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Digitization Is Not Decolonization

South Africa's Amagugu Ethu Museum Project and Colonial Documentation in Digital Times

Laura Gibson

ABSTRACT: A year ago, the South African Cabinet approved the National Policy of the Digitization of Arts, Culture, and Heritage. With a focus on digitizing the country's heritage resources for preservation, access, and management of ownership, this act is emblematic of a broader trend conflating digitization of Africa's cultural heritage collections with decolonization. Yet, by examining how one of the continent's oldest museums documented its ethnographic collections, this article demonstrates how normalized colonial knowledge systems still are, and why decolonization requires more than making collections digitally available. Cognizant of this challenge is Amagugu Ethu, a South African not-for-profit organization, whose work developing a digital Museum-in-a-Box I analyze in the second part of my article as an important way of resisting and interrupting colonial knowledge production in (South) Africa's museums.

KEYWORDS: Amagugu Ethu, anarchiving, cataloging, decolonization, digitization, Museum-in-a-Box, South African Museum

Thulani's video call came as I was navigating my way through the walk-in, digital billboard that now dominates the entrance to Tottenham Court Road tube, one of London's busiest underground stations. "We won," he told me, "They love The Box!" Boyzie Myeni's face appeared on the screen and then someone else's and then there was an attempt to zoom in on the certificate that awarded them a best speaker prize at the 2023 South African Museums Association (SAMA)

conference. Views of the banquet hall in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) distorted and then disappeared as my escalator descended deeper underground. I WhatsApped “Congratulations” and a bunch of yellow-faced emojis during a moment of Wi-Fi access; they sent back black thumbs-ups and photos from the ceremony.

“The Box” is the museum developed by Thulani, Boyzie, and the other members of Amagugu Ethu. Emerging out of a community visit to Cape Town and the Iziko Museums in 2019, Amagugu Ethu (AE) is now an officially registered South African not-for-profit (NPO) organization with the mission to “preserve and promote Zulu culture and spirituality through decolonization of cultural heritage in the digital age” (Amagugu Ethu 2021). AE members identify as Black and primarily as Zulu. Their skill set is wide ranging and expanding—traditional medicine, nursing, creative writing, jewelry design, DJing, tour guiding, painting, business management—but, even though some work more directly with heritage sector institutions, their roles do not encompass specialized skills normally associated with managing and providing access to museum collections and archives. The SAMA award is, then, welcome recognition of the important work they are undertaking in the museum sector with their Museum-in-a-Box (MiaB).

At the moment, this MiaB includes a collection of just 26 items, of which only 12 could be considered more strictly “museum” objects. The items themselves are postcards—images of beadwork, bangles, archival documents, *uMkhonto* (spear), an open drawer in a museum storeroom, a dance at the foot of Table Mountain—and a 3D print of a pot, which is not actually a pot, or is not *just* a pot. The 12 physical counterparts of the AE museum objects are all housed at the Iziko Museums of South Africa in Cape Town, some 1,500 kilometers from the Luthuli Museum in KwaZulu-Natal where the main MiaB resides, and even further from where many of

the belongings originated. The box part of AE's museum is equally unassuming: small enough to fit inside a child's shoe box and powered by a credit card-sized Raspberry Pi computer. Fitted with a very simple sound system, when these postcards and prints are placed on the Box, it plays back the audio clips—oral histories contributed by AE members—embedded in Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags stuck to their backs.

Yet, for the AE not-for-profit group, this Museum-in-a-Box is a radical reimagining of their cultural heritage, the beginnings of a restitution process that restores their authority over how their communities' material belongings are interpreted, and who narrates their histories. It acts as a tangible resistance to the colonial, still pervasive forms of documenting and classifying objects belonging to African peoples in museums worldwide. Specifically, it resists the museum and archival documentation system instigated at the South African Museum (SAM)—arguably the continent's oldest museum south of the Sahara (Summers 1975) and part of the Iziko collective since 2001—where the 12 MiaB items were first accessioned as part of the SAM's Anthropology and Ethnography collections.¹

In recent years, critical inquiries into the production of knowledge and historiography outside the Global North—particularly in Africa—have forced a fundamental re-examination of museum and archival practices in ways that challenge more “positivist” framings of archives as impartial records of the past (Chamelot et al. 2020). Closer engagement with colonial archives from the end of the twentieth century has exposed the very narrow forms of knowledge and records they include since these archives can only be said to “reliably” represent historical events from the colonizer's point of view (Hamilton, Harris, Pickover, et al. 2002; Mbembe 2002; Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Peterson 2002; Said 1994; Stoler 2009). The International Council of Archives (2016) now recognizes that for an archive to be valuable to society, it must represent

the historical event in question while also recognizing that any representation will be limited to the view of whoever or whichever institution created the document in the first place. South African scholars have long been aware of this situation and, in the early years of post-1994 democracy, urged caution when dealing with public archives because colonialism and apartheid meant they were always “being added to and subtracted from” (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002: 7). So extensive are the exclusions from South Africa’s collections that Professor Bhekizizwe Peterson (2002: 31) articulated the postcolonial challenge as being to “find, assemble, catalogue and elucidate as much as possible of this material” so that it can be brought “into play in the public or institutional orbit.”

