Community Collaborations and Social Biographies of Museum Collections from Colonial Contexts

Meanings of Zulu Beadwork

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we look at collections of Zulu beadwork at Manchester Museum and Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History tracing their provenances and social biographies. We present these two institutions as colonial museums founded on similar ideals of presenting objects as cultures of the "other" in absence of object and community agency. In rethinking colonial contexts associated with processes of collecting beadwork, we look at how these museums can be decolonized by collaborating with communities. Decolonization is deployed here as both a theory and a method toward the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in museum practices. Methodologically, the article highlights decolonial strategies in the form of open, democratic, inclusive, and multivocal engagement that we embraced undertaking the research.

KEYWORDS: beadwork, collaboration, decolonization, *isimodeni*, KwaNongoma, materiality

Colonial museums with collections of cultural "objects" from different parts of the world like Manchester Museum (MM) are currently grappling with problematic histories of appropriation, dispossession, looting, and containment of cultural objects ushered in by colonial violence (Chipangura 2023). The expansion of the British Empire to Africa**,** Oceania, the Americas, and Asia during colonization paved the way for the violent capture of cultural objects of the colonized. MM has more than twenty-five thousand ethnographic collections ordered and categorized according to geographical regions of Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and Asia (Chipangura 2023). The African collection has approximately twelve thousand objects. Further, there are more than a thousand objects from Africa that are not provenanced. Within this African collection there are 70 pieces of traditional Zulu beadwork dating to the beginning of the twentieth century classified as Collier, Speaks, Boyd, Halifax, and Salford collections. R. Collier collected several cultural objects from South Africa including beadwork that was accessioned into the MM collection in 1915. It is not clear what motivated him to collect or what the circumstances were around how he got the beads from the communities. Evidently, there is no proper provenance or biographical information apart from labels recording his name and South Africa as the only available context. The other prominent collectors of Zulu beadwork were Speaks, whose collection was accessioned in 1915, and Sir Boyd Dawkins whose beadwork collection was accessioned in 1925. In addition, between 1955 and 1956 a donation of Zulu beadwork was received from the Halifax Museum, and in 1969, a sizable number were brought in from the Salford Museum collection. MM gave the Salford Museum European antiquities in exchange for more than two thousand African objects.

MM also has a collection of modern Zulu beadwork known in local parlance as *isimodeni* acquired between 1990 and 1991. These *isimodeni* beads were purchased from Frank Jolles, then Professor of German at the University of Natal, who collected them from KwaLatha, Nongoma, and Umvoti Districts between 1960 and 1985 (Banks 1992). At Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History (DNMCH) in Pretoria, South Africa, the 350 Zulu beadworks in the anthropology collection form part of just over twenty-five thousand objects obtained from different regions of Africa and a small portion from Oceania and Asia. The anthropology collection at DNMCH was amassed through donations and purchases from collectors, such as J. R. Ivy or Colman Brothers, and from donations by magistrate officers, and includes "evidence" confiscated from black communities by the police, soldiers, or the Native Affairs Department, later renamed Department of Bantu Administration and Development (Van Schalkwyk 1996). The other method of acquisition and expansion was through fieldwork that took place mainly in Southern Africa and in other British colonies such as Peru and Polynesia. Colonial museums and their collections have become arenas and battlegrounds for contestation regarding cultural representation. Members of cultural groups, traditionally represented by colonial collections, also are challenging museum control over issues of interpretation, representation, and ownership. DNMCH has not been spared these contestations and acknowledges the roots of the institution are muddied by both colonization and apartheid.

Against this backdrop and in presenting the problematic history surrounding the acquisition of beadwork, we argue that colonial museums classified and categorized "objects" in accordance with disciplinary configurations of anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography that ignored their social biographies (Chipangura 2024). As a result, the beadwork was ordered according to regimes of Western knowledge that erased Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. In rethinking stagnant and static representations of the beadwork in these two colonial museums we aimed to address the following critical curatorial questions: (1) How can we conduct collaborative biographical research with originating communities from where the beads were collected? (2) How can we achieve inclusivity and responsible care with respect to building active relationships between the beads and originating communities? (3) What does an empirical praxis of decolonizing the beadwork entail? (4) How do we reorder the beadwork cultures curatorially in ways that unsettle the conventional ordering of knowledge in colonial museums by creating space for lived experiences and Indigenous knowledges? (Chipangura 2024; Taiwo 2022).

