

## Chapter 20

# Challenging the Concept of Infinity Retention of Collections in Selected National Museums in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter challenges the concept of undefined, infinity, and indefinite retention periods of collections in Zimbabwe's state museums and underscores the need for each state museum to develop a collections management policy. The concept of indefinitely retaining collections characterizes Zimbabwe's National Museums. In that regard, this chapter interrogates issues surrounding collections management in Zimbabwe's state museums. Museums in Zimbabwe are overburdened with inherited collections from the past with limited supporting information. This coupled with the need to store contemporary collections congests the storage space in museums. A multiple case study approach was employed to examine the state of collections in three selected state museums in Zimbabwe. Findings revealed that collections in these museums have been inherited from the past collectors who amassed collections with limited information about them. There was no formal collections management policy. The chapter proposes a regime to guide museums in dealing with their collections.*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of indefinitely retaining collections characterizes museums worldwide. This is because museums are custodians of the inheritance of humanity. It is their duty to preserve, interpret and promote the use of this heritage and ensure that it is kept and passed on to future generations. When an object is made a museum object the overall intention is to ensure that it is permanently maintained as a primary source of evidence. The concept of keeping collections indefinitely is also characteristic in Zimbabwean state museums (Chaterera, 2017, p. 330). This was a realization made by the author while investigating

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issues surrounding collections management in Zimbabwe's State Museums. This chapter underscores the critical need for a collections management policy in facilitating the smooth flow of museum operations within the context of Zimbabwean museums. Museums are repositories of collections and more often than not museologists struggle over the need to create more space for collections. Zimbabwean museums are overburdened with inherited collections from the past, most of which either fall outside the scope of their collections mandate or have very little to no supporting information. In some cases, storerooms are filled with "the unknown" where there are incomplete collections registries or absent object records. This, coupled with the need to store contemporary collections, congests the storage space in museums.

A multiple case study approach was employed to examine the state of collections in Zimbabwe's state museums (Baxter & Jacks, 2008). Face to face interviews were conducted with the members of staff responsible for the management of collections in these museums. A total of 12 interviews were conducted. Observations of the museum storage environment were conducted, in the form of object, museum building, condition assessments and use of storage space surveys. This chapter starts by discussing the conceptual framework that governs the management of collections, it presents the research findings by presenting each case of the three selected museums namely the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS), the National Museum of Transport and Antiquity (NMTA) and Zimbabwe Military Museum (ZMM), it then gives a general discussion of collections management in the three selected Zimbabwean state museums. It ends by suggesting a suitable regime for dealing with crowded storerooms for collections management in Zimbabwean Museums.

## **COLLECTION MANAGEMENT IN MUSEUMS AND THE PROBLEM OF MANAGING SPACE**

According to article 3 subsection 1 of the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2017) statutes

*A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM statutes, 2017, p. 2)*

This ICOM definition provides an understanding of the roles and functions of a museum. It underlines the primary goals of a museum, which are to acquire and keep the natural and cultural, tangible and intangible collections of humanity (ICOM, 2017). Acquisition is an everyday function in museums and this is a practice that has its origins as far back as the second millennium BC. As old as the practice is, there have been a lot of collections amassed in museums over the years (Lewis, 2004). The reason for these collections being made is evident in the museum code of professional ethics principle II which, gives museums the mandate to hold collections in trust for mankind and its development (ICOM code of ethics for museums, 2017, p. 7). There have been efforts by museologists to gather this primary evidence of mankind's development. With the vast improvements to technology made by humankind in a bid to adapt and successfully use their environment, humankind has created and disposed a lot of material. Evidence of which is found in museum repositories.

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