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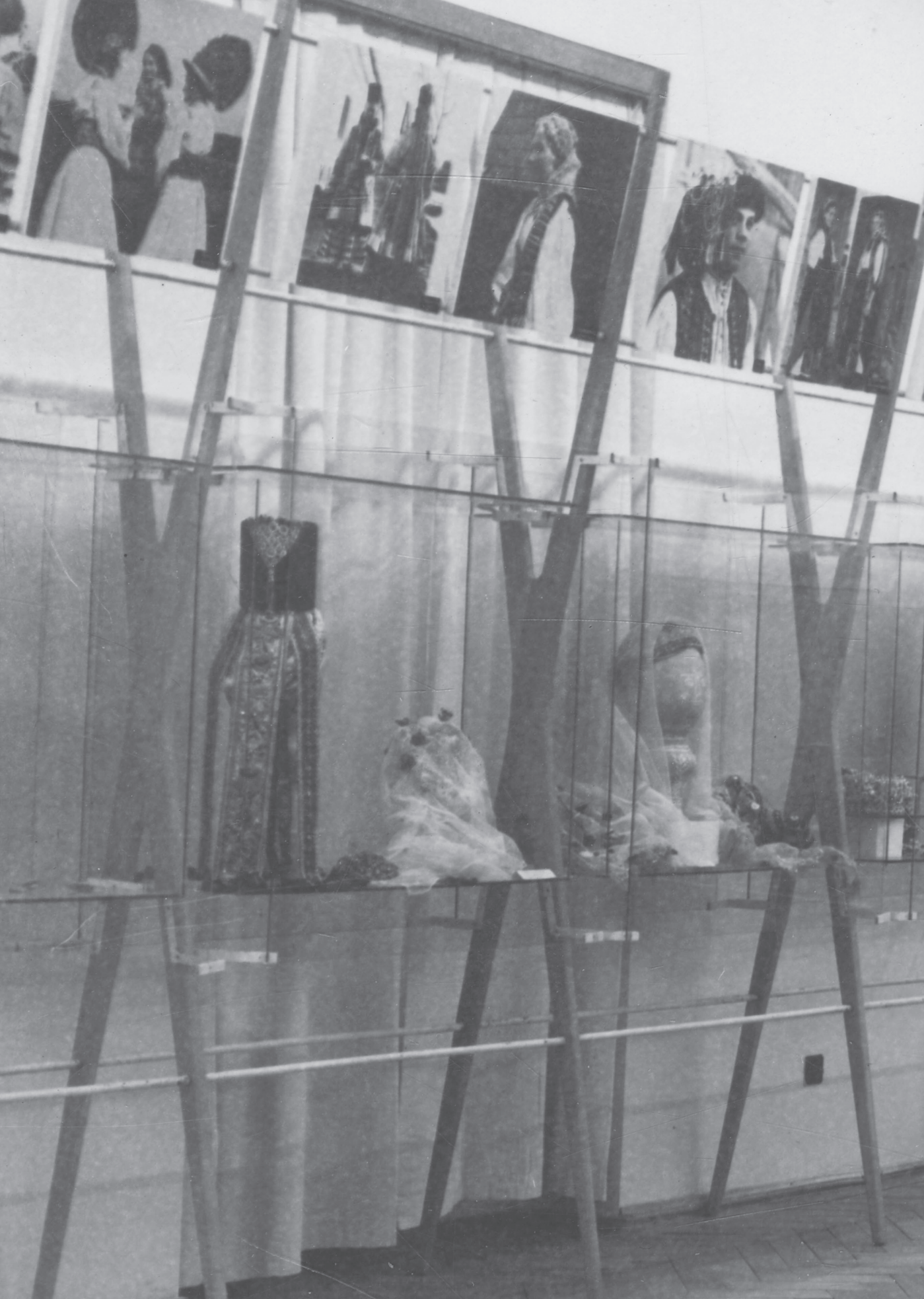

Working with Contested Ethnographic Collections to Change "Old Museum" Perspectives: Mutare Museum, Eastern Zimbabwe, 2015-2017

