Chapter 8

Africanising museums on the African soil: A critique of the Western concept of keeping human remains in Zimbabwean museums

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Introduction

The concept of a museum as an institution in its modern sense is a product of European ideology which was grafted on the African continent during the expansion of European empires in Africa and other parts of the world (see Adejuwon 2012:2). These museums were established during the colonial era to house objects that best served the interests of imperial agents (Foley 2000). Putting it in a broader picture, Isidore (n.d) opines that the impact and after effects of colonialism on African socio-cultural practices are equally as strong as they are on the politico-economic domain. As Vrdoljak (2006:36) aptly puts it; "the history of museums shows that these institutions have facilitated, justified and benefited from colonialism and related policies of discrimination, assimilation and genocide". Supporting the same line of thinking Shepherd (2002), argues that archaeology both as a discipline and as an idea, was introduced into Africa as part of the process of colonial expansion itself. This means that the idea of displaying cultural objects for purposes of research, education and entertainment is also foreign to the African continent in general and Zimbabwe in particular. In line with this understanding, Matenga (2011:30) submits that the practice of collecting cultural objects and building institutional and private collections is also foreign to Shona culture. Thus museums

have been nurtured on the African continent using the West as the template and yardstick notwithstanding the huge disparities in cultural ideology that separates the two world views. It is indeed true that Africans had their own ways of perceiving their cosmology which largely differs from the West. It is normally the case that where two cultures encounter each other especially after invasion or conquest of one by the other, the conquered's culture is bound to be subservient or even engulfed by that of the conqueror. This is exactly what happened between Europe and Africa. Being subjected under colonial rule, the African lenses of perceiving and world making were gradually and forcibly removed and a new set of lenses that were Euro-centric and palatable only to Europeans were amazingly given to the Africans. That being the case, the African ways of viewing the world obviously changed accordingly.

In concurrence with the above line of thinking, it is not a misconception to point out that the creation of museums in Africa was not meant to benefit the Africans but was a way of Europeans to materially enrich themselves, studying and displaying the exotic cultures or what has been termed "othering and saming" (see Mawere 2013b). As Shepherd (2002) rightly puts it, the archaeology of Africa has, historically, been carried out by non-indigenous practitioners, for whom African landscapes figure as exotic and African people and cultures figure as "others." He went further arguing that archaeology appears in this context as one of the forms of scientific enquiry that mediated the encounter between the agents of colonialism and audiences back home, and the unfamiliar people, cultures, and territories with which they came into contact (Shepherd 2002). To this end, human remains were taken to museums for research and display purposes, a thing which is unacceptable to Zimbabwean culture. I use the term Zimbabwean culture because though the country is made up of people from different ethnic groups,

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they by and large share a plethora of common cultural attributes, hence the term Zimbabwean culture. Disheartening to note is the fact that even after attaining what I refer to as 'political independence', some of the curators who received Western education adopted the Western ideology and also added to the list of human remains already dumped in museum cabinets. Though some of the relatives of these human remains are sometimes known, no efforts have been made to return them and/or rebury them as per their respective cultures. Such a practice is against African and in particular Zimbabwean ethical values and is also a major cause for concern in this discussion. This was and is still against African morals as far as the treatment of human remains is concerned.

Interesting to note is the fact that one of the museums in Zimbabwe which was established during the colonial era namely the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare (ZMHS) contains more than one hundred human skeletal remains. Though some of the museums in the country such as the Mutare Museum of Antiquities also contain human remains, the greatest numbers of human remains are in the ZMHS since it is the one which specialises in human sciences. A substantial number of these human remains were put in the museum during the colonial period by the colonial masters and remain stored in the museum to date despite fundamental transformations that the country has undergone since the attainment of national independence in 1980. Surprisingly, the situation still remains the same as post-colonial heritage practitioners in independent Zimbabwe (Nzewunwa 1990; Pwiti 1996; Munjeri 2004; Ndoro 2004; Abungu 2006 and Chirikure, Manyanga, Ndoro and Pwiti 2010) simply adopted these alien values at the expense of local concerns and aspirations.