The SAM archives are, then, a far cry from early twentieth-century visions of an impartial and authentic record of the past. As we pay more attention to how these archives are constructed—to what is excluded from them as much as what is included—the notion too of archivists and museum professionals being passive custodians unravels completely. At the SAM, we cannot overlook the significance of Margaret Shaw whose extensive career began as the museum’s first professional ethnologist in 1933 and ended with retirement in 1981 (Davison 2002). White and educated, Shaw fits the profile of most archivists and museum professionals working in the Global North today (Macfarlane 2021; Zippia 2023). Her imprint on South African museums and the SAM archive dealing specifically with the Natal Nguni people—people AE identify as their ancestors—is prolific. Yet, despite recognizing a need to temper the influence of colonial archivists and practices by incorporating Indigenous voices in ways that bring these exclusions into play, as Megan Mulder (2023: 20) and others (McNulty 2011; Tsosie 2017; Vawda 2019) have argued, rarely translates into “rebuilding an epistemological base.”

We see just how persistent this epistemological base is as colonial archives expand into digital spaces. The SAM archive is just one of many African archives being increasingly digitized, ostensibly for reasons of preservation and access as climates in Africa are judged more precarious, and—according to recent media narratives—to meet the challenges of decolonization (Chamelot et al. 2020). In South Africa, we should expect a rapid uptake in museum and archival digitization projects thanks to the Cabinet’s approval in March 2023 of the National Policy on Digitisation of Works of Art, Culture and Heritage—a policy 14 years in the making. In its present form, this policy seems to reflect a deeply embedded positivist belief, widespread beyond Africa, which sees digital technologies and mastery of them as an elixir for problems of poverty and access in a supposedly postcolonial, neoliberal era (Greene 2021). What this policy does not obviously consider is who is performing this digital archiving, nor does it require an interrogation into the exclusionary practices of the many archives being digitized; practices that, unless done differently, make them still uncertain spaces for South Africans like AE that they are supposed to serve. What makes this transition possible are the huge amounts of work that went into stabilizing archival knowledge in the first place so that it appears fixed and impartial and consequently obscures an understanding that its epistemological base was ever “built” (Bowker and Star 1999; Lampland and Star 2009).

The MiaB is an attempt to reveal and resist these normalizing practices of inclusion and exclusion at an epistemological level where, I argue, the real work of decolonizing takes place. Elsewhere, my collaborators and I have referred to this process as anarchival, or counter-archival (Gibson 2019; Turner et al. 2021), terms borrowed from academics like Carine Zaayman (2014), Kate Hennessy and Trudi Lynn Smith (2018), and Stephanie Springgay, Anise Truman, and Sara MacLean (2020) who speak about a social responsibility to bring back into focus the unbounded

absences of the archive. These absences—how they came to be, how they continue to be—and the complexities involved in bringing them back into focus, particularly in an increasingly digital environment, are at the heart of what follows.

I begin by exploring how the process of classifying and cataloging the MiaB items as anthropological and ethnographic specimens—a documentation practice widespread in settler colonies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—calcified them within a colonial narrative intent on justifying white supremacy and occupation of “primitive” Indigenous people without histories (Turner 2020). I examine why, despite their colonial overtones, these practices persist in a politically postcolonial period and how, despite the promise of a digital utopia, digital practices and technologies risk reinforcing them. Given how insidious and deeply embedded these practices are, what motivates a disparate group of people to form an NPO with this explicit mission and to place their confidence in such a simple technology to help them do this, as AE has? And, as the effects of our climate crisis are increasingly felt in KZN, as South Africa’s economy and the global economy stutter in the aftermath of COVID-19, why does this group remain committed to this museum project? These are the questions addressed in the latter parts of my article where I chart the emergence and evolution of the MiaB.

This article is not a proposal for a single solution—a Museum-in-a-Box—that might be universally applied to decolonize museums either in South Africa or the Global North. Instead, it is an attempt to understand how and why core museum and archival practices—cataloging, classifying, documenting—still present challenges, and why the messy business of confronting them, and how we do that, is not a distraction from the immediate and obvious crises we face but are deeply entangled in their root causes.

Methodology

My discussion draws on archival research that I undertook at the Iziko Museums between 2016 and 2018. Specifically, it is based on a systematic analysis of archival documents associated with one collection: artifacts classified as Natal Nguni, or Zulu, by the former SAM and accessioned as part of its broader Anthropology and Ethnography collection. This archive comprises annual reports, accession registers, correspondence, and the catalog cards.

