



Figure 1 (opposite).  
Cabinet photograph. Names  
unknown. Photographer: William  
Laws Caney, West Street, Durban,  
c.1890. [www.soldiersofthequeen.com](http://www.soldiersofthequeen.com)  
(accessed 29 October 2010)

## ‘Knobkerrie’: Some Preliminary Notes on the Transformation of a Weapon into a Swagger Stick, or Sometimes a Stick is Not Just a Stick

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a knobkerrie as a ‘short thick stick with a knobbed head, used as a weapon or missile by South African peoples. Also extended to similar weapons used by other peoples, e.g. in Polynesia and Australia.’<sup>1</sup> Although there are many ways of visualising a knobkerrie, in this essay the focus is on the knobkerrie as it appears in photographs of uniformed African policemen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Compellingly, these African policemen have been immortalised in photographs that are most peculiarly labelled and catalogued under the index or subject entry ‘Zulu policeman’ or ‘Zulu native policeman’. In other words, what unites the knobkerrie and the policemen is that the latter were almost without exception identified as ‘Zulu’. This congruence between a material object – the knobkerrie – and a living subject – the ‘Zulu policeman’ – offers an opportunity to explore both the meaning of photography in this period and the ‘Zulu’ material cultures that were marshalled, modified and formalised as African men were incorporated into the state’s policing functions.

It must be immediately acknowledged that the topic also has contemporary resonances and possible disavowals. The internecine violence of South Africa’s urban townships in the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with legislative attempts to proscribe the carrying of ‘traditional weapons’, has meant that the collective known as the ‘Zulu *impi*’ became a figure of fear and a symbol of apartheid ‘third force’ tactics.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘Zulu policeman’ has, however, not always been merely a tool. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries he was a compelling photographic subject. In studio photographs, family albums, ethnographic monographs and postcards his presence is ubiquitous. Dressed mostly in his uniform, he is both dashing and uncomfortably

1 The etymology of the ‘knobkerrie’ is given as follows: ‘knob *n.* + *kerrie*, variant of *kierie n.*, after Cape Dutch *knopkierie*, *-kier*’, <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/104083> (accessed 8 June 2011).

2 This essay is a homage to an article published by the historian Jeff Guy entitled ‘A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with Special Reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879’, *Journal of African History* 12(4), 1971: 557–70.

3 The word ‘*impi*’, like ‘knobkerrie’, has many connotations both historical and contemporary. It is derived from the Zulu word, both noun and verb, meaning ‘war’ or ‘warring party’. In the South African imaginary and media parlance the word has come to mean ‘armed group of mostly Zulu men’.