To reiterate, the ZMHS still show residual traits of the process of transplantation of historical disempowerment and colonial takeover several years after attaining majority rule. To

exacerbate matters, the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of some of the human remains are not clear. Some of the human remains were recovered during developmental projects and some were retrieved during the construction of dams such as Mazvikadeyi Dam in Banket District in Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. It is also highly probable that some of the human remains were collected, perhaps, as part of research. What remains apparent however is the fact that the real identity of most of these human remains is not known hence it is sometimes difficult to take corrective measures such as reburying them. What is at stake is a conspiracy of silence regarding the future of the human remains housed in the ZMHS. To make matters worse, no significant research has been carried out on most of the human remains kept in the ZMHS. From my previous experience as a Curator of Archaeology and Head of the Conservation Department at one of Zimbabwe's biggest archaeological site in Africa south of the Sahara, the Great Zimbabwe National Monument in the past eight years, I learnt that to this day, human remains are kept in the museums without a clear policy guiding their conservation. Contrarily, other countries in the region especially South Africa has policies governing the keeping and displaying of human remains in museums. Plans to display as is the case in Europe and America are not envisaged. The question then is; why keeping them in the museum? The other question which begs for an answer is; who has the responsibility to initiate discussions around this sensitive and contentious issue? More so, one can even argue that the existence of human remains in the ZMHS deter potential local visitors (from within Zimbabwe) and many others from across Africa because dead bodies are considered as sacred and as such deserve 'decent' burial. Displaying lifeless human bodies can, in fact, be considered as an act of witchcraft in some African societies such as the Shona culture of Zimbabwe.

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That said, this chapter challenges the museum practice of keeping human remains. This act in the course of colonial history undermined and violated Zimbabwean traditional values concerning the treatment of bodies of dead people. This chapter further raises the controversial and emotive issue of what should be done to redress past wrongs of keeping human remains in museums as part of museum collections. The question whether human remains should be treated as mere artefacts or as something else deserves some careful attention. On this note, the chapter argues that as long as African museums in general and in particular Zimbabwean ones perpetuate a Euro-centric model of presentation and interpretation, their operations and activities will never be relevant to the ordinary Zimbabweans. Since the attainment of national independence, Zimbabwe has faced the challenge of displacing the impasse and creating a new cultural capital to undo old colonial paradigms. It is from such observation that the chapter attempts to influence the Government of Zimbabwe and policy makers in the field of culture and heritage studies to domesticate and indigenise museums so as to make museums relevant to the people of Zimbabwe. The chapter wraps the discussion by recommending Zimbabwean museums to ideologically re-position themselves and put Zimbabwean values and norms at the centre of their operational policies.

'Humans on the shelves': Background information to the display of human remains in museums

The presence of human remains in museums raises an array of controversial, uncomfortable and contentious issues in the museum community the world at large. Many museums particularly in America and Europe maintain large collections of human remains that contribute to scientific research. The existence of these human remains in museum collections is,

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however, a highly complex and contentious issue (Andersen 2010). On the other hand, the exhibition and display of human remains in the museum presents new challenges that directly confront the ethics and morality of museum professionals and visitors alike. The exhibition and storage of human remains in anthropological and natural history museums has been an issue strongly debated during the last decade (see, for example, Hubert 1991b) but to no avail.