Our significant point of departure in this article is that while other researchers have been grappling with decolonizing the museum, which has become synonymous with the restitution of objects, our own approach is different, as we posit that restitution is only a small area where the museum needs to be severed from its colonial ties (Ariese and Wróblewska 2022). Museums must rethink the colonial knowledges that led them to collect particular objects and to order, store, and handle them in particular ways. Therefore, comprehensive provenance and biographical research have to be undertaken first as a praxis that aids knowledge production prior to any forms of return (Chipangura 2023). At the same time, colonial museums must acknowledge that restitution takes more than just a legal or material transfer of objects, natural specimens or ancestors back to communities—rather it is a restoration and return of spiritual and sacred knowledge that may have been previously lost as a result of colonial violence and associated appropriating methods (Soares 2023). We also underscore that in some instances communities do not demand to have everything back from colonial museums but desire to be connected with their collection with the aim of recovering lost Indigenous knowledge and working toward cultural revitalization, as was the case with the Zulu beadwork open engagements. From our practical curatorial perspective, decolonization, simply put, means challenging and dismantling colonial structures through sharing control and authority in storytelling with originating communities whose cultural objects are contained in museums.

Why Collaborations? Our Positionality and Shortcomings

As part of the John Ellerman Foundation's fiftieth anniversary celebrations, the Protea International Curatorial Exchange Program was launched in 2021 with eight curators working in the United Kingdom and South Africa selected to undertake collections-based research and field work (JEF 2023). This fellowship was named after the South African national flower, the protea, in memory of Sir John Ellerman who lived

Figure 1. The location of Nongoma. Map prepared by Russell Kapumha.

part of his life in South Africa (JEF 2023). We were selected to be part of the cohort of curators for this exchange after having made a joint application to represent the Manchester and Ditsong museums. Our collaborative application was influenced by our own past curatorial contacts and engagements during which we had previously discussed similarities of anthropological collections between the two colonial museums. Based on our existing collections knowledge as curators, we decided to choose traditional Zulu beadwork from KwaNongoma. Before traveling to KwaNongoma for field work, we spent time together in the Living Cultures/Anthropology collection at MM in May 2022 where we took high resolution photographs of the beadwork. In June 2022, we conducted further collections-based research together at Ditsong taking more photographs of the beadwork in this museum. Our decolonial collaborative engagement and multivocal dialogue with the community was also undertaken in June 2022. All these research stints between Manchester, Pretoria, and Nongoma were supported by the John Ellerman Foundation. Prior to our traveling to KwaNongoma, Motsane spoke to community members giving them a sense of the research, and one participant, Baba Thembinkosi Mncube, who is a member of the community in KwaNongoma made some advance arrangements for the research when he met up with Motsane in Johannesburg in May 2022.

KwaNongoma is in the province of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa some 300 kilometers south of Durban (see figure 1). It is surrounded by international tourist attractions, such as the iSimangaliso Wetland Park to the east and the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park to the south (Nongoma Tourism 2022). Most importantly, the current King of the Zulu nation resides in Nongoma, and therefore the municipality is considered to be the heart of the Zulu kingdom (Nongoma Tourism 2022). KwaNongoma still has deep rural characteristics and people live by the traditional Zulu customs that have remained unchanged for centuries.

