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*Shared provenance research with
communities — stories of Zulu
beadwork*






hello future

Research Problem

- **Encyclopedic museums** that houses collections of cultural 'objects' from different parts of the world like Manchester Museum (MM) are grappling with problematic histories of appropriation, dispossession, looting and containment ushered in by **colonial violence**.
- The expansion of the British Empire to **Africa**, Oceania , Americas and Asia during colonisation resulted in the appropriation of cultural objects that found their way into museums.
- The problem is that encyclopedic museums classified and categorised these cultural objects in accordance to disciplinary configurations of archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, ethnography **which ignored social biographies** embedded in the 'objects'.
- Secret, sacred , ritual and ceremonial 'objects' from **Africa** were ordered by regimes of Western knowledge that **erased Indigenous ways of knowing and doing**.





Disciplines of Knowledge production in museums.

- Collecting and ordering cultural objects for the ethnographic gaze –aesthetic value
- Scientific inquiries and othering - anthropological knowledge .
- Objects imprisoned in museum storage rooms.
- Static, lifeless , mundane and frozen in a timeless past.
- Cultural representations through materialities.

Research Questions

- How do we conduct **collaborative provenance research** with descendant and or diaspora communities whose cultural objects are contained in EM's?
- How can we achieve **inclusivity and care** in respect of building active relationships between our collections and descendent communities whose cultures we hold?
- What does an **empirical practice of decolonising these collections** entail?
- How do we re-order dispossessed cultural objects curatorially in ways that unsettle conventional ordering of knowledge in EM's by **creating space for lived experiences and Indigenous knowledges**?

Decolonial curatorial practices – Curator of Living Cultures, Manchester Museum, 2021 – present

- ✓ Manchester museum is largest university museum in the UK with a collection of over 4.5million cultural and natural objects.
- ✓ The concept of **living cultures** is a recognition that objects that I am responsible for are not just static things but rather are living cultures representing living people and their practices.
- ✓ Responsible for the care of more than 25,000 living cultures from **Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas**.
- ✓ **African Collection** has approximately 8 000 objects
- ✓ **Asian Collection** – approximately 4 500 objects
- ✓ **Americas Collection** – approximately 4 000 objects
- ✓ **Oceania Collection** - approximately 7 000 objects
- ✓ **Human Remains** - over 1000- Africa, Oceania, Americas , Asia

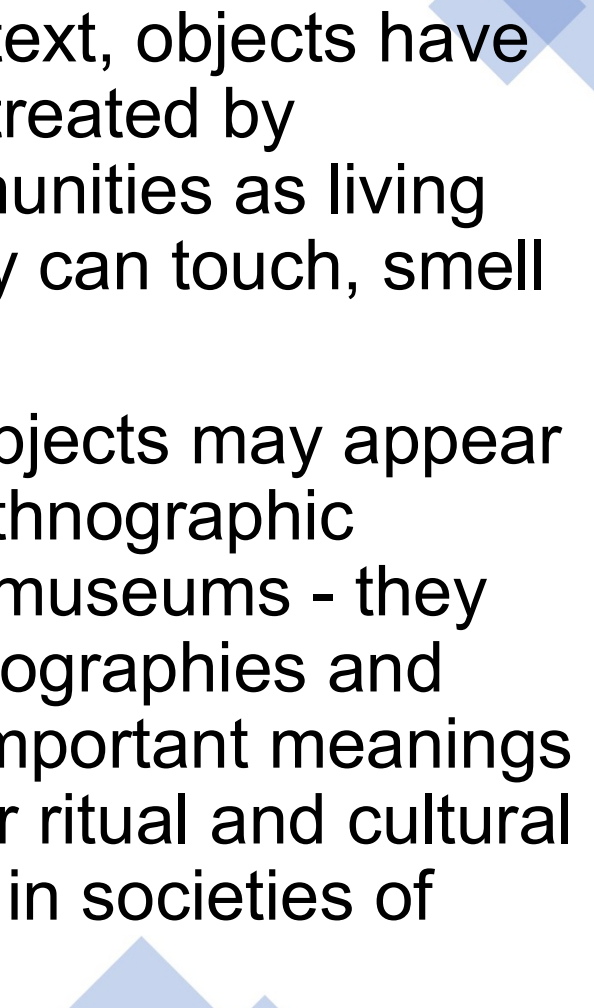
Curator of Living Cultures: Decolonial Work in Practice?

- Acknowledging that the collection that I am responsible for is not a function of materialities and the physical fabric of "things".
- Anthropological turn – objects are not just objects they are living and have potency representing living people from where they were dislocated from.
- In fact, they are not objects but are ancestors of living people.



The top left corner features two overlapping yellow geometric shapes: a large triangle pointing downwards and a smaller diamond shape.

The Biographical Story from an African Context

- In an African context, objects have potency and are treated by indigenous communities as living beings which they can touch, smell and taste.
 - Although these objects may appear stagnant within ethnographic classifications in museums - they have individual biographies and carry with them important meanings connected to their ritual and cultural functions located in societies of origin.
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- The top right and bottom right corners feature blue geometric shapes. The top right has two overlapping triangles pointing right. The bottom right has two overlapping triangles pointing left.

