Museums & Social Issues
A Journal of Reflective Discourse

ISSN: 1559-6893 (Print) 2051-6193 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ymsi20

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To cite this article: Njabulo Chipangura, Patricia Magodyo Chipangura, Jesmael Mataga & Farai M. Chabata (2025) Truth-telling as a form of decolonial care: stories from a collaborative object biography research with the Ndau community of Eastern Zimbabwe, Museums & Social Issues, 19:1, 26-44, DOI: 10.1080/15596893.2025.2463657

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2025.2463657

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MUSEUMS & SOCIAL ISSUES
2025, VOL. 19, NO. 1, 26–44
https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2025.2463657

Truth-telling as a form of decolonial care: stories from a collaborative object biography research with the Ndau community of Eastern Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we examine the implications of having a museum practice in Africa that is underwritten by accountability, truth-telling and meaningful care for objects/living cultures that were appropriated from indigenous communities during colonization and extended periods of colonial domination. We argue that care is not just a function of conserving "objects" in a museum for presumed posterity but rather should be redefined and extended to address what it means to care for communities whose living cultures are still pretty much frozen in exhibitions or locked up in storage areas. We critique the whole anthropological or ethnographic categorization of objects, encapsulated in museological disciplines Museums Objects, Relics and Counter- Heritage has bent on "disciplining" the colony by alternatively posing that African museums must rehumanize living cultures and ancestors that they care for through proactive collaborations with communities at their doorsteps.

KEYWORDS
Rehumanization; community collaborations; decolonization; care; African museums; truth telling

Introduction

In this paper, we examine the implications of having a museum practice in Africa that is underwritten by truth-telling and meaningful care for objects that were appropriated from indigenous communities during eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial conquest and expansion projects (Adjei & LeGall, 2024; Verges, 2024). We argue that care is not just about conserving "objects" for presumed posterity, but rather should be redefined and extended to address what it means to care for communities whose living cultures are still either frozen in museum exhibitions or locked up in storage areas which are not easily accessible (Chipangura, 2024; Morse, 2022). Using critical museologies as a framework, we challenge the categorization of objects as "anthropological" or

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"ethnographic," encapsulated in contemporary museological practices in a process that Mataga (2015) has described as bent on "disciplining" the colony. Alternatively, we argue that African museums must decolonize objects from colonial contexts by reconnecting them with the living cultural aspect of originating communities which are more important and relevant to them than their cultural representations. Truth-telling itself is a proactive approach to acknowledging how both ancestors and objects from the colonized were dehumanized by different colonial collecting practices spanning appropriations, looting, salvage anthropology, missionary-led collecting, grave robbing, theft, plundering and stealing (Chipangura, 2024; Rousseau et al., 2018).

We propose that decolonization can be achieved through truth-telling approaches centered around equitable collaboration with communities of origins from where the objects were collected. By truth-telling, we present a method that we think museums with objects from colonial contexts can embrace first by openly accounting for problematic circumstances that informed their past collecting practices. To achieve this, we draw on the case of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) formed at the height of British colonial rule in 1972 with a mandate of conserving the country's ethnographic collections. Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia, was a British colony from 1890 up until 1980 when it gained its political independence. Museum making in early Rhodesia was at the impetus of mining interests of the British South African Company (BSAC) – a company formed to take over the natural and mineral resources as well as land in Southern Africa (Chipangura & Mataga, 2021). We reveal how this case study, which is based on empirical work we did with the Ndau community in Eastern Zimbabwe, is an important and timely contribution to ongoing debates of decolonizing museum practices through Afro-centric perspectives that gives agency to originating communities' ways of knowing and doing (Bacci, 2024; Chipangura, 2024; Taiwo, 2022). We also offer an alternative reading to disciplinary power that configured and represented cultures of the "other" in museums through Western regimes of truth which subjugated multiple indigenous knowledge and ways of being (Barolsky et al., 2024). Thus, objects from colonial contexts can no longer be viewed as mute, frozen, stagnant or lifeless rather they speak to us in multiple voices and play an important role in building active relations of care between museums and originating communities (Dilger et al., 2025).

Critical museologies: truth-telling and accountability

Given their complicit association with colonial histories, the museum should exorcize themselves from legacies of cultural dislocations, dehumanization and epistemic injustices (Hicks, 2021, 2020; Rassool, 2015a, 2015b; Vawda, 2019). There is an urgent imperative for reinvention, especially in the postcolonial contexts, by truthfully opening up and accounting for the violent colonial circumstances under which living cultures and cultural expressions (often referred to as objects) were acquired. Thus, African museums must transcend beyond being repositories of static, mute, lifeless and timeless "things." Following Taiwo's (2022) argument, we suggest that museums can proactively and truthfully give agency to communities who lost their connection to cultural objects as a result of colonial extractive processes, most of which were conceptually and physically violent. The praxis of truth-telling that we show in this paper is one that challenges dominant forms of Western knowledge by embracing community-informed ontologies and axiologies in redefining

meanings of objects previously categorized as ethnographic at ZMHS. Connected to this – we show how decolonizing truth-telling in museums is linked to calls for pluriversality wherein multiple community cosmologies are deeply entangled and interconnected (Barolsky et al., 2024; Mignolo, 2009). Our empirical analysis draws from collaborative engagements related to selected objects in the ZMHS' ethnographic collection of traditional clay pots and *muchongoyo* traditional dance regalia. Using these objects as a contact zone – this biographical research took us outside the walls of the museum (literally and conceptually) to the Jezi/Jersey, Chipinge District of Eastern Zimbabwe an area predominantly inhabited by the Ndau-speaking people. (See Figure 1). The chosen objects are reported in ZMHS records to have been collected from the Ndau people – a minority indigenous cultural and linguistic which still possess a rich, but largely under-recorded history (Muyambo & Sithole, 2022; Sithole, 2018).