The culture of displaying human remains in museum has its roots in America and Europe. As a contested issue, the treatment, display and retention of human remains in academic and museum contexts started in the 1970s in the United States and spread to the United Kingdom by the 1990s (Jenkins 2011). In the US, the treatment of human remains was being protested against by a rising tide of indigenous activism that was incensed at the inherent racism in the different management accorded to remains; those considered European received reburial, while those considered Native American were curated, studied and often displayed (Jenkins 2011). In Europe, the public display of human remains has been accepted for a long time as the origin of this practice dates back to the cult of relics in the Middle Ages (Jenkins 2011). The most important relics have traditionally been skulls and skeletons, hair, fingernails, blood and ashes. During this period, large collections of relics of the saints were established in Europe between the 4th and 13th centuries (Jenkins 2011). In Africa, the practice of keeping human remains in museums was initiated by the Westerners who ironically introduced the discipline of archaeology in the continent: the move was ironic in the sense that in reality the Europeans were in search of gold and other valuables from Africans having realised that most of the African people when deceased were buried with all their possessions including ornaments and the pieces of gold and silver they owned. This was mainly done when the discipline of archaeology was still closed out to the indigenous populace and

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strictly confined to a few elitist professionals. In Southern Africa, as elsewhere, there has been a turn toward reappraising collection practices involving human body parts and skeletal material (Legassick and Rassool 1999; Morris 1996).

By definition, human remains include the bodies of people who lived thousands of years ago, and of those who have died within recent or living memory (Manchester University Policy on Human Remains 2010). In museum circles, the term human remains refer to the bodies, and parts of bodies, of once living people. These are most commonly regarded as being confined to members of the species *Homo sapiens* (Manchester University Policy on Human Remains 2010). Human remains in particular have received attention when archaeological associations started formulating ethical codes for the handling and storage of archaeological material (Cassman and Odegaard 2007a; 2007b). It is still, however, unclear in archaeology whether human remains should be treated equally with all artefacts or if they deserve to be perceived as something more than simply things.

In Zimbabwe, the practice of keeping human remains in museums especially from a cultural and even moral perspective is a highly contentious issue that deserves urgent attention. It is a common phenomenon in Shona, for example, that when burying the body of a dead person, relatives and friends expect the deceased to 'rest in peace'. This categorically implies that they do not expect anyone to temper with the grave let alone the remains of the deceased. Any action to be taken on the grave of the dead should be sanctioned by chiefs in liaison with the family members of the deceased. One wonders whether keeping these remains in museums is a way of making the dead 'rest in peace' or is simply a way of tormenting them. From a moral perspective and that of the Shona culture, I argue that keeping human remains in museums frustrates both the spirit of the dead and the remaining relatives. People should not treat human remains as public material culture that is displayed in

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museums. Human remains should be treated with due respect and dignity and reducing them to the level of artefacts as is the case in most museums, is a cardinal sin and a mockery to African cultural values.

The morality of keeping human remains in museums: A Global Perspective

In 1986, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) published its first code of ethics in response to the growing debate on the role of museums in the contemporary world. It was not by coincidence but by design because questions surrounding the fate and uses of what museums held as specimens were at that time becoming a problematic issue for cultural institutions worldwide. The major problem that was haunting museums was the growing criticism of the suitability and morality of collecting, displaying and keeping human remains as part of museum collections. This criticism sent through an unwelcome message to ICOM whose Code of Ethics notes that "the primary duty of the museum is to preserve its collection for the future and use them for the development and dissemination of knowledge, through research, […] and displays" (ICOM 2001:2.9).

Though the code accepts the displaying and keeping of human remains in museums it also spell out that museums themselves are not the only ones who hold a legitimate interest in their possessions, in particular when it comes to 'collections of human remains and material of sacred significance.' The same code states that the handling and use of such material "must be accomplished in a manner consistent with (both) professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated"(ICOM 2001: 6.6). While at international level museums are allowed to keep human remains as part of their collections they are supposed do so on condition that

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they engage and consult all the relevant stakeholders. More importantly, they are supposed to consider the interests and beliefs of the concerned members of the community. If we are to trace the acquisition of human remains by the ZMHS it will be apparent that most of the human remains were simply taken to the museum sometimes without the consent and knowledge of the concerned and affected people. The expectations and concerns of the local people whose ancestors' remains are now part of the museum collections are not taken on board. What makes this issue highly emotive is the fact that in Zimbabwe, no one has so far showed the willingness to initiate the discussion as this issue is highly controversial and sensitive. Furthermore, since the identity of most of these human remains is not known, there are no immediate communities claiming them. Also, there are no laid down procedures and parameters to be followed in pursuing such an issue.

