‘The Name of Zulu is Now Given’: Provenancing Objects from Colonial Natal in the British Museum’s Christy Collection

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This essay focuses on a selection of mid-nineteenth-century objects from the Christy Collection at the British Museum. It considers how the classification of this material first as the work of ‘Natal Kaffirs’ and subsequently as ‘Zulu’ obscures its complex provenance.

The Christy Collection is constituted by the objects amassed by London-based Henry Christy (1816–45), as well as additions made to the collection since it passed to the British Museum. Using a biographical approach to people and objects, and taking the materiality of these largely pristine objects into account, this essay discusses a number of items, mostly from the Colony of Natal, which found their way into the Christy Collection from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and from the London 1862 International Exhibition. The Kew objects in question were collected by three British individuals—the first Anglican Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso (1814–83), Major Robert Jones Garden (1821–70) and John Sanderson (1820–83)—while the 1862 International Exhibition objects were assembled by a fourth, Dr Robert James Mann (1835–86).

By treating the British Museum and archives consulted as field sites, this essay reveals more specific provenance for the objects with regard to the mostly anonymous makers and their loci. Using a biographical approach to people and objects, it also aims to draw out a number of people associated with certain objects and to trace some of the ‘life stories’ of a selection of items. This endeavour, it is hoped, will help to further illuminate the historical material culture of the Thukela-Matshakulu region,* the classification of which, first as that of ‘Natal Kaffirs’ and then as ‘Zulu’, is misleading.

*The name of Zulu, provenance and the Museum as field site
The objects with which this essay is concerned, mostly items of personal adornment and articles of everyday and ceremonial use made by indigenous men and women in what is now the southern part of South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal province, were conveyed from the newly established British Colony of Natal to the imperial metropolis. Sent in some


2 I consider these pieces to be works of art, but as they are particular nineteenth-century classification is not central to my argument; I have chosen to refer to them here more broadly as objects of material culture.