I supplement this research with observations and field work in the form of workshops and semi-structured interviews with South African museum practitioners and interlocutors self-identifying as Zulu and originating community members of the Natal Nguni collection. These took place in Cape Town and in various locales across KwaZulu-Natal between 2016 and 2023, with a significant lull in activity from 2020 to 2022 thanks to the COVID pandemic and my maternity leave. In 2019, I facilitated a collaborative workshop at Iziko with my brilliant colleague and friend, Dr. Hannah Turner (UBC), after which the seven isiZulu-speaking participants formalized their ongoing work and relationships by creating the AE organization.² During this time, I have occupied multiple different roles: as a former employee of the Luthuli Museum National Legacy Project in Groutville, KZN, as a PhD researcher, as a United Kingdom University Lecturer, and as an AE Board Member.

<Figure 1 near here>

Figure 1. The *umancishana* narrates AE's oral history when placed on the MiaB. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Arrival and Erasure

One of the objects in the Amagugu Ethu MiaB is a lightweight, 3D model of an *umancishana*, printed in bright yellow Polylactic Acid (figure 1). The Box version is small enough to nestle in the palm of your hand; the original, however, requires both hands and no small degree of strength to lift it from the ground to your lips so that you could drink the *utshwala*—sorghum beer—during celebrations and feasts. The original item, like the others in the MiaB, is now part of Iziko’s collection and lives at the Social History Centre in downtown Cape Town, overlooked by the Devil’s Peak and Table Mountain. The *umancishana* and other items began their museum lives as part of the SAM’s Anthropology and Ethnography collections, a classification that became increasingly troublesome following President’s Mandela’s 1997 speech that publicly criticized museums for failing to transform post-apartheid (Witz 2006). Subsequently reclassified as social history items, in 2005, Iziko started relocating them from the historic Company’s Gardens building—where objects now classified as natural history are stored and exhibited—to the new Social History Centre in what former SAM Curator Patricia Davison (2005) recognizes as a symbolic and physical break with the colonial past. The items relocated with baggage: their paper catalog cards and boxloads of archival documents that offer some clues as to why they made it into a museum in the first place and how they shaped—and were reshaped by—a deeply colonial narrative of Africa.

When the items now included in the MiaB first entered the SAM, they—like other Indigenous belongings—received new names; in many cases, items considered ethnographic were concurrently stripped of their isiZulu names. We see this clearly with items in AE’s collection, belongings they identify as *izinhlola*, *imphepho*, and *ukhamba*. The latter looks very similar to the MiaB *umancishana*. It is one of three items donated to the SAM in 1908 by a Miss Neethling, presumably of the Neethling family who resided in Utrecht, a *Voortrekker* settlement

established in the foothills of the Balele Mountains in 1855, that is now part of northwest KwaZulu-Natal. At that time, the donation was registered in a ledger system catalog introduced by the SAM in 1862 as part of an early effort to install order on a haphazard collection. For decades, Neethling’s donation languished as a single-line entry in the SAM’s ledger book.

It was only in the 1940s, once the museum had embarked on a serious and “scientific” cataloging method, that Neethling’s donation was documented in the card format that lives on today (figure 2). Instrumental to this shift in documentation style was Margaret Shaw. She quickly came to regard these ledger books and accessions registers as inadequate for the modern museum’s needs, ultimately dismissing this method of cataloging because it “fails . . . to be of much assistance for the scientific study of the material listed in it” (Shaw 1940: 118). In the 1940 South African Museums Association Bulletin (SAMAB), she revealed her alternative cataloging system whereby each object should receive a corresponding, separate card that included the information fields shown in figure 3 and that we see on catalog cards for the MiaB items (Shaw 1940). Some of these information fields—those recording the object number, its location in the museum, its provenance details—are echoed in twenty-first-century museum CMS (content management systems) while other fields—Tribe and Native Name, for example—thankfully are not.

<Figure 2 near here>

Figure 2. Catalog card for SAM item 1164. Iziko Social History Resources Centre, Cape Town, South Africa. Photograph courtesy of Iziko Museums.

<Figure 3 near here>

Figure 3. Miss Shaw’s catalog card showing the information fields she included and how they were arranged. Iziko Social History Resources Centre, Cape Town, South Africa. Photograph courtesy of Iziko Museums.

What is striking, however, is how the standardized form of Shaw’s catalog card and a modern-day CMS database both present their information fields as natural and normal, and effectively obscure any work undertaken to produce them in the first place. And yet, Shaw’s correspondence with colleagues at other museums during this period reveals a huge amount of work that went into standardizing documentation practices. She refers openly to the compromises inherent in her project: in a draft letter to one correspondent at the National Museum in Bloemfontein, she described “much consultation meaning headaches” over producing a terminology for South African material culture as a means of facilitating cataloging.³ Clearly there are no given information categories for describing ethnographic objects in museums; yet, the final iteration of Shaw’s catalog card and corresponding terminology belies this fact.