As curators and researchers, we moved from museum storerooms where the objects were incarcerated and went back to communities from where these objects were "acquired" during the colonial period. This physical shift from the space of the museum was accompanied by an epistemological move – where as trained curators, we had to challenge

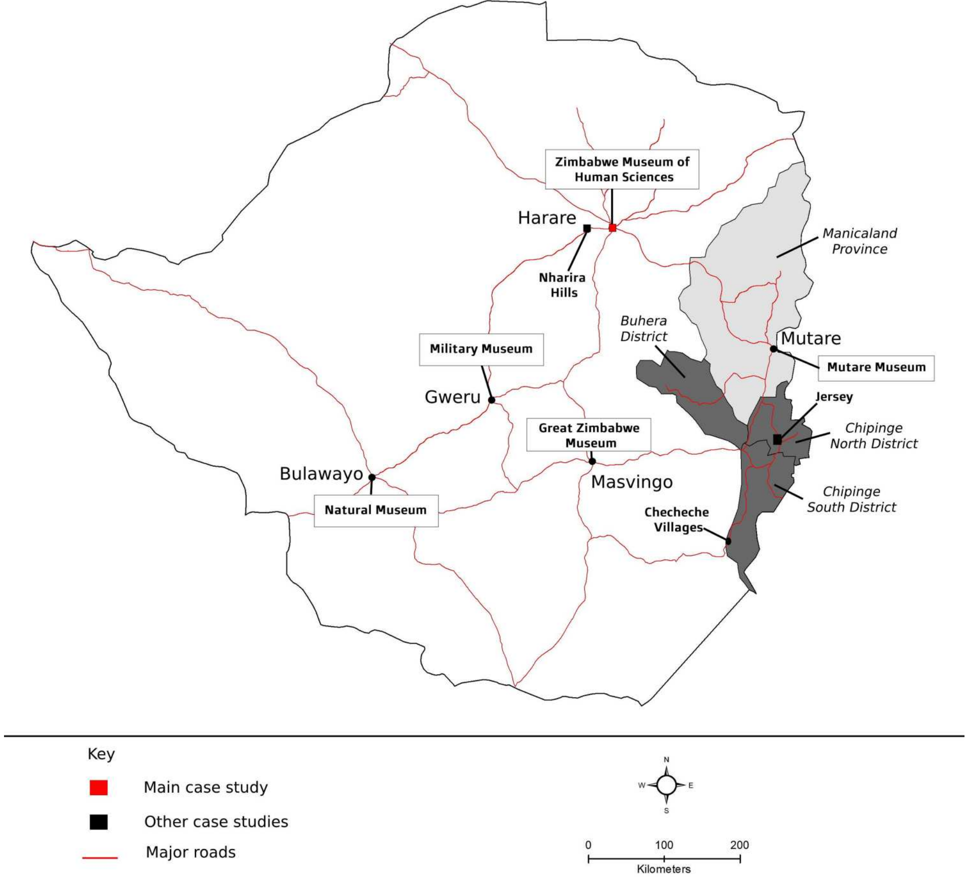

Figure 1. Showing the location of Chipinge district where the Ndau-speaking people reside. Map by Russell Kapumha.

our approaches, worldviews and authoritative standards, through engaging with local connoisseurs/custodians and their ways of knowing and practices related to the chosen objects. This turn has been characterized by Verges (2024) as a post-museum – one that disrupts the norms of the Western museum by inscribing objects and memories in their living environment. In discussing this example as a form of truth-telling – we posit that idealistically changing the work of museums framed by some as decolonization should be steeped in an empirical practice where communities are given agency to question the categorization of ethnographic collections and offer alternative ways of knowing. In this regard, decolonization, simply put, means challenging and dismantling colonial structures through sharing control and authority in storytelling with originating communities whose cultural objects are contained in museums (Chipangura & Seabela, 2024).

Meanwhile, truth-telling entails acknowledging problematic contexts within which objects were collected in museums, and how disciplinary, professional and technical curatorial practices dislocated them from communities. It's a process by which museum curators suspend and let go of their authoritative power through respectful consideration of the agency of local communities (Chipangura, 2024). In light of this (Barolsky et al., 2024, p. 10) convincingly argue that truth-telling functions as a living critique of the pervasive presence of coloniality in museums towards prefiguring new ways of being (ontology) and doing (axiology). Henceforth in decolonizing the museum we must not content ourselves with just diversifying what is on display and/or take pride in increasing the "so-called" diversity programs. Instead, we call for a programs of absolute disorder that recognizes that a museum is not a neutral place but a site of constant ideological, political and economic battles (Verges, 2024).

