

Chapter 19

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in the Preservation of Collections at the Batonga Community Museum in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Museums in Zimbabwe often face several conservation challenges caused by different agents of deterioration. The Batonga Community Museum find it challenging to maintain and properly take care of the collections on display. This chapter examines the effectiveness of the conservation strategies being employed at the BCM. The study made use of qualitative and ethnographic research approaches. The majority of collections at the BCM are deteriorating at an unprecedented level. The study gathered that bats have posed serious and extreme conservation challenges as well as affected the presentation of exhibitions. The chapter concludes that bats are the main problem bedeviling the museum and needs immediate control.

INTRODUCTION

Museum collections are a valuable resource that can be used to define a people's identity, history and culture. The concept of Intergenerational Equity (IE) by Weiss (1992:6) posits that the existing human race holds the planet on behalf of their species and for future generations. According to the concept of IE, the present generation has a right to use and benefit from their cultural heritage as well as protecting it for the benefit of future generations. As such museums have an obligation to effectively take care of

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humanity's cultural heritage. This includes societal history, material culture and to make this heritage accessible to the public. Museum collections are always under threat from relative humidity, temperatures, pollution, light and pests as well as rodents. Chiwara (2017) cites that all public museums in Zimbabwe experience conservation challenges due to lack of storage space and have little or outdated equipment to maintain microenvironments. Almost all museums in Zimbabwe are under equipped to effectively conserve the collections they hold (Chiwara, 2017).

Chiwara (2017, p. 349) further indicates that to a large extent museums in Zimbabwe employ remedial or restorative conservation as compared to preventive conservation. Remedial or restorative conservation is done when collections are already deteriorating or damaged. For example museums would want to fumigate when they realise an object has been infested by pests and this may be done by people in many cases not trained in conservation science. Chiwara has observed and gathered that fumigations done at the Zimbabwe Military Museum have contributed to further deterioration of collections and posing health risks to staff members (2017, p. 348). Chiwara (2017) indicates that they are benefits if museums actively embrace preventive conservation in the protection of collections as compared to initiating remedial or restorative work. This study was undertaken at the Batonga Community Museum in Binga in 2015 and 2016. Nyangila (2006, p. 2) indicates that museums may realise great opportunities of operating efficiently and effectively if they develop a participatory relationship with local communities. Nyangila (2006:2) points out that local communities are a valuable resource that can contribute to the development and growth of a museum. Therefore they are several levels in which local communities may assist in heritage management and that can be through sharing of knowledge (Nyangila, 2006:3). The study argues that museums have great opportunity to realise effective, green and less cost conservation strategies if they tap and make use of indigenous knowledge. This can only happen if museums seize to see themselves as experts but collaborate and share curatorial control.

AGENTS OF DETERIORATION

It takes quite a lot to effectively look after and maintain a collection. Museum collections are constantly under threat from agents of deterioration. So much research has been published about how relative humidity, temperature, pollution, light and pests and rodents as well as human factors affect museum collections (Caple, 2012; Pinniger & Winsor, 2004). Caple (2012:26) highlights that human beings contribute to the deterioration of museum collection. This can be through touching, vandalism, incorrect handling, incorrect packaging and movement of objects. Human factors include museum visitors and staff who may touch objects on display contributing to physical or mechanical damage through the salts in their hands. Museum personnel have also been observed to contribute to the deterioration of museum objects through incorrect handling, use and movement of objects, vandalism and graffiti (Caple, 2012:26; Ambrose and Paine, 2012). Chiwara (2017) has also pointed to the fact that human beings contribute to the deterioration of museum collections through using poor chemicals and methods in fumigating and housekeeping. For example Chiwara (2017) has observed at the Zimbabwe Military Museum that lack of storage space led to museum personnel piling up artifacts on top of the other in the JOC Hut.

Incorrect or fluctuating relative humidity is another agent of deterioration that is known to cause shrinkage, embrittlement, swelling and cracking in collections (Caple, 2012; Ambrose & Paine, 2012, Chiwara, 2017). Relative humidity (RH) is a ratio of water vapour in the air to the amount it could hold if fully saturated, and is expressed as a percentage. Incorrect relative humidity has been documented to

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