Investigating Te Papa's South African Collection

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What is the South African Collection?
Te Papa holds artefacts and specimens from across the world and this includes over 1000 items originating in South Africa. The collection encompasses objects from weapons, domestic tools, instruments, coins, badges, and clothing.

The first South African object to enter the collection was donated to the then Colonial Museum in 1900. This collection has continued to grow into the present day. Aotearoa and South Africa have had various points of interaction across time making the objects integral to communicating our histories.

Goals of the Project
There is a significant number of South African objects at Te Papa, but the collection suffers from fragmented documentation and being relatively unknown to the wider public. Thus, this project aimed to:
- Better understand the acquisition history of the objects through archival research
- Reconcile discrepancies between the physical and digital records
- Write posts for Te Papa's blog that will bring attention to the collection

Institutional Connections
Uncovering an object’s history would not have been possible without the support of outside institutions, such as Wellington College. Donations to the museum are not just made by individuals, but organisations as well. These connections have been helpful in filling the blanks, helping to paint a fuller picture of Aotearoa’s connection with South Africa.

This speaks to the importance of collaboration and working with communities in the museum sector. The key to giving the objects the respect and care that they deserve is engaging with the people whose cultures they belong to.

Afterlife of the Project
By drawing attention to the collection through this work, the hope is that more understanding about the pieces and their histories and cultures can be gained.

Ongoing work is being carried out to verify objects in the collection that are labelled as “Zulu” have been done so accurately. This has included reaching out to scholars on the continent and is part of the ongoing efforts to ensure the objects are being presented with the respect they deserve.

To read more: blog.tepapa.govt.nz/author/courtney-powell

Highlighting the Collection
The third goal was to help bring more attention to the collection. To achieve this I have written four blog posts on the collection and selected three key objects: two marimba, a fighting axe, and beaded tablet pendant (pictured here).

This is to provide the public with better awareness of the museum’s lesser exhibited collections and has been an opportunity to emphasise Aotearoa’s connections with South Africa.

Ghost in the Archives
Completing the first goal proved difficult. Documentation remained sparse and much had been lost since the museum’s establishment in 1865. Little information was recorded about donors, making it harder to piece an object’s history together. As I worked with the records and became intimately familiar with the collection, it became easier to spot discrepancies in the transition from physical to digital records and work on correcting them.

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