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will examine the history of collecting ethnographic objects at Mutare Museum, moving between the colonial and postcolonial periods in order to show how these time scales structured the ways in which exhibitions are presented. I argue that by removing ethnographic objects from their cultural setting and inserting them into the visual system of the museum, their dynamic web of physical and social meanings was broken. Whilst I acknowledge that Mutare Museum's system of displaying its ethnographic collection was shaped by colonialism in a way that resulted in the marginalisation of certain communities, I will show how collections in one of the galleries—the Beit Gallery—were transformed to convey new postcolonial meanings. In part, the article also looks at how the concept of object biography and ethnomuseology assisted in redesigning and changing old exhibitions in the Beit Gallery. This case in point will be illustrated by gleaning through the multi-layered histories of collecting at this museum. Next, I will argue that the particular, 'old' manner in which ethnographic objects were displayed conforms to the traditional practice of presenting exclusively for visual observation. Objects would be displayed on the floor in an almost derogatory way—presented as if they were strange and exotic and devoid of any social and historical significance. Yet, this type of scenography did not do justice to the social biography of the collection, which could not be understood in terms of a single unchanging identity, but rather by tracing the succession of meanings attached to the objects as they move through space and time. As a result, communities living around this museum used to periodically contest narratives that were appended on ethnographic collections on display in the Beit Gallery. Therefore, in this article, I will show how we reorganised this exhibition through a collaborative partnership with the source communities where the objects had originated from. The discussion in this article is premised on the data derived from my involvement in redesigning displays in the Beit Gallery as a curator at Mutare Museum. Later on, I will also address public perceptions of the new installations and gauge whether the exhibition attained the desired effects.

KEYWORDS

Ethnography, contested, collections, Mutare Museum, Beit Gallery.

Introduction and historical background of Mutare Museum

The Mutare Museum is one of the five regional museums under the administration of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) organisation. All five museums were established as result of colonial encounters; Zimbabwe was colonized by Britain in 1890 and gained its independence in 1980. Mutare Museum, situated in Eastern Zimbabwe, is the national collector of transport objects and antiquities. The Mutare Museum (formerly Umtali Museum) opened its doors to the public in 1964 with displays of antiquities, transportation, botany, and geology. Later, additional displays of ethnographic and archaeological objects were added. Up to the present day, these permanent exhibitions have remained essentially unchanged. The Mutare Museum has been frozen in time

and biased towards colonialism as many aspects of an independent Zimbabwe have been ignored, hence the growing need to change the displays or even revamp some of the outdated exhibitions (Chipangura 2014). The locals have often criticised this museum for being alien, imported, elitist, urban-based and still serving colonial interests almost four decades after independence.

Looking back, the history of Mutare Museum is inextricably interwoven with that of the Umtali Society (Broadley 1966). The Umtali Society came into being as a committee of the Southern Rhodesia Hunters and Game Preservation Association in October 1953. This society was established for the purpose of inaugurating and fostering interest in the establishment of a museum in Umtali. The society gathered and displayed the first collections of historical and natural objects in January 1956, which persuaded the Municipality to provide a temporary home for the museum (Broadley 1966). It was only in November 1957 that the Umtali Municipality granted the association some space in an old hostel, allowing them to exhibit on a semi-permanent basis (Broadley 1966). By mid-1958 the museum had about five hundred visitors each month, but it had no funds for further development, which lead them to approach the trustees of National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia to takeover. Having secured grants from the Government and the Umtali Municipality, Sir Edgar Whitehead officially opened the museum in November 1958. Captain E.F Boultbee was then appointed Honorary Curator of the Umtali Museum on 1 September 1959 (Broadley 1966).

The trustees realized that the existing building was unsuitable and, with the help of the Umtali Museum Society, raised funds for a new building for the museum. The new building was officially inaugurated by Sir Alfred Beit on 13 September 1964 (Broadley 1966). When it opened its doors to the public, the museum had displays focusing on antiquities, transport, botany, and geology. Later on, additional displays of ethnographic and archaeological objects were installed in the Beit Gallery. Therefore, the creation of Mutare Museum, and many other museums throughout Africa, is closely linked to colonialism (Arinze 1988). These museums were created as a result of colonial encounters. They share a common history in terms of their development in that they tend to be the by-products of colonialism and they are twentieth-century creations—a period marked by European imperialism. In most cases they were created in specific socio-political contexts that sought to denigrate the local population, diminish self-confidence, and reduce pride in past achievements (Bvocho 2013). Similarly, I argue that exhibitions at Mutare Museum have been frozen in time as many aspects of an independent Zimbabwe have been ignored, hence the growing need to change the displays or even revamp some of the outdated exhibitions. Murambiwa (1999) also argues that between 1965 and 1979 there were deliberate attempts to use museums to undermine African culture while at the same time highlighting the positive impact of colonisation.