We also discuss the developments at ZMHS through the lenses of critical museologies along with aspects of transformation, change and decolonization (Rassool, 2018). Critical museologies in Africa build upon challenging the continual entrenchment of classifications of objects in national museums with colonial foundations (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020; Rassool, 2018). ZMHS like many other African ethnographic museums have, variably, been adopting changes and new strategies in changing socio-economic environments, and the need for a critical museology is widely accepted in southern Africa. Critical museologies move beyond colonizing of knowledge (s) espoused in Vergo's (1989) now outmoded idea of new museology (Krstovic, 2020). Instead within formulations of critical museologies – museums are regarded as stewards of objects keeping them on behalf of local communities rather than being sole voices of authority in displaying and interpreting them (Peers & Brown, 2003). Through deploying critical museologies – the museum is now perceived as a vehicle for truth-telling, accountability and a meaningful propagation of cross-racial and cross-cultural identity.

The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in context

Currently, the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), established in 1972, is the institution responsible for the management and preservation of Zimbabwe's museums heritage. It was established under the Act of Parliament (National Museums and Monuments Act 25:11), whose legal mandate was designed to safeguard cultural heritage in the country, including management of monuments/cultural heritage sites, state museums and deposited collections. As per the NMMZ Act, there are 5 regions, each

with one national museum which is wholly a function of regional administrative governance. (see Figure 2 below).

The 5 national museums in each region are the Mutare Museum (eastern region) which is the national collection of transport objects and antiquities, the Great Zimbabwe Museum in Masvingo (southern region) which specializes in the conservation of dry-stone wall structures due to its geographical proximity to Great Zimbabwe World Heritage Site, the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo (western region) which looks after the country's natural history collections and the Military Museum in Gweru (central region) with a mandate of presenting the military history of Zimbabwe from anti-colonial and liberation wars perspectives. The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare, which we discuss in this study, is in the northern region with a specialization in archaeology and ethnographic collections. What is crucial to note is that the structural framework of all national museums in Zimbabwe was inherited from the colonial period, indicating that knowledge production, classification, and representation practices were influenced by Western epistemological ideas (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020). A particular focus on the classification and categorization of natural and cultural history collections of the colony was influenced by disciplinary specializations, embedded in each regional museum with clear-cut collecting priorities as we have outlined above.

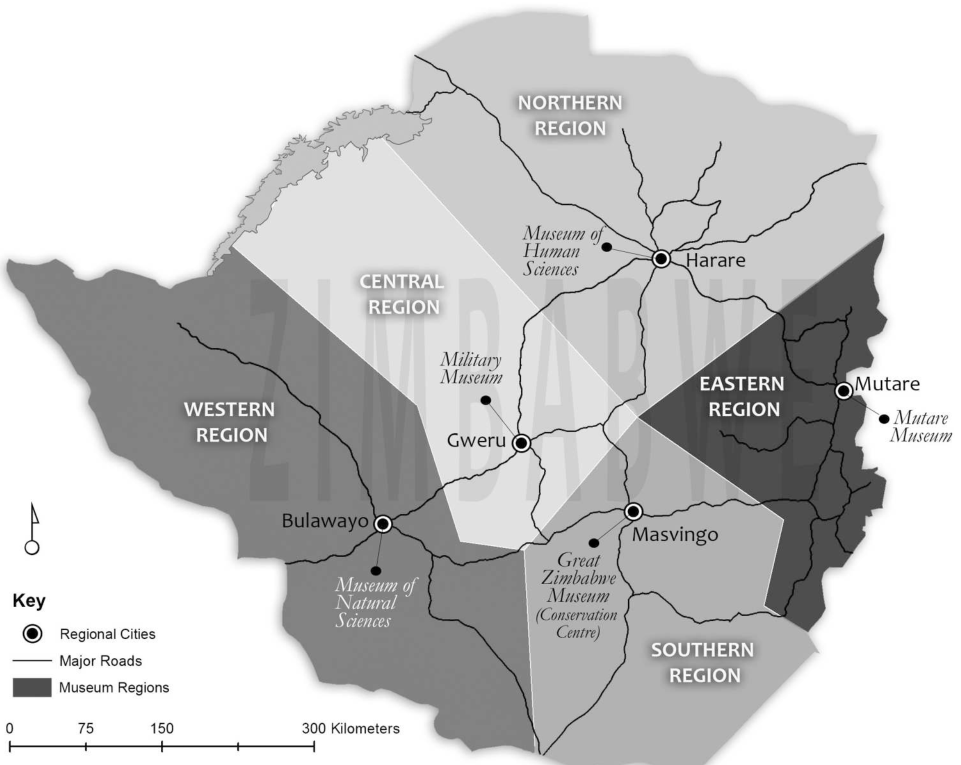

Figure 2. The map of the regional distribution of national museums in Zimbabwe. Map by Rusell Kapumha.

ZMHS, formerly Queen Victoria Museum (QVM), was started by a white minority in Rhodesia in 1901 after the death of Queen Victoria of Great Britain and the museum was built in her memory. The museum was an outcome of the desire by settlers to maintain their imperial heritage, and their need to imprint modernity in the new city of Salisbury. QVM was opened in 1903 in Salisbury (now Harare). It started as a combination of a museum and a public library. After shifting its locations several times around Salisbury city, the current museum building was opened in 1964 and is located in the civic center of Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe (See Figure 3). Over several decades during the colonial era up to now, ZMHS developed to be a general museum, mainly focusing on cultural histories as informed by its archaeological and ethnographic collections. The museum hosts the largest ethnographic collection in the country.

