

# Sepulcherised Objects and Their Decolonial Futures in African Museums: The “Robert Edward Codrington Collection” at the Zimbabwe Natural History Museum

Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals  
2022, Vol. 18(1) 42–58  
© The Author(s) 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/15501906211073105  
journals.sagepub.com/home/cjx



Jesmael Mataga<sup>1</sup> , Farai Mudododzi Chabata<sup>2</sup>,  
and Charity Nyathi<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This essay builds on the emerging (museum) decolonizing perspectives to (i) explore the biographical details and modes of curation and classification to which “ethnographic”<sup>1</sup> objects collected during the colonial era have been exposed; to (ii) foreground the complexities of inherited colonial museum processes embedded in African urban contexts; and, to (iii) consider alternative modes of engagement with ethnographic objects and local Indigenous communities to challenge the embedded regimes of care and the marginalization rendered to Indigenous epistemologies. One of the biggest questions facing museums in the world today is how to deal with the hordes of objects collected from various Indigenous communities and placed in museums far away from the communities who made and used them. Using the case of an “ethnographic” collection in a former colonial museum, we call for a paradigm shift in museum practices, and challenge the present state of affairs of museum curatorship. We then briefly suggest possible ways in which such museums can confront their

---

1 In using the term “ethnographic”-, the authors acknowledge the contested nature of the term. The objects and collections discussed herein are still officially named and classified as “Ethnographic,” against other preferred various categorizations i.e., Social History collections etc. In this essay, we opted to maintain this official characterization, while putting it in inverted comas to denote the problematics around this terminology.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, Harare, Zimbabwe

<sup>3</sup>Zimbabwe Natural History Museum, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

## Corresponding Author:

Jesmael Mataga, Sol Plaatje University, P O Box X 5008, Kimberley 8301, South Africa.

Email: [Jesmael.Mataga@spu.ac.za](mailto:Jesmael.Mataga@spu.ac.za)

imperial histories and unsettle their inherited regimes of care and representation. We call for museums to enter into conversations with communities, listening to them and effecting curatorial activities that re-center local ways of knowing, while embracing the complexities associated with such engagements.

### Keywords

African museums, ethnographic objects, Robert Edward Codrington, decolonial, Biographies, repatriation, Indigenous communities, research and topics

*There is something colossal, uncountable, and almost priceless that has been lost for good, and that is attested by the life of all our objects in captivity... (Mbembe 2021, 162).*

### Introduction

Born in the United Kingdom's Gloucestershire, Robert Edward Codrington, a protégé and confidante of Cecil John Rhodes was tasked with the military conquest of what is now Zimbabwe, Zambia, and parts of Malawi. In an expedition, that extended to parts of modern day's Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola, Robert Codrington militarily conquered the "tribes" in these areas and established the foundations of British colonial rule in Southern Africa. He was the Administrator of the two territories (Northeast and North-West Rhodesia) ruled by the British South Africa Company (BSAC)—a private commercial company that conquered this part of Africa. Part of his conquest included the military occupation of Matabeleland, the overthrow of its ruler, King Lobengula, in present day South-Western Zimbabwe, and the taking of African land by force in 1893–4, which still has violent consequences in today's Zimbabwe. Apart from running the violent military expeditions, Codrington was interested in the cultural aspects of the conquered groups, and he "acquired" objects as part of his war booty from the ethnic groups that he defeated. In doing this, he made himself a de facto collector—a colonizer and a pseudo-ethnologist (Jones 1937, 1945; Summers and Gann 1956). He amassed hundreds of objects, many of which were valuable cultural and religious pieces taken from chiefs, religious leaders, and local families. In 1920, this collection of objects was donated to and placed in the Rhodesia National Museum (Now Zimbabwe Natural History Museum—NHMZ<sup>2</sup>) in Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) by his family.

---

2 The Zimbabwe Natural History Museum (the museum's official name), houses the largest collection of "natural history" specimens in Southern Africa. It was renamed so in 1982 following the moving of the bulk of the natural science collections to this museum.