Old ethnographic displays in the Beit Gallery

Before reorganization, the Beit Gallery measured approximately 224 square metres and included a wide range of exhibitions that covered themes related to traditional aspects of the Shona culture in Zimbabwe. Shona is the name widely given to the indigenous population in Zimbabwe, consisting of people who speak a similar language also called Shona. However, the Shona language itself is not homogenous because within it are different dialects that vary from region to region—Eastern Zimbabwe is inhabited by the Manyika, Ndau, Jindwi, Hwesa and Karanga speaking people.

The old Beit Gallery had two entrances. The first entrance was located in the front, close to the main museum entrance, and the other one was situated just adjacent to the Boultbee Gallery. Right by the first entrance to the gallery, a case containing transport accessories was displayed. Objects in this display were placed more or less as if in a storeroom. Opposite this display, there were zoological displays comprising an animal tree and two cases with different kinds of insects. Running the length of the gallery, there were a variety of mixed objects including geological displays and different types of traditional artefacts. There was also a display case with beads, head rests, snuff boxes and a portrait of a traditional chief adorned with symbols of chieftainship such as badges and ceremonial artefacts (Mareya 1999). Next to this was a section showcasing traditional modes of transportation that included bark boats and different types of sledges, all of them displayed on the floor. As depicted above, the old exhibitions in the Beit Gallery did not tell a meaningful story, and visitors could easily mistake it for a storeroom. This is because it was a hodgepodge of exhibits with no clear-cut objectives, nor any specific themes addressing the visitor.

The old ethnographic displays in the Beit Gallery fit within the premise of exhibiting exotic cultures by the colonial authority when the museum was opened to the public in 1964. Karp and Kratz (2000) employed an analytical approach in examining the politics of ethnographic representations in museums. Of fundamental importance to their approach was the careful consideration and examination of the word "ethnography" as central to exhibitions of people's cultures. In analysing this term, they concluded that "ethnographic displays are not only confined to natural history museums, ethnographic museums or culture history museums" as "they are part of almost all cultural displays, including displays of the ethnographic, and other displays in art museums and outside museum contexts altogether" (Karp and Kratz 2000: 19). Furthermore, they also classified ethnographic displays as emerging out of complex histories and ideological contexts that include at least four elements. These four elements cover aspects of Enlightenment, imperial and colonial expansion history, the actual history of representation, and the history of exhibiting exotic cultures (Karp and Kratz 2000).

Fig. 1: Ethnographic objects displayed on the floor in the Beit Gallery, Feb. 2018. Photo credit: Njabulo Chipangura.

In examining ethnography, Karp and Kratz (2000) distinguished between two forms of authority: the ethnographic authority and the cultural authority. They explained cultural authority as a fundamental resource that museums use to produce and reproduce themselves. The exhibitions in a museum, its documentation and research functions give the museum its cultural authority. However, according to Smith (2006), getting to know people's experiences about the past is more important than ascribing their heritage to authorised national and international frameworks where expert knowledge has complete hegemony. Instead, she argues that this authorised structure of knowledge in a museum context can be diffused by analysing its production using histories from below—that is to say by focusing on the various socio-cultural processes that resulted in the making of the objects themselves (Smith 2006). Upon the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe, the indigenous population expected an about-turn in the

ways in which their collections were being presented in museums. Debates focused on when they would be granted respect, the right to consultation, involvement and engagement in setting up museum displays (Ucko 1994). However, for decades after the end of colonialism, Mutare Museum was continuously haunted by stereotypical presentations housed as ethnographic displays in the Beit Gallery.