The ethnography collection is central to the museum. Most of these ethnographic objects were collected during the colonial period for scientific purposes, devoid of their meaning and presented as part of the ethnographic gaze (Chipangura, 2020; Mataga et al., 2022). Subsequently, spiritual values associated with their uses were ignored upon collection. In their original context, these objects were rich archives and reservoirs of knowledge beyond their aesthetic appeal (Mbembe, 2020). Furthermore, they were interwoven with cultural narratives; proverbs, songs and dances (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020). Since the colonial period, ZMHS and the other national museums in the country have been regarded as elitist places for a minority, those who usually visit the museum for leisure, whilst most communities still feel excluded (Mawere et al., 2015). Henceforth, for a long time, communities were disgruntled with how ethnographic objects appropriated from them during the colonial period were misrepresented and detached

Figure 3. The façade of Zimbabwe museum of human sciences. Photo by Patricia Chipangura.

from their social context as they lay imprisoned at ZMHS. For example, in the last couple of years – a few objects from this collection have grabbed public attention owing to their spiritual association. A good example is a walking stick associated with Mukwati, a famous nineteenth-century spirit medium, and the *Ngoma lungundu* – a mystical drum believed to belong to the vaRemba group (Parfitt, 2008). The Mukwati walking stick is believed to have belonged to Mukwati, a Shona spirit medium who was active in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and considered one of the most influential religious leaders in the earliest protests against British colonial rule. This sacred walking stick was collected and taken to Europe by Robert Baden-Powell, (founder of the Boys' Scouts Movement) and repatriated back to ZMHS in 2002 with strict conditions from the originating community and traditional leaders that it would be treated according to traditional protocols. On the other hand, the *Ngoma Lungundu,* a sacred Venda drum linked to the Judeo-Christian's Ark of the Covenant was brought to life through research that was conducted by British anthropologist Tudor Parfitt in 2008. Tudor Parfitt's claims through his book, though contested by many that the drum was not just a museum object but rather a sacred religious being connected to the VaRemba community of southwestern Zimbabwe (Mataga & Chabata, 2012). These two examples not only point to the symbolic and spiritual importance of objects but also highlight ways in which normative museum practices of classification and authoritative interpretations were challenged. Given the above, we examine other strategies that ZMHS is using in giving agency to communities towards reimagining meanings of their cultural heritage objects.

Just like many other museums in Africa that were formed during the colonial era – collecting practices at ZMHS were not premised on respect for originating communities and their cultures, but a monolithic desire to stereotype Africans. This was part of an agenda or adventure of exploring "pristine" Africa for the amusement of western and foreign tourists. Initially founded as the Queen Victoria Museum in 1901, only to be renamed ZMHS after the attainment of independence from Britain in 1980, ZMHS was no exception to such practices of colonial and epistemological violence. However, post-1980 and with the renaming of the museum, ZMHS was seized with reconfiguring the museum practices and programming through among other initiatives, community engagement through research or engaging some cultural practitioners such as pot makers and mbira makers or players to explain the art of making these objects as well as their utilitarian, aesthetic and symbolic values. Community collaboration, based on mutual respect has been a process, gathering great momentum in recent years in tandem with calls to decolonize museum practices.

Towards a decolonial care: biographical stories of the objects

In openly disclosing colonial practices which informed the collecting of clay pots from the Ndau community of Eastern Zimbabwe – we deployed truth-telling as a decolonial methodology of engaging with the originating community. In this regard, we empirically illustrate how deep-seated problems of "othering" in museums with ethnographic collections can be disrupted by conversations on what the ethic of care means from a truth-telling point of view (Kuper, 2023; Sleigh, 2024). Truth-telling is a decolonial method that critiques the pervasive presence of coloniality in museums by prefiguring new ways of being and doing (Barolsky et al., 2024). Truth-telling also contributes towards the construction of

pluriversality and challenges colonial habits of thought, action and hegemonic ideologies. Our truth-telling approach took us outside the four walls of ZMHS to the Ndau community of Jersey, Eastern Zimbabwe where the clay pots were collected by one Mr Gallagher in 1957 through purchases. The name Jezi is a direct Shona translation of Jersey and it is important to note that it is located in Eastern Zimbabwe and has no connection with the Channel Island of Jersey. We must be very careful in looking at donations which may well have been coerced and purchasers who might have bought these objects at prices they set themselves (Zimmerer et al., 2024). It is not clear what motivated Gallagher to collect or the circumstances around how he got pots from the Ndau people. There is no proper provenance or biographical information apart from labels recording his name and Jersey/Jezi as the place where the pots were collected from. In the case of Gallagher who allegedly purchased the clay pots from the Ndau people, it is not clear what would have motivated the locals to sell such objects of symbolic and cultural value – this remains open to speculation. Hence the suspicion that the acquisitions by Gallagher may also have been enabled by aided coercion masked in the implementation of such acts as the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899 (Mataga & Chabata, 2012). For most of the pre-1980 collecting of ethnographic objects, either the unlawful application of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899 was used, or some donor-collector or purchaser brought the collections to the museum with scanty biographical and provenance information. The collectors – missionaries, explorers, hunters, mercenaries or colonial officials – tended to reproduce this pattern. The glaring gaps in the provenance and biographical history of the objects made the actual circumstances under which the objects found "their way" into the museum opaque. What is certain, however, is that where the Witchcraft Suppression Act was applied, force was used.