One question that keeps on lingering in people's minds is: should–Zimbabwe and other African countries be guided and controlled by international legal instruments that openly violate cultural values and norms? It is important to note that European values originate from outside. They are exogenous and imposed. African values originate from African philosophy and thought. They are endogenous and based on local talents (Chivaura 2009: 239). If as a nation we are able to fight against neo-colonialism ideologies that are bent on profaning our esteemed cultural values such as homosexuality, why not doing the same to volatile issues such as the displaying of human remains in museums? What is disturbing is the fact that while the country has made significant strides in indigenising the economy of the country, that is, to put the economy firmly in the hands of the rightful owners, the same is not happening to issues to do with culture especially as presented in museums. If the economy and religion can be indigenised, why not museums? I, therefore, submit that chiefs as the custodians of culture as well as important stakeholders in policy formulation

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should carefully and thoughtfully consider this practice with a view to come up with an ethically informed position regarding the issue of keeping human remains in museums. Thinking within the same framework, Legassick and Rassool (1999: 49), writing from a South African perspective concur that there is no conceivable scientific value in the preservation by museums of human remains which outweighs the ethical need for their reburial. It is therefore crucial for museums to take into cognisant cultural values concerning the mortal remains of the dead. Add to that, the relatives of the deceased should be engaged and consulted as important stakeholders so that they voice their concerns regarding the disposition of their relatives' remains. In fact, the practice of displaying remains of the deceased tantamount to witchcraft activity from the Shona culture perspective.

Living and the living-dead in African cosmology: A focus on the Shona culture

All societies have their own customs and beliefs surrounding death and each culture has its own approaches to dealing with loss. These may be more or less standardised but almost always involve a core of understandings, spiritual beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette (Parkes *et al.*, 1997). According to African understanding, there is a close relationship between the visible and the invisible world. These two worlds though believed to be separate are spiritually connected so closely together that the African worldview can be described as mono-sectional (Parkes *et al.*, 1997). Thus in the African worldview, there is no fundamental difference between life and death because the latter is perceived as being simply a different mode of existence. In fact, death is considered as a rite of passage that allows one to enter the ancestral realm (Asante and Mazama 2009:162). It is because of this intricate relationship between the living and the dead that

Chivaura (2009: 234) postulates that although the ancestors are dead, they remain human and continue to exist among human beings and take part in human affairs and influence human destiny. In the Shona metaphysical understanding, a human being does not die forever (*munhu haafi zvachose kana kurova*). This means that the Shona people believe in the metaphysical realm of life after death. They believe that the end of bodily life marks the beginning of spiritual life-'life in disembodied body,' (Mawere 2010: 572). They, therefore, believe in the existence of a world of the living dead. As conceded by African traditionalists, the Shona of Mozambique and Zimbabwe in particular, these bodiless persons reside in the 'world beyond'-a metaphysical/spiritual world *(nyikadzimu)* where only lives in disembodied forms and not otherwise can reside. The bodiless however constantly interact with those in the physical world through mediums such as traditional healers *(n'angas)*, among others (Mawere 2010:569).

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, death has always been followed by a sequence of rituals that differ from group to group but, by and large, serve the same purpose of ensuring a proper transition of the dead from a life of bodily existence to a life of spiritual existence (Masaka and Chingombe 2009: 190). In this world, only those who died and were righteous in their day to- day life and had necessary rituals and ceremonies of death conducted for them are the inhabitants of this world (Mawere 2013a). It is believed that these 'individuals' are quite conscious of the events taking place among those living in this physical world. They have the capacity to tell, cause and heal misfortunes and prevent deaths among the living if they dim necessary (Masaka and Chingombe 2009: 196). In light of the ensuing discussion, the Shona cosmology does not permit the display of human remains whether from a moral or cultural perspective. What disturbs the writer is that the same practice is being perpetuated by some of the present crop of archaeologists in Zimbabwe. That being the case, there is need

