

**BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE STUDIES**



**OBJECT, PROVENANCE AND BIOGRAPHY: AN EVALUATION OF THE
ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF THE MKWATI
WALKING STICK AT THE ZIMBABWE MUSEUM OF HUMAN SCIENCES.**

**RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND
HERITAGE, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE BACHELOR OF HONORS
DEGREE IN CULTURE AND HERITAGE STUDIES**

BY

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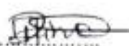
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Abstract

This dissertation offers a comprehensive evaluation of the ethnographic collection management system of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, using the Mkwati Walking stick as a central case study. This study draws on interdisciplinary frameworks, particularly object biography, provenance research, and post-colonial museology to interrogate how significant cultural artefact is handled, recorded, interpreted, and displayed within the museum's institutional practices. The Mkwati walking stick holds deep historical and symbolic relevance in Zimbabwean heritage being closely associated with spiritual leadership, anti-colonial resistance and national identity. As such, it serves as an ideal object through which to explore the layered meanings, ownership histories and representational challenges that come with managing ethnographic collections in post-colonial contexts. By tracing the object's provenance and evolving significance, the research highlights the shifting values ascribed to overtime, both indigenous communities and the museum space. The methodological approach combines qualitative data collection including curatorial interviews, archival research and exhibition analysis with theoretical insights into the life cycle of museum objects. Through this approach, the study assesses the strengths and shortcomings of the museum's existing documentation systems, conservation policies and public engagement strategies. It finds that while there are commendable efforts to preserve and display artefacts like the Mkwati Walking stick, current practices often fall short in addressing issues of cultural sensitivity, provenance accuracy, and community inclusion. Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of rethinking collection management systems to reflect more inclusive, participatory, and contextually grounded practices. It proposes that integrating indigenous knowledge systems, digital cataloguing tools and collaborative curatorial models can enhance the ethical stewardship and interpretive richness of ethnographic collections. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to ongoing debates about decolonizing museum practices in Africa and advocates for a more dialogic and historically conscious approach to object care and representation.

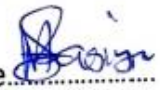
Approval form

I certify that I have supervised Thelma R Chikandamina for this research titled: Object, provenance and biography; An evaluation of the ethnographic collection management system of the Mkwati Walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. This research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Bachelor of Sciences Honors Degree in Culture and Heritage Studies and recommends it proceeds for examination.

Supervisor's name..... T.H. Jimucha-Saguna Signature.....  Date..... 14/10/25

Chairperson of the departmental Board of examiners

The departmental board of examiners is satisfied that this report meets the examination requirements and I therefore recommend Bindura University of Science Education to accept a research project titled: Object, provenance and biography; An evaluation of the ethnographic collection management system of the Mkwati Walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. This research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Bachelor of Sciences Honors Degree in Culture and Heritage Studies and recommends it proceeds for examination.

Chairperson's name..... DR M. E. SAGUYA Signature.....  Date..... 14/10/25

Declaration form

I, Thelma Runyararo Chikandamina studying for a Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Culture and Heritage Studies, aware of the fact that plagiarism is an academic offense and that falsifying information is a breach of ethics of Culture and Heritage Studies and Bindura University, I honestly declare that:

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Dedication

To my parents, Mrs Margaret Chikandamina and Mr Paddington Chikandamina, whose enduring support, guidance, and belief in the value of education have been instrumental throughout my academic journey. May God bless you abundantly. I also extend this dedication to my academic supervisor, whose insightful mentorship, patience, and unwavering commitment to scholarly excellence have profoundly shaped the direction and depth of this research. I also dedicate this project to my industrial attachment supervisor who gave me insights to this topic. Last but not least, to me, who took the time and effort to produce this work and to all who have supported me along the way

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

NMMZ: National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe

ZMHS: Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The Mkwati Walking Stick, a significant artifact within the Ethnographic Collection at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, embodies the rich cultural heritage of the Shona people. This study explores the object's provenance and biography, evaluating the Zimbabwe museum's ethnographic collection management system.

The Mkwati Walking Stick, crafted from indigenous wood, showcases intricate carvings and symbolic motifs that reflect its owner's cultural identity and social status. Walking sticks in Shona culture often serve functional and ceremonial purposes, acting as a marker of authority and a means of connecting with ancestral spirits. As noted by scholars like M. Chigariro (2010), such objects are not merely utilitarian; they carry deep cultural narratives that speak to the values and beliefs of the community.

Provenance refers to the history of an object's ownership, which is crucial for understanding its significance. The Mkwati Walking Stick is believed to have been created in the early 20th century, during a period of significant social change in Zimbabwe. It was originally owned by a local chief, a lineage that adds layers to its historical importance. The stick was acquired by the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in the late 20th century during a concerted effort to document and preserve the country's cultural artifacts.

The biography of the Mkwati Walking Stick is interwoven with narratives of colonialism, identity, and resistance. Scholars such as J. M. Nyoni (2015) argue that objects like this walking stick testify to the resilience of indigenous cultures amid external pressures. The stick not only represents the craftsmanship of the Shona people but also serves as a reminder of their historical struggles and cultural continuity.

The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences has implemented an ethnographic collection management system aimed at preserving and interpreting cultural artifacts effectively. This system follows best practices outlined by museum studies scholars like S. D. M. Chevalier (2019), emphasizing the importance of provenance research, conservation techniques, and community engagement.

The museum's approach includes detailed documentation of each artifact, ensuring that the history and significance of objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick are accurately represented. Moreover, the museum engages with local communities, promoting participatory practices in the curation process. This aligns with the views of K. B. M. Moyo (2018), who advocates for inclusive museum practices that honor the voices of the communities from which these artifacts originate.

However, challenges persist. Limited funding and resources can hinder the museum's ability to fully implement these practices. As highlighted by L. S. Nyanga (2021), the sustainability of such initiatives relies on securing partnerships with international organizations and local stakeholders to enhance the museum's capacity for conservation and education.

In conclusion, the Mkwati Walking Stick is more than a functional object; it is a vessel of cultural memory and identity. Its provenance and biography reflect the intricate tapestry of Zimbabwean history, emphasizing the importance of understanding artifacts within their cultural contexts. The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences' ethnographic collection management system, while commendable in its efforts to preserve and interpret such artifacts, must continually evolve to meet the challenges of cultural preservation. Engaging with scholars and local communities remains essential for the sustainable management of Zimbabwe's rich cultural heritage.

1.2 Background of the study

The Mkwati walking stick is not merely a functional object; it serves as a cultural artefact that is rich in history and significance, reflecting the traditions and values of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The study of this object at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences reveals insights into its provenance and biography, highlighting its importance in understanding both individual identity and broader social narratives within Zimbabwean society.

Walking sticks have served various roles across different cultures, acting as tools for support and symbols of status, authority, and cultural identity. In many African societies, including that of the Shona, walking sticks are not only practical objects but also carry deep symbolic meanings.

Among the Shona, walking sticks are often associated with leadership and wisdom, typically held by elders or chiefs during social gatherings and ceremonies. They symbolize respect and the passage of knowledge from one generation to the next (Chikowero, 2015). The Mkwati

walking stick exemplifies these values, often intricately carved with motifs that tell stories of ancestry and lineage, thereby functioning as a visual narrative of the individual's life.

Understanding the provenance of the Mkwati walking stick involves tracing its history of ownership and the context of its collection. Provenance plays a crucial role in ascertaining the object's authenticity, cultural significance, and the ethical considerations surrounding its display in a museum setting.

The Mkwati walking stick was acquired by the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences during the mid-20th century, a time marked by an increased Western interest in African artefacts. This period was characterized by colonial dynamics, where many indigenous objects were collected, often without fully understanding or appreciating their cultural significance (Ndoro, 2004).

The acquisition of the Mkwati walking stick reflects these complex histories. It was collected during a time when Western museums aimed to showcase African heritage, sometimes resulting in the misinterpretation of the objects' meanings (Houghton, 2002). The museum's role in this context is pivotal, as it must navigate the legacy of colonialism while striving to represent the narratives of the communities from which these objects originate.

Provenance research is vital in uncovering the journey of the Mkwati walking stick. Museum archives, collector notes, and oral histories contribute to understanding its past. Records may reveal the original collector's motivations, the socio-political context during its collection, and the significance attributed to it by both the collector and the Shona community (Zimunya, 2009).

The biography of an object encompasses its life story, including its creation, use, and the meanings ascribed to it over time. The Mkwati walking stick's biography is intertwined with narratives from the Shona culture and the historical developments of Zimbabwe.

The creation of the Mkwati walking stick involves skilled craftsmanship, often characterized by traditional techniques passed down through generations. Artisans typically carve the sticks from indigenous hardwoods, employing intricate designs that reflect cultural motifs and symbols (Campbell, 2004). These motifs may represent local fauna, ancestral spirits, or significant life events, serving both aesthetic and communicative purposes.

Functionally, the Mkwati walking stick provides support and stability, particularly for the elderly or those in leadership positions. However, its use extends beyond mere practicality; it is often a central element in cultural ceremonies and rituals, embodying the wisdom and

authority of the bearer (Chikowero, 2015). During social interactions, the stick acts as a focal point, symbolizing the values and traditions of the community.

The socio-political landscape of Zimbabwe has undergone significant transformations, influencing the context in which the Mkwati walking stick is understood. The post-colonial era has seen a resurgence of interest in indigenous cultures, prompting museums to re-evaluate their roles in representing these narratives. The Mkwati walking stick, therefore, is not only a remnant of the past but also a symbol of cultural resilience and identity in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The study of the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences provides a multifaceted understanding of its significance as an object, its provenance, and its biography. It stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Shona people and the complexities surrounding the collection and display of Indigenous artefacts. As museums continue to confront the legacies of colonialism, the Mkwati walking stick remains a vital resource for understanding the intricate interplay between culture, identity, and history in Zimbabwe.

1.3 Purpose of the study

This study aims to evaluate the Ethnographic Collection Management System (ECMS) of the Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, focusing mainly on object, provenance, and biography.

