

# The Knobkerrie History

Matshana Museum

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Matshana Museum (Zulu patriot Matshana kaMondisa) or more commonly “small stones” is based in Onrust River, Hermanus and is largely the vision of published author, radio presenter and Anglo-Zulu War researcher Shiloh Noone and Matshana Radio station production engineer Mawande Lobi, a young man fluent in four African languages. Mawande shared the vision of reaching into schools and disadvantaged communities to create accessibility to those based in the Overberg and beyond the greater Cape Town area. Shiloh says, ‘while Cape Town schools have the accessibility of the rich museum heritage of Cape Town, the poorer country schools don’t even have the petrol or transport to visit those institutions, so we needed to place something of enrichment into their jurisdiction’.

They have offered this unusual account.

*The twist in the Knobkerrie story*, courtesy of the Matshana Museum, Onrust, River Overberg, South Africa.

They call it *The Bloodwood Tree*, it is basically Kiaat, ironwood or Tambotie, a wood so strong and heavy that it needs to be chip carved. (In Australia it’s known as Mulga Wood, utilised by the Aborigines to make their Boomerangs and Nula Nula clubs). It is this wood that was used to make the deadly Knobkerrie (Iwisa) that was used with deadly velocity by the Zulus against Queen Victoria’s troops in 1879, its roots with the San, later the Nguni. For years Christie’s and various Lords of the Manor have paraded the snake-shaft Knobkerrie as an authentic Anglo Zulu War artefact, basically the shaft a twisted snake with gaping holes of air in-between. These were sold off by the Zulus as tourist items in the early 1910 period before The Great War when teams of British tourists came to pay their respects to those that had fallen during 1879. (My late grandmother remembers them well). These Snake knobkerries would shatter at first contact due to the weak shaft. Another tourist item was a knobkerrie where the neck is coiled copper wire to strengthen the weakness of having two separate pieces, the shaft insert into the ball.

Sadly many of these were also sold off at auctions as the ‘*Real McCoy*’; they were never used in the Anglo-Zulu War, again due to the weakness of two separate pieces. The Zulu craftsmen knew how to hide this flaw and did it well, as a mere ten rand in 1910 could feed a Zulu family for a week.

The ironwood Knobkerrie, sometimes Spherical for throwing which was used in the Anglo Zulu War can only be whittled down from a single piece, chip- carved, no knife could whittle that wood as sure as no man could (braai) barbecue that wood without running for a very wet bushy release. These exaggerations like the hallowed letter claiming that the bodies of the British soldiers of Isandlwana reflected a golden sheen and were in good condition after a few days would never be corrected, due to English pride and the preserved sanctity of what they want to believe, notwithstanding the pounds already paid for such items. In hindsight the month of January in the Rorke’s drift area of Natal, 40C degrees in the shade, a bleeding body, would already have vultures descending, jackals and hyenas circling, we are talking 1879, notwithstanding a few leopards, enough said.