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to re-claim lost past glory and ensure that all future national plans and aspirations are firmly anchored on culture. This is simply because no nation has developed outside the framework of its culture. Culture should be the basis of 'real development' thus culture and development are two sides of the same coin. It is fundamental to note that sustainable approaches to human development cannot be achieved using notions of development borrowed from outside which are meant to suit the needs of their people and their environment. The dangers of using them are enormous because those who made them have to be relied upon for advice, skills training and supply of equipment on regular basis. Such a model of approach to development consumes money and puts nations in debt. It further compromises people's sovereignty and leave them open to blackmail and plunder (Chivaura 2009: 239).

Coming to the practice of displaying and keeping human remains in museums, Africans let alone Zimbabweans have no record and history of displaying cultural objects for purposes of amusing and entertaining people before the contact of Africa and the outside world, particularly the European settlers. Cultural objects were perceived as sacred hence they were kept in the custodianship of chiefs and priests. These precious cultural objects were handed down from generation to generation as part of family legacies. Some of the cultural objects were used for special rituals that connected the living and the dead. Given the crucial role some of these cultural objects played in connecting, protecting and unifying family members of the same descend, such objects were not expected to be publicly displayed. Most importantly, these cultural objects were not supposed to be found in the hands of aliens or people not directly related to them. A good example of such an object is the Ngomalungundu drum which is believed to have originated with the Lemba people found in some parts of Gutu, Tadzembwa and Mberengwa of Zimbabwe.

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What is disturbing is the fact that if cultural objects were not for public display what more of human remains? Equally worrying is the fact that when these human remains are taken to the museum, the concerned local communities and family members are not consulted on how they are to be stored. It still remains unknown and unclear whether these human remains will remain locked in museum cabinets forever. The classification of human remains into the artefact category presents more challenges than solutions. If they are truly artefacts, then they should be displayed for educational and research purposes. In the mid-1990s, some of the human remains in the ZMHS were taken by the University of Zimbabwe's Biology Department for research purposes. This then gives us a clue that human remains are surely treated as collections in Zimbabwean museums. This now brings the discussion to another question which begs for a reply namely; is there a policy that guides the documentation and conservation of human remains in Zimbabwe museums? As any other artefact, human remains should be governed by existing collection policies. The truth of the matter is that the exact nature of the legal entitlement to human remains in the ZMHS remains gloomy. As a result, another question arises as to whether this museum has an unfettered right to make decisions regarding the care of human remains in its collections. This brings us to another dimension of the discussion that in the absence of a clear policy on the keeping of human remains in museums, the affected relatives or ethnic groups (where they are known) should initiate and spearhead discussions in this highly emotive issue.

Setting a new ideological paradigm for Zimbabwean museums: Some recommendations

The practice and discourse of heritage resource management have become established in Africa over the past

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three or so decades, and a lively debate exists around perceptions of cultural heritage, the management of archaeological collections and resources, and the development of indigenous management models (Abungu and Abungu 1998; Ndoro and Pwiti 2001, Pwiti and Ndoro 1999, van Schalkwyk 1996). Further to that, African archaeology has also tended to be a recipient rather than an initiator of archaeological theory (Hall 2000). It is this observation that made Agorsah (1990: 191) to postulate that Africa has been designated the laboratory or testing ground for ethno-archaeological ideas that have been generated elsewhere. This borrowed Eurocentric approach to the discipline of archaeology as well as the management of museums is usually evidenced in the discord created in the application of heritage practices in non-Western cultures such as Africa.