Similarly, we also argue that the burden of proof for objects from colonial contexts must be overturned in favor of treating all of the colonial collecting practices of that time with suspicion and illegality until the opposite is proven (Zimmerer et al., 2024). Because of such problematic colonial collecting practices in 2021, we conducted collaborative object biographical research with the Ndau community where the clay pots were collected through purchases by Gallagher and later on donated to ZMHS. We were deeply conscious of the fact that since ZMHS has been exclusive and inaccessible to this community – the call for inclusivity should start by allowing those who suffered from colonialism to be at the forefront of the telling of their own story (Sleigh, 2024). Therefore, as we stepped outside the museum – we embarked on a trajectory that challenged our positionalities. Our experiences with collaborators from the community required us to have a certain level of vulnerability, humility and openness to the other ways of knowing embedded in community practices.

Methodologically, we selected and photographed clay pots that were collected from the Ndau people by Mr Gallagher in 1957 and took with us printed copies that we showed them during the collaborative biographical research At ZMHS, these clay pots (See Figure 4) were all along classified and categorized in accordance to disciplinary configurations of anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, thereby ignoring social biographies and ritual lives embedded in them. Consequently, they were ordered according to regimes of Western knowledge that erased Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

The selection of clay pots as a point of reference was part of our approach towards seeking to understand their absent social biographies by deploying truth-telling, multivocality and knowledge-sharing with the Ndau community. In view of this, we argue that

Figure 4. In the museum: Traditional clay pots in storage at ZMHS. Pictures by Farai Chabata.

truth-telling is a good strategy that can be actively embraced in decolonizing museum practices in Africa. We juxtaposed the "in the museum" life of objects against the "out of the museum" life of objects – as they are currently used by this local community. (see Figure 5). By engaging with the Ndau community rather than acting from our epistemic, authoritative curatorial voices – we stepped out of our professional comfort zones in adopting a disposition of observing, noting and listening. During the conversations – stories of how clay pots are still used in brewing traditional beer emerged from community members as soon as they saw pictures of their pots that are imprisoned in storage rooms at ZMHS. We spoke to three elderly women aged between 75 and 90 years. They were neighbors but were gathered at one of their compounds brewing what they identified as beer for a forthcoming full moon celebration. The three women refused to be photographed saying that they did not like foreign gadgets (phones and cameras) for the moral reason that they were made by the same white people who violently appropriated their pots during colonization. Back to the beer brewing clay pots, we gathered that the type of beer they were brewing was for socialization during the full moon celebration/gatherings (see Figure 4). A full moon is a night-time social gathering to mark the end of the harvesting season which was accompanied by the slaughtering of goats and chickens. People would sit around an open fire as they feast together and dance to *muchongoyo* cultural dances. However, they also hinted that the other clay pots we showed them were used for ceremonial functions such as rainmaking ceremonies, marriage functions, baby welcome celebrations and burial rites. We learnt that during burial ceremonies traditional sorghum beer was imbibed by grave diggers before they started digging. The beer was poured onto the ground as an offering to ancestors asking them for continuous protection and guidance. From the conversations that we had with the elderly women, they said that ancestors prefer beer that is served from clay pots.

The women also mentioned that full moon celebrations usually take place once a year, but if more than one family was willing to host this event, arrangements were made accordingly for the celebrations to last longer. Most importantly, traditional sorghum

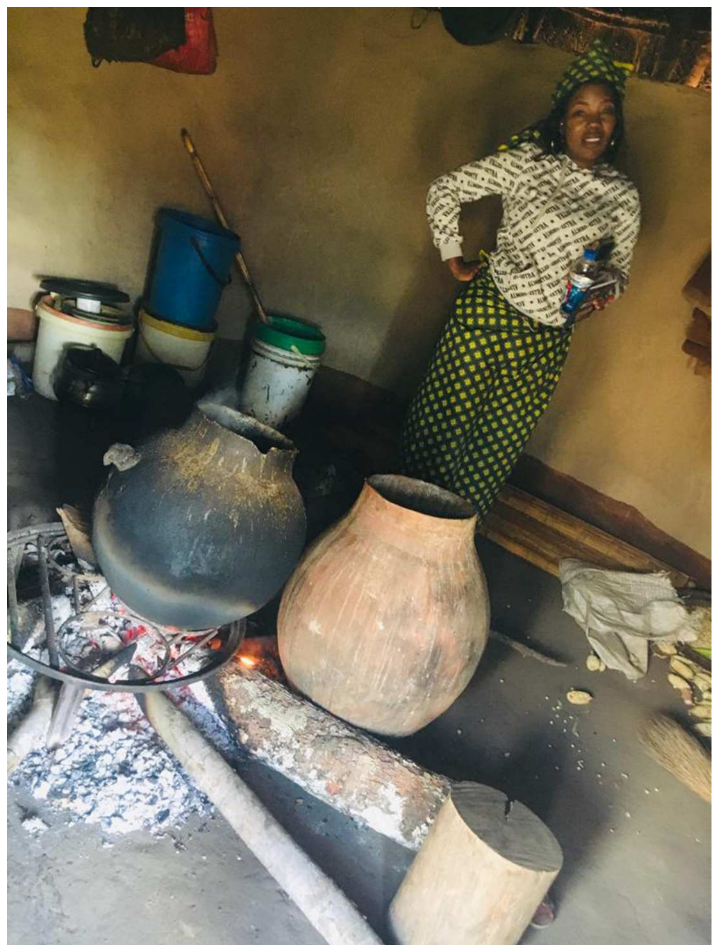

Figure 5. Outside the museum: contemporary use Ndau clay pots. Picture taken by a community member showing Patricia Chipangura standing in front of the pots.