As part of the collaborative ethnographic research that took the form of dialogue with community members in KwaNongoma, we used decolonial approaches benchmarked by inclusivity in which the community had a higher degree of participation and agency in the interpretation of the beadwork. Therefore, framed in this way, collaborations give communities the agency to have control and to be involved in decision-making from the outset, contrasted with hegemonic curatorial ways of the past that were exclusionary. By way of collaborating with this community, we became facilitators of conversations that were built upon understanding the social biographies of the beadwork. Permission to carry out this research was obtained from the local traditional leadership and all collaborators gave us consent to engage in dialogue with them. We use the real names of community collaborators in this article because we were given the permission to do so by them. Collaborations are at the center of decolonial methodologies since they promote engagement over doctrine and multivocality over connoisseurship (Boast 2001: 11). This is exactly what we experienced in undertaking the research as we democratized ways in which knowledge is produced within authorized curatorial practices at Manchester and Ditsong museums. Therefore, by collaborating with the KwaNongoma community, we acknowledge community agency by ensuring that they are not frozen passive audiences of didactic and authoritative forms of knowledge production but are implicated in an ongoing process of knowledge production and debate as active co-producers (Butler and Lehrer 2016; Danbolt 2019; De Palma 2019; Hansen et al. 2019).Through equitable sharing practices, Indigenous perspectives from the KwaNongoma community were marshaled on the meanings of the beads. Collaborative approaches like these constitute the broader agenda for decolonizing museum practices in that they confront long-standing imbalances regarding who makes decisions and who benefits (Chipangura et al. 2020). We agree with Margaret Bruchac (2014) who argues that a decolonizing agenda that is informed by community collaborations counters the dominance of colonial ideologies and improves the accuracy of Indigenous representations. Within African worldviews and cosmologies, Indigenous perspectives have continuously challenged dominant narratives of settler communities and universalism (Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2015). For example, in African archaeological theory scholars, such as Felix Chami (2015), Joost Fontein (2015), and Peter Schmidt (2017), have argued that a practical decolonial perspective is one that decenters authority by allowing for an investigative process in which decision-making about knowledge and objects of the past is a shared responsibility. In the same vein in our own museum curatorial work, we agree with Eisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) who posits that decolonial work in Africa entails knowledges produced locally and primarily in Indigenous languages by individuals and communities "believing in their past, producing and giving themselves their own pasts which have meaning, authority, and significance for the local population." Thus, we have actioned our decolonial work in this research by integrating diverse perspectives in the interpretation of the beadwork from KwaNongoma.

What was more defined in this decolonial work was how we collaborated with KwaNongoma community members whose knowledge and ways of knowing the beadwork shaped the co-curation of an exhibition at MM that incorporates their voices. In this regard, it can be argued that through truth telling, transparency, and by opening to communities what we did in Nongoma, we allowed the people to rewrite narratives, change our curatorial practices and to share their own cosmologies to decolonize (Soares and Witcomb 2023). However, it has been argued that collaborations can be a breeding ground of neocolonial tendencies in which hierarchies of power are maintained in asymmetric relationships between museum curators and community members (Boast 2011; La Salle 2010. Similarly, Sumaya Kassim (2017) has argued that museums are not neutral, and it is not possible to decolonize them through collaborations. She looked at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG), zeroing in on the *Past Is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* exhibition, which was co-curated by six women of color with diverse heritages, who were external to the museum (Kassim 2017; Minott 2019). The exhibition was an experiment exploring how to decolonize and democratize the museum by adopting collaborative models. However, the whole project was fraught with tensions as some of the key exhibition decisions were made without consulting the external co-curators. This somewhat resonates with the argument made by Sarah Linn and colleagues (2024: 3) that in some contexts, collaborations are designed internally to suit the needs of museums and funders wherein collaborators are seen as contributors and not partners. Thus, the desire by colonial museums to become inclusive and/or to act democratically does not take away all the vestiges of discrimination (Lynch 2017). During the process of undertaking this collaborative research with KwaNongoma

community members, we were conscious of the possibility of uneven power relations that could potentially stifle voices of this community in what Bernadette Lynch (2017) characterizes as "museum empowerment lite." Such forms of tokenistic engagements often patronize communities, and their knowledge is often appropriated and extracted in the absence of any meaningful benefits (Chipangura 2023; Morse 2022). What perhaps was different with the Zulu beadwork collaboration was that we allowed the community to take the lead in deciding which stories they wanted to tell in the exhibition for themselves, by themselves (Chipangura 2023).