Furthermore, argued Shaw, the cards should make the “most important” items the most prominent and so she advised putting “the number, the name of the object [in English] and the tribe” at the top (Shaw 1940: 121). Shaw’s catalog card is, in this way, a quintessential example of how the success of a particular standard can be explained not by any natural law but by a number of human activities being favored by a more powerful community of practice (Bowker and Star 1999; Lampland and Star 2009). It is no accident that the name of the maker or artist is not included in the catalog card for ethnographic items, nor is it inevitable that the “Native name” of an ethnographic item was not prioritized in Shaw’s layout and was, in fact, frequently left blank. We might consider these cards as examples of Matthew Hull’s (2012: 14) “graphic

artifacts,” items whose material and spatial qualities—document size, inscription tools, text alignment, and spacing—deserve greater attention since they expose the kinds of “normative relations between discourse genres and graphic forms.” More than simple tools that illustrate complex relationships, Shaw’s catalog cards derive power from their claim to transparency that paradoxically allows them to “generate opacity” (Hull 2012: 246). When recognizing this, the layout of the catalog card reveals itself as highly constructed and reflective of a particular colonial epistemology.

For Neethling’s donation—and those MiaB items that still have catalog cards—the “most important” items *are* recorded. What we also see, alongside these entries, are smaller, handwritten letters, inscribed in pencil or red ink. Object number 11970, purchased by the SAM in 1981 as part of the Kingsley-Holgate Collection and chosen by AE for the MiaB, for example, is cataloged as a “Medicine Flask” and identified—in the prominent, top right-hand corner of the card—as Tribe: Zulu. Next to “Zulu,” is the same, small, red “A” that appears alongside Zulu on Neethling’s donation (figure 2). These letters are part of Shaw’s system for authenticating information, something she considered highly important if material was going to be studied scientifically.⁴ Shaw credited Nicolaas Jacobus van Warmelo, the government ethnologist for South Africa (1930–1969)—with whom she worked closely—with this authentication idea (Shaw 1940: 122). Van Warmelo’s own work on classifying and fixing “tribes” was subsequently used by the apartheid regime and is work that Iziko curator, Gerald Klinghardt (pers. comm., 11 October 2016), describes as representative of the way classification systems propped up the apartheid homelands.

Shaw’s system depended on marking key catalog fields with a letter from the key outlined in table 1 below to indicate how the cataloger reached their conclusion.

Table 1. Shaw’s code for authenticating information documented on catalog cards (Shaw 1940).

<Table 1 near here>

Despite including 11 categories in her authentication code, in a 1965 letter to the director of the Natal Museum, Shaw stated that while “there are other categories which involve judgment of the object . . . A & B are the only two that are of value for reference work.”⁵ What is conspicuous about this statement—and the key code more generally—is the absence of any category suggesting that the originating community might be a source of reliable information about the items. This is misleading since, at times, South African museums did request assistance in both collecting and verifying information from people perceived as originating community members. Margaret De Lange, the East London Museum ethnologist in 1960, for example, wrote Miss Shaw a detailed account of her “Xhosa girl” and staff identifying paint materials by their Indigenous names and explaining how they were used, by whom, and when.⁶

There was, however, a pervasive skepticism about the reliability of Indigenous informants. De Lange tempers her enthusiasm for this apparently valuable information with an aside that one cannot rely implicitly on what one person tells you of her customs. In another correspondence, we see the SAM seek advice from Dr. Malcolm in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Natal, because they were unsure that *imbenge* was the right term for a particular basket, and it was the “maker” who supplied this information.⁷

Within the “scientific” classification systems used by Shaw and van Warmelo, there is no place for the kinds of contributions given by AE members about their belongings, no key code that denotes their knowledge as either reliable or valuable. In many cases, there is no dedicated

space on Shaw's card that permits recording the information fields they consider most important about these museum objects—color of the item, how the item sounds, for example (Gibson 2019). Or, when an information field AE considers very important is included on the card, such as “equivalent Native name,” the SAM cataloger has left it blank, a practice that quietly and systematically strips items of their Indigenous names and reduces them to an English approximation, like “pot” in the case of Neethling's donation.

What these English approximations fail to convey is either the significance these belongings have for originating communities or how they are implicated in complex belief systems that transcend the basic functions of people the colonial museum represented as primitive. AE and their broader communities, for example, are adamant that Neethling's donation is not just a pot. During a group conversation in Groutville about this item, Siyabonga Mzobe was insistent about this, declaring that it “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” (Mzobe, pers. comm., 9 December 2016). Likewise, while the *umancishana* in the MiaB bears resemblance to Neethling's pot, AE rarely refers to it by this English name since doing so would undermine its significance in the beer drinking ceremonies. As *sangoma* (traditional healer) Dr. Skhumbuzo Miya—also a founding member of AE—explained, the *umancishana* is spiritually important since he can talk to the ancestors over it (Miya, pers. comm., 26 January 2017). Without their isiZulu names, their importance is concealed, undermined, and, in turn, the English approximation gives the impression that these items are familiar, are knowable, can be controlled, all without having to engage with the possibility of an alternative, complex belief system.