Museums and object agency

In broader and more empirical terms, museums in postcolonial countries have to transcend the empirical practices in which they operate as object archives or repositories of dead collections. This is because objects and their distribution are no longer seen to reflexively mirror human behaviour, instead material culture plays an important role in the construction of social relations that maintain or transform relations of power and inequality (Latour 2005; Hodder 2012). Museum objects used to be regarded as passive and inert materials to which things happened and things were done. However, objects do not merely carry meanings, they make meanings, because they also possess social agency much like the people who made them (Hoskins 1998). Objects may acquire a wide range of meanings during their manufacture and use as they changed hands, embedded in different social strategies and networks (Gosselain 2000; Appadurai 1986; Hoskins; 1998; Lucas 2012).

There is a dialectical relationship between people's behaviour and objects generally referred to as the Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005; Hodder 2012; Faulkner et al 2010; Harbers 2005; Alberti 2016; Brysbaert 2017). In short, ANT accounts for the ways in which non-humans (objects) guide or steer humans (subjects) to do something even when the latter are not aware of that. It centres on the ontological relationality of entities against the background that they are produced in networks (Olsen 2012; Hanare *et al.* 2007; Alberti 2016; Preucel and Meskell 2007). People and materials are interwoven in extensive networks of activities, social relationships and practices. Within these relational ontologies, agency is de-centered from the human subject and distributed among a network of people and things (Lucas 2012; Preucel and Meskell 2007). Thus, there is a radial symmetry of interactions between humans and non-humans which breaks the divide between the object and the subject (Faulkner et al 2010; Harbers 2005; LaMotta 2012; Olsen 2012; Alberti 2016).

Therefore, in planning changes to the ways in which ethnographic objects were displayed in the Beit Gallery, the museum was cognizant of the fact that those were not just mute objects, deprived of agency. They have biographies derived from their socio-cultural uses before they were museumised. Examining object biographies from the perspective of birth, life and death provides a convenient narrative structure which is integral to the analogy of life histories (Hoskins 1998). The biography of an object can be divided into eight processes: procurement, manufacture, use, maintenance, reuse, cultural deposition, reclamation, and recycling (LaMotta 2012; Walker and Lucero 2000). Moreover, objects possess a dual nature which entails that they simultaneously belong both to the physical and the mental realms (Faulkner et al. 2010). The dual nature concept underscores the idea that an object is constituted by both its physical properties and the functions associated with it. Looking at the biography and agency of ethnographic displays in the Beit Gallery also entailed putting in place a well-defined collections policy that put an end to the haphazard and random collections of artefacts. The chosen themes in this new exhibition were aligned to illustrate the main areas of concentration in the Eastern Shona societies. The subthemes

in the new exhibition now include a short prehistory of Eastern Zimbabwean agriculture; traditional healing; music; religious practices; and the community's relationship with the natural environment.

Curating experiential change in the Beit Gallery

The Eastern Shona comprises several chieftainships and covers seven major districts—Buhera, Mutasa, Makoni, Chipinge, Chimanimani, Mutare, and Nyanga. During the colonial period, the collecting of ethnographic objects from these areas for scientific study was stimulated by colonial desires to understand the cultural diversity of the natives. In designing the new experiential exhibition, the museum employed ethnomusicological approaches to rethink the placement of traditional drums in one of the ethnographic sections of the Beit Gallery. The use of this approach was premised on the understanding that the drums might have acquired a wide range of meanings during their use, passing from one individual to the other, embedded in different social strategies and networks, before being dislocated from their original context to be included in a museum collection (Gosselain, 1999; Appadurai, 1986; Hoskins, 1998). Within their places of origins, the Eastern Shona people used the drums to give rhythm to songs during their ritual ceremonies. There were different types of music and dances for each occasion. *Chimaisiri* is a good example of a dance performed by the Eastern Shona, punctuated by loud drum beating during the ceremonies. This dance was originally associated strictly with hunting ritual ceremonies but has now become a social dance for beer parties, other joyful occasions, and also funerals. *Chimaisiri* was also performed before a hunting session as a way of asking for guidance and protection from various wild animals that the hunters might encounter in the forest.