1.4 Statement of the problem

The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZHMS) houses diverse ethnographic collections rich in potential biographies and provenance. However, there are information and process gaps in the ethnographic collection management system concerning the Mkwati walking stick, which may hinder the effective preservation, documentation, accessibility, and interpretation of this object. One such glaring gap is attributed to the exclusion of communities in the curation of ethnographic collections (Chipangura, 2015; Moyo, 2018). The Mkwati walking stick was acquired before Zimbabwe's independence in 1965 without adequate biographical or provenance detail. The colonial-era collection methods primarily served the interests of the minority white settler population (Coombes, 1994; Chikowero, 2015). Additionally, without a thorough understanding of the current system's limitations, it is difficult to implement improvements or fill these gaps in managing ethnographic collections (Jenkins, 2016; Sarr &

Savoy, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the existing ethnographic management system at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences to identify areas of improvement and make recommendations for the long-term conservation and interpretation of this invaluable and culturally significant object.

1.5 Research objectives

The following research objectives will be addressed;

1. To document the provenance of the Mkwati Walking Stick.
2. To explore how the Mkwati Walking Stick reflects the cultural beliefs, leadership roles, and social values of its originating community.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the collection management system in preserving and presenting the Mkwati Walking Stick.

1.6 Research questions

1. What are the detailed provenance records of the Mkwati Walking Stick, and how do they trace its historical journey and ownership?
2. In what ways does the Mkwati Walking Stick embody the cultural practices, beliefs, and social dynamics of the community it originates from?
3. How effective are the current collection management practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in preserving the Mkwati Walking Stick's cultural context and ensuring its accessibility for research and public education?

1.7 Assumptions of the study

The walking stick is presumed to hold cultural and historical importance for the community it originates from, reflecting social status, tradition, or craftsmanship. It is also assumed that the provenance records associated with the walking stick are accurate and well-documented, providing insights into its origin, ownership, and journey. The physical condition and materials of the walking stick are assumed to be preserved adequately, allowing for proper evaluation and analysis. The study also believes that there exists an established framework for interpreting ethnographic objects that considers the perspectives of the originating community. There's also an assumption that the museum's collection management practices adhere to ethical standards, ensuring the proper care and contextualization of the walking stick. The study presumes that

there is potential for meaningful engagement with the community related to the walking stick, fostering dialogue about its significance.

1.8 Significance of the study

The impetus for examining the Mkwati walking stick within the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences stemmed from a commitment to understanding how cultural artefacts embody and convey historical narratives, particularly those related to colonial resistance and spiritual heritage. This study explored the intersection of indigenous cultural practices and modern museum curation, using the Mkwati walking stick as a focal point. The Mkwati walking stick, associated with Sekuru Mkwati, a significant figure in Zimbabwe's anti-colonial history, is a tangible link to the nation's past struggles and spiritual traditions. Its journey from colonial appropriation to repatriation and eventual display in a national museum highlights the complexities of preserving and honouring cultural heritage. Notably, the conditions set by Mkwati's descendants for its exhibition, such as specific rituals and handling protocols, underscore the importance of respecting Indigenous customs within institutional settings. This research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on decolonizing museum practices by emphasizing the need for integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into artefact curation and management. By focusing on the Mkwati walking stick, the study underscored the significance of culturally informed practices in preserving the integrity and authenticity of historical artefacts. Such an approach not only honours the cultural and spiritual significance of the artefact but also fosters a more inclusive and accurate representation of Zimbabwe's rich heritage within museum spaces.

1.9 Delimitations of the study

This evaluation explicitly addresses the Mkwati Walking Stick, which limits the scope of this single object and its unique historical and cultural context. Other artefacts within the museum's collection are not considered, even though they may provide valuable insights into broader themes of ethnographic preservation. The analysis is confined to the Shona culture and the historical significance of the Mkwati Walking Stick within that specific community. This does not encompass the diverse ethnic groups and cultures represented in Zimbabwe, thereby narrowing the discussion of ethnographic diversity. The provenance and biography focus

primarily on the late 19th to early 20th centuries, which excludes earlier histories or post-colonial developments that may also affect the understanding of the walking stick's significance. The evaluation relies on existing scholarly literature and museum documentation, which means it does not include primary research or interviews with community members or curators. This limits the perspectives in assessing the artefact's significance and management practices.

1.0 Limitations of the study

The historical records of the Mkwati Walking Stick may be incomplete or fragmented, hindering a comprehensive understanding of its provenance. Gaps in documentation can hinder the full narrative of the object's journey from creation to museum display. The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences faces financial and resource limitations, which can impede the implementation of ideal collection management practices. This affects conservation efforts and the ability to conduct thorough research on the artefacts. The management system may struggle with cultural sensitivity issues, particularly regarding the ownership and representation of Indigenous artefacts. Balancing academic interpretation with the perspectives of the communities from which the objects originate poses ongoing challenges. While the museum aims to engage with local communities, the effectiveness of such initiatives can be limited. Visitor engagement strategies may not fully reflect the diversity of perspectives within the community, potentially leading to a narrow understanding of the object's significance. The use of technology in cataloguing and displaying artefacts may not be fully realized due to infrastructure challenges. Limited access to digital platforms can hinder the museum's ability to effectively reach broader audiences and share information about the Mkwati Walking Stick.

1.11 Definition of key terms

Object- Pearce (1995) denotes that it is a material created or modified by human agency and has cultural significance. According to Appadurai (1986), an object is a thing that has been invested with meaning and value through social and cultural processes.

Provenance – According to Miller (1998), it encompasses the entire history of an object from its creation to its current location, including all owners, exhibitions, and transformations. Gosden and Marshall (1999) denote that the documentation of an object's origins, history, and subsequent ownership provides a framework for understanding its cultural significance.

Biography- Latour (2005) states that it is an actor-network that maps the associations and relationships between objects, people, and institutions. It is the critical concept in understanding the material and cultural lives of objects, revealing their complex histories and meanings (Tilley 1999).

Museum- The International Council of Museums (ICOM) (2019) states that it is a permanent institution that conserves and exhibits artefacts and works of art for purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.

1.12 Dissertation Outline

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This is an introductory chapter that focuses on giving an overview of the study. It outlines how the study will be carried out. The statement problem of the study is discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

This chapter aims to explore literature concerning the object, provenance, and biography of the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. It seeks to give a detailed discussion highlighting critical arguments on the Mkwati walking stick, bringing out the glaring information gaps on the object, provenance, and biography.

Chapter 3 - Data collection techniques and methodology of the research

This chapter highlights how the study was carried out. It will also reveal the techniques used in carrying out the research, as well as the methods used in gathering the data from the field.

Chapter 4 - Data analysis and presentation

In this chapter, the data gathered during the fieldwork is going to be analysed and presented.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter is mostly concerned with discussing the aspects that arise from chapter four. This chapter is mainly a summary of the whole study. The researcher would then make recommendations on the identified problems,

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The study of object provenance and biography in museum collections has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the field of ethnographic collections. The Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) offers a compelling case study of how object provenance, cultural history, and biographical narratives intersect within museum collections. This dissertation evaluates the ethnographic collection management system of the Mkwati Walking Stick, focusing on the global, African, and Zimbabwean perspectives on the issues of object provenance, its role in museum practices, and the significance of object biography.

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 Object Biography Theory (Kopytoff 1986): A Framework for Understanding Material Culture.

The Object Biography Theory, introduced by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986), is a lens through which objects are seen as active participants in shaping cultural narratives. Unlike traditional views of objects as passive items displayed or preserved in museums, this theory posits that objects have a "life cycle" or "biography," during which their meanings, uses, and value are shaped by the contexts in which they exist. According to Kopytoff (1986), objects pass through various stages of significance depending on the social and cultural contexts in which they are placed. The theory emphasizes that objects have a history intertwined with the people and societies that create, use, and interact with them. This framework is particularly beneficial when studying objects like the Mkwati walking stick, which carries deep cultural, spiritual, and political significance across different historical contexts.

2.2.2 The Mkwati Walking Stick: From Sacred Artifact to Colonial Trophy

The Mkwati walking stick serves as an ideal example of how object biography plays out in the context of ethnographic collection management. Originally crafted as a sacred object by the Shona people, the walking stick was used by Mkwati, a spiritual medium who played a crucial role in the resistance against British colonialism during the late 19th century (Tandfonline,

2025). For the Shona community, Mkwati's walking stick was not just a practical tool, but a deeply spiritual artefact used during religious rituals and acts of divination. The carvings on the walking stick symbolized a link between the physical and spiritual realms, marking it as an important cultural object tied to ancestral communication and resistance to foreign rule.

However, during the colonial period, the walking stick was appropriated by colonial authorities, symbolizing the disruption and destruction of indigenous cultural practices. The stick was confiscated by Robert Baden-Powell, a British military officer and the founder of the Boy Scouts, during his military campaigns in Southern Africa. Much like other African artefacts of the time, the Mkwati walking stick was removed from its cultural and spiritual context and placed within Western collections, stripped of its meaning and reinterpreted as a curiosity or a trophy of colonial conquest (Herald, 2025). This appropriation aligns with the broader colonial mindset, where African objects were often seen as symbols of a "primitive" culture rather than valuable components of living spiritual traditions. Thus, the walking stick transitioned from being a sacred object of resistance to an ethnographic specimen in a colonial collection, reflecting the broader dynamics of colonial exploitation and cultural appropriation.

2.2.3 Repatriation and the Restoration of Meaning

The biography of the Mkwati walking stick did not end with its removal from Zimbabwe. The repatriation of the walking stick to Zimbabwe in 1998 marked a significant chapter in its life cycle, as the object's return was viewed as a form of restitution, not only of the physical object but also of its cultural and spiritual significance (Tandfonline, 2025). Upon its return, the walking stick was reintegrated into the cultural practices of the Shona people, where it regained its status as a powerful symbol of spiritual authority and resistance. This phase of its biography illustrates how objects are re-contextualized when they return to their communities of origin. The Mkwati walking stick, once disconnected from its cultural heritage, was once again imbued with its original meaning, serving as a focal point for spiritual practices and a symbol of cultural resilience.