This brings into the discussion the relevance of museums to the contemporary society in which they are situated. Zimbabweans should strive to demonstrate the relevance of museums in celebrating past and present cultural achievements as well as in plotting future trends in the management of museums that is strongly informed by African philosophy and wisdom. This will involve a radical transformation of current operational paradigms that are insensitive to African cultural values and norms. Emphasising the same point Hassan (1999: 398), notes that while colonialism and the disappointments of the postcolonial era are painful to experience, Africans must look beyond the agony and the anger to new vistas of actions that are grounded in African cultural ideology. He further suggests that Africans should not build on the ruins but should instead examine its own historical experiences in order to chart a new future hinged on African philosophy. From this it therefore follows that Zimbabweans (especially cultural heritage experts and the different governmental sectors that deal with culture) should stop viewing the world using borrowed lenses from the West. It is because of these

borrowed intellectual lenses that people in Zimbabwe no longer have respect for their cultural values as is evidenced by the keeping of human remains in museums. It is also fundamental for Zimbabweans to start embracing a new philosophy of thinking that places Zimbabwean sensibilities at the centre and/or heart of museum day to day activities. It is the contention of this chapter that chiefs in Zimbabwe should take this issue on board and consider possible ways of correcting this horrendous act.

As part of some of the recommendations, the Government of Zimbabwe in partnership with institutions in charge of culture and heritage should put their heads together and find a lasting solution to the practice of keeping human remains in museums. It is the contention of the chapter that where the relatives of some of the human remains are known efforts to engage them with a view to redress the anomaly through reburials should be initiated by the museum in charge of the remains. Funds permitting, the government should widely consult with the people of Zimbabwe on how best this situation can be handled in a way that fosters and enriches culture. To this end, the government of Zimbabwe should spearhead the crafting of home grown policies that embrace societal values and norms and that also acknowledge the importance of engaging local communities in the interpretation and presentation of public material culture. It is this document that will clear the mist and set a new cultural paradigm for the people of Zimbabwe.

The other recommendation that can be adopted by both the government and NMMZ is to ensure that legislation and policies governing cultural heritage in Zimbabwe should be grounded in Zimbabwean cultural ideologies which are informed by African philosophy and wisdom of Ubuntu and personhood. Most importantly, the current crop of heritage professionals in Zimbabwe should think outside the box and find practical ways of making museums relevant and useful to

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the people of Zimbabwe. For this to be achieved, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ)-the organisation that has been given the mandate through an Act of Parliament to be the custodian of the country's cultural heritage on behalf of the people of Zimbabwe) should exhibit and keep collections that represent the interests of the local indigenous populace as well as adopting programmes and activities that are shaped and informed by members of the public (Chaterera and Nyawo 2013: 214). It has been noted that most museums in the world have been transformed by taking on board communities as partners in their programmes and activities. This new approach has created a favourable working condition between museums and communities as museums are about people and created by the people themselves. The social inclusion leads to trust, understanding, a sense of identity, and creating a museum that is more relevant to the community (Nyangila 2006:2). This will enable the museum and the people to use the same language as well as to perceive the world using the same lenses. Currently, the language of museums is not the language of the people and this is the root cause of the issue under discussion. In short, Zimbabwean museums should re-position themselves and stop conceptualising culture using borrowed lenses.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the moral and cultural issues that arise when it comes to the conservation and displaying of human remains in African museums, particularly the Zimbabwean ones. It has demonstrated that the practice of displaying human remains in museums originated from Europe and was gradually fostered on the African continent during the spread of colonialism. Notwithstanding the huge disparities in cultural ideology, this practice has failed to assert itself within the African context. On this note, the chapter has criticised the

massive and uncritical adoption of Western cultural ideologies in Zimbabwean museums especially with reference to the keeping of human remains in museums. This practice has since the advent of colonialism negatively dented the Zimbabwean socio-cultural values and beliefs which had cemented the people since time immemorial. The chapter has also challenged the current crop of heritage managers and other stakeholders in the cultural sector to set up a new ideological agenda for Zimbabwean museums that is grounded in African philosophy and thought of Ubuntu.

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