Decolonizing these collections is, then, a far more complicated task than simply digitizing the items and records and making them accessible online, despite early claims that

digital museums might be a utopian alternative to museum practices of exclusion, an idea that anthropologists Haidy Geismar (2018) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) have critiqued extensively. Yet, cultural heritage collections across Africa continue being digitized with the rationale that the digital versions address some of the challenges of a colonial legacy, particularly in terms of access to shared histories (Chamelot et al. 2020). We see this specifically in South Africa with the Cabinet's approval of the National Policy on the Digitization of Arts, Culture, and Heritage last year. The Cabinet argued for its implementation on the grounds that digitization will bring "immense benefits for the country as it will provide easy access to information resources particularly those held by archives, libraries and museums" (SA-GCIS 2023). As well as failing to engage with the kinds of colonial documentation practices embedded in these information resources that determine what kinds of knowledge will be accessible, the policy currently overlooks the realities of a digital landscape that is likewise shaped by this same legacy.

Alternative Cataloging and Classifying

About an hour north of KwaZulu-Natal's largest city, on a drive that takes you alongside the Indian Ocean coastline and through rolling sugar cane fields, is the Luthuli Museum. Once the home of Chief Albert Luthuli, Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner and president of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1952 until his untimely death in 1967, this peri-urban homestead secured recognition as a South African National Legacy Project in 2004. Luthuli spent much of his later life confined to his home and the immediate surroundings as the apartheid government issued one banning order after another with the intention of breaking the Liberation Movement's leadership. The banning orders extended to all letters and literature written by Luthuli, which were either confiscated or smuggled out of the country so that when his home

became a museum, the house itself was the only documented item in the collection. What this means is that the Luthuli Museum was unencumbered by the kinds of collecting, cataloging, and classifying legacies of Margaret Shaw and has consequently pursued a newer museology focused on “memory and the intangible” as well as growing its archive and artifact collections (SAHO 2022). It is, then, a fitting site to hold conversations about alternative museum collections, for AE to embark on a process of anarchiving and as a home for the MiaB.

We started these conversations during a workshop I held at the Luthuli Museum in 2016. AE was not yet a formal organization but the seven founding members either attended this gathering or other similar workshops held elsewhere in KwaZulu-Natal—in Eshowe, Dundee, or Ulundi. We pored over photographs of items from the SAM collection that Shaw once documented as Natal Nguni, or Zulu, items including “Neethling’s pot,” items that once belonged to their ancestors, to this part of the world. The participants laughed at the absurdity of classifying a “puzzle” as Zulu when it resembled nothing they recognized, a situation which is—as South African historian Grant McNulty suggests—symptomatic of a colonial penchant for conflating African and Zulu during the nineteenth century (McNulty, pers. comm., 7 July 2017). They filled sheets of flip chart paper with information about *izinkhamba* (pots), medicine containers, *isifociya* (belts) and were surprised by how little of this was recorded on the corresponding SAM catalog cards that we examined later in the day. Many, like Mzobe, expressed concern about such misleading classifications as “pot.” Others, like Miya, were troubled by the presence of such spiritually significant items as the medicine container being held somewhere ill-equipped to care for them, a situation he inferred from the way Shaw’s catalog card constructed museum objects as “inert and mute,” leaving no space for the possibility of documenting something more vibrant, more complex (Appadurai 2009: 4).

It was during these early workshops that interlocutors began coalescing around categories they would include if they were documenting their own material heritage. They engaged directly with the absences they noticed in Shaw's catalog cards, emphasizing just how significant the item's isiZulu name is as a way of addressing and correcting narrow colonial classifications. Other categories—like the item's color, how it sounds, who made it, where it was made—came to the fore during these discussions as we attempted to distill order out of the anecdotes, stories, and exchanges shared over those days and weeks, sometimes during the workshop sessions but often over cups of rooibos tea or lunch. I have discussed the broader implications of these categories elsewhere (Gibson 2019, 2020), but notable for the purposes of this article is just how clearly they illustrate a need and desire to upend museum documentation systems like Shaw's that persist, despite being fundamentally flawed.

I tried to capture the essence of these discussions in follow-up booklets, publications that I created specifically for the participants as a way of holding myself accountable to them, something Indigenous scholars have criticized academics for failing to do when sharing their research (Denzin et al. 2008; Smith 1999). Rather than present our findings as a neat alternative to Shaw's categories, I tried to capture the "consultation" and "headaches" that went into developing them, a process that Shaw's correspondence alludes to but is concealed by the sanitized form of the catalog cards themselves. Alongside the photo and catalog card for one SAM item—documented as a belt collected in 1962 at Tugela Ferry and authenticated with a little "A" thanks to information supplied by the donor, seller, or collector—I printed an excerpt from the workshop discussion that revealed the kinds of consultations that took place: "We're not all in agreement but most of us identify this as an *igege*, a belt worn by women purely for decorative purposes. It's made with a type of grass called *ingongoni* found near rivers in KZN."

I recognize these booklets now as an early attempt—albeit a highly imperfect one—at anarchiving as an effort to start bringing into focus the many absences embedded in Shaw’s system. Where the booklets failed to function as a more satisfying counter archive was not so much in their content but in their form. Something that became clear during the workshops was just how many participants were uncomfortable communicating primarily in English and how a significant number either could not read English or could not read at all, a legacy of the 1953 Bantu Education Act that intentionally undereducated Black South Africans. Despite working closely with a graphic designer to foreground images in the booklets, comprehending their significance still rested on interpreting the written text. Another obstacle was my own editorial role in the process, a position that compromised just how participatory this research could be. I had initially imagined publishing the workshop results on a private WordPress website to which participants would have full access and editing rights; however, I soon realized during the workshops themselves that a host of technology-related issues would make digital access and further sharing highly unlikely, rendering them ultimately useless as any kind of archive for this originating community.

The search for a better solution took on new urgency as my research in the SAM archives collided with a GRAP 103 audit of Iziko’s collections. A fairly recent South Africa National Treasury Accounting Guideline, GRAP 103 requires that all items classified as heritage assets—“assets that have cultural, environmental, historical, natural, scientific, technological or artistic significance and are held indefinitely for the benefit of present and future generations”—be given a monetary value (National Treasury of South Africa 2014: 6). As a means of assessing the heritage assets’ value, the auditors looked to the paper catalog cards as a source of reliable information about the collections. At the same time, Iziko was slowly transferring the same

catalog records into the Logos Flow digital database. Iziko estimates that it must capture 2.26 million artifact records in digital form—including the Natal Nguni collection—something it recognizes as “an enormous challenge,” since the institution’s long history means these were primarily accessioned in a paper-based card system (Iziko Museums of South Africa 2017). What GRAP 103 seemed to compound, therefore, was a situation where, thanks to their apparently innocuous form, colonial knowledge structures passed into and informed current museum practices and decisions about what items are considered “valuable,” but all without querying the underlying knowledge structures that bestowed value in the first place.⁸ For my interlocutors, it was yet another form of dispossession and disempowerment redolent of colonial times where decisions were made about their belongings at a distance and without them.

(Re)building the Box

In April 2019, we finally had an opportunity to bridge some of this distance between originating community members and the SAM collections, with a three-day workshop hosted at the Iziko Social History Centre, an event Dr. Turner and I called “Amagugu Ethu / Our Treasures: Understanding Zulu History and Language with Zulu-Speaking Communities and Their Belongings” on the grant applications.⁹ Seven isiZulu-speaking community members—Thulani Thusi, Boyzie Myeni, Wilfred Mchunu, Dr. Skhumbuzo Miya, Thuli Mtshali, Nini Xulu, and Thandi Nxumalo—flew down from KZN to encounter, in person, belongings once classified as Natal Nguni and Zulu by the SAM, items they had so far seen only in photographs and in photocopies of the catalog cards. For most of the participants, it was their first time in Cape Town; for some, their first time on an airplane. Joined by museum professionals, academics, artists, and entrepreneurs, the group spent time in the storerooms (re)uniting with the *ukhamba*,

the medicine container, the belt, the beadwork, the *umkhonto*, and many other items unexplored during the earlier workshops. The Iziko staff accompanying us—Lailah Hisham, Fatima February, Gerald Klinghardt, and Paul Tichmann—generously permitted the group to move through the storerooms at their own pace, to open drawers and cupboards as they wished, and assisted with handling objects that they chose. The encounters were emotional, with participants experiencing delight when handling older objects that they had only heard about from their elders, but also expressing regret that many of the skills embedded in these belongings had been lost, as well as unease about how items entered the collection in the first place.

We spent one afternoon in the Iziko Social History Centre boardroom, a space we transformed into an art room for artist and activist Gary Frier's Visual Response session. A facilitator for occupational therapy at Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital and with significant experience working with community-based action groups in the Cape Town area, Frier is well versed in the ways art can enable processing trauma. In our session, Frier encouraged participants to sculpt the terracotta clay into items that responded to and were inspired by the storeroom encounters. This notion of more creative knowledge production inspired the storytelling session at Iziko's Rust en Vreugd historic house site on our final morning (Manning 2015). Using printouts of items with which participants had formed closer connections and combined with memories of the art sessions and the storeroom encounters, storytellers Mbongeni Nomkonwana and Antonia Porter encouraged the group to develop their own stories about the items. Against the backdrop of Table Mountain, in this eighteenth-century garden, the group shared these as a song, a dance, and a performed sketch.

<Figure 4 near here>

Figure 4. Amagugu Ethu members encounter collections in the Iziko Museums Social History Centre storerooms (2019). Photography replicated by author from Amagugu Ethu’s MiaB.

Snapshots of these many scenes—examining documents in the archive, sculpting clay, peering into drawers in the storeroom, and dancing in the garden—are also included as part of the MiaB collection in clear defiance of Shaw’s collecting and documentation practices. Instead, they seem to meet Søren Rasmussen’s (2020: 189) notion of an anarchiving as constituting a surfeit of “memories, feelings, and affects,” things excessive to the standardized, authoritative ways of ordering the archive. Familiar with the MiaB tool following a demonstration by the MiaB entrepreneurs—George Oates (Founder) and Charlie Cattel-Killick—on Day One, the community members recognized its possibilities for anarchiving in ways the earlier booklets or a website could not.¹⁰ Since the research could be recorded and shared orally and in isiZulu, this overcame obstacles surrounding English language and literacy levels, and while a digital tool, it works without a network connection and so demands neither costly data nor a fixed Internet connection to function. Embracing these features, the group selected belongings they wished to curate as their MiaB collection, and we spent the final afternoon photographing these and recording the accompanying oral histories.

The form and kinds of information included in these oral history records would surely be dismissed by Shaw as inadequate for scientific study. There is very little structure to the oral records and no consistency in the categories of information included, besides foregrounding the item’s isiZulu name. In his recording for the *igona* (medicine flask), for example, Miya switches between isiZulu and English as he narrates an account more focused on the types of *muti* (medicine) it contains and how he uses similar in his work as a *sangoma*, rather than on the item

itself. Nini Xulu likewise opens her oral history of the *imphepho* (incense) by explaining its significance to her community where it is burned during ceremonies that forge connections with the ancestors, but only a “certain category of people . . . do the talking.” Narrating her account of the *isicholo* (headdress) that she wore during the recording, Thandi Nxumalo similarly emphasized its important function as a wedding day hat and explained how this particular item was likely made.¹¹

What all three accounts also do is locate these items within a time frame: Miya’s account implies he still uses items that bear resemblance to the *igona* accessioned by the SAM nearly four decades earlier, Xulu refers to the *imphepho* being used by the elders in “previous days,” and Nxumalo details how the SAM *isicholo*—made from human hair and grass—would have been stitched into the bride’s hair, but “nowadays” women use a detachable version. Colonial museum practices, like Shaw’s, categorically resist this kind of historicization so that Indigenous belongings were collected and documented as representatives of static, ahistorical cultures precisely because it served colonial interests to represent Indigenous peoples as being without a history. Consequently, in the SAM archive, the *igona*, *imphepho*, and *isicholo* are—in South African historians Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer’s (2016: 24) evocative words—“marooned out of time.” The MiaB makes some attempt to moor them against this tide.

The scenes included in the collection further locate the MiaB documentation process within both time and place, revealing, as they do, the collaborative nature of this research as well as where and how some of the curatorial decisions were made. Once again, this is in stark contrast to the SAM documentation processes that are obscured by the catalog card so that recovering details about why it takes the form it does requires some painstaking archival work and creative attempts to fill in the gaps. A similar desire for transparency prompted the isiZulu

participants to visibly insert themselves in the process and so seven of the cards in this collection are individual portraits of the participants embedded with a recording of each person introducing themselves. This makes it less surprising, therefore, that Thuli Mtshali, a jewelry designer, would select a piece of beadwork for the MiaB collection. What this does is unsettle a sense that collecting is any more of an objective pursuit than classifying or cataloging. The SAM archives hint at the subjective nature of collecting; for example, Shaw's correspondence reveals a growing interest in basketwork during the 1930s and a subsequent increase in collecting these items so that items classified as basketwork by far constitute the greatest proportion of all items in the Natal Nguni collection. That this happened despite Shaw's admission that during her earlier field trips to KwaZulu, she experienced the "greatest difficulty in finding any basketry at all" suggests that the ethnographic collection is less representative of items being produced, used, and circulated by Natal Nguni people at this time, and more reflective of the SAM's own interests and ideas on what should be included in an ethnographic collection.¹² Foregrounding the MiaB archivists and curators is a welcome antidote to this kind of obscuring.