beer was only brewed by women who would have reached menopause and women of child-bearing age were prohibited from touching beer brewing clay pots because this would make the beer go sour. Such kinds of taboos and restrictions were also meant to conserve the pots. During the full moon celebration, they also discussed their previous harvest and good yields which would determine the best type of crop to plant in the following farming season. Additionally, the gathering provided a peace and reconciliation platform to those who may have offended or wronged each other in any way. Thus, by undertaking this collaborative object biography research we unpacked the notion of "decolonial care" which we imagined as a conceptual approach that builds sustainable ongoing relationships between objects and people through challenging exclusions and othering of their cultures in museums. Under this empirical premise – we further posit that gone are the days when a curator was viewed as a towering figure of authority; today a curator is a facilitator of dialogue wherein originating communities are given agency to explore meanings of their objects that have been imprisoned in museum storage for a long time (Chipangura, 2020). Using this approach we illustrate how

sustainable relationships of care must extend to communities whose objects we contain in museums. Therefore, care is not just a function of conserving "objects" in a museum for presumed posterity.

It was also interesting to find connections between traditional beer brewing and the uses of beer during specific events accompanied by *muchongoyo* traditional dance. Traditional dance attires and shakers shown in Figure 6 below are used during *muchongoyo* and are part of the ZMHS collections from the Ndau community. Such kind of analogical reasoning underpins interpretations of the past developed within the context of personal knowledge of how individuals and communities interact with material culture. Moreover, contemporary communities generally exploit the same traditional objects just like their forebears with little changes (see Figure 7).

As presented at ZMHS, there seems to be not enough information, especially regarding the significance of these objects to originating communities. It was difficult to understand how they were acquired and one of the authors, who is a senior curator of ethnography at ZMHS, elaborated that these objects were collected without any information about their cultural significance and uses. Henceforth, the sacredness of these objects was stripped away. This led to misrepresentations and distortion of meanings of for example *muchongoyo* dance objects.

Meanwhile, traditional dance regalia, musical instruments like shakers and drums, and clay pots have always been a part of Ndau culture and there is a connection between how these objects are interpreted and used. Our findings brought an understanding that these objects have powerful stories about colonialism and its injustices linked to racist production of knowledge about non–European colonized societies (Zimmerer et al., 2024). Interrogating their biographies and documenting them properly was a rich way of going beyond the aesthetics as was in the case at ZMHS, and this helped in uncovering their histories. Through dialogical conversations, we gathered that *muchongoyo* dance was performed during different types of cultural celebrations. There is a belief today that the dance, especially during rain-making ceremonies, is meant to appease and

Figure 6. In the museum: cultural dance attires (skirts – made from animal skins worn during the muchongoyo cultural dance). Picture by Patricia Chipangura.

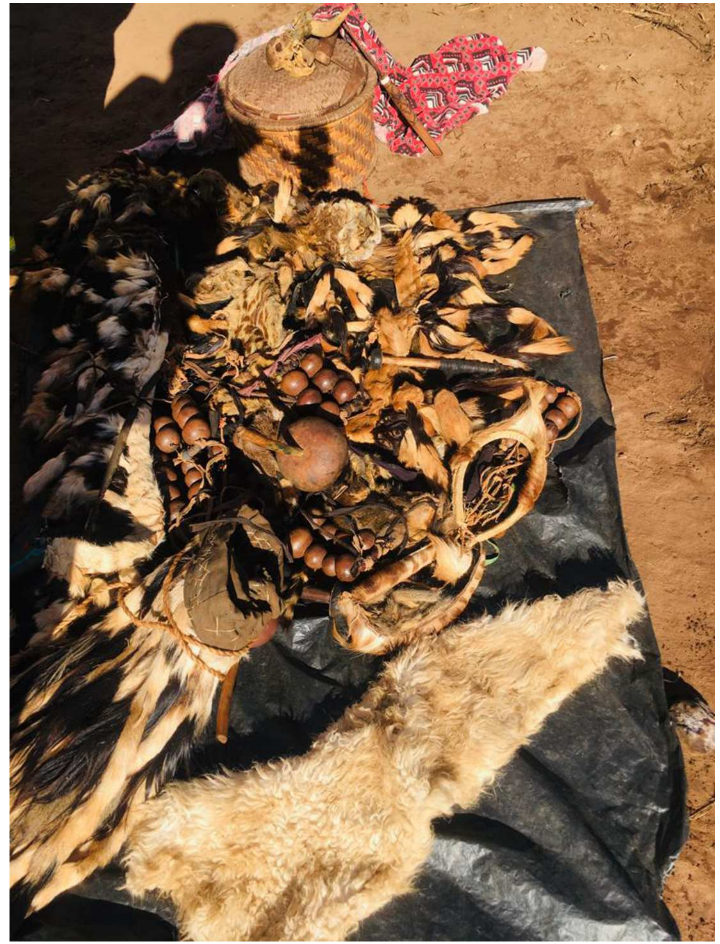

Figure 7. Outside the museum: traditional dance attires used during *muchongoyo* performances by the Ndau community. Picture by Patricia Chipangura.

amuse the ancestors, hence in some cases the attires are regarded as spiritual. Specific animal skins could be very special and only meant to be worn by spirit mediums or by virgins and unmarried women depending on the occasion. Most of the attires looked exactly similar to the ones at ZMHS.