Decolonizing Zulu Beadwork and Representations in Colonial Museums

Since the beads at MM and Ditsong were collected at the height of colonization, they have been presented as static, stagnant materialities in the absence of biographical information. Many ethnographic museums in the Global North, such as Manchester, were built on the foundations and legacies of the empire and are still entwined in museological discourses of extraction and misrepresentation (Linn et al. 2024; Longair and McAleer 2012). Similarly, museums in the Global South, such as Ditsong, were established during the colonial era that celebrated settler domination, while the voice of the oppressed communities were deliberately excluded. Within their foundations, these institutions were influenced by the political and social contexts of the colony and perpetuated the colonial paradigm of domination. From the outset, the formation of museums in Africa was a by-product of colonization (Chipangura and Mataga 2022) and a European imagination that was heavily influenced by the need to represent cultures of the "other" as timeless, frozen, and static. Therefore, our research with community members in KwaNongoma aimed at co-opting Indigenous worldviews and forms of knowledge in decolonizing the beads that were viewed as representations of cultures of the "other." To decolonize in this sense meant that decisions, objectives, and outcomes of our research were in the hands of and developed in partnership with the KwaNongoma community. Within this decolonial process, community members were valued as experts who brought with them lived experiences as a form of knowledge that challenged dominant cultural representations enshrined in colonial museums. To decolonize the beadwork empirically, the "other" shared their voices and contested hegemonic narratives presented in colonial museums (Soares and Witcomb 2023). It is on the same basis that Bruno Soares and Andrea Witcomb (2023) argue that decolonization and repairing of past injustices starts with the people through their involvement in museum practices that previously marginalized them.

From the outset, our decolonial approach was premised on critiquing the colonial gaze as we were all aware that one cannot decolonize a museum without delinking its colonial matrix of power since the practice of collecting and classifying beads is deeply embedded in colonialism itself, which created the museum institution as we know it today (Abungu 2019; Mignolo 2011; Vawda 2019). By being reflexive, we were able to be critical of the colonial foundations of these two institutions by admitting that authority can no longer be premised on curatorial expertise but instead ought to be informed by knowledge-sharing and intercultural exchanges (Soares and Witcomb 2023). In doing this decolonial work on the beadwork, we concurred with Soares (2023: 54) who argues that the museum is a politically determined instrument of colonialism and is still very much embedded in coloniality. By deploying decolonial methodologies in conducting this research, the scientific ethos used by the two colonial museums was questioned as we took an interest not only in the beads as things but also in the people and their practices and belief systems that lend the beads meaning (Golding and Modest 2019). For us, decolonizing Zulu beadwork empirically was an act of active listening to the community, their beliefs and allowing their voices to be heard in a co-produced exhibition installed at MM last summer.

Elsewhere, Soares (2023: 14) argues that decolonization is not only something that is apprehended in museum manuals as a theory but rather must also be regarded as a movement and an ongoing process toward liberation and political and social change. Reflecting on the collaborative Zulu beadwork research, we agree with Soares (2023: 5) that to "decolonise refers to open practices and bottom-up approaches that allow community members to change museums' authorised narratives in a critical appropriation of cultural heritage." The continuing presence of coloniality in museums has influenced current debates about what

decolonization should look like as "an ongoing process that involves restitution, rehumanisation, notably through the sharing of knowledge and by encouraging mutual understanding" (Soares and Witcomb 2023: 1).

Zulu Beadwork Biographies beyond the Material

The anthropological category of objects is traditionally defined as any portable or non-portable elements of the material world including objects, artifacts, ecofacts, sediments, features, and places (LaMotta 2012). These are all summed up as materialities produced by repeated sets of human actions but most importantly they also exhibit their own specific inherent behavioral characteristics and act beyond human control (Gosden 2005; Hodder 2000). This is because objects use human muscles and skill to bring about their own reproduction thereby gaining agency by being embedded in social relations with people (Henare et al. 2007). Similarly, in thinking about Zulu beads as materialities, we argue that these are not "objects" in a colonial museum but rather are living cultures that speak, offer suggestions, make demands, and pose problems. "Living cultures" is a concept that encompasses many different traces of life such as agency, animism, spirituality, subjectivity, and intelligence (Muller and Langhill 2022). We therefore critique the anthropological category of "objects" that project the makers, users, and owners as anonymous, wherein the meanings behind these objects are obscured (Minott 2019). This is part of the material turn that seeks to dismantle binary divisions between human/non-human, nature/culture, object/subject, and importantly respecting epistemological worlds of Indigenous people (Bormpoudakis 2019).