Conclusion

In September 2019, the seven participants received the final MiaB and organized a launch event to share the project with local schoolchildren, media representatives, and museum professionals at the Luthuli Museum. The group was already calling itself Amagugu Ethu by this stage and was making plans about how to pursue their research further. They formalized their intentions during their first official meeting on 6 March 2020 where they elected their chairperson and committee members. All immediate plans were, of course, swiftly halted a few weeks later when South Africa imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns in response to the COVID-19

pandemic. Tragically, two of AE's founding members—Thuli Mtshali and Nini Xulu—passed away during this period. Other members, especially those most precariously employed, were occupied with supporting themselves and their families through increasingly difficult financial times. A period of civil unrest in 2021 following former President Jacob Zuma's imprisonment and devastating floods in KZN a year later compounded an already difficult situation. And yet, AE remains active and committed to expanding and evolving its MiaB project. The group continues to meet when possible—overcoming long commuting distances and rising travel costs—to recruit new members, and proudly presented its work during the 2023 SAMA conference.

AE recognizes that the MiaB project is not the answer to the kinds of repatriation issues that intensified recently in KZN following King Misuzulu's meeting with the British High Commissioner to South Africa where he stated that Zulu items held in Britain should be brought home (Mavuso 2023). Instead, it is more akin to the slower, painstaking work that South African historian Mbongeseni Buthelezi (2016) contends decolonization demands; work performed in conjunction with mounting attention-grabbing exhibitions or tearing down statues of colonial icons, work that requires looking in detail at the past and engaging with the very categories and classifications we use to talk about it. A key recommendation drawn from the AE project is that any digitization project or policy serious about decolonization must scrutinize these categories and classifications as an integral part of this work.

As this article demonstrates, there is still work to be done at the epistemological level in museums and archives, not least in institutions that hold collections originally designed and documented to represent Indigenous peoples within a normalized colonial narrative. Interrogating the very form and layout of these documents, revealing that decisions were made

about what information went where and why, and about what should be included and excluded, and who was trusted to make those decisions, make it starkly clear that at the SAM, at least, the archive is fraught with absences. Digitizing these collections may bring some benefits in terms of allowing more people to access them—if they have the right technology tools and skills—but it does not decolonize the knowledge structures embodied within them. Instead, it draws them into a neoliberal, neocolonial narrative where policies, like the newly approved SA National Policy on Digitization, are constructed around the notion that digitization and technological solutions are the answer to very complex social issues, a situation Dan Greene (2021) terms the “access doctrine.”

The AE MiaB attempts to resist this. The project is grounded in revealing the many exclusions from the archive as well foregrounding the messy and collaborative nature of archiving and documenting material heritage, and how instrumental the archivist’s role is in this process. As a counter archive or anarchive, it does not replace the SAM archive as the absolute authority on this collection, but it does challenge its epistemological base. Allowing these authorities to coexist both inside and outside institutions—something digital spaces arguably make more possible—is another recommendation drawn from this article since doing so exposes knowledge production as an ongoing, situated process, and this, in turn, challenges the epistemological structures of colonialism. More broadly, the AE MiaB reveals how core museum and archival practices continue to present challenges and why confronting them, and how we do that, is vital for understanding just how entangled they are with the root causes of broader societal challenges worldwide.

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Notes

1. The 1998 Cultural Institutions Act integrated the SAM and four other museums in the Western Cape into the Southern Flagship Institution. These museums, along with six others, became the Iziko Museums of Cape Town in 2001 and were renamed Iziko Museums of South Africa in 2012.

2. IsiZulu is the emic name given by native speakers to their language.

3. Shaw, Margaret. 1941. Letter to Dr van Hoepen, National Museum, Bloemfontein. SAM archive collection, item 353. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

4. Shaw, Margaret. 1940. Letter to E. Joan Houghton, Transvaal Museum. SAM archive collection, item 331. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

5. Shaw, Margaret. 1965. Letter to Director of the Natal Museum. 2 September. SAM archive collection, item 1104. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

6. De Lange, Margaret (East London Museum). 1960. Letter to Shaw from De Lange, East London Museum. 9 November. SAM archive collection, item 691. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

7. SAM. 1961. Letter to Dr Malcolm, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Natal. 16 June. SAM archive collection, item 734. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

8. In 2022/23, Iziko acquired a new database collections management system—Vernon Systems—which has expedited the rate at which records are captured (Iziko Annual Report

2022/23, 35); however, there is no indication yet that the categories of information have themselves been overhauled.

9. For a detailed account of this three-day workshop, see Turner, Gibson, and Gimenez-Delgado (2021).

10. MiaB was founded in 2015 by George Oates. In 2019, MiaB registered as a Community Interest Company, a United Kingdom category that recognizes social enterprises that use their profits and assets for the public good. Adrian McEwen took over running the company in 2023.

11. These oral histories can be accessed online. “Amagugu Ethu / Our Treasures.” *Museum in a Box*. https://heart.museuminbox.org/view_collection/260?page=3 (accessed 15 August 2024).

12. Shaw, Margaret. 1982. Letter to Professor Preston-Whyte. July 1. SAM archive collection, item 2186. Iziko Museums, Cape Town.