As far as the contemporary Ndau community is concerned, the ritual idea behind the making of the clay pots, traditional regalia and musical instruments is more important than their placement and misrepresentation in museum dioramas. Thus, we posit that decolonial care must be adopted by museums with collections from colonial contexts as a way of extending what care means beyond the material presentation of things to look at how sustainable relationships can be enacted with originating communities. At the same time, one cannot deny that these "objects" possessed their agency which cannot be separated from the social and mental framework of its creators. This is because objects can make an effect and cannot be reduced to their intrinsic qualities only. Thus, properties of the objects emerge because of being embedded in a network of human and nonhuman entities through which they also gain an identity (Brey, 2005).

Discussion: resilient legacies, decolonial change and reinvention

Drawing from the above experiences this article challenges the processes through which African cultural heritage has been objectified. What we take from the ZMHS case is on the one hand, that there are lingering colonial legacies embedded within normative museum curatorial practices in Africa, and on the other hand that these legacies offer us space for the possibility of change/transformation. This idea is reflected within contemporary calls for decolonization of the museum space and the redefinition of the very idea of the museum (Mignolo, 2011, 2009; Vawda, 2019). Current global debates on the future of museums continue to emphasize the inclusive role of museums in society and the central role that the institution plays in the well-being and aspirations of communities. Therefore, we concur with Sleigh (2024) who posits that museums must be for all people and inclusion must be at the heart of everything they do. All this points to the need for future museum practices that embrace inclusive museum models. In this global conversation, the question is where does Africa's voice stand? It is in these emerging frameworks that empirical studies of objects in African museums can play a central role in refiguring the narratives related to the objects and the museums.

In 1992 when Eilean Hooper-Greenhill wrote the compelling opening chapter to *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, she testified to the rapid and unprecedented changes that were happening in the museum sector. Museums were not only mushrooming, but they varied in size and subject matter, challenging both the concept of a museum and what a museum was for (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Despite the negative impact of their colonial legacy, cultural institutions in Africa have woken up to a new era in the period after political independence. New and innovative approaches and reinterpretation of cultural heritage policies and practices have contributed to peace, reconciliation, increased participation, recognition, and promotion of cultural diversity in previously volatile political environments. Thus, the museum that historically originated as a site of encyclopedic learning and scholarship, dominated by the powerful and the rich and scholarly, must chart new frontiers to remain relevant. They are a source of healing of past misdeeds and the ever-present colonial wound. In this regard, the decolonization of museum practices must be read as ongoing work towards the partial dressing and repairing of this wound (Soares, 2023).

However, the decolonial question in museums must not be premised on its instrumental and pacifying common metaphoric usage as has been popularized in almost every academic discourse (Verges, 2024). We argue that decolonizing is a function of truth-telling and bottom-up approaches that allow community members to change museums' authorized narratives. Therefore to decolonize as a museum action requires acknowledging the multiple ways museums can be driven by communities and shaped together with their various audiences to achieve the contestation of history and their unrestrained transformation in the process (Soares & Witcomb, 2023). Decolonization of museums entails deconstructing, reconstructing and redistributing power through enacting collaborative programmes that bring epistemological and ontological perspectives from previously marginalized communities as we have shown from the example of the Ndau community in Jezi, Eastern Zimbabwe. We also highlighted using the example from our collaborative pot biographical research that decolonization is not just about or giving back cultural heritage objects to communities – rather it is about inviting these communities to change our

ways of thinking to rethink our understanding of cultural heritage and to denounce the violence produced by museums.

At the same time, the process of rehumanization is very important for African museums in view of turning cultural objects and ancestors that were dehumanized into humans once again (Mbembe, 2019). Rehumanization as a function of truth-telling "is constituted as an ongoing and relational process of becoming that includes the human and more than human, the living and the ancestral deeply connected to communities of origin" (Barolsky et al., 2024, p. 10). This is because the process of dehumanization in African museums started by rendering ancestors as objects of race that were collected, de fleshed, classified, studied and exhibited (Rousseau et al., 2018). However, one cannot rehumanize without understanding practices and processes that seek to erase the human in a museum. The ethnographic museum stripped all human dignity even in death by subjecting the ancestors to different kinds of measuring, othering and racial profiling as part of the dehumanization project. A central part of this is reflected in the current calls for museums to play a key role in reintegrating cultural, social and ancestral connections with the communities from which they were taken.

In light of this, the strategy to decolonize the museum simply means a proper representation of people spoken about rather than listened to. Elsewhere, Message (2018) proposes a "disobedient museum," which prioritizes engagement through community participation outside the instrumentalized forms of knowledge production within archaeology, anthropology and ethnography. The disobedient museum embraces truth-telling as a strategy to engage with the community in a non-disciplinary or undisciplined way (Message, 2018). Sandell also (2002, p. 96) argues, "museums can impact positively on the lives of disadvantaged or marginalized individuals, act as a catalyst for social regeneration and as a vehicle for empowerment with specific communities and also contribute towards the creation of more equitable societies." Henceforth, collaborations can potentially transform museums from being places that were once regarded as displaying "others" to locations of cultural revitalization, community voice and empowerment (Chipangura et al., 2019; Onciul, 2019). Accepting originating communities as experts and research partners can change museum practice by opening up different ways of knowing and caring for the past as we have illustrated using examples of the collaborative object biography research with the Ndau people (Onciul, 2019). A collaborative methodology in a museum has been described by Shelton (2018) as encompassing three elements:

> transforming the role of a curator into a facilitator in which the community independently takes charge and determines the subject of an exhibition; collaboration in periodic dialogues with the community to ensure the fidelity of the exhibition with their expectations; and collaboration as a dialogic process through which culture is generated in conversations between curators and the community representatives (Shelton, 2018, xviii).

