‘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.’ 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. Compellingly, these African policemen have been immortalised in photographs that are most predictably labelled and catalogued under the index or subject entry ‘Zulu policeman’ or ‘Zulu native policemen’. 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 intersecting 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.

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 in Johnson, Samuel, A Dictionary of the English Language, revised and completed by Nab sounds, after Cape Dutch Junghans, 88. 2. This essay is an extract from an article published in the History Journal by Hloniph Nokoena, in Omis at the University of Stellenbosch, 1997.
3. The word ‘impi’ (the Zulu) has many roots in both historical and contemporary. It is derived from the Zulu word, both noun and verb, meaning ‘he or she of utmost power’ in the South African imaginary and media parataxis the word has come to mean formal group of mostly Zulu men.