

160  
NET  
CONT  
TODAY

Handwritten note on a yellow sticky note, mostly illegible.





**Thank you  
Dank u wel  
Ngiyabonga kakhulu**

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