In this sense, the repatriation of the Mkwati walking stick also speaks to broader efforts in postcolonial Zimbabwe to reclaim cultural artifacts that were taken during the colonial period. Repatriation not only allows for the return of physical objects but also facilitates the restoration of cultural memory and identity that was disrupted by colonialism. As noted by scholars in the

field of decolonial museology, the act of repatriation is not only about returning objects to their rightful owners but also about healing cultural wounds and fostering national pride (Chipangura, 2015). The Mkwati walking stick's return to Zimbabwe thus serves as a powerful symbol of the country's ongoing struggle to reclaim its cultural heritage and assert its postcolonial identity.

2.2.4 Tracing the Life Cycle of the Mkwati Walking Stick: Object Biography in Practice.

Applying Object Biography Theory to the Mkwati walking stick enables a deeper understanding of its life cycle, illustrating how its meaning evolved as it moved through different contexts. The walking stick's biography began with its creation by a skilled artisan, not merely as a functional object but as an embodiment of the Shona people's spiritual beliefs and resistance against colonial forces. Its first phase as a sacred object for Mkwati marked its cultural significance within a specific community, deeply connected to ancestral traditions.

The second phase of its biography occurred when the walking stick was removed from its community and placed in a colonial context, where it was viewed as a curiosity rather than a sacred object. The colonial appropriation of the walking stick reflects how objects were often stripped of their cultural significance and reinterpreted as symbols of colonial power. However, in its third phase, the object was repatriated and reintegrated into Zimbabwean society, where it regained its role as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and spiritual authority. Each of these phases represents a different chapter in the walking stick's life, highlighting how its meaning was shaped by the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it existed.

2.2.5 The Role of Museums in Managing Object Biography.

Museums play a critical role in managing the biographies of objects like the Mkwati walking stick. However, effective collection management requires more than just the preservation of physical artifacts; it requires understanding the cultural, historical, and political contexts that shape the meaning of these objects. In the case of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, there is a need for more robust collection management systems that document not only the physical attributes of objects but also their provenance and the narratives surrounding them. This is where Object Biography Theory can be invaluable, as it encourages curators to trace the full life cycle of an object and to understand its evolving meaning over time.

In particular, the museum can apply this theory to better document the Mkwati walking stick's complex history, including its creation, appropriation, and eventual repatriation. Provenance research is also essential in ensuring that objects like the Mkwati walking stick are accurately documented and understood within their cultural and historical contexts (Jenkins, 2016). By employing Object Biography Theory alongside these practices, museums can create more comprehensive, ethical, and culturally sensitive approaches to collection management.

2.3 Reviewing International Literature on the Ethnographic Collection Management System of the Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences

Ethnographic collection management has undergone significant transformation in recent years, with a growing emphasis on inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and responsiveness to the legacies of colonialism in museums worldwide. The Mkwati walking stick, a potent symbol of anti-colonial resistance and cultural identity in Zimbabwe, offers a unique opportunity to explore how such objects are handled within contemporary museum practices. This literature review synthesizes international scholarship in key areas such as object biography, provenance research, digital documentation, and decolonial curatorial practices, offering insights that can inform and enrich the management of ethnographic collections like the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS).

2.3.1 Object biography and symbolism in museum collections

The concept of object biography, introduced by Kopytoff (1986), is pivotal in understanding the evolving significance of objects within different cultural and historical contexts. This approach views objects as dynamic entities that acquire new meanings as they pass through different stages of their existence, shaped by the social, political, and cultural forces they encounter. The Mkwati walking stick, originally a functional object, transcended its utilitarian role to become a powerful symbol of Zimbabwe's struggle for independence and resistance against colonial oppression. Its significance, therefore, evolves in tandem with the changing socio-political climate of Zimbabwe.

Gosden and Marshall (1999) further support this view by emphasizing that objects should not be considered as isolated artifacts but should be interpreted through their "life histories," which include their past uses, owners, and the changing meanings they acquire over time. In the case

of the Mkwati walking stick, its transformation from a personal tool into a national symbol highlights the importance of understanding its shifting roles within Zimbabwean society. This dynamic perspective can guide the curation of the walking stick at ZMHS, ensuring that its representation reflects its evolving significance from a functional object to a key icon of resistance.

International museums have increasingly adopted object-biography methods to enhance the depth and context of their ethnographic collections. For instance, the British Museum's Living with Gods exhibit demonstrated how religious artifacts were interpreted through evolving user narratives and shifting cultural symbolism (MacGregor, 2017). ZMHS could take inspiration from such approaches by framing the Mkwati walking stick not just as a static historical artifact but as a living, evolving object with deep cultural and political resonance. This approach would highlight its role in Zimbabwe's struggle for independence and the broader anti-colonial movement, illustrating its enduring cultural significance.

2.3.2 Provenance and ethical collection practices

The issue of provenance, the study of the origin and ownership history of an object—has become a central concern in modern museum practice, especially in relation to objects collected during colonial times. Establishing clear and transparent provenance is essential to ensuring the ethical management of museum collections and addressing the complex histories of exploitation and conflict that often surround colonial-era artifacts. According to Jenkins (2016), effective provenance research is critical to ensuring curatorial integrity and maintaining public trust in museum institutions. In the case of the Mkwati walking stick, the provenance is currently unclear, and this gap in documentation is not unique to Zimbabwe. Museums in Europe, such as the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, have faced similar challenges in providing clear provenance for African objects, which has led to renewed debates about repatriation and the need for greater transparency in collection practices (Savoy, 2018).

International efforts to develop more robust provenance frameworks, such as the Benin Dialogue Group's work on collaborative research with source communities, underscore the importance of engaging with communities to reconstruct the histories of objects (Hickley, 2020). By adopting similar collaborative approaches, ZMHS can engage local communities in tracing the Mkwati walking stick's history, exploring its journey into the museum collection, and addressing any ethical concerns that arise from its acquisition. Such practices not only

ensure greater transparency but also provide a more nuanced and culturally respectful understanding of the walking stick's origins and significance.

Incorporating local stakeholders in the provenance process is crucial not only for ethical reasons but also for creating a more inclusive narrative surrounding the object. This participatory approach to collection management strengthens the bond between the museum and the community, fostering a sense of shared ownership and responsibility in the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage.

2.3.3 Digitization and technological integration

Digitization has become an essential tool for enhancing the management, preservation, and accessibility of ethnographic collections. Museums worldwide, including the Smithsonian Institution, have implemented digital collection systems that link visual, textual, and oral data to individual artifacts. This technological integration enriches the engagement with these objects, allowing for a deeper understanding of their cultural and historical contexts (Parry, 2007). The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences is also making strides in this direction, having transitioned from manual to digital systems in 2024 with support from the U.S. Embassy (TechZim, 2024). This shift aligns with global trends in the museum sector and offers new opportunities for documenting and disseminating Zimbabwe's cultural heritage.

Digitization is more than just an administrative tool; it can also serve an interpretive function. Cameron and Kenderdine (2007) argue that technology should not only manage data but should enhance the depth of interpretation. For the Mkwati walking stick, a digital archive could include photographs, oral histories, and community narratives, providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the object's cultural significance. This approach ensures that the digital representation of the walking stick is as meaningful and culturally rich as its physical form. Furthermore, digitization opens up new possibilities for global access to Zimbabwe's heritage, making it available to scholars, researchers, and diaspora communities' worldwide, facilitating cross-cultural exchange and research.

Digitization also facilitates greater accessibility and preservation. By creating an easily accessible digital archive of the Mkwati walking stick, the museum ensures that this important cultural artifact is safeguarded for future generations. The digital archive would also provide a platform for continued engagement with the object, allowing its narrative to evolve over time through contributions from various communities and scholars.

2.3.4 Decolonial and Postcolonial Curatorial Practices

A growing body of international scholarship has called for the decolonization of museum practices, urging institutions to move away from Eurocentric perspectives and embrace indigenous knowledge systems and voices. Scholars such as Lonetree (2012) and Coombes (1994) emphasize the need for museums to transform from colonial archives into spaces where indigenous histories, voices, and perspectives are honored. In this context, decolonial museology challenges the traditional narratives that have often marginalized or misrepresented the experiences of colonized peoples. The Iziko Museums in South Africa have exemplified this shift by rethinking the display of colonial-era artifacts through collaborative curation, involving local communities in interpreting and presenting their cultural heritage (Gibson, 2019).

The Mkwati walking stick presents an ideal opportunity for ZMHS to explore decolonial curatorial practices. Rather than simply presenting the object as a relic of the past, the museum could reframe it as a powerful symbol of indigenous resistance and resilience. This would not only serve to honor the object's historical role in Zimbabwe's struggle for independence but also position it as a living testament to the ongoing relevance of anti-colonial memory in the contemporary era. By doing so, the museum would align with broader international efforts to decolonize museums and ensure that indigenous voices are given prominence in the interpretation of cultural heritage.

Moreover, the global discourse on restitution, particularly about African artifacts held in European museums, has highlighted the ethical importance of reconsidering the ownership and representation of cultural objects (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Although the Mkwati walking stick is already housed in Zimbabwe, the ethical imperative remains: its presentation must reflect the values and experiences of the communities it represents, taking into account both historical injustices and contemporary significance.

2.4 Reviewing African Literature on the Ethnographic Collection Management System of the Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences

In recent years, African scholarship and museum practices have increasingly focused on rethinking how ethnographic collections are managed, with an emphasis on recognizing

indigenous knowledge systems, addressing colonial legacies, and ensuring ethical representation. The Mkwati walking stick, a powerful symbol of resistance and cultural identity in Zimbabwe, provides a pertinent case study through which to examine how museum practices can shift to better reflect African perspectives. This essay delves into African literature on museum practices, examining key issues such as object biography, provenance, decolonization, and the role of digitization in managing the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS).

