



## Curiosity and Aesthetic Delight: The Snuff Spoon as Synecdoche in Some Nineteenth-Century Collections from Natal and the Zulu Kingdom

Anitra Nettleton

If there is one thing one learns very quickly in researching historical objects collected from Africa in the stores of European museums of ethnography, it is that their records are notoriously unreliable, subject to serial interventions and some quite inexplicable alterations.<sup>1</sup> In most of the museums of Europe early material from the east coast of southern Africa is attributed to the generic category of Kaffir/Kaffern/Kaffre/Cafre. The term has become completely opprobrious, but was, at the time of British colonisation of Natal and the Cape, sometimes used to distinguish speakers of what were coming to be called 'Xhosa' and 'Zulu' from the other large linguistic group, often referred to as 'Betschuanan'.<sup>2</sup> This usage points to a general lack of understanding of the complexities of cultural affiliations and political allegiances in the area, in spite of the fact that some nineteenth-century records offer a somewhat more complex picture of these groupings.

This nomenclature was used on the labels of most of the material accessioned in the British Museum of southern African material in the period from the first acquisitions in the 1850s, right into the second quarter of the twentieth century. Similar labelling was also used in identifying objects seen on the other major international expositions in London, Paris and elsewhere, organised to celebrate colony and empire by different European nations. An apparently ethnically specific nomenclature, Zulu or Xhosa (Xhosa) was used, often as a prefix to 'Kaffir', on the labels of most of the material accessioned in the British Museum (and others in Europe). This was done in order to name what were considered the appropriate culture-circles or groups in which shared cultural features were evident.

In this essay I examine a number of collections of objects from Natal in the British Museum, all of which contain similar pieces. Centring on one object type, the bone snuff

s, London: J. Hogarth, 1849  
(see Figure 2, Klopper, this volume)

<sup>1</sup> This research was made possible by a grant from the National Research Foundation (South Africa). I also thank the following for access to the British Museum stores: Jim Hamill, Heidi Cutts, Catherine Elliott Weinberg and Chris Spring.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed all these issues elsewhere, showing that nineteenth-century museum records are replete with examples of this usage. See A. Nettleton, 'In What Degree They are Possessed of Ornamental Taste: A History of the Writing on Black Art in South Africa' in *African Art in Southern Africa: Tradition to Township*, edited by A. Nettleton and W.D. Hammond-Tooke, Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1989, pp. 22–9 and A. Nettleton, 'History and the Myth of Zulu Sculpture', *African Arts* 21(3), 1988: 43–51.