

Gender, power and iron metallurgy in archives of African societies from the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu region

Abstract

This dissertation examines the social, cultural and economic significance of locally forged field-hoes, known as *amageja* in Zulu. A key question I have engaged in this study is whether gender-based divisions of labour in nineteenth-century African communities of this region, which largely consigned agricultural work to women, also affect attitudes towards the tools they used. I argue that examples of field-hoes held in eight museum collections form an important but neglected archive of “hoeculture”, the form of subsistence crop cultivation based on the use of manual implements, within the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu geographic region that roughly approximates to the modern territory of KwaZulu-Natal. In response to observations made by Maggs (1991), namely that a disparity exists in the numbers of field-hoes collected by museums in comparison with weapons, I conducted research to establish the present numbers of *amageja* in these museums, relative to spears in the respective collections. The dissertation assesses the historical context that these metallurgical artefacts were produced in prior to the twentieth-century and documents views on iron production, spears and hoes or agriculture recorded in oral testimony from African sources, as well as Zulu-language idioms that make reference to hoes. I furthermore examine the collecting habits and policies of private individuals and museums in this region from the nineteenth-century onwards, and the manner in which hoes are used in displays, in order to provide recommendations on how this under-utilised category of material culture should be incorporated into future exhibitions.

Key words: field-hoe, *amageja*, gender, iron, power, museums, collections, Zulu.

Steven Kotze, July 2018