Living cultures and reinventing ethnographic museums in Africa

In this last section, we advocate for the use of the term "living cultures" in African museums with ethnographic collections from colonial contexts as an important redefinition of "objects" which are not mundane, lifeless and static but rather are representations of cultural practices of everyday people. The concept of living cultures underscores that in an African context, objects have potency and are treated by communities as living beings which they can use, touch, smell, and taste. Although these "objects" may appear stagnant

within ethnographic classifications in museums – they have individual biographies and carry with them important meanings connected to their ritual and cultural functions located in societies of origin (Chipangura, 2020, 2023) and may also assume new meanings, thereby creating a patina of values (Mataga & Chabata, 2012). Thus, for a long time, ethnographic objects were exhibited in a manner that conformed to the traditional practice of presenting objects exclusively for visual observation (Chipangura & Mandizvo, 2015). This practice dehumanized and took away the human agency in the story which was part of the colonial aim to portray culture as coincidental and not a result of rational, thoughtful and strategic human action. In Zimbabwe, just like in many other African countries, objects in national museums were removed from their original context, robbed of their function and taken out of time and place to be incorporated into new frameworks of meaning and significance.

However, the concept of living cultures aligns well with notions of un-disciplining the museum through a recognition that "objects" are not just static things but rather represent living people and their cultural practices. By way of reinventing the ethnographic museum in Africa, we have shown that we must transcend beyond a predication with disciplinary thinking that categorizes and classifies living cultures as anthropological objects. We have criticized the anthropological category of "objects" that projected the makers, users, and owners as anonymous as well as silencing and obscuring the biographies and meanings embedded in these "objects" (Minott, 2019). We propose that the reinvented ethnographic museum must be collaborative in the production of knowledge with a focus on the application of the practice of "waking up objects" through touching, looking, smelling and listening which is what makes them living cultures (Chipangura, 2023; Muller & Langhill, 2022). This approach emphasizes liveliness and counters the colonial emphasis on disciplinarity, ordering and containment (Muller & Langhill, 2022).

Therefore, ethnographic museums with colonial collections can be reinvented into becoming active spaces for multiple enunciations that question the binary division between the other "subjects," other forms of knowledge and other imaginaries and this otherness is differentiated from European subjects of reason (Soares, 2023). This, it can be argued, is part of the ontological turn which seeks to dismantle binary divisions between human/non-human, nature/culture, object/subject and importantly respect the epistemological worlds of indigenous people (Bormpoudakis, 2019, p. 546). While ethnographic museums historically have constructed narratives that legitimized and normalized knowledge of (Western) self and (non-Western) other, the future of the ethnographic museum is undergirded by the act of curation as a radical undertaking, a "transgression" or act of "deviance" (Esche et al., 2011). In so many ways, reinvented ethnographic museums in Africa must give up on their authoritarian voice of control and allow the public or communities to speak for themselves henceforth making them less of temples and more of forums of interactions (Chipangura, 2023)

How then do we confront these deeply engrained but skewed museum practices in Africa to engender a locally relevant practice that contributes to the society in which the museums are located? Our case study, in particular the collaborative biographical research with the Ndau people on the meanings of their objects has considered what can be practically done in trying to write back the social-cultural, political, cultural and symbolic patinas related to the so-called ethnographic objects now stuffed in museum

storerooms – away from their context of origin. We draw on the anthropological notion of object biography, as a central strategy for the "positive, incremental model of recontextualization, where each new setting is a new accumulated layer of life for an itinerant object, a creative phase full of new meaning, some kind of semiotic patina" (Hicks, 2021, p. 12). This approach excavates a discussion of enduring colonial violence and dispossession over time.

Conclusion

Contemporary global museological conversations on decolonization and truth-telling bring collections into analytical focus. Collections are the lens through which we see museums and cultures. The history of collecting "objects" in African museums that were formed during colonization is closely associated with the violent practices by which local communities lost their heritage unwillingly. In this paper, we argued that the only way African museums can be rid of colonial legacies is by starting from truthfully and openly sharing the problematic nature of ethnographic objects that are contained in these institutions. Drawing from the example of ZMHS – we demonstrated how postcolonial museums in Africa can embrace decolonial care as a strategy for connecting cultural heritage objects dislocated during colonization with communities of origins. Our experience with the Ndau people of Eastern Zimbabwe challenged the ethnographic museum and its hegemonic standard curatorial practices towards collaborations which are embedded in anthropologies of listening and care. Ultimately our experiences, as should be those of many other museums in Africa with ethnographic objects in their storerooms are that it is no longer adequate, to view museums as neutral bastions that stand for the conservation and representation of cultures. Rather, museums should, in collaboration with local communities, carry out practices that confound objects as part of living cultures, connected to living people and their practises.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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