Mhande is another indigenous song performed by the Eastern Shona during annual rain petitioning rituals. The *mhande* repertoire consists of distinctive songs and rhythms used for communicating with the *majukwa* (rain spirits). The rain spirits in turn communicate with God *(Mwari)*, the provider of rain on behalf of the people. *Mhande* performances involve singing, drum playing, hand clapping, dancing, and ululation. It is generally believed and accepted by the Eastern Shona that religion is a medium through which complex human problems, especially comprehension of life after death or life beyond the grave, can be addressed. Their social structure rests on religious beliefs and that *Nyadenga* (God), the spiritual being, is responsible for everyone's destiny. Since God was said to be busy in the spiritual world, he could not be accessed by an ordinary man but through spirit mediums—*midzimu,* which correspond to family, clan or *mhondoro* levels. Thus, the Eastern Shona believe that when a person dies the spirit wanders about until it is given permission by the ancestors from the spiritual world to come back and protect its children. Ceremonies were held to give these wandering spirits permission to come back, and the drum was one of the main objects used during the ceremonies. Only fully-grown persons who had children could become effective spirit mediums once they died. The spirits of the dead are believed to convey any message from the living to God and as such are central to religious beliefs of the Eastern Shona (Mupira 2013). Such a well-structured system of beliefs by the Shona strongly refutes old colonial misconceptions about the animistic nature of the same drums displayed as a function of the ethnographic gaze in the museum.

Against this background, experiential ethnomuseology methodology was able to shed light on questions concerning material and ritual technologies used by the Eastern Shona relative to similar objects

that were collected and placed in the Beit Gallery during the colonial period. Thus, it was observed that the Eastern Shona still use the type of traditional drums that are found in museum exhibitions during their ritual ceremonies. Such analogical reasoning underpins interpretations of the past developed within the context of personal knowledge of how individuals and communities interact with material culture (Iles and Childs 2002: 193). The traditional drum *(ngoma)* is cylindrical in shape, open and narrower at the bottom than the top. The drum is made from hardwood and has its top covered by animal skin secured on both sides with wooden pegs (Ellert 1984).

Ethnographic methods were used together with museological approaches to explore the contemporary relevance and meaning of the material past. Using ethnomuseology, this study managed to observe the ritual practices associated with the use of the traditional drums. This method also enabled the museum to clarify issues of theory and epistemology by directly observing the social dynamics associated with the use of the drums. In this sense, it was more akin to participant observation as it aimed to produce a comprehensive and empirically based reconstruction of past behaviours that could inform us on the real uses of the drums previously displayed out of context at Mutare Museum.

Fig. 2. Entrance into the reorganised Gallery, Feb. 2018. Photo credits: Njabulo Chipangura.

The reorganization of the Beit Gallery

A new exhibition emerged from the experiential ethnomuseology study. In turn, the exhibition was the starting point for the reorganisation of the Beit Gallery, which reopened in June 2016. A proper representation of the Shona ways of life in the re-organised Beit Gallery solved the problem of artefacts meaninglessly lying all over the gallery floor. Interactivity in the Beit Gallery was also imagined by designing a traditional Shona kitchen hut where visitors were allowed to enter and experience it. In this set-up, the hut retained all the cultural attributes of a model Shona kitchen which has survived unchanged for many centuries. This is quite appealing to visitors especially to young stars and urbanites that never experienced the traditional set-up of the homestead in the rural areas as they can rest and recreate in the hut in a traditional way. One visitor commenting on the kitchen display in the guestbook said: "I was quite impressed by the cultural hut section. It is showing the real African culture of many Zimbabweans. The recreated kitchen is exceptional; a lot of creativity has been shown. Keep up the good work you are doing for our children especially those who have never been to rural areas." Looking at the visitors' comments in the guestbook and the positive responses that the new displays got, one can argue that digital technology changed the face of Mutare Museum and consequently led to an initial increase in the number of visitors. Also included in the new gallery is an interactive interface showing how hunting and gathering was undertaken in the past by the Eastern Shona people. Thus, a reproduction of the hunting forest was created where visitors make their way through the immersive set of environments as they journey back in time to the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest. Using an

Fig. 3: The kitchen hut reconstructed inside the Gallery, Feb.2018. Photo credits: Njabulo Chipangura.

interactive computer, visitors are exposed to various traditional hunting methods that include the falling log trap and hunting nets.