The African Collection

- Has more than 8 000 cultural objects from different parts of the continent – former British colonies.
- Many more are unprovenanced.
- These are secret, sacred ceremonial objects that are ordered and classified according to regimes of Western knowledge which excluded and erased Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.
- How then does a decolonial praxis look like at MM considering this history?
- What are some of the methodologies that the museum can or has embraced in decolonising its problematic collections and exhibition practices?

What is a decolonised museum practice? – Conceptual Strands...

- “Decolonizing museum curating involves decoding museum collections from the colonial meanings in which they have been cut off, displayed and decontextualized from where they had once belonged, and in which they have been categorised, labelled and transposed into the alien binary hierarchies of Western rationalism and the value systems of colonialism and imperialism”- Jette Sandahl – 2019 – *Curatopia, Museums and the Future of Curatorship*

The Disobedient museum

- The “disobedient museum,” – is one that prioritises engagement with formerly marginalised communities outside the dictates of instrumentalised forms of knowledge production.
- The “disobedient museum” is a typical methodology which embraces voices from local communities to reorder objects at Manchester museum in a non- disciplinary or undisciplined way.
- This disobedient approach as both a concept and a methodology essentially rethinks the various ways in which museums engage with local knowledge and local ways of doing.
- Message, Kylie. 2018. *The disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge*. London: Routledge



Routledge Research in Museum Studies

CURATING LIVELY OBJECTS

EXHIBITIONS BEYOND DISCIPLINES

Edited by
Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill

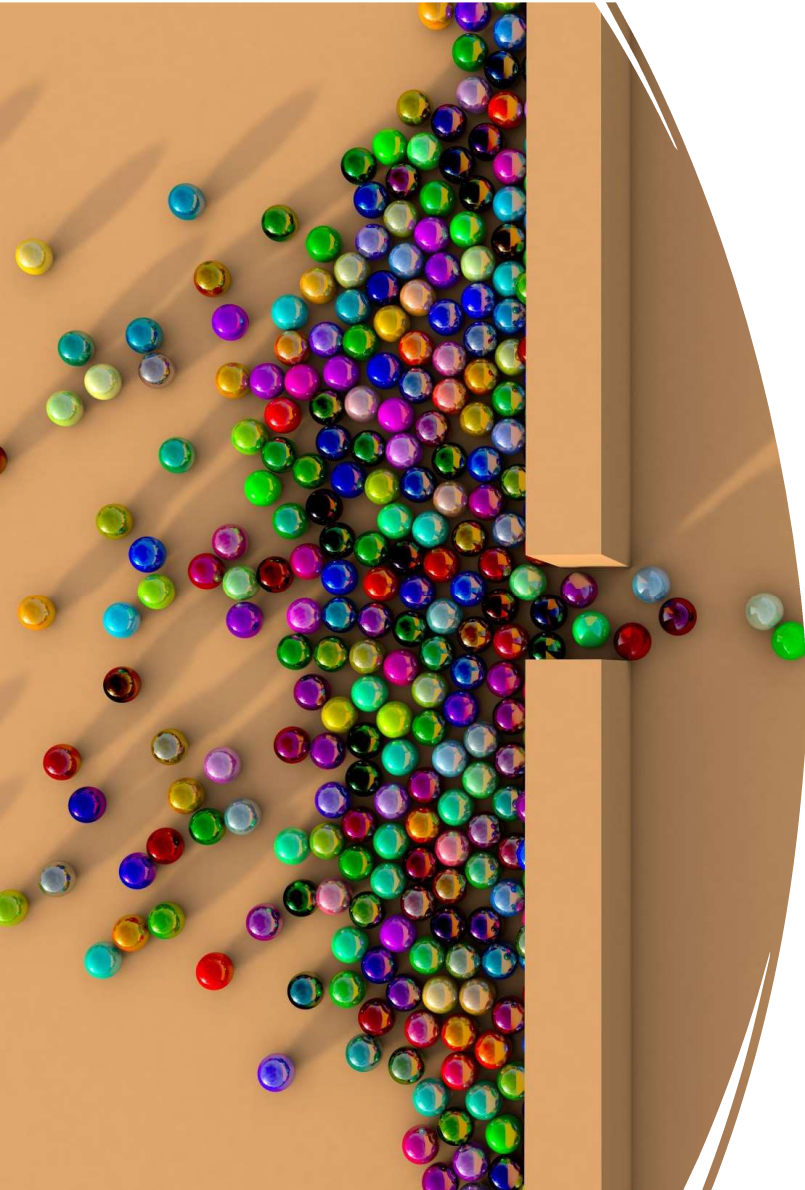


Decolonial Perspectives & Practices at MM

- The following strategies represent some of the empirical ways by which decolonisation is being approached at MM
1. Comprehensive Provenance Research – The Zulu Traditional Beads
 2. Collaborative Biographical Research
 3. Indigenous Curatorship
 4. Co-Curatorship /Co-production
 5. Downside of decolonial methodologies in museum.

The Beadwork ;
Manchester
Museum &
Ditsong Cultural
History Museum,
Pretoria



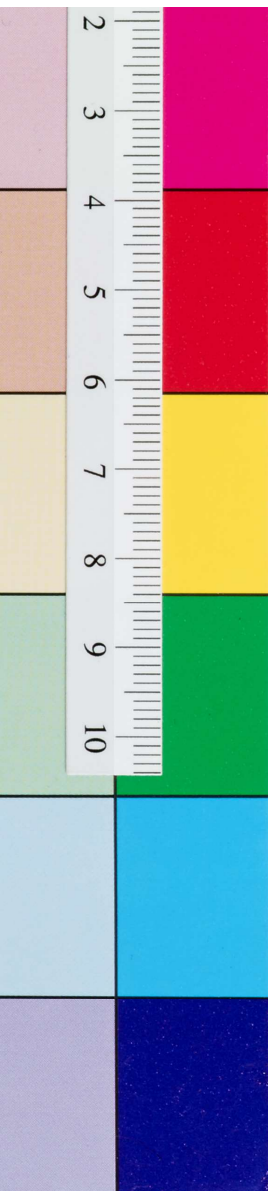


Provenance Research.

-
- In view of the absent stories on this collection of beads we conducted a comprehensive provenance research in trying to answer the following question:
 - Where did the beads come from in SA?
 - How were they collected?
 - When were they collected?
 - What were the underlying uses of the beads - spiritual, ritual and ceremonial?
 - What are some of the contemporary cultural practices that are associated with the beadwork?

Our Curatorial Intervention

- Our sense of curating in this research was profoundly a relational caring practice of objects through active relations of reciprocity and dialogue with local communities.



MANCHESTER MUSEUM



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Visual Representation: Ditsong Museum Beads

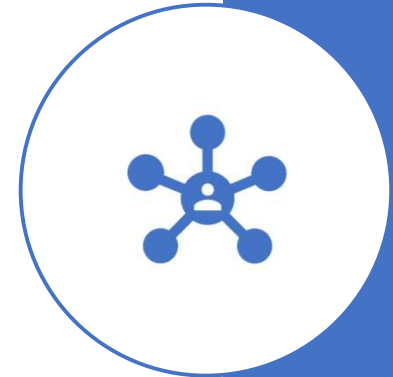


Motsane – Curator
of Anthropology
during the research

- Ditsong Cultural
History Museum
- Pretoria, South
Africa

Collaborative Practices

- Collaborations ensure that communities are not considered as passive audiences for authoritative forms of knowledge production but are implicated in an ongoing process of knowledge production and debate as active co-producers.
- Ethnographic field work was carried out in KwaZulu Natal in June to follow up on the visual analogy as a way of understanding uses of the beads in source communities
- Collaborations between source communities and museums, provide an opportunity to reimagine the meanings of objects.





Co-curatorship as a method

- Co-curatorship entailed - not only taking an interest in the Zulu beads as objects but also in source communities changing practices and belief systems that lend meaning to the beads.
- Co-curatorship prioritises social history and the collecting of contemporary cultures in a dialogue with source communities.
- Narratives from the community were included in the provenance findings of this research.





Indigenous Curatorship?

- Indigenous ontologies and forms of knowledge are going to be in cooperated in the ways in which Zulu beads and local histories are going to be presented at Ditsong and Manchester museum from this provenance research.
- In indigenous curatorship, objects are not treated as frozen in a timeless past but rather they are living beings connected to the present and future in continuous ongoing relationship.
- These ceremonial objects connect people, places and events and also represent histories of continuity and change.





Reimagined Collections (Ongoing)

- This gallery reimagine African collections by moving beyond colonial tropes of categorising cultures of the 'other'
- An ongoing transformation and we use **relational curatorial practices in** giving agency to descendant communities to create and weave their own stories.
- Part of this display draws from a **collaborative provenance research** on Zulu beadwork that I undertook in June 2022 **through open dialogue** with community members in KwaNongoma, KwaZulu Natal, SA.
- This **ethnographic research** explored beads not as materialities but as connected to people, their practices, belief systems and contemporary uses.



Public Facing Outputs

- A new display in the Reimagined African Collection Gallery.
- This co-produced exhibition – is going is an outcome of the collaborative provenance research between Manchester Museum, Ditsong Cultural History Museum and Nongoma community members.
- The exhibition will be called *'Stories of traditional Zulu beadwork'*

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

MUSEUMS AS AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE


Collaborative Programmes at the Mutare
Museum

Njabulo Chipangura
and Jesmael Mataga



Curator of Archaeology – Mutare Museum,
Zimbabwe. 2009 – 2020.

- This co-authored book publication arose out of my empirical curatorial research work at MM over this period.



The downside
of co-curation,
collaboration &
community
engagement



Where is the real power
located within these
activities – is it with the
curator or with the
community?



“...nonmatter how much we might think of
pluralizing knowledge production in museums
through collaborations – the intellectual control
will still remain vested in the hands of curators”
- Robin Boast, 2011.

Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact
Zone Revisited