Ethnoligised Pasts and Their Archival Futures: Construing the Archive of Southern KwaZulu-Natal Pertinent to the Period Before 1910

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This essay makes two methodological interventions designed to explore modes of engaging with inherited colonial collections of material pertinent to southern KwaZulu-Natal's late independent and early colonial past. We focus primarily on collections of objects (and photographs that feature such objects and other items of material culture) often categorised as ethnographic, historically denied archival status and more recently habilitated as 'art'. The first move draws this material into the ambit of archive. Our move differs from what art historians and archaeologists do when they engage with these kinds of materials in their analyses. Where they use objects as historical evidence, we take a different tack by investing in the research necessary to frame collected material culture as archival. We then take the further step of reconstructing the archival histories of these materials. The two interventions offer us a position of engagement with the available archive that holds in view its making and remaking over time, with what we hope are productive possibilities for rethinking some of the yawning gaps in our knowledge of the remote past. In pushing beyond critique of colonial and apartheid practices afflicting understandings of pre-industrial times, and attempting to offer something new, our aim in this essay is not to write a history for the region and period with which we are concerned. It is to provide a carefully researched and historiograpied account of the preservation of material remains pertinent to the region and period with which we are concerned.

This includes their entanglement in colonial collecting practices, in dominant and local knowledge practices, then and subsequently, and the establishing of a sense of their archival potential.

1 This essay is part of a long-term research project of the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, Ethnoligised Past and their Archival Futures (http://kapusc.ro.ac.za/). The project draws attention to the archival apparatus and challenges of ethnographic material. It does this in order to enable ongoing engagement with pasts that were locked in Otherness in various ways and colonised and apartheid. Parts of the argument in this essay were tested out in publications at an early stage of the research: (1) Hamilton and Leibhammer, "Javanese, Khoikhoi, and Other: Archival Archetypes in 'Colonial' South Africa", South African Journal of History, 2013, pp. 15-46. 2 Certain objects readily lent themselves to the kind of treatment we consider in this essay. Other objects are more difficultly categorized without the necessary time spent on them. Another implication of our argument is that this condition can be navigated when they can be linked to related materials in other settings.