This interactive element therefore implied that the local people are consistently active participants, as opposed to being passive receivers of information as it was the case in the traditional museum set-up. Given the importance of emotions and societal attachments to cultural objects, the exhibition strived to design ways that maximised visitor experiences of awe and reverence. Such a transformation thus entailed looking at indigenous societies as dynamic entities as well as having a museum that focused more on contemporary issues in their exhibitions. In addition, dialogue between the objects exhibited and the surrounding communities was generated to embody a shared authority in museum knowledge production.

The very nature of this exhibition made it a postcolonial display designed with the full participation of the once marginalised communities. Music and dance are one of the subthemes showcased in this new exhibition which chronicles the traditional aspects of the Eastern Shona people in Zimbabwe. Our experiential ethnomuseological research revealed that the Eastern Shona people were and still are music lovers. They entertained themselves through music and dance, hence music was integral to their day to day activities, such as cultivating, harvesting, and also to their funerals. Although the coming of Western culture had an impact on the musical activity of the Eastern Shona, these forms of entertainment still exist especially in the rural areas. In the new exhibition, events and their specific songs and dances are explained with the aid of short video images of the performances on display.

Fig. 4: Video recordings of traditional dances on display in the Gallery, Feb.2018. Photo credits: Njabulo Chipangura.

Therefore, the new exhibition uses both audio and video recordings to illustrate the socio-cultural uses of the drums that were randomly collected when this museum opened in 1964. In this exhibition, it also emerged that apart from helping to fulfil the basic museum functions of documenting, conserving and exhibiting, objects had accumulated individual biographies as they were used in ritual activities.

The changed museum and postcolonial aspirations

As the precursor to the imposition of the Western model of the museum in the early twentieth century, colonialism was responsible for the loss of cultural objects belonging to indigenous people. Ethnographic objects were simply collected from local communities without a proper understanding of their socio-cultural uses and the various relations established with their makers. Writing about the role of museums in postcolonial societies, Harrison and Hughes argue that "post-colonies are connected in terms of their heritage by the need to forge new national identities in the wake of decolonisation" (2010: 238). Identity has emerged as one of the most important issues for postcolonial nations, and as such museums play an important role in helping people to identify both who they are as individuals and the communities to which they belong (Harrison and Hughes 2010). Therefore, the new Shona cultural displays in the Beit Gallery reflect on how societies deal with the aftermath of colonial rule in the search of identity lost in museums because of flawed ethnographic representation. Postcolonial theory is concerned primarily with unveiling, contesting and changing the way that colonialism structured societies and the ideologies associated with colonialism. In rethinking the old collection and exhibiting practices in the Beit Gallery, we considered the genealogy of colonisation and its impact on indigenous communities in terms of how cultural objects were appropriated under the guise of ethnographic research.

Dis-placed from their original context and re-placed in museums, they became objects of ethnography and were assigned with new meanings derived from scientific, historical and aesthetic paradigms of Western knowledge (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). In thinking about how museums stand at the intersection of scientific work and public display, the "exhibitionary complex," expounded and elaborated by Bennett (1995: 12), is a useful conceptual tool with regards to how idealized museum 'publics' were produced and placed as both the object and subject of the power and knowledge ensuing from their conceived citizenship. In this manner, as Bennett explains with regards to Britain, "the exhibitionary complex (…) perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged, in which the crowd comes to commune with and voluntarily regulate itself through interiorizing the ideal and

