



Figure 1 (opposite).
Clem Webb wearing beadwork
that is now in Museum Africa.
Photograph: Nicholls (no date).
Museum Africa Collection, ref 920
Webb, Clem D.

Using Zulu and Losing Zulu: How the Clem Webb Collection was Undone

Sara Byala and Ann Wanless

In 2010, Nessa Leibhammer, then the Johannesburg Art Gallery's curator of southern African 'traditional' art,¹ went to Museum Africa, Johannesburg's oldest and largest cultural history museum, to search for items dated between 1850 and 1910 from what was at the time Natal. Wading into the estimated 800 000 pieces that comprise this vast museum,² Leibhammer's initial search of the museum's catalogue produced a paltry four objects whose classification fitted definitively with this region and time period: a necklet of claws and beads from Durban c.1899–1902 (60/37); a necklet collected on the south coast of Natal in 1933 (78/1026) and an ornament and an armband, but from the Herschel district in the Cape Province, collected in 1910 (80/1239 and 80/1243). All were designated 'Zulu.' A broader search, based partly on past and present staff members' memories, led Leibhammer to focus on a collection made in the relevant period that contains many items that could well have come from the correct geographical area.³ The collection was assembled by Clement Davies Webb between roughly 1886 and 1920, but his index – detailing the provenances of the items – was lost before the collection was donated to the museum by his wife in 1937 and, although some work had been done to sort and identify the pieces within it since then, this research did not go so far as to match the collection with dates and locations available from Webb's biography. As such, it seemed to offer no meaningful contribution to Leibhammer's research. Amazingly, out of an estimated 900 items categorised as Zulu in this museum, it appeared that only four fitted Leibhammer's criteria.

This essay speaks to the supposed dearth of items from the second half of the nineteenth century from southern Natal in Museum Africa, questioning whether there is not, in fact, more in this museum than at first meets the eye. It does so by attempting to reconstruct the 'backstory' of the so-called Clem Webb Collection and its maker before the collection arrived in what was then termed the Africana Museum.⁴ This story

1 See essay by Leibhammer in Volume 1 for a discussion on the problematic nature of the term 'traditional'.

2 Diana Wall in conversation with Sara Byala, 27 July 2010. See also internal museum document: 'Museum Africa Collections: Number of Items, 3 March 2010'. This overall number includes more than 300 000 photographs, 17 000 geological specimens, 10 000 objects of black culture and 17 000 items that fall within the broad category 'history', in addition to collections of weaponry, stamps, costumes, maps and more.

3 Since the museum did not, at that time, employ a curator for the ethnographic collections, they asked Ann Wanless, who had worked with them for many years some time before, to assist.

4 For more on 'backstory', see C. Hamilton, 'Backstory, Biography and the Life of the James Stuart Archive', *History in Africa* 38(1), 2011: 319–41.