We also underscore that in an African context, objects such as beads have potency and are treated by communities as living beings that they can use, touch, smell, and taste. They have individual biographies and carry with them important meanings connected to their ritual and cultural functions located in societies of origin. Chris Gosden (2005: 198), thus argues that "the form that the objects take in terms of morphology and decoration are crucial to the influences they have on people." In the same vein, Jody Joy (2009: 540) thinks of objects not as just products of society but as living entities with personalities similar to their makers. This relationship between people and objects can be properly elucidated using what she calls the biographical approach underwritten by following the life of an object from its birth (creation) to death (disposal). The biography of an object can be characterized by eight processes: procurement, manufacture, use, maintenance, reuse, cultural deposition, reclamation, and recycling (LaMotta 2012: 71; Walker and Lucero 2000). At the center of our inquiry during this engagement in KwaNongoma were the beads themselves that served as contact zones for dialogue bringing the community together in creating equitable forms of relations and constellations of co-produced knowledge (Bennet 2010). Thus, concept of the contact zone formulated by James Clifford (2007) and Mary Louise Pratt (1991) has allowed colonial museums to evolve beyond easily definable, geographical arenas of interaction into becoming places for dialogue and intercultural exchange that bring people in contact with each other and establish ongoing relations. According to Laura Peers and Alison Brown (2003: 5), "artefacts function as 'contact zones' as sources of knowledge and as catalysts for new relationships—both within and between these communities." Objects as contact zones bring communities together who were formerly spatially and politically separated from them by colonialism. During these engagements we presented to the community photos of traditional Zulu beads (see figure 2) that are imprisoned in collections stores at Manchester and Ditsong colonial museums away from home, as we sought to pick the meanings, memories, and stories that they contain.

Museum objects like the beadwork illustrated above used to be regarded as passive and inert materials to which things happen and things are done. However, meanings are not carried by objects but are identical to them in that they also possess social agency much like the people who made them (Hoskins 1998). Objects may acquire a wide range of meanings during their manufacture and use as they pass through the hands of individuals, embedded in different social strategies and networks (Appadurai 1986; Gosselain 1999; Hoskins 1998; Lucas 2012). Hence, colonial museums have to transcend empirical practices in which they operate as object archives or repositories of dead collections. Furthermore, there is a dialectical relationship between people's behavior and objects which is generally referred to as Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Alberti 2016; Faulkner 2010; Haber 2016; Latour 2005). ANT, in short, elaborates the ways in

Figure 2. Sangoma healing gourd from the Collier Collection of 1915. Manchester Museum. Photo: © Manchester Museum/Njabulo Chipangura.

which nonhumans (objects) guide or steer humans (subjects) to do something even when the latter is not aware. People and materials are interwoven in extensive networks of activities, social relationships, and practices. Within these relational networks, agency is decentered from the human subject and distributed among a network of people and things (Lucas 2012; Preucel and Meskell 2007). Thus, there is a radial symmetry of interactions between humans and nonhumans which breaks the divide between the object and the subject (Alberti 2016; Olsen 2012). Similarly, museum objects become more extraordinary when they connect with people in active curatorial relationships and meaning-making. This we refer to as relational curatorship, which we embraced as a decolonial practice during this research in Nongoma. From Manchester and Pretoria to Nongoma, we took pictures of the beadwork to the community to create new connections, meanings, and knowledge together (Chipangura 2023). In relational curatorship, objects are not treated as frozen nor ordered in a timeless past but are reordered as living beings connected to the present and future in continuous ongoing relationships (Golding and Modest 2019; Muller and Langhill 2022). These objects connect people, places, and events. Equally, they represent histories of continuity and change. Material culture is thus also primarily concerned with "the study of beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions of a particular society or community at a given time through the examination of their objects" (Wobst 2000: 6). By using relational curatorship as both a theory and method during the research in Nongoma, we reimagined a curatorial practice that is more inclusive and open to views from communities that were subjected to different forms of colonial violence and regimes of global ordering (Chipangura 2023).

Meanings Embedded in Traditional and Modern Zulu Beadwork

Traditional beadwork from Nongoma is known to have distinctive diamond-like diagonal rows of triangles in red, green, blue, black, and white (Morris and Preston-White 1994: Gatfield 2019). *Isigege* is a traditional beaded skirt (Gatfield 2019). This type of beadwork, as argued by Stan Schoeman (1983: 147), was made primarily for communication purposes between individuals of the opposite sex on the sensitive subject of marital relations. However, Rowan Gatfield (2019) also argues that apart from communicating love messages, traditional Zulu beadwork denotes age, group, or family status while color combinations show regional and ethnic identities. Over time these regional ethnicities have been renegotiated, which has led to the emergence of hybrid styles in the beadwork (Gatfield 2019). Some of these styles that have been developed since the 1930s include the Eshowe with bars of red, yellow, royal blue, and green beads on a white field; the Ndwendwe and Natal styles, which are similar with multicolor dotting on a black field; the Maphumulo style with a striped motif in green, black, navy, royal blue, orange, or pink on a white field; Msinga with a variety of motifs that include *isishunka* style with seven colors, *umzansi* style made from navy, green, white, and opaque red beads, and Msinga *isimodeni* style with large letterforms in orange, black, and green (Gatfield 2019: 130). The *isimodeni* style emerged as an aesthetic modern blend of the Nongoma style and the Msinga traditional style known as *isinyolovane* with dotted multicolored beads on a black field (Gatfield 2019; Jolles 1993). Therefore, it is also important to emphasize that traditional Zulu beadwork is not stagnant as it has been evolving and changing over time.

Isimodeni is local Zulu parlance for modern-day beadwork. In Zulu traditional cosmologies, white is the only color that does not have adverse value as it denotes purity of love, good luck, happiness, and children (Schoeman 1983). Used in a positive representation black is for marriage and regeneration, while blue beads would be associated with fidelity in marriage, yellow with wealth, and fertility, green with contentment and domestic bliss, pink with an oath or promise, and red with strong emotions and love (Schoeman 1993: 150). However, some color codes can also carry with them negative connotations, for example, black is associated with death or misfortune; blue for ill feeling and hostility; yellow for thirst and withering away; green for illness and discord; pink is for poverty and laziness; red for anger and heartache (Jolles 1991, 1993: 45; Schoeman 1983: 150). Color combinations are also widely associated with regional and ethnic differences with red and yellow identified with communities from the Mtunzini district; green and blue beads are from Nkandla; red and blue are from a region between Ulundi and Msinga; green and yellow for Empangeni; while red and green represents Nongoma (Schoeman 1993: 151). Several scholars have argued that *isimodeni* beads do not necessarily represent authentic traditional Zulu materialities (Gatfield 2019). Rather, the authenticity is staged as a way of appealing to international tourists in Durban who will be looking for "real beadwork" to take back home (MacCannell 1973). Therefore, *isimodeni* as a new modern style of beadwork was conceived for white tourists with an appetite for colorful Zulu authenticity (Gatfield 2019: 144).

However, outside the tourism consumption zone, Gatfield (2019) argues that *isimodeni* style reflects innovative beadmaking by the communities who still draw inspiration from the past, which is very much connected to their present. Our very own ethnographic engagements with some community members in Nongoma also revealed that although they are now making *isimodeni* beads mostly for selling to tourists, ever-present ancestors are viewed as the motivation factor in developing new styles (see figure 3). MaNtshangase (Qalazile Nsele), after she had seen images of traditional beadwork at Manchester and Ditsong museums, revealed that "in the South African philosophy of life, they value *ubuntu*—which simply denotes humanness, and this speaks to how the Nongoma community understand that a person is a product of other persons."

Ancestors are viewed as a part of humanity and, not withstanding their immateriality, are ever-present in all facets of life. She went on to say that "ancestral beliefs are actively connected to the ancestral world and, here in Nongoma, beads that we make are not just regarded as material objects, but the styles and designs were bequeathed to us by our ancestors." The idea of the ancestor as portrayed by MaNtshangase is co-interpreted here to show that ancestors have an active presence in everyday life, and we cannot separate current beadwork techniques that MaNtshangase and other community members are still practicing because the techniques were imparted to them by the same ancestors who lost the beads to colonial museums.

Figure 3. MaNtshangase explaining *isimodeni* and connections to traditional styles, Nongoma, South Africa, 2022. Photograph by Njabulo Chipangura.

Other communication codes embedded in beadwork include love letters in the form of short, beaded necklaces used during the courting process and given by the young women to their lovers (Morris and Preston-Whyte 1994). The other variant of traditional beadwork was used by *sangomas*/traditional healers for ritual and other purposes (Jolles 1993; Schoeman 1983). Manchester and Ditsong museums contain several beaded gourds that were used by *sangomas* (see figure 4). The problem with the gourds at MM, both from the Collier and Speaks collections, is the inaccurate and derogatory colonial labels that they still carry. The work that we have been doing to decolonize the labels entails removing terms like "witch snuff boxes" and accurately replacing them with correct terms such as *ishungu*/medicine containers used by *sangomas*. Baba Nsele, another community member who we engaged with in Nongoma, is himself a *sangoma*, and he said that his knowledge in administering traditional healing practices cannot be separated from beadwork. He said, "the making of beads and amulets is essential to the practice of *ubungoma* [traditional healing] as beads are worn as a protection against evil spirits and misfortunes." Protection can be in the form of ritual interventions, often mediated by trance or in the form of amulets made of beads. Taking beads not just as objects waiting to be explored in colonial museum storage rooms via biographical accounts like these by communities showed us that beadwork is still a specialized knowledge practice in Nongoma.

During the same dialogue, Baba Nsele recounted how he was given a round neck bead when he was young. He said that "the story of love and affection was expressed using beads as means of communication between intimates." He went on to mention that "the quantity, types and combinations of beadwork ornaments worn convey information about an individual's age, gender, courting or marital status." During the same conversation, MaNtshangase (Qalazile Nsele) added that "when a young woman decided that she

Figure 4. The *ishungu*/medicine container used in traditional healing practices. Anthropology collection. Photo: © Ditsong Museum/ Motsane Seabela.

wanted a young man to be her sweetheart she would use beads not words. She would give the man who she wished to be with a string of blue and white beads known as *ucu* as an indication that her heart was full of love. This string of beads was a testimony of love shared between two people bounded together just like the beadwork." According to Schoeman (1983: 151) the *ucu* is a standard item in the form of a white beaded string some five meters in length, and its function can be equated to that of an engagement ring within Western societies. However, he observed that in the event that a girl was jilted by the boy she would make a *ucu* using black beads and proceed to place it around the neck of any dog that she came across. That was done as a bold expression of anger over failed affection (Schoeman 1983).

The other open dialogue on the meanings of beadwork was with MaMagwaza who reflected on symbolism and said, "white beads are regarded as pure and beautiful—in Zulu, white stands as a sign to show that you are no longer a girl, but now you can have a boyfriend. It's for peace, purity and love, white beads are also commonly used by *sangomas*." MaMthalane also interjected and explained that "if you do traditional beadwork for a certain customary function then you use different colors. Most meanings lie in the black, red, and white beads and some designs are for rituals like the wedding, the *umemulo* 'coming of age,' young female's ceremony that celebrates their journey into womanhood." She was adamant that beadwork displays messages as with "a virgin she must wear an *isigege* short Zulu skirt made of white beads," believing that "you can separate the colors according to what stage or level of life you are making beads for." She also said, in her opinion, modern beadwork is done just to "look good." However, she went on to say, the negative meaning of black means bad luck; "you wear it if someone has died—it indicates something bad." Black generally represents evil, disappointment, and misfortune. The other colors and their symbolic meanings as explained by MaMagwaza and MaMthalane are: "Blue—yearning; Brown—useless; Gold—as beautiful as the sunrise; Green—peace of mind or spirits, a soft spot for someone; Pink—poor, Sky Blue—clean as the sky; Yellow—house, household, relatives, a grand occasion—where everything is fine."