2.4.1 Object, biography, and Cultural Reinterpretation

The concept of object biography is crucial in understanding the multifaceted lives of cultural artifacts, especially in African contexts where objects are often imbued with evolving meanings that reflect dynamic cultural practices. The object biography framework allows museum curators to view artifacts not as static displays but as living symbols whose significance changes over time depending on social and cultural contexts. For instance, Chipangura (2015) highlights how the Mutare Museum in Zimbabwe has begun incorporating local narratives into its ethnographic displays, moving away from Eurocentric interpretations and instead prioritizing indigenous perspectives. This shift helps museums position objects as active elements in cultural storytelling, rather than relics of the past.

When applied to the Mkwati walking stick, this approach allows the object to be seen as a physical artifact, an emblem of anti-colonial resistance, and a symbol of national identity. The walking stick, once used by Mkwati, a key figure in Zimbabwe's resistance to British colonialism, serves as a point of connection to a broader historical and cultural struggle. Framing the walking stick in this way transforms it from a mere artifact into a living testimony of Zimbabwe's journey toward independence and cultural restoration, emphasizing its ongoing importance in Shona heritage and national pride.

2.4.2 Provenance and Ethical Research in Collection Practices

Provenance research plays an essential role in understanding the journeys that ethnographic objects have taken, particularly those removed from their communities during colonial rule. This process involves investigating the history of how an object came into a museum's collection, which is especially critical in the case of objects that were appropriated or looted under colonial regimes. In the case of the Mkwati walking stick, Chipangura and Chipangura

(2020) discuss the significance of collaborative provenance research, such as that undertaken at Manchester Museum, where engagement with local communities revealed complex narratives surrounding the acquisition of objects like Zulu beadwork. By applying similar research methods to the Mkwati walking stick, curators at ZMHS could uncover the object's colonial past, including how it was removed from Zimbabwe and its subsequent transformation into a museum piece.

This process of examining provenance is part of a larger movement in the museum world toward more transparent and ethical collection practices. Kingdon (2024) argues that museums need to engage more deeply with source communities to ensure that the history and cultural significance of objects are accurately reflected. In the case of the Mkwati walking stick, understanding its acquisition and the ethical issues surrounding its original removal could help to reframe its meaning, shedding light on the ongoing debates over restitution and the return of looted heritage to African communities.

2.4.3 Decolonization and the reclaiming of cultural narratives

Decolonization in African museums involves a fundamental shift in how cultural artifacts are interpreted and presented. Chipangura (2015) describes the Marange Community Museum in Zimbabwe as an example of a decolonial museological project that uses indigenous ontologies to interpret objects. This perspective rejects the Eurocentric frameworks that have traditionally dominated museums, instead privileging local ways of knowing and understanding the world. A similar decolonial approach can be applied to the Mkwati walking stick, which, instead of being reduced to a colonial trophy, can be framed as a symbol of Shona resistance and cultural sovereignty.

In line with the ideas presented by Lusaka (2023), decolonization in museums requires a radical reconfiguration of heritage practices to reflect national identities and indigenous voices. For the Mkwati walking stick, this could mean interpreting the object not merely as a tool of resistance but as a pivotal component of Shona cultural heritage, one that continues to resonate with contemporary Zimbabwean society. In addition to reshaping the interpretation of the walking stick, the decolonial process would also involve rethinking its place in the museum. It would no longer be treated solely as a museum object but as a living part of the cultural fabric, with relevance in both historical and modern contexts.

Furthermore, decolonization involves addressing issues of restitution, the return of cultural objects taken during colonial times. In the case of the Mkwati walking stick, its return to Zimbabwe can be seen as part of the broader movement to reclaim stolen cultural property. Decolonizing the stick's display and interpretation would involve engaging with local communities to ensure that it is returned to its rightful cultural and spiritual context, allowing for a more meaningful interaction with the object that goes beyond its status as a colonial trophy.

2.4.4 Digitization and community involvement

Digitization is increasingly recognized as a critical tool for preserving African heritage, enabling objects to be documented, shared, and studied in ways that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries. The Iziko Museums of South Africa, for example, have demonstrated the power of digital archives to connect ethnographic objects to their historical, social, and political contexts (Iziko Museums, n.d). Through digitization, objects like the Mkwati walking stick can be preserved for future generations while also making them accessible to a global audience, including Zimbabweans in the diaspora.

For the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, digitizing the Mkwati walking stick could involve creating a digital archive that includes high-quality images of the object, oral histories, archival documents, and contextual information about its significance in Zimbabwean history. Such an archive would not only ensure the object's physical preservation but also provide a platform for continued scholarly and community engagement. Digitization can serve as an interactive tool, allowing local communities and the broader public to engage with the object in meaningful ways, contributing their own perspectives and stories.

Schorch et al. (2019) emphasize that digitization must be seen as more than just a means of preserving objects; it should also be a tool for interpretation and storytelling. For the Mkwati walking stick, this means that digitization should not only serve administrative purposes but also create a space for the object to be understood in relation to broader historical and cultural narratives. By embracing digital technologies, ZMHS could create an ongoing dialogue around the walking stick, highlighting its significance as a cultural and national symbol that continues to resonate with Zimbabweans today.

2.4.5 African Agency in Colonial Collecting Practices

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the agency of African actors in shaping the colonial collecting process. Kingdon (2024) explores the role of African artists, traders, and intermediaries who were often actively involved in the collection and exchange of cultural artifacts, complicating the simplistic narrative of European colonial collectors and passive African subjects. Recognizing this agency offers a more nuanced understanding of how artifacts like the Mkwati walking stick may have entered colonial collections.

In the case of the Mkwati walking stick, acknowledging African agency can challenge the assumption that all such objects were simply taken by colonial powers. It raises the possibility that local intermediaries, perhaps cultural brokers or political figures, may have been involved in the circulation of such objects. Understanding the role of African agency complicates the historical narrative around these objects and can inform contemporary discussions about ownership, representation, and restitution in the context of museums.

2.5 Reviewing Zimbabwean Literature on the Ethnographic Collection Management System of the Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences

The Mkwati walking stick, a highly significant cultural artifact housed at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS), is not just a physical object but a symbol of spiritual authority, colonial appropriation, and postcolonial repatriation. The story of the Mkwati walking stick, which transitions from a sacred tool in Zimbabwe's traditional spiritual practices to an ethnographic object in a Western museum, offers profound insights into the dynamics of object biography, provenance, and the management of ethnographic collections. By tracing the life of this object, we explore broader themes related to Zimbabwe's colonial history, the ongoing legacy of colonialism, and contemporary efforts aimed at restoring cultural heritage to its rightful owners.

2.5.1 Object Description and Cultural Significance

The Mkwati walking stick is far more than just a utilitarian object; it is an emblem of spiritual and cultural authority within the Shona community. Historically, it was used by Mkwati, a prominent spirit medium who played a pivotal role in resisting British colonial rule during the late 19th century. Within the Shona tradition, spiritual mediums like Mkwati were believed to hold direct access to the ancestral realm, acting as intermediaries between the living and the spirits of the deceased. Therefore, the walking stick was not simply a tool for physical support but a sacred object integral to the spiritual practices of the Shona people. It played a vital role

in rituals, divination, and other spiritual ceremonies, facilitating communication between the living and their ancestors.

The Mkwati walking stick was carefully crafted with intricate carvings that symbolize the deep connection between the physical and spiritual worlds, representing a rich cultural and spiritual history. This makes the walking stick not just an ordinary artifact, but a key object in the social, political, and spiritual life of the Shona community. Objects like the Mkwati walking stick serve as powerful vessels of cultural meaning in African traditions, where material objects are often imbued with profound significance and are deeply interconnected with the customs and values of the people (Tandfonline, 2025).

2.5.2 Colonial Encounter and Appropriation

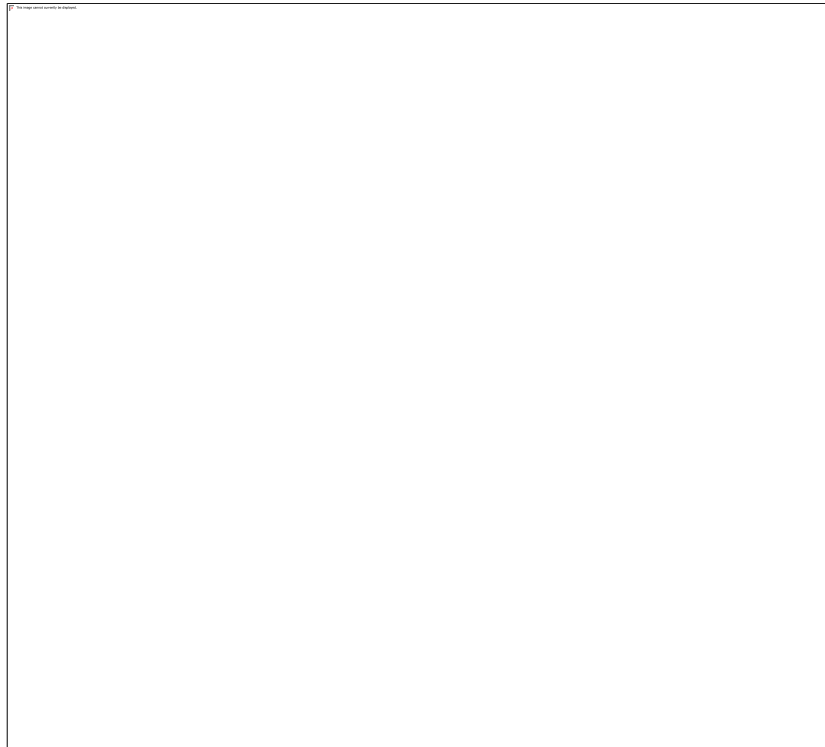
The onset of colonialism in Zimbabwe marked a period of profound disruption to indigenous spiritual practices and cultural expressions. British colonial authorities sought to impose their power by not only controlling the land but also suppressing the indigenous belief systems and spiritual practices that had long been a vital part of the Shona and other African communities. Under colonial rule, many indigenous religious practices were criminalized, and sacred objects like the Mkwati walking stick were seized as part of the broader colonial project to control and diminish indigenous culture. The Mkwati walking stick became one such object of colonial appropriation.