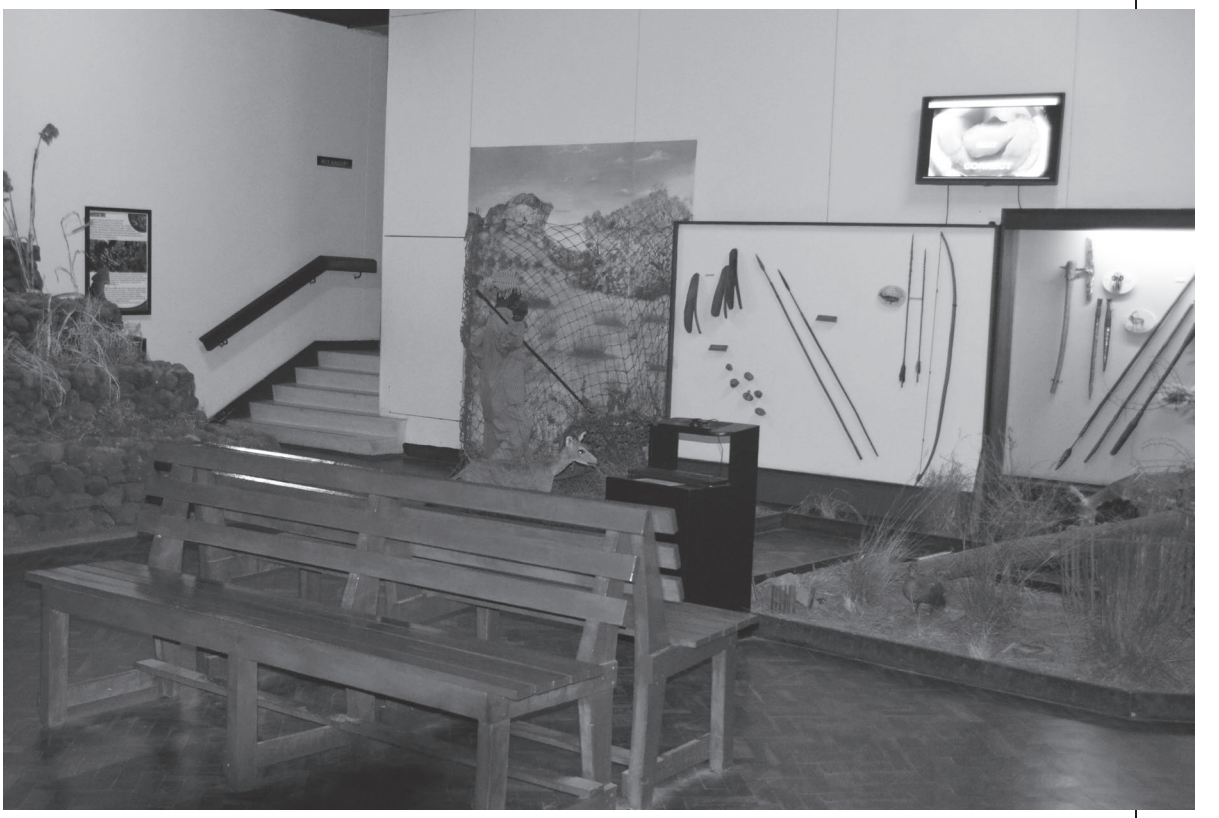

Fig. 5: New interactive interfaces in the Gallery, Feb. 2018. Photo credits: Njabulo Chipangura.

ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power—a site of sight accessible to all" (1995: 13). In this way, not only was a new 'public' formed within the narratives of national progress through and toward civilization, but it was also placed in "new relations of sight and vision" as well as "new relations of power and knowledge" (Bennett 1995: 13).

Old exhibitions in the Beit Gallery thus occupied a distinctive niche in the development of scientific enquiry, both as a site of accumulation where objects were arranged in specified orders and as the location where people were taught to look at the world, to value the past, and to visualize relations between objects. As a result, many indigenous people came to associate the museum with colonialism, cultural repression and loss of their heritage. Thus, the onus fell on Mutare Museum to transform these displays which had been static for some time and in which indigenous societies have been frozen in a kind of timeless past.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide a critique of collection and exhibition practices at Mutare Museum in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Using the example of exhibits in the Beit Gallery, I have demonstrated how, from 1980 to 2015, ethnographic objects were simply collected for research and then randomly displayed without providing clear contextual meanings. However, to correct this anomaly an experiential ethnomuseology exercise was undertaken to trace the local origin of some of the objects in the Mutare

Museum's collections. This work paved the way for an implementation of changes where the old exhibits were reorganised to reflect their true biographical meanings which were conspicuously absent in the old set-up. Various rituals in which the ethnographic objects were used were also documented in real time through video and audio recordings. These are now integral part of the new multimedia displays of the reorganized Beit Gallery.

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