While we acknowledge that the bigger question is whether museums in Africa, in their current form, modeled on Euro-American ideas, are the right places for cultural materials from Indigenous groups, we argue that museums are still relatively valued as spaces for transformation and change. In making our argument on the need to unravel and decolonize colonial museum practices whose foundations were not laid on any ethics as understood today, we use the “Codrington Ethnographic Collection,” probably the most eminent and well-preserved collection of ethnographic objects in any museum in Southern Africa. Drawing from the biography of this collection, we reflect on the museumisation of objects looted through violent military conquests of the late nineteenth century in Africa, during which Robert Edward Codrington featured prominently. The biography of this ethnographic collection highlights the issues around the colonial complexities of processes of collecting, naming, and confinement, which were part of violent colonial extractivism that resulted in epistemic marginalization of African cultures, experiences, and ways of knowing. We thus locate this biography within the context of the development of museums in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, before proposing possible approaches to unraveling the coloniality embedded in the life story of this collection as it remains in a museum today.

### **Methodological and Analytical Context**

The methodological and analytical framing of this paper was influenced by the respective professional roles and experiences of the three co-authors within the museum sector and ethnographic collections in Zimbabwe in general and specifically the Codrington Collection at the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo. National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), is the state supported organization responsible for the management of all national museums in Zimbabwe. The first author previously worked for the NMMZ as a Curator and Head of Ethnography at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, the second author is the current Curator and Head of Ethnography at the same museum, while the third author is a Curator in the Natural History Museum, which houses the Codrington Collection. Part of the third author’s curatorial duties in this museum is that of managing the Codrington Collection. Their collective professional experience within the museum sector in Zimbabwe, give the authors a close, personal, and professional attachment with the collection. This proximity afforded the authors relative ease of access to the material and an intimate and close knowledge of the collection. This paper is thus largely a reflection on professional processes and practices that the three authors participated in within the institution and the collection. The study involved working with the objects and the collection, looking at the documentary archives, and exhibitory practices related to the Codrington Collection. From the experiences of the authors, issues around the circumstances through which objects were acquired emerged after a realization that many

ethnographic objects in Zimbabwe's national museums did not just exhibit cultures but seemed to represent African spirituality and even royalty. Some of the objects, like those that comprise the Codrington Collection, crossed cultural and geographical boundaries, and carry complex layers of meanings. The stories of these objects, in their sepulchers, fit into the tales of the sojourner in discussions on repatriation of objects and imagining decolonial futures of both the museums and objects. These objects are sepulchers in the sense that they have been collected, but have literally been buried in a colonial museum, detached from their communities of origin. In his description of museums as sepulchers, Adorno likens museums as places where "observers and objects no longer have vital relationships, and where objects we their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present". He also cautions that museums are "...like family sepulchres...testifying to the neutralization of culture, yet are in the process of dying" (Adorno 1967, 175).

Museums formed in the colonial era can thus be perceived and understood, as places of death, literally and figuratively. By collecting bodies of Black ancestors, and cultural relic violently wrenched from reluctant African societies, museums became a kind of necropolis, containing preserved remains, and bearing witness to brutal dislocation and incarceration of bodies, objects, and what they represent to African societies (Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019; Hicks 2020; Legassick and Rassool 2000; Mbembe 2021; Mudimbe 1994). This confounded museums as sites where African cultures died—a legacy that persists within most museums on the continent.

The Codrington Collection, detached physically and symbolically, distanced from its source community and placed in a museum in an urban area, has been "monumentalized" as a static memorial to a colonial collector, and to a violent history of dispossession and detachment, rather than for its rich and complex cultural, religious, and an aesthetic significance.

## **The Making of Museums in Zimbabwe**

The Zimbabwe Natural History Museum (Formerly Rhodesian National Museum) in the second largest city, Bulawayo, and the Zimbabwe Museum of Human sciences (formerly the Queen Victoria Museum, established 1901) in Zimbabwe's capital city Harare, are the oldest and largest museums in Zimbabwe. Museums in colonial Zimbabwe were products of the nineteenth century European imperial order, ideals, and worldview. In 1901 when Cecil John Rhodes visited Bulawayo for the last time, he received two requests, the first from the Chamber of Mines to appoint a Geologist and the second from the Rhodesia Scientific Board who wanted a museum to house their growing collection of minerals. It was suggested that the two bodies get together in 1902, the Rhodesia Museum came into being focusing initially on the geology of the country, and supporting the colonial mining interests. This was the genesis of

museums in the colony, which would later on grow to what is today called the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe—a state sponsored body that manages all national museums and heritage sites in the country. In 1982, most of the natural science collections from across the country's museums were moved to Bulawayo and the museum was renamed the Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe, reflecting its mandated focus in research, exhibition, and conservation of the country's natural science collections. Today, its collections and exhibits include geology and fossils, mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates, as well as broad cross-section of the social history of southern and central Africa, making the museum one of the largest in Zimbabwe and in Southern Africa.

This history and biography of the establishment and growth of the Zimbabwe Natural History Museum is representative of the biographies of museums in Africa. In Southern Africa generally, museums became integral to the establishment and perpetuation of racial science, exploitation, and the dehumanization of indigenous cultures and societies (Dubow 2006; Legassick and Rassool 2000; Rassool 2015a, 2015b). Museums, in this era found themselves appended to a network of political geographies of militarily conquest that represented Rhodesians' relationship with their past by exhibiting the incoming settlers' connection to landscapes, monuments, and practices of memorialization, in their attempts to create an exclusive Rhodesian identity (Chaterera and Nyawo 2013; Mataga 2018; Thondhlana 2015).

Throughout the colonial period, the Rhodesian museums were involved in various collecting activities, amassing a substantial build-up of archaeological, geological, ethnographic, and natural history collections; framing a colonial epistemology that undergirded an official heritage needed by Southern Rhodesia in negotiating her place in contemporary, regional geopolitics. There is ample written evidence showing that the Rhodesian National Museum became a central point in the development and professionalization of natural scientific disciplines including the development of Archaeology, Ethnography, and Anthropology throughout colonial Rhodesia. Therefore, when the "Codrington Collection" was donated to the museum, it made the centerpiece of the collection of an anthropological and ethnographic nature. The role and place of this collection in early Southern Rhodesia are well documented by some of the earliest "Scientists" of the time such as Neville Jones (Jones 1937, 1943, 1945) and decades later by Summers and Gann (1956). All this was in a period where scientific disciplines were solidifying in their quest to understand the African cultures, pushed by White academics, professional archaeologists, and museum professionals. This framework of museums was inherited by the country when it gained political independence in 1980. While notable changes have happened to the museum, one of which is the growth of Black professionals, managers and curators, the museum service is still largely urban-based and detached from the majority of Indigenous, mostly rural-based Black communities.

In the post-colonial era, the slow pace of change in re-configuring of museums in Zimbabwe has been well acknowledged (Chaterera and Nyawo 2013; Garlake 1982; Mazel and Ritchie 1994; Munjeri 1990; Thondhlana 2015; Ucko 1994). The unchanged nature of the Codrington Collection is part evidence to the lack of re-curation of objects in postcolonial contexts. Unchanged, and with no further work on it, the Codrington Collection sequestered in a museum gallery, plays to the idea of museums as repositories where relics, exhibitions, or even museums themselves become objects that need to be preserved. Thus, the exhibition, objects, and perhaps the whole museum remained a sepulcher—with materials installed in a specific historical (colonial) context but kept and preserved in the contemporary. In the post-colonial period, where there was anticipation for changing the cultural ichnographies of a new postcolonial context, the colonial museum, relatively unchanged, becomes an artefact to be kept, preserved as an “object” dedicated to a bygone colonial era.

### **Confronting Colonial Legacies: Repatriation, Restitution, and Life Writing**

If we agree that museums formed in colonial Africa have become sepulchers—monuments to their own histories of violence and to legacies of cultural dislocation, we can appreciate why in postcolonial Africa, calls for the return of the remains of African ancestors and the restitution of African cultural objects and treasures looted from parts of Africa during the colonial period in parts of Africa have become louder. This has forced governments, museums, and other cultural institutions to confront the inevitability of return and repatriation, as well as to engage in conversations with communities from where the cultural materials were plundered. Such calls are encapsulated in activities such as requests by African presidents to countries like France, Germany, Britain, and others to return bodies and objects of African ancestors, and objects taken mostly through military conquest in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth Century. The 2017 Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr Report on the return of looted cultural properties, and the recent (2019) return of ancestral bodies by Germany, back to Namibia, have sparked renewed vigor in the calls for repatriation. Notable is how new museums are being constructed across Africa, supposedly to house the returned objects. Emerging writing on colonial museums in Africa, is beginning to lay bare the violence that went along with the “collection” and “acquisition” of cultural objects from various African societies. They also excavate the nature and value of the objects, and what was lost when the objects were pillaged from their original settings and transplanted into private collections or exported to museums outside the continent. For instance, the recent provocation by Hicks (2020) in his, *The British Museum* has galvanized the world of museums, to self-introspect and look at their histories of violence, displacement, and

misrepresentation. In describing, the nature of the objects, and the violence during the expeditions, Achille Mbembe says:

Europeans ransacked and often burned down whole villages... In the whirlwind, they carried off just about everything—objects of finery; others related to the basic necessities of life; delicate fabrics; sumptuous necklaces; rings; artistically made jewellery inlaid with gold, copper, or bronze; belts; diverse gold-broached objects, including swords; shields used by warriors; doors - ornamental openwork, seats and thrones with figures... elements of flora and fauna; magnificent fibulas, bracelets, and other spangles; ...and thousands of medicaments... (Mbembe 2021, 158).

Thus, beyond their aesthetic and artistic appeal, these relics were a rich archive and a reservoir of knowledge, experiences, practices, and ways of being, valued greatly by the societies who made and used them (Mbembe 2021; Mudimbe 1994). It is for this reason that Mbembe argues that while what Africa lost in these processes is quantifiable, the total loss from the looting of cultural objects from Africa can never be adequately restored even if all the objects were to be returned to the continent or to their original communities (Hicks 2020; Mbembe 2021).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that calls for (re) questioning colonial collections in European Museums, and their biographies of movement and associated physical and cultural violence are mounting, challenging museums with looted collections to consider repatriation, and in some cases reparation (Hicks 2020; Mbembe 2021). This is happening parallel to the highly-contested discussions on reviewing the definition of a museum by foregrounding its civic role within societies and processes of decolonization and epistemic justice (Mataga 2018; Morin 2014; Sandahl 2019; Vawda 2019). What is emerging in these calls is the fact that museums need to reinvent themselves, integrate Indigenous epistemologies as key aspects of curating a new museology that inspires justice, enquiry, humanity, and recognition for all—a critical, and de-colonial museology (Lonetree 2012; Mignolo 2011; Rassool 2015b, 2018; Wrightson 2017). However, as the calls for reconfiguration of museums with looted collections outside the African continent continue, questions still remain on what happens to colonial museumising processes on the African continent—whose histories of violence and racial biases are well documented (Dubow 2006; Rassool 2015b; Vawda 2019).

The “Codrington Collection” offers an opportunity for African museums to not only take some responsibility in not acknowledging vestiges of coloniality deeply entrenched in them; but to demonstrate that they can walk the restitution talk because it is an emotive historical and moral issue, both within and without museological practices. This essay is a clarion call for all concerned to imagine what happens if we look at the Ethnographic objects such as the Codrington Collection differently. To imagine them not only as an exquisite collection of masterpieces from African societies, but on

one level as a rich archive of cultural experiences of African societies, and on another level as evidence of violence, dispossession, cultural loss, and sequestration. For us, highlighting the biographical details of the “Codrington Collection,” excavating the violence, and the afterlife of the collection is our contribution to breathing life back into one of the most eminent collection and its association with violence, dispersion, and racial science. Here, we highlight processes that need to be challenged, unsettled, or even changed. For there is need for African museums to reflect on which aspects of their form, content and practices continue to echo the cries of those who were vanquished and brutalized by militaristic colonialism. The approach should deliberately re-humanize a collection of cultural materials whose value has been defaced through colonial violence and associated museumising processes. We imagine a decolonized future for this collection through consideration of redemptive curatorial interventions, and perhaps a more radical intervention that could consider repatriation and return of the collection to the original communities. We, however, note that repatriation to date has tended to be mainly understood as movement of objects from European museums and collectors back to Africa. Museum collections that are situated in the same context as the “Codrington Collection,” offer an opportunity for cross cultural conversations and exchanges using museological processes. By extension, it could also open up intergovernmental co-operation through what has been termed in some academic circles as cultural diplomacy.

The 2021 International Council of Museum’s (ICOM’s) theme for International Museums Day is quite telling in terms of museums confronting the pasts while simultaneously dealing with their present and imagining their futures: “*The Future of Museums: Recover and Reimagine.*” Similarly, ICOM’s themes for the past decade have focused on themes that challenge museums to introspect and re-think their roles in society. For instance, in 2014, the theme was *Museum Collections Make Connections*. The implication of this theme, according to ICOM, was that by telling a story about the cultural heritage of a community and its shared memory, museums contribute to the development of their society by creating bonds between visitors and objects in their collections. The theme of International Museum Day 2017 was *Museums and contested histories: Saying the unspeakable in museums*. It would seem that the story of Zimbabwe considering repatriating objects in the Codrington Collection in the museum remains unspeakable. Last year’s theme was “*Museums for equality: diversity and inclusion.*” Although African countries and museums have actively participated in ICOM programs and events, it would seem that critical reflection on museum practices as inspired by shared views has not taken place in any significant way, so as to shake the roots of coloniality in many African Museums, especially those that were established during the colonial era.



## The “Codrington Collection”: Regimes of Care and Curation

One of the powers of a museum, besides its collections, lies in its authoritative and sometimes exclusive rights to naming, categorizing, and classifying of objects. As far as the “Codrington Collection” is concerned, questions that immediately come to mind are related to what aspects the collection represents, but more importantly, what is it that is silenced by the museum processes. The collection of over 200 ethnographic objects is exhibited in the Natural History Museum’s *Hall of Kings Gallery* (Figures 1–4) as a memorial to Codrington’s work during the colonization of Africa. To the uninitiated, one sees an exquisite collection of objects, artistic and aesthetically appealing and well preserved. Carefully placed in clean glass display cases in the exhibition, the objects’ only interaction with society is via curious gazes from visitors filing through the museum galleries. The objects just sit there—muted and silenced, as if they are waiting for their voices to be revived.



**Figure 1.** The entrance into the Hall of Kings Gallery in the Natural History Museum. Photograph by author—Charity Nyathi.



**Figure 2.** Part of the Gallery exhibiting the Codrington Collection, showing the array of objects in the gallery. Photograph by author—Charity Nyathi.



**Figure 3.** An Object in the Codrington Exhibition—An exquisite ceremonial Axe confiscated from King Mwata Kazembe. The Captions reflect the problematic dynamics how objects were collected. Photograph by author—Charity Nyathi.

Noteworthy is that the fact that this collection is not named after any of its source communities, makers, or users of the objects, but rather after the collector—a military man and politician who violently amassed the objects as war loot (Figure 4). Both the processes of acquisition and the actions of naming a collection effectively muted,



**Figure 4.** Part of the Exhibition showing Objects from the Codrington Collection, and a short Biography of Robert Edward Codrington. Photograph by author—Charity Nyathi.

silenced and denied the appropriate and legal provenance of the objects. The purpose of the collection seems to have been preconceived—to beautify a colonial museum and speak to the curiosities and conquests of the empire in a monolithic manner. The naming of the objects, which mostly acknowledge a tribe—or region, denied and erased the local authorship and ownership by the original owners, users, and custodians of the objects. In the exhibition, the objects are carefully placed, classed, and causally labeled. In the gallery, the only biographical details are the classificatory names, a link to regions, or a chief from where an object was “collected.” In the museum catalogues and the accession records, the references are as scanty and devoid of detail as the labels in the display cases.

Yet, this exquisite and extensive collection of objects capture a relatively comprehensive totality of the lives of the communities from where they were collected. In their original contexts, these objects would have been associated with a variety of functional, symbolic, and spiritual values. They range from sacred objects, specters, hunting apparel, figureheads, everyday tools and apparel, to the mystical, religious, and sacred relics of the communities from where they were collected. The Codrington Collection idolizes the collector and mutes the objects from telling their story (Figure 4). Biased modes of classification and categorization in the museum rendered these

objects nameless, ownerless with untraceable or conveniently vague provenances. This speaks to the motive and the context in which the objects were collected.

As one walks through the galleries, the critical questions that come to mind and may be hard to find answers to are: where are the full stories—of authorship, of origins, of movement and mobility and the violence for which they are witnesses? As one marvels at the workmanship, skills, and mystic aura, one also wonders who made these, how, when, what went through their minds when they were then taken? Thus, for these objects, curated in museum halls, physically and metaphorically distanced from the communities from which they were collected, the museum remains a monument to its own processes and to the violence, disposition, and epistemicide enacted on cultures in Africa. Amid the gaze of the museum publics, and attention by curators, the exhibitory practices force us to look and think about these objects outside of their origin, value, and devoid of people, experiences, and nuances, except the story of the collector. They are objects of pain and shame, but these deep histories and symbolisms are effaced.

### **Defying Odds: The Collection Still “Speaks”**

Yet, despite the complexities engrained in its painful biography, the voices of the Codrington Collection can still be heard from the glasses of the sepulcher, in the *Hall of Kings*. Some of the objects’ labels give us glimpses of the contexts in and from which Codrington appropriated them. These include the curious case of a ceremonial axe recorded as given by Kazembe X to a Mrs Anderson as a warrant to act on Kazembe’s behalf (Figure 3). The collection includes ornaments worn by Chiefs, traditional war armaments, sacred staff, exquisite wooden headrests and sculptures, copper spears, royal stools, headdresses, ceremonial spears and drums, and other various royal objects that tell a story of violence and loss (Figure 1). In this part of the museum, the objects have a loud qualitative and quantitative presence, along displays of archaeological, historical, and cultural history, albeit in a monolithic way that has not incorporated recent research and current museological discourses. The “Hall of Kings” exhibition displays objects, relics, documents, photographs, and other memorabilia associated with historical figures in the country’s political history. Exhibitions of the two Ndebele Kings, Mzilikazi and Lobengula, are juxtaposed in the shadow of the Codrington Collection, in more or less a similar state of sepulcher. In a substantial way, the classification and arrangement posit a crude tradition and modernity binary. In a sense it is not merely the objects that are sepulcherised, but with them their contexts and stories. While the museum personnel explain these unchanged museum displays, as the result of the lack of financial resources for replacing them, their existence also reflects an approach that seeks to accommodate colonial history with the purpose of integrating it as part of the postcolonial historical narrative. Thus, the museum, with

its holding of objects assembled in the colonial era, steeped in that period's intellectual traditions but preserved in the present, becomes a sepulcher of the colonial past—a museum that becomes an artefact in its own right.

## **Decolonial Futures: Imagining Objects' Rights**

Collected by missionaries, military men, and pseudo-anthropologists, and curated and kept the way it is, collections such as the “Codrington Collection” remain a celebration and reminder of conquest and cultural vanquishment meted out on African societies. In the contemporary, how do we undo these travesties on the ground? How do we unravel these remnants of the imperial order that linger on in spaces where societies have changed? The calls for (re) questioning colonial collections in European museums, their biographies of movement and associated physical and cultural violence are mounting. Some of the suggested strategies include acknowledging Indigenous conceptions of ownership, transfers, or repatriation of Indigenous materials; the possibilities of co-curation to reinterpreting, renaming, and reclassifying objects and redeem them of the fetishization. In doing this, museums that hold collections taken from African societies need to deal with the complexities caused by moving objects from Africa. These include issues around provenance, ownership, and custodianship. There is need to think of the spaces or institutions to which such objects can be returned.

What is notable is that while the critique on the coloniality of museums in Euro-American contexts and other parts of the world such as Latin America and the Oceania has been an ongoing one, much less attention has been on how museums in the South can deal with coloniality at a local level. We call here for such attention at a more local level, where museums, mostly in urban areas, that need to use collections such as the one discussed in this paper need to think critically about confronting the histories of violence and/or appropriation embedded in their histories and represented in their galleries. Co-curating the objects with communities could help to foster connections with museum collections and societies that were previously marginalized from museums. As in the case of the “Codrington Collection,” there is a clear need for research on provenance to rehumanize those objects. Given the violence represented in these objects, by doing this, the museums turn themselves into sites of healing and social justice. In the contemporary, such counter museums that foreground collections curation in their stories should be created in Africa; either by transforming the culture of museums inherited from the colonial past or through establishment of community-driven museums, which could host repatriated objects. Such museums can be critical enablers to the surfacing of alternative narratives, counter-histories, and “narratives from below.”

As far as the “Codrington Collection” is concerned, the notion of the object biographies, and of re-establishing the silenced lives of the various objects presents a chance

for a new way of engaging stakeholder communities as well as academics. As indicated in the previous sections, part of the change required for the “Codrington Ethnographic Collection” include its renaming, reclassification and renaming of individual objects, and revamping the ways in which the objects are presented in the museum. The objects and collection discussed are still officially named after Robert Edward Codrington, and are classified as “Ethnographic.” Both characterizations are problematic. Naming the objects after Robert Edward Codrington misrepresents the origins, ownership, and provenance of the material, while classifying it as “Ethnographic” disavows the historic, symbolic, and cultural value of these objects. This is against other preferred and widely used categorizations such as “social/cultural history collections” and others.

A second strategy should be aimed at excavating the previous lives of the objects in the collection to enable multiple perspectives and at the same time facilitate restorative justice and correcting the coloniality deeply embedded in the curatorial and institutional authority of national museums in Africa and thereby challenging the idea of an “encyclopaedic museum” on the continent. The current scenario postures the big museums such the Natural History Museum as predominately colonial in nature. Community-led interpretation of objects helps to restore and reconnect living cultures with museum objects. Museums must allow for the diversity of narratives, fluidity, and happenstance nature to be part of breathing life back to the sepulchered objects. Object biographies can empower and create space for voices from outside of the institution. In some African museums, curators need to confront colonial histories to the extent where, as suggested by Fusco (2021), the empire may even need to be de-accessioned through repatriation. For Zimbabwe, the demographic profile of the museum professionals—now mostly local and Black, presents an opportunity for the curators and managers to use this positionality to effect the change that is needed. These objects were vehicles of complex cultural practices, the everyday and today they are evidence of artistic endeavors and craftsmanship, encapsulating multi-layered societal experiences and complex ways of knowing. Thus, even those that looked mundane such as mere utensils and or everyday devices and tools, still had a share in life: that is, in physical, psychic, and energetic life and in the sort of life whose primary quality was circulation. Perhaps in confronting the pasts of the objects that comprise the Codrington Collection, we ought to start advocating for the rights of cultural objects through what some may perceive as intellectual activism, with the potential to impact the contexts in which museums operate (Message 2018). Museums’ rights and morality in holding objects in their custody without giving their stories the rights to be heard must be interrogated, cross-examined, and challenged on de-colonial grounds.

Because objects carry meanings, functional, and symbolic, that affect and appeal to lives of people both in the past and present, they should be regarded as having a life of their own, at least historically, morally, and legally. If organizations can be regarded as

a legal person that can sue or be sued, a similar principle could be imagined and contextualized in de-colonial museology. One imagines an ICOM International Museums Day theme that speaks to this matter, to raise awareness through truth telling and to build critical masses that will push for repatriation between and within continents. We call for such action at a local level where museums and collections such as the one discussed in this paper need to think critically about confronting the histories of violence and appropriation.

## **Conclusion**

In its current context, the Codrington Collection is not only failing to exhibit the socio-intellectual disposition and complexity of African societies but more aptly speaks to the need for museum and heritage practitioners to work on using museums and their objects as sites for dealing with violence, trauma and healing. Although the original creators and owners of the objects were lost, even sacrificed during regimes of collecting, the need for re-contextualizing and re-configuring museum spaces is inescapable. The voices for museums to introspect have grown louder over the past decade as attested to by ICOM's International Museums Day themes of the past decade. Museums should not shy away from provenance research or be wary of the implications of such research. Repatriation possibilities are opportunities for cultural dialogue and exchange, which can happen within and even beyond the museums. The need to: retrace the biographies of objects acquired or stolen; find out who the object hunters were; return to the source of biographic travesty; go back to the original protagonists and interrogate the priests of ethnological phantasmagoria has become more imperative than has been the case for many years. Repatriation and restitution, have the potency to resurrect sepulchered objects and usher them into their de-colonial futures. Some of these objects, like freed prisoners, may not need the patronage of museums but the stewardship of communities.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **ORCID iD**

Jesmael Mataga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1809-9737>

## References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1967. "Valéry Proust Museum." In *Prisms*, edited by Theodor W. Adorno, 175–85. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chaterera, Forget, and V. Z. Nyawo. 2013. "Decolonizing the Museum: The Case of Zimbabwe Military Museum in Gweru." *International Research Journal of Arts and Social Science* 2 (9): 213–9.
- Dubow, Saul. 2006. *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa, 1820-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fusco, C. 2021. "Deaccessioning Empire." *The New York Review of Books*, February 26, 2021 Issue.
- Garlake, Peter Storr. 1982. "Museums Remain Rooted in the Past." *Moto* 31–2.
- Giblin, John, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout. 2019. "Dismantling the Master's House." *Third Text* 33 (4–5): 471–86.
- Hicks, Dan. 2020. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jones, Neville. 1937. "The Codrington Collection in the National Museum of Southern Rhodesia." *Occasional Papers of the Rhodesian Museum* 7: 1–11.
- Jones, Neville. 1943. "Ethnography in Museums of Southern Africa." *SAMAB* 3 (3): 61–8.
- Jones, Neville. 1945. "On the Need for Collecting and Preserving Objects of Native Material Culture." *The Rhodes-Livingstone Journal* 4: 33–9.
- Legassick, Martin, and Ciraj Rassool. 2000. *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South African Museums and the Trade in Human Remains 1907-1917*. Cape Town: South African Museum.
- Lonetree, Amy. 2012. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Mataga, Jesmael. 2018. "Museum Objects, Local Communities and Curatorial Shifts in Africa Museums." In *Museum Cooperation Between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies*, edited by Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere, 57–68. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Mazel, Aron, and Gaby Ritchie. 1994. "Museums and Their Messages: The Display of the Pre and Early Colonial Past in the Museums of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe." In *The Presented Past: Heritage, Museums and Education*, edited by Peter G. Stone and Brian Leigh Molyneaux, 225–36. London: Routledge.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2021. *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Message, Kylie. 2018. *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge*. New York: Routledge.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2011. "Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum (1992)." In *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, edited by Jonathan Harris, 71–85. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Morin, Peter. 2014. "My Life as a Museum, or, Performing Indigenous Epistemologies." In *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*, edited by Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki, 137–52. University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing.
- Mudimbe, Valentin Yves. 1994. *The Idea of Africa* (African Systems of Thought). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Munjeri, Dawson. 1990. "Refocusing or Reorientation? The Exhibit or the Populace: Zimbabwe on the Threshold." In *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*,



- edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 444–56. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Rassool, Ciraj. 2015a. “Human Remains, the Disciplines of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex.” In *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*, edited by Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua, and Ciraj Rassool, 133–56. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rassool, Ciraj. 2015b. “Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41 (3): 653–70.
- Rassool, Ciraj. 2018. “Building a Critical Museology in Africa.” In *Museum Cooperation Between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies*, edited by T. Laely, M. Meyer and R. Schwere, xi–xii. Bielefeld and Kampala: Transcript Verlag and Fountain Publishers.
- Sandahl, Jette. 2019. “The Museum Definition as the Backbone of ICOM.” *Museum International* 7 (1–2): vi–9.
- Summers, Roger, and L. H. Gann. 1956. “Robert Edward Codrington 1869-1908.” *Northern Rhodesian Journal* 3: 44–50.
- Thondhlana, Thomas. 2015. “Old Wine in New Bottles: A Critical Historiographical Survey of Zimbabwean Museum Institutions.” In *African Museums in the Making: Reflections on the Politics of Material and Public Culture in Zimbabwe*, edited by N. Henry Chiwaura, Munyaradzi Mawere, and T. P. Thondhlana, 15–45. Mankon, Cameroon: Langa Research and Publishing.
- Ucko, Peter J. 1994. “Museums and Sites: Cultures of the Past Within Education in Zimbabwe, Some Ten Years on.” In *The Presented Past: Heritage, Museums and Education*, edited by Peter G. Stone and Brian Leigh Molyneux, 237–83. Routledge: London.
- Vawda, Shahid. 2019. “Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality.” *Museum International* 71 (1–2): 72–9.
- Wrightson, Kelsey R. 2017. “The Limits of Recognition: The Spirit Sings, Canadian Museums and the Colonial Politics of Recognition.” *Museum Anthropology* 40 (1): 36–51.

## Author Biographies

**Jesmael Mataga** is an Associate Professor of Museum and Heritage Studies at Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, South Africa. He worked for the National Museums and Monuments (NMMZ) and taught at the University of Zimbabwe and the National University of Lesotho. His research focuses on thinking through new ways of approaching museums and heritage in Southern Africa.

**Farai Mudododzi Chabata** is a Senior Curator of Ethnography and the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. He is based at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare. A Historian by training, Farai is responsible for the Organization’s Ethnographic Collection and has expertise in issues around Intangible Heritage management, Community liaison, Exhibition Development and Conservation.

**Charity Nyathi** is a Curator and head of the Archaeology and Monuments department in the Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe. Her research interests border museology, implementation of heritage legislations, heritage conservation, and sustainability.