In the late 19th century, as part of the British colonial government's efforts to undermine indigenous religious practices, numerous ceremonial and spiritual objects were confiscated. The Mkwati walking stick was one of the many sacred items taken by colonial forces during this period. It was appropriated by Robert Baden-Powell, a British military officer and founder of the Boy Scouts movement, during his military campaigns in Southern Africa. Baden-Powell, like many colonial figures, saw African cultural artifacts not as sacred objects, but as curiosities or trophies to be collected. In this way, the Mkwati walking stick was removed from its cultural context and placed within a European collection, where its spiritual and cultural significance was effectively stripped away. This act of appropriation is reflective of the broader colonial attitude, which often treated African heritage as something to be controlled, collected, and studied rather than respected and preserved in its original cultural context (Herald, 2025).

In European collections, the walking stick was viewed purely through the lens of colonial curiosity, disconnected from its spiritual significance. It was categorized and displayed as an

ethnographic object, often alongside other artifacts that were regarded as cultural curiosities rather than as integral aspects of a living and evolving cultural heritage. This was typical of the colonial mindset, which often stripped objects of their cultural meaning and re-contextualized them within a framework that served the interests of the colonizers.

Table 1: Shows the colonial encounter and appropriation of the Mkwati walking stick.



2.5.3 Repatriation Efforts and Contemporary Significance

The repatriation of the Mkwati walking stick to Zimbabwe in 1998 represents a critical moment in the country's ongoing postcolonial efforts to reclaim its cultural heritage. The return of the walking stick was far more than just a symbolic gesture; it was an act of restitution aimed at restoring not only the object itself but also the cultural and spiritual connection it represented. The repatriation of the Mkwati walking stick fits into the broader context of Zimbabwe's efforts to recover and return artifacts that were wrongfully taken during the colonial period, and it has become a powerful symbol of the country's ongoing struggle to assert its cultural identity and reclaim autonomy over its heritage.

Upon its return, the walking stick was treated with great reverence, as traditional leaders and community members emphasized the importance of following cultural protocols. The walking

stick was not simply put on display as a museum piece but reintegrated into the cultural and spiritual practices of the Shona people. This act of repatriation was a powerful statement of Zimbabwe's commitment to restoring lost cultural heritage and addressing the historical injustices associated with colonial appropriation (Tandfonline, 2025).

The repatriation of the walking stick also carries deeper symbolic meaning for Zimbabwe. It represents an effort to heal the cultural and psychological wounds left by centuries of colonial exploitation. Moreover, the return of cultural artifacts like the Mkwati walking stick is a part of a larger, ongoing global movement where African nations, including Zimbabwe, are demanding the return of cultural heritage that was taken or looted during the colonial era. The act of repatriation is not just about returning an object; it is a process of reconciliation and healing, both within Zimbabwe and between former colonial powers and their former colonies (Herald, 2025).

2.5.4 Object Biography: Tracing the Stick's Life Cycle

The concept of object biography offers a framework for understanding how the life of an object evolves across time and different contexts. It traces the trajectory of an object from its creation, through its various uses and transformations, to its eventual recontextualization in new settings. The biography of the Mkwati walking stick illustrates how an object can embody multiple layers of meaning and significance depending on its cultural and historical context.

The Mkwati walking stick's biography begins with its creation by a skilled artisan, who crafted it not only as a physical object but as a medium of spiritual expression. As it passed into the hands of Mkwati, the walking stick became imbued with deeper meaning, representing his connection with the ancestors and his role as an intermediary for the community. It was not just a tool; it was a conduit for spiritual communication and a vital part of the community's spiritual and social life.

The stick's life takes a dramatic turn during the colonial period when it was seized by colonial authorities and removed from its original cultural context. During this period, the walking stick ceased to be a sacred object and became an ethnographic curiosity within Western collections. The object's meaning shifted as it was re-contextualized in the European museum setting, where it was seen through the lens of colonial curiosity, stripping it of its cultural and spiritual significance (Press.anu.edu.au, 2025).

Finally, the walking stick's return to Zimbabwe in 1998 marked a significant chapter in its biography. Repatriated to its original cultural context, the stick once again became an integral part of the Shona community's spiritual and cultural practices. This reintegration of the walking stick highlights the dynamic nature of object biography, where meaning is not fixed but evolves as objects move through different historical and cultural contexts. The Mkwati walking stick's biography underscores the idea that objects, over time, accumulate layers of significance, shaped by the lives they touch and the histories they witness (Press.anu.edu.au, 2025).

2.5.5 Challenges in Museum Documentation and Management

Effective museum documentation and management are essential for preserving the cultural and historical significance of objects like the Mkwati walking stick. However, in Zimbabwe and many other African countries, museums face significant challenges in maintaining accurate, comprehensive, and standardized records of their collections. These difficulties are compounded by inadequate funding, limited resources, and a lack of professional training in the museum sector.

The lack of proper documentation and record-keeping systems poses substantial challenges in provenance research, making it difficult to trace the origins and histories of objects like the Mkwati walking stick. Without clear documentation, efforts to return cultural artifacts or establish rightful ownership can be obstructed. To address these challenges, experts have emphasized the importance of developing more robust documentation systems that include detailed provenance information, contextual descriptions, and photographic records. Such improvements would not only enhance the management of ethnographic collections but also support efforts to reclaim and return cultural heritage to its rightful owners (Ajol.info, 2025)

2.6 Conclusion

The Mkwati walking stick serves as a powerful symbol of Zimbabwe's colonial past, its postcolonial efforts to reclaim cultural heritage, and the broader struggles for restitution of cultural artifacts across Africa. Through its biography, we can better understand the intersections between material culture, colonialism, and the contemporary pursuit of restitution. The stick's repatriation offers valuable insights into the significance of object biography and the ways in which objects can carry and transform meaning over time.

The repatriation of the Mkwati walking stick has allowed Zimbabweans to reconnect with a crucial part of their cultural heritage, while also contributing to global discussions around restitution and the legacies of colonialism. Addressing challenges related to museum documentation and embracing methodologies like object biography will play a critical role in preserving cultural heritage, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and fostering reconciliation. By understanding the complex histories embedded in objects like the Mkwati walking stick, museums can contribute to healing and restoring cultural narratives that were damaged by colonial exploitation.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The Mkwati walking stick, housed at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, holds significant cultural value, and understanding its provenance and biography is crucial for interpreting its historical, cultural, and social importance. The research methodology behind the museum's ethnographic collection management system aims to trace the object's origins, history, and evolving meaning over time. By adopting an ethnographic approach, the methodology seeks to uncover the various uses and cultural contexts of the walking stick, shedding light on its journey through different periods and the social narratives it carries. This research not only examines the object's physical history but also its broader cultural significance within the community.

3.2 Research design

Research design is a structured plan that outlines the methods and procedures for conducting a study, ensuring the research questions are addressed effectively. According to Creswell (2014), it is the plan or proposal to conduct research involving the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods. Neuman (2014) describes it as a blueprint for data collection, measurement, and analysis. It provides a framework that guides researchers in choosing appropriate methodologies, ensuring the study is valid and reliable and produces meaningful results.

The study employed a qualitative approach as ethnographic research would be appropriate for exploring the cultural and historical significance of the Mkwati Walking Stick. Ethnography on Collection Management Systems aims to understand the everyday life and practices of a community and the institution.

The research on the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences utilized a case study design, which was well-suited for an in-depth exploration of the object's significance in its cultural and historical context. This design allowed the researchers to focus closely on the walking stick as a unique artifact, tracing its origins, uses, and evolving meaning over time. By adopting this approach, the study aimed to uncover detailed insights into the walking stick's life cycle, from its creation to its present-day role within the museum collection.

In addition to the case study, the research also employed ethnographic methods, which were key to understanding the social and cultural dimensions of the walking stick. Through participant observation, interviews, and fieldwork with community members who had knowledge of the object, the researchers gathered valuable qualitative data. This ethnographic approach helped to build a comprehensive biography of the walking stick, revealing its cultural significance and the stories attached to it.

Furthermore, the study incorporated historical research methods to investigate the object's provenance. Archival research, along with the review of museum records and other historical documents, enabled the researchers to trace the walking stick's ownership and journey over time. This historical analysis provided crucial context to the object's role in different periods and cultures, offering a broader understanding of its significance.

By combining these methods, the research ensured a well-rounded and robust examination of the Mkwati walking stick, drawing on both qualitative insights and historical documentation to present a complete picture of the object's provenance and biography.

3.3 Population of the Study

The targeted population for this study consisted of the staff members of the Ethnography Department at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. This department is responsible for the curation, management, and preservation of ethnographic collections, including the Mkwati walking stick. The researcher specifically focused on individuals who are directly involved in the acquisition, documentation, interpretation, and exhibition of cultural artifacts.

The ethnography department staff was selected as the population for this study due to their in-depth knowledge of the museum's collection practices, historical records, and the broader cultural and social context surrounding the objects in the museum's care. The staff members' expertise includes but is not limited to, curatorial practices, provenance research, object conservation, and the maintenance of ethnographic records.

The researcher engaged with key staff members, including senior curators, archivists, and researchers, whose roles are pivotal in the collection management process. Additionally, conversations with junior staff involved in object handling and cataloguing were also incorporated to gain a holistic understanding of the museum's approach to ethnographic collections.

By focusing on this population, the study aimed to gather detailed insights into the management systems, challenges, and methodologies employed by the ethnography department in the context of object provenance and biography. Their professional experiences and institutional knowledge provided the critical data required for understanding how the Mkwati walking stick, and similar ethnographic objects, are researched, preserved, and interpreted within the museum setting.

3.4 Sampling

Sampling refers to selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population for research. Goodley (1984) defines a sample as a portion of the population studied to draw conclusions about the whole group. In this study, a sample was selected from the Ethnography Department

staff at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences to represent individuals involved in the curation and management of ethnographic collections.