Beads can talk, but in colonial museums, they are mute objects. We gathered this during our conversation with Thokozani. She said she was able to make her beadwork "talk" in the example of the HIV and AIDS beadwork that she specializes in. She explained that when she makes the AIDS symbol using beads, it is a message to the community in solidarity with families who have lost their relatives to the disease over the last three decades. She also said that "I have learned a lot about how to protect oneself from the disease, and I can conscientize others through the beadwork." Putting the HIV symbol on the beadwork is also a means to eradicate social stigma and discrimination often experienced by persons affected by this disease. MM has in its collection similar beadwork that was collected between 1991 and 1992 and purchased from Professor Frank Jolles (Banks 1992). At the time of undertaking this engagement, *isimodeni* beads at MM were reduced to bare aesthetics and the talking aspect mentioned by Thokozani in reference to HIV and AIDS beadwork was conspicuously absent.

Curatopia, Dialogic Collaborations, and Co-curatorship

As can be deduced from stories gathered around meanings of the beadwork, dialogic collaborations can transform museums from being purveyors of lopsided knowledge and global isolators that once displayed "others" into becoming locations of cultural revitalization, community voice, and empowerment (Onciul 2019). We therefore posit that the Nongoma dialogue was also conceptually informed by the notion of curatopia, which explores the ways in which mutual, asymmetrical power relations and scientific entanglements associated with the ordering of objects can be transformed into more reciprocal, symmetrical forms of cross-cultural curatorship in the present (Schorch et al. 2019: 2). As a concept, curatopia looks at the active reciprocal relationship between communities and museums. Its application and use during this research gave us the opportunity to develop future closer working relationships with the Nongoma community. Subsequently, we also challenged our own positionalities as curators with anthropological knowledge into facilitators of dialogue rather than being undisputable champions of authorized knowledge production. Therefore, it can be argued that curatorship has evolved from being a strict, specialized connoisseurship of individuals to being a public service that attends to problems in contemporary communities (Schorch et al. 2019). The outcome of the dialogue with Nongoma community members is a co-curated exhibition called *Stories of Zulu Beadwork* that was installed at Manchester in August 2023. A collaborative approach to exhibition production is also reflective of shared authority between the community and museum curators (Chipangura 2019). This is because exhibitions have become more than just sites for the manifestation of preconceived curatorial theory but are increasingly sites of collaborative research and knowledge production (Butler and Lehrer 2016). They have shifted from the status of merely presenting concluded results into important active venues for analyzing social issues and producing relevant knowledge (Dahre 2019; Hansen et al. 2019).

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed colonial collecting practices of anthropological objects at Manchester and Ditsong museums. We specifically looked at Zulu beads that were brought into these museums by different collectors during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and what it means to hold them and how to deal with new forms of knowledge production through dialogue and collaborations with originating communities. Underlying our decolonial position from a curatorial perspective drawn from inclusive care, we demonstrated how we engaged community members in KwaNongoma allowing them to tell their own stories on the meanings of the beadwork. The article also looked at modern-day beadwork known as *isimodeni* being made in Nongoma, which is closely related in style to traditional forms representing cultures of the "other" in the colonial museums under discussion. Methodologically, our field research in Nongoma took the form of open dialogue, conversations, and shared authority as we sat down together with community members showing them images of mute, stagnant beads locked in drawers at Manchester and Ditsong museums without biographical information. Therefore, from the outset, we acknowledged

that these two institutions were established as sites of knowledge production and for a while remained heavily burdened by colonial legacies that contributed to the ordering of the world through the practice of classifying and categorizing objects from "other" distant cultures. Decolonizing such practices for us took the shape of dialogic engagements and multivocal conversations with communities as they shared their own Indigenous knowledge that informed the co-curation of an exhibition at MM called *Stories of Zulu Beadwork*.

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