

Negotiating the Decolonisation of National Museums in Zimbabwe

Simbarashe Shadreck Chitima

Midlands State University-Gweru, Zimbabwe

Abstract

This study examines the success of decolonisation efforts employed by national museums. The study employed qualitative research with a research population of 740 participants drawn from museum personnel and local communities including members from the black, coloured and white community. It is revealed that decolonisation efforts such as renaming museums and refocusing displays is mock and inadequate. It is concluded that there is a need for political will to decolonise the mental frameworks, exhibitions and narratives, interpretations, educational philosophies and methods of content delivery.

Introduction

Museums in Zimbabwe are a colonial inheritance. Currently, 40 years after independence, museums are viewed by Zimbabweans as still subscribing to Occidentalism. This study examined the success of decoloniality efforts expended by national museums in Zimbabwe. The major research questions probed by the study are: Which decoloniality efforts have been initiated by museums? What do museum stakeholders think constitute a decolonised museum? The aim of the study is to provide a decoloniality framework for museums.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research and phenomenology research design. The research population totalled 740 participants drawn from museum personnel, university lecturers, school teachers and members of the public, some of whom represented distinct local communities and the white as well as coloured communities in Zimbabwe. Research instruments used include interviews, observations and focus group discussions. The study was undertaken from 2016 to 2019 at five national museums in Zimbabwe.

Results

There are few efforts being employed in the decolonisation of museums and some of the initiatives include renaming museums, refocusing displays, improving accessibility and working with local communities. National museums

were renamed in 1982 where the Rhodesian Museum became the Natural History museum, the Queen Victoria the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS), the Umtali Museum the National Museum of Transport and Antiquities (NMTA), the Midlands Museum the Zimbabwe Military Museum (ZMM) and the Great Zimbabwe monument was declared a world heritage site in 1986. Secondly, the ZMM has refocused some displays in the Zimbabwe Military History and the Zimbabwe Republic Police galleries. The NMTA has changed the Beit exhibition and added a display case in the Boulton exhibition to depict the second liberation struggle. The ZMHS has refocused the Stone Age and Iron Age exhibitions, made additional displays of the Shona Village and material culture as well as the rock art in Zimbabwe. The NHM has renamed and refocused the Hall of Chiefs, included a live snake exhibition and added a mine shaft model in the geology gallery. The NHM has also included a coelacanth rare fish display, added in the mammalogy gallery a display case of hippos in the wetland and wildlife within the wet as well as dry seasons. The site museum at the GZWHM contain exhibitions created from the late 1980s to 2000.

The government has also given equal employment opportunities to all Zimbabweans which was unheard of during the colonial period. Even access to museums has been widened. Indigenous cultures in Zimbabwe have demanded from the government to repatriate stolen cultural material and so an effort was made for the repatriation of the Mkwati stick and some of Zimbabwe birds. Museums have also engaged local communities in the management of cultural sites through the Adopt 'A' site educational programme. Areas cited by participants to be decolonised include: museum architecture, exhibitions and narratives, mind-set and curatorial democracy, educational philosophy, language and methods of content delivery. It has been revealed that museum architectural design is viewed as a European model. Suggestions are that museum architecture should reflect the designs on Zimbabwe type dry-stone or on Shona or Ndebele villages. Museum exhibitions and narratives are also considered colonial. It was suggested that exhibitions and narratives should be reconstituted since these were done during the colonial period. White community participants expressed that although they pity colonialism, the decolonisation of museum narratives should be balanced so that the white population living in Zimbabwe is not seen as evil which could contribute to segregation and xenophobia. The coloured community indicated that they felt excluded from museums as there were no representations or content that related to them. It was gathered that instead of museums continuing to embrace colonial permanent exhibitions, they could change and talk about topical issues affecting society. For example, it was indicated that in 2020 the world, including Zimbabweans, were battling to contain the Corona Virus (Covid 19). It is also established that the majority of permanent exhibitions in Zimbabwe are choked with scientific language and jargon comprehensible only by a few. It is strongly felt that museums should also make use of indigenous languages in their interpretations.

Discussion

Decolonisation is a process where museums strive to repeal colonial or neo-colonial iconography, names, exhibitions, narratives, interpretations, educational frameworks and methods of content delivery. Decolonisation is to do away with a Western museology that embraces colonial worldviews of being, power and knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2011). Decolonisation of museums is a negotiated process and not an instant one time project. There is need for strategies and principles (policy or action plans) of operations because they help capture the terms and references and operational guidelines of stakeholders to avoid conflicts. Decolonisation of museums is not a one man band undertaking but require all relevant stakeholders in order to avoid the former coloniser being colonised or further seclusion of politically weak smaller groups. Museums may assemble a decolonisation team constituted by local communities, government agents and museum personnel. The third step is to conduct a decolonisation audit which helps identify areas that require to be decolonised. The areas that need to be decolonised differ from one museum to the other. A number of areas have been suggested in the case of Zimbabwe that need to be decolonised such as the iconography, museum architecture, mental framework of staff, exhibitions and narratives, interpretations, educational philosophy and method of content delivery. Although the government in Zimbabwe renamed museums the majority of permanent exhibitions, narratives and interpretations as well as conduct remain colonial. The philosophy grounding museum education service needs to be re-examined in Zimbabwe. Mbembe (2015) points out that there is something wrong if museums continue to provide educational content designed to meet the needs of the colonialist in the post-colonial era. Museums still use English, scientific language and jargon as the dominant mode of communication on captions and guided tours and these need to be decolonised. Chipangura (2014) recommended the use of diverse indigenous languages like Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya, Chewa, Kalanga, Shangani, Sotho, Venda and Xhosa. It is a known fact that pupils learn effectively through their first languages (Gomba, 2017).

Decolonisation of museums should also touch on the methods of content delivery. Guided tours and study sheets promote the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970) where the museum visitor is reduced to passive recipient of information, needs to be repealed. They are other active methods of making visitors, including students, take ownership of their museum experience and these are not limited to role playing, games, drama, song and dance, folk lore, music and interactives. Decolonising the museum is not an instant happening. As audiences continue to change, museums will be required to constantly review themselves. New audiences will have new expectations and needs, hence the need for museums to review and conduct decolonisation audits time and again.

Conclusion

Decolonisation of cultural institutions is a negotiated process that requires the participation of all relevant stakeholders the museum serve. National museums in Zimbabwe still live in a colonial shell and exhibitions embrace the Western Museology. It is concluded that Zimbabwean museums still remain colonial settings that are failing to transform themselves to reflect and serve the current communities. There is need therefore, to involve all Zimbabweans, black, white and coloured, in defining and negotiating histories, narratives and cultural heritage. Decolonisation of museums should touch on the museum architecture, mind-set, exhibitions and narratives, interpretations, educational philosophy, language and methods of content delivery.

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