Purposive sampling was used to select key informants with specific expertise relevant to the Mkwati walking stick. This non-random method was chosen to ensure that participants with detailed knowledge of the object's provenance, cultural significance, and museum practices were included. The sample consisted of curators, archivists, and researchers directly involved in the collection's management. This approach ensured that the researcher gathered rich, relevant data from knowledgeable staff members.

3.4.1 Sample size

The study was carried out at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human sciences. The sample size consisted of 10 people, who are Ethnographic curators responsible for the curation, management, and preservation of ethnographic collections, including the Mkwati walking stick.

3.4.2 Sampling Methods

Sampling methods are essential for selecting a representative subset of individuals or cases from a larger population for research purposes. In this study, the researcher employed non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, to ensure the selection of participants with the most relevant knowledge and expertise regarding the Mkwati walking stick. Unlike probability sampling, where each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected, non-probability sampling is based on specific criteria and allows for the intentional selection of individuals who can provide deep, meaningful insights into the study topic (Creswell, 2014).

Given the nature of the research, which required detailed information about the cultural significance, provenance, and biography of the Mkwati walking stick, purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate method. This type of sampling involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2002). The researcher targeted individuals within the Ethnography Department at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences who were directly involved in the management, documentation, and interpretation of ethnographic collections.

The use of purposive sampling ensured that the researcher gathered data from those who were most knowledgeable about the object, thus ensuring the collection of rich, accurate, and

insightful information. Since the purpose of the study was to explore the walking stick's cultural and historical importance, it was crucial to engage with individuals who had firsthand experience or expertise in the object's collection, preservation, and exhibition. By focusing on knowledgeable key informants, the researcher was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the object's biography and its significance within the museum context.

3.5 Methodology

The methodology employed in the research of the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences was a combination of ethnographic and historical research methods, designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the object's provenance, cultural significance, and historical context. This multi-layered approach enabled researchers to gain deep insights into both the tangible and intangible aspects of the walking stick, ensuring that it was understood not just as an artifact, but as a living piece of cultural heritage.

The research began with an ethnographic approach, which was central to exploring the object's role within the cultural and social frameworks of the community. Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, emphasizes the study of people and cultures through direct engagement and observation. In this case, the researcher focused on gathering information from individuals who had direct knowledge or experience with the Mkwati walking stick. This included conducting interviews with museum staff that is those who know information pertaining the Mkwati walking stick, thus the senior curators, whom could shed light on the walking stick's historical and cultural significance. The researcher also used participant observation to understand how the object was used and understood in everyday life, both in its original context and within the museum's collection. This ethnographic engagement allowed the research team to uncover the meanings and stories attached to the object, enriching the understanding of its biography and cultural importance.

In conjunction with the ethnographic methods, historical research played a critical role in tracing the provenance of the Mkwati walking stick. Provenance research aims to reconstruct the history of an object by investigating its ownership, origins, and movement over time. The researcher at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences conducted thorough archival research, examining museum records, acquisition documents, and other historical materials to trace the walking stick's path from its creation to its current status as a museum artifact. This historical analysis provided essential context for understanding how the walking stick was used

and valued in different periods, how it came to be part of the museum's collection, and its evolving cultural significance.

To tie these qualitative and historical methods together, the research adopted a case study design, which allowed for a focused, detailed examination of the Mkwati walking stick within the specific context of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. The case study design enabled the researchers to delve deeply into the object's individual history, investigating its life cycle from creation and use in the community to its eventual collection and display in the museum. This approach provided a nuanced, holistic view of the walking stick, incorporating both its material aspects and its symbolic meanings within a broader cultural and historical narrative.

While the primary focus was on qualitative data, the research also incorporated some quantitative methods to enrich the findings. For example, the cataloging of the walking stick's physical characteristics, its frequency of use, and its exhibition history in the museum added a layer of empirical data that supported the broader qualitative analysis. These quantitative elements allowed the researchers to establish patterns in the walking stick's use and display, further informing its biography and cultural context.

In conclusion, the methodology used in the research of the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences combined ethnographic and historical research methods, integrated through a case study design. This multifaceted approach provided a thorough understanding of the object's cultural, social, and historical significance, enriching the museum's collection and offering valuable insights into the life cycle of the object. The research method not only traced the object's physical history but also uncovered the deeper meanings and narratives associated with it, allowing for a holistic interpretation that respects both its tangible and intangible dimensions.

3.6 Data collection methods

3.6.1 Archival Research

The research began with in-depth archival work. Acquisition records, museum catalogues, and colonial-era administrative files housed at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences and the National Archives of Zimbabwe were analyzed to trace the walking stick's provenance. These documents provided insight into colonial collecting practices and the possible transfer of the object during or after the suppression of the First Chimurenga (Schmidt, 1992). Missionary

journals and ethnographic reports were also reviewed to identify references to ceremonial artefacts connected to Mkwati and his resistance movement.

3.6.2 Oral Histories and Interviews

Due to the colonial bias and incompleteness of written records, oral history was essential for uncovering alternative narratives and community knowledge (Nhemachena & Mavhunga, 2020). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with elders, chiefs, and traditional spiritual leaders in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. These informants provided rich oral accounts regarding the walking stick's role as a spiritual symbol, its ritual uses, and its connection to resistance leadership. These testimonies helped to frame the object not only as a historical artefact but also as a living symbol in local memory (Mashingaidze, 2013).

3.6.3 Fieldwork and Participant Observation

To better understand the context in which the Mkwati walking stick was originally used, the researcher undertook fieldwork in communities historically associated with Mkwati. Through participant observation, the researcher attended local ceremonies, witnessed traditional storytelling practices, and engaged with cultural rituals. This immersive approach allowed the researcher to connect material characteristics of the object to its spiritual and social functions (Bourdillon, 1990). Observations of the use of similar artefacts in rituals provided comparative insight into the symbolism of walking sticks as extensions of ancestral power and authority.

3.6.4 Comparative Object Analysis

To verify the authenticity and cultural significance of the Mkwati walking stick, a comparative analysis was carried out. This included examining walking sticks and similar objects in other museum collections, both locally and internationally. By comparing craftsmanship, materials, and stylistic features, the researcher was able to situate the object within broader Southern African material culture traditions (Spring, 1993). This method also illuminated shared symbolic patterns and regional variations, further grounding the object in its historical and geographical context.

3.7 Data validity and reliability

It refers to the extent to which the research accurately measures what it intends to measure. In the context of this study, validity was achieved by carefully selecting key informants with

specific expertise in the Mkwati walking stick and the museum's ethnographic collections. The researcher employed purposive sampling to ensure that the participants chosen were those most knowledgeable about the subject matter, thus increasing the likelihood that the data accurately reflected the object's cultural and historical significance. To further enhance validity, the researcher triangulated data sources by combining interviews with museum staff, archival research, and comparative analysis of similar objects from the museum's collection. This triangulation helped confirm the consistency of the information gathered and reduced potential biases or inaccuracies in the data (Creswell, 2014).

Data reliability, on the other hand, concerns the consistency and repeatability of the research findings. Reliability was addressed in this study through careful documentation of the research process, including detailed notes and consistent interview protocols. The researcher ensured that the same questions were asked to each participant and that the data collection methods were standardized. Additionally, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in a systematic manner to maintain consistency in the interpretation of responses. To further enhance reliability, the researcher also conducted member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review their responses and provide clarification if necessary. This process helped to ensure that the data collected was accurate and consistent over time.

3.8 Data Presentation and Analysis

Data presentation and analysis were fundamental in ensuring that the findings of the study were effectively communicated and interpreted. In this research, the data collected on the Mkwati walking stick were analyzed qualitatively to understand its provenance, historical context, and cultural significance. The analysis aimed to offer a comprehensive exploration of the object's biography within the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences.

To present the data clearly, the researcher organized it thematically, focusing on critical areas such as the walking stick's historical background, its role in cultural resistance, and the challenges involved in its preservation. Thematic analysis was used as the primary method for analyzing the data, as it enabled the identification and interpretation of patterns within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By analyzing recurring themes in interviews, archival records, and museum documentation, the researcher was able to uncover important insights into the walking stick's cultural and historical significance. One prominent theme that emerged

was the walking stick's role as a symbol of resistance during the First Chimurenga, which the researcher linked to broader historical narratives within the museum's collection.

The researcher employed triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings, cross-referencing various data sources, including interviews with museum staff, archival materials, and direct examination of similar objects in the museum collection. This strategy provided a more comprehensive understanding of the walking stick's role in the broader ethnographic context. Additionally, the researcher used visual aids, such as photographs of the walking stick, to complement the textual data and provide deeper context for the analysis. These visuals helped illustrate the object's symbolic and functional significance.

By using thematic analysis, triangulation, and incorporating visual materials, the researcher ensured that the data were represented accurately and enriched with diverse perspectives. The methods used in the data presentation and analysis contributed to a well-rounded understanding of the walking stick's cultural and historical value, thereby offering valuable insights into the field of ethnographic collection management.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations played a crucial role in ensuring that the research was conducted in a responsible and respectful manner. In this study, which focused on the Mkwati walking stick housed in the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, the researcher adhered to established ethical standards to maintain the integrity of the research process and protect the rights of all parties involved. The following aspects guided the study;

3.9.1 Informed consent

A primary ethical concern was ensuring informed consent. Before any interviews were conducted, the researcher made certain that all participants, including museum staff such as curators and archivists, fully understood the purpose of the study, their involvement, and how the collected data would be used. Participants were given detailed information about the study and were provided with an opportunity to ask questions. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences. This approach ensured that participants made informed decisions about their involvement in the study, aligning with the ethical principle of respecting individual autonomy.

3.9.2 Confidentiality

It was another significant ethical concern in this research. Given the sensitive nature of the information shared by museum staff and the cultural importance of the Mkwati walking stick, the researcher ensured that all personal and institutional data collected during the interviews remained confidential. The identities of the participants were anonymized in the study's findings, and the collected data were securely stored, accessible only to the researcher. This approach was crucial in safeguarding the privacy of participants and fostering an environment in which they could openly share their insights.

3.9.3 Cultural sensitivity

Additionally, the researcher was acutely aware of the need for cultural sensitivity when working with objects of historical and cultural significance, like the Mkwati walking stick. The object held profound cultural meaning, and the researcher ensured that the study was conducted with the utmost respect for the communities associated with the artifact. The researcher took great care to avoid misrepresenting or oversimplifying the cultural significance of the walking stick. Instead, the findings were presented in a way that acknowledged the deep historical context of the object, ensuring its cultural integrity was preserved.

3.9.4 Ethical guidelines

The study also followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. The museum had specific protocols for handling and displaying culturally sensitive objects, and the researcher adhered to these guidelines to ensure that the study did not interfere with the institution's practices or misrepresent the object. By following these institutional rules, the researcher maintained a respectful and professional relationship with the museum and ensured the accuracy and integrity of the research.

3.9.5 Ethical implications

Lastly, the researcher recognized the broader ethical implications of representing historical and cultural artifacts in public institutions such as museums. The study aimed to present the Mkwati walking stick's significance in a respectful and meaningful way, contributing to a deeper understanding of Zimbabwe's cultural heritage. The findings emphasized the importance of

viewing such objects not only as artifacts but also as symbols of historical memory, resistance, and identity.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology used to explore the provenance and cultural biography of the Mkwati walking stick housed at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. The study adopted a qualitative approach, relying on data collected through interviews, archival research, and object analysis. Purposive sampling was employed to select knowledgeable participants from the museum's ethnography department, ensuring relevant and informed data. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings, while ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity were strictly observed throughout the research process. Overall, the methods applied were aimed at producing a respectful, in-depth understanding of the object's historical and cultural value.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted the research design and methodology that was adopted by the study, sampling techniques, as well as the ethical considerations that informed the study. The ongoing chapter aims to present, analyze, and discuss the findings of the study on the ethnographic collection management system of the Mkwati Walking Stick on object, biography, and provenance at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. The discussion states the implications of the findings and their limitations, as well as the conclusions drawn. The study examined whether the Zimbabwe museum was an institution that embodies ethnographic collection management through a multi-method approach, including semi-structured interviews with participant observation and archival research. The chapter presents the answers to the following research questions;

1. What are the detailed provenance records of the Mkwati Walking stick, and how do they trace its historical journey and ownership?
2. In what ways does the Mkwati Walking Stick embody the cultural practices, beliefs, and social dynamics of the community it originates from?
3. How effective are the current collection management practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in preserving the Mkwati walking stick's cultural context and ensuring its accessibility for research and public education?

4.2 Presentation of information

This section presents information that was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Out of ten participants, only five were able to make it to the interview. The semi-structured interview was aimed at the Ethnography department curators who had knowledge and information pertaining to the history, provenance, biography, as well as the repatriation of the Mkwati Stick as an object. The group consisted of senior curators who took part in the handling of the Mkwati walking stick and the junior curators who are responsible for its management and conservation. In regard to the views on the Mkwati walking stick as an object, five out of five subscribed to

the view that the importance of the stick does not lie in the object but in the owner of the object. Having an ancient stick which was passed from an African messenger or spirit medium to a European notorious colonial administrator by the name Badin Powel, who in some books is described as the chief hangman as he was involved in the hanging of Africans who resisted the British occupation, then presents an object with an activity. The study was carried out within a period of a day at the ZHMS.

Table 2: Shows Demographic data response by participation.

Out of 10 curators only 5 were able to make it and answer the research questions as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Respondents by Participation

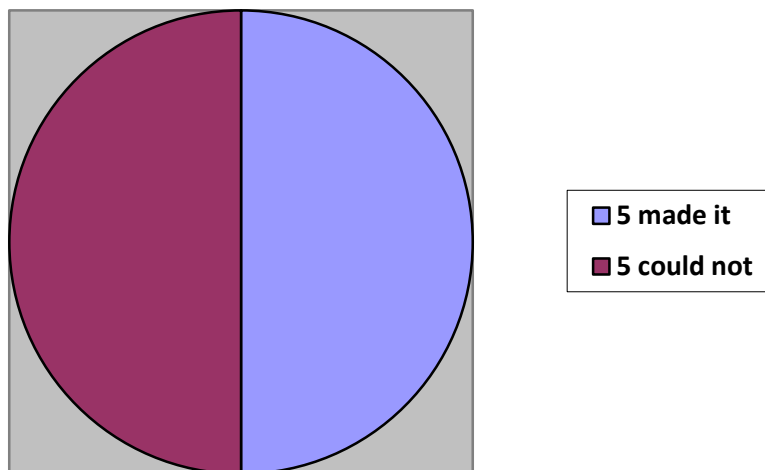
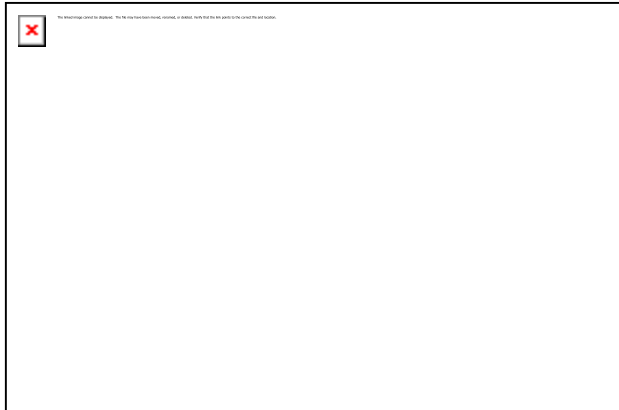


Table 3: Shows Demographic Data response by Gender

Gender composition is important in research. It is a key in ethnographic collection management at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences as it influences communication, decision making and adoption technologies.

Figure 2 Respondents by Gender



4.3 Provenance Records of the Mkwati Walking Stick and Its Historical Journey

The Origin and Acquisition of the Mkwati Walking Stick

The Mkwati Walking Stick is a distinctive cultural artifact with deep-rooted ties to traditional leadership and spiritual authority in Zimbabwean communities. This ornately crafted stick is more than a utilitarian object; it is emblematic of power, guidance, and spiritual influence within its community of origin. Museum curators have traced its acquisition to the early 20th century, suggesting it was exchanged with a local community leader.

“The Mkwati Walking Stick was acquired by the museum in the early 20th century, through an exchange with a local community leader. The exact date is somewhat unclear, but it is believed to have entered the museum's collection during a period of increasing colonial interest in African artifacts,” said curator A.

The curatorial team acknowledges that the walking stick likely became part of the museum’s collection when European institutions were actively collecting African objects, often under informal or unequal circumstances.

“We have some documentation that points to the walking stick being part of a larger collection of objects that were transferred to the museum, but detailed records from the acquisition period are sparse,” curator B remarked.

Despite incomplete provenance records, the museum has been able to confirm that the walking stick was once associated with a prominent regional leader.

“It is believed that the stick belonged to a spirit medium who held a high rank within his community. This connection gives us important insight into the object’s status and role,” said curator A.

Historical Journey of the Mkwati Walking Stick

Understanding the historical journey of the Mkwati Walking Stick is essential in reconstructing its full narrative and determining how it ultimately came to be part of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. Like many ethnographic artifacts, this walking stick has likely passed through multiple hands and contexts, some documented, others not.

Following its acquisition, the object was not immediately put on display.

“After its acquisition by the museum, the walking stick was initially stored in our storage facility for a period of time before being displayed in the gallery,” explained curator C.

Early records concerning its exhibition are incomplete.

“It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how it was displayed initially, as early cataloging practices were not as comprehensive as they are today,” curator C added.

This gap in display records is a familiar issue in museum practice, particularly when dealing with items acquired in the early to mid-20th century.

Curator D provided more insight into the artifact's exposure beyond Zimbabwe.

“At one point, we know the walking stick was part of a traveling exhibit that toured various institutions in Europe in the mid-20th century. This would have significantly broadened its exposure, but we have limited records on its specific locations during that time.”

The walking stick’s participation in international exhibits reflects the broader colonial practice of circulating African cultural objects through European museums and galleries, though precise documentation of this process is scarce.

Despite these challenges, curators remain committed to uncovering the artifact's full history.

"We are actively working to uncover more about the walking stick's past, using both our internal records and collaborating with other institutions and researchers who may have documented it," curator C noted.

Ownership and Provenance in colonial and Post-colonial contexts.

The ownership history of the Mkwati Walking Stick highlights the complex and often troubling relationship between colonialism and indigenous cultural traditions. Its journey from the hands of a local spirit medium to the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences is emblematic of broader patterns of cultural displacement and contested heritage.

"The walking stick was originally in the possession of a local spirit medium who used it as a symbol of power and authority," said curator A.

The walking stick's transition into colonial hands reflects a common dynamic in which significant cultural objects were removed under unequal or coercive circumstances.

During the colonial era, objects of this kind were often taken or traded under complex circumstances, sometimes without the full consent of the original owners. For example, the Mkwati walking stick was taken by Baden Powell, who was described as a notorious colonial administrator and, in some books, the Chief hangman, who was the leader of the Boy Scout movement, who showed little respect for the Africans. The way these objects were acquired by museums during this time was often not documented in the way we would expect today," curator A added.

Curator B further explained how the museum's current practices are shaped by post-colonial responsibilities:

Since independence, there has been a greater emphasis on the importance of understanding and acknowledging the origins and ownership of our cultural objects. We have a responsibility to ensure that the true cultural significance of objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick is not lost."

Nevertheless, the curators also recognize the ongoing difficulties in establishing a complete and accurate ownership record.

Ownership in the colonial period is often unclear. Many objects were obtained through exchanges or donations that were not well-documented. As such, we face challenges when trying to establish the complete ownership history of certain items,” curator B shared.

4.4 Ways the Mkwati Walking stick embodies the cultural practices, beliefs, and social dynamics

Historical Context and Cultural Significance of the Mkwati Walk

The Mkwati Walking Stick is a deeply revered cultural artifact traditionally used by elders in Zimbabwean communities. Far from being a mere aid for mobility, it symbolizes authority, respect, and the culmination of wisdom earned over a lifetime. Its use is reserved for individuals of notable status or seniority, making it both a personal and communal symbol of honor.

“The Mkwati Walking Stick is not just a means of support for the elderly; it is an embodiment of the life lived by the individual. It symbolizes their contribution to the community, their wisdom, and their journey through various stages of life,” said Curator A, senior curator of the Ethnography Department at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences.

More than a status symbol, the stick is seen as a tangible link to the past, holding memory and meaning for both the individual and the broader community.

“It's a status symbol, yes, but it also functions as a living testament to the history of the community itself. The walking stick is a repository of memory, carrying the stories of ancestors, of victories, of challenges faced and overcome,” Curator A added.

Crafted from resilient woods such as mahogany or ebony, and adorned with carvings of cultural and spiritual importance, the Mkwati Walking Stick is a form of artistic expression as well.

“What is often overlooked in the study of walking sticks like the Mkwati is the artistry involved. These aren't just functional objects; they're miniature canvases that depict ancestral lore. In the carvings, one might see representations of animals, plants, or gods that are integral to the cosmology of the community,” explained Curator A.

“Each carving, each detail, is a visual language that communicates the values, beliefs, and struggles of the society from which it originates.”

Mkwati Walking Stick as a Symbol of Social Authority, Leadership and Respect.

The Mkwati Walking Stick is more than just a functional object; it plays a significant role in the traditional social structures of Zimbabwean communities. It is a symbol of status, power, and intergenerational respect. Traditionally presented during public ceremonies, its conferral marks a formal recognition of an individual's leadership and wisdom.

“In our society, the Mkwati Walking Stick is a powerful tool of recognition,” shared curator B. *“When an elder receives the walking stick, it’s a formal declaration of their authority. It’s a public acknowledgment of their wisdom, their accomplishments, and the role they have played in guiding the community. It is a tool that binds the individual to the community’s collective memory.”*

The walking stick is often handed down through generations, symbolizing the continuation of knowledge and tradition, and reinforcing a cyclical understanding of leadership.

Beliefs and Spirituality: Connecting to the Divine and Ancestral World

Beyond its visible role in social order, the Mkwati Walking Stick holds profound spiritual significance in Zimbabwean communities. It serves as a sacred object that embodies the interconnection between the physical and spiritual realms. The materials and carvings used in its creation are carefully selected not only for durability or aesthetics but for their symbolic power and sacred origins.

The walking stick is frequently used in rituals and ceremonies, particularly during key life events such as initiation rites, where it functions as a conduit for ancestral guidance.

“The Mkwati Walking Stick, particularly during initiation rites or rites of passage, is believed to hold ancestral power,” said ethnography curator C. *“The carvings themselves are not just decorative; they represent the spiritual energy of the ancestors. It’s said that when an elder walks with this stick, they are walking with the spirits of those who have come before them.”*

Moreover, the spiritual significance of the Mkwati extends to its materials, which are often sourced from sacred natural locations. This reflects a worldview in which the environment itself is imbued with sacred energy.

“The materials for the Mkwati are never taken lightly,” explained curator B. “The wood chosen, for example, is often from trees that are sacred to the community, which means that the stick is not just a tool for movement but a sacred object that ties the individual to both the land and the spirits of the ancestors.”

An Object of Cultural Continuity

The Mkwati Walking Stick is a richly symbolic artifact that extends far beyond its functional use. Deeply woven into the cultural fabric of the community from which it originates, the stick represents authority, ancestral connection, and societal continuity. It is traditionally carried by elders and spirit mediums, figures who are seen as custodians of knowledge and tradition.

Ethnography curators emphasize the living and evolving nature of the culture that surrounds the Mkwati Walking Stick. While it remains rooted in tradition, its meanings adapt with each generation.

“It is a living culture, one that is always evolving but that remains deeply rooted in its traditions. It tells a story of continuity, of respect for the past, and of the deep connections between the people, their land, and their spiritual beliefs,” said curator B.

The stick’s carvings and materials serve not only as aesthetic choices but also as sacred references; each element tells a story and reinforces the stick’s role as a vessel of communal memory.

4.5 The Effectiveness of Current Collection Management Practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Preserving the Mkwati Walking Stick’s Cultural Context and Ensuring its Accessibility for Research and Public Education

Collection Management and Preservation Practices

Effective collection management is central to preserving artifacts, especially those with cultural and spiritual significance such as the Mkwati Walking Stick. At the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS), efforts are made to ensure that such ethnographic objects are maintained both physically and contextually.

As curator D explained,

“Our preservation methods for ethnographic objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick focus on preventing environmental damage. The object is housed in a climate-controlled environment, and we monitor temperature and humidity to ensure its longevity.”

However, the curators also noted institutional constraints due to limited funding and access to modern conservation technologies.

“While we strive to adhere to best practices, the financial limitations of the museum mean that we often don’t have access to the latest technology in conservation. For example, we lack the sophisticated tools used in digitization, which would allow us to preserve objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick in digital formats, making them more accessible globally,” said curator D.

In addition to physical preservation, curators stressed the importance of preserving the cultural narrative associated with the object. Curator C emphasized,

“Preserving the physical object is important, but we must also preserve the cultural context that surrounds it. The Mkwati Walking Stick is a symbol of status, and we have to make sure that the meaning it holds is passed down to future generations.”

Cultural Context Preservation

The Mkwati Walking Stick stands not only as a physical artifact but also as a vital conduit of cultural meaning, social memory, and ancestral heritage. As a key item within the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS), how it is displayed and interpreted directly affects public understanding of its importance.

Curator B highlighted the current approach to interpretation:

“We make every effort to include detailed interpretive labels that explain the walking stick’s role in society. For example, we note its symbolic meaning, its use by local leaders, and its representation of power and status.”

This reflects the museum’s intention to ensure visitors grasp the walking stick’s cultural function beyond its material appearance.

However, constraints in space and format limit the depth of these explanations. Curator B admitted:

“While we provide basic information, there is often not enough space to go into detail about the specific rituals and traditions associated with objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick. We rely on short descriptions in labels, which may not fully convey the depth of the object’s cultural context.”

Furthermore, the museum is making efforts to involve cultural custodians from local communities to enhance interpretation. As curator B explained:

“We have begun to work more closely with community elders and cultural practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the traditions surrounding such objects. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of integrating the knowledge of local communities into our exhibitions and programs.”

Accessibility for Research

A critical component of effective museum collection management is ensuring that artifacts are accessible to researchers for in-depth scholarly study. The Mkwati Walking Stick, a culturally and spiritually significant artifact, presents unique challenges in this regard.

Curator C revealed that access is heavily restricted due to conditions set at the time of the stick’s return to Zimbabwe:

“When it came to Zimbabwe, the walking stick was conditionally surrendered to the museum as it was said that it should always be wrapped in black cloth, and if the museum wants to use the object, it should not be taken a picture.”

This restriction highlights the walking stick’s spiritual importance, suggesting that it is not simply a historical object but a sacred item governed by cultural protocols.

Access is further complicated by bureaucratic processes that delay scholarly engagement.

“The approval process can take time, especially when researchers need to access it for extended periods. This can be frustrating for both the researchers and us, as it delays important research work,” noted curator D.

These administrative hurdles deter timely academic exploration and limit the dissemination of knowledge.

Digitization, a modern solution to enhance accessibility, is not an option for this artifact.

“The Mkwati walking stick is not digitized, conditions of its surrender advised against the act and it is stored in a vault for protection,” explained curator B.

This lack of a digital presence restricts both local and international scholars from engaging with the object remotely, a major drawback in today’s research landscape.

Despite these limitations, curators recognize the value of expanding academic collaboration.

“We could create more structured programs that bring researchers and museum staff together to study our objects,” curator A proposed.

“This would help researchers to better understand the objects, and it could also offer fresh perspectives on the cultural and historical significance of pieces like the Mkwati Walking Stick.”

Public Education and Engagement

One of the core mandates of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) is public education, and the Mkwati Walking Stick plays a vital role in the institution’s educational outreach. As an artifact deeply embedded in Zimbabwean cultural and spiritual life, it serves as a bridge between historical knowledge and contemporary public understanding.

Curator B emphasized the importance of connecting artifacts to living cultural practices during public education programs:

“We run regular school tours and workshops where we talk about the cultural significance of our objects. We try to make the connection between the physical object and the living cultures that created them.”

However, curators acknowledged that these educational efforts face significant challenges. Curator B noted that:

“One challenge we face is making objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick more engaging for visitors. Many people come to see the artifacts, but they may not always grasp the deeper cultural meanings behind them.”

To tackle this, curator D proposed modernizing exhibition methods:

“We’ve been thinking about ways to make our exhibits more engaging, perhaps through virtual reality or interactive displays that show the walking stick in use during cultural ceremonies.”

Such technologies could make exhibits more immersive, helping visitors to experience the cultural context rather than simply observe the artifact.

Another key dimension discussed by curators is community involvement. While some efforts exist to include local cultural experts in exhibitions, several curators agreed that more collaboration is needed to ensure cultural accuracy and community engagement.

Challenges and Recommendations for Improvement

Funding Constraints

When discussing barriers to improving conservation and digitization, curators cited financial limitations as a major obstacle:

“One of the biggest challenges is funding. Without adequate resources, it’s hard to implement advanced conservation methods or digitize our collections.”

Integration of Local Cultural Knowledge

In response to questions about how well the museum reflects the cultural meanings of artifacts, one curator emphasized the need for deeper collaboration with local communities:

“We need to collaborate more with local communities to ensure that the cultural context of objects like the Mkwati Walking Stick is preserved and communicated accurately.”

Curator A

Digital Access and Engagement

On the topic of improving access for researchers and the public, curators highlighted the need to enhance the museum's digital capacity:

“Expanding our digital presence would allow researchers and the public to interact with our collection more easily. We need to prioritize creating a more robust digital catalog and invest in technologies that facilitate this.”

4.6 ANALYSIS OF PROVENANCE RECORDS AND HISTORICAL TRACING OF THE MKWATI WALKING STICK.

4.6.1. Constructing provenance through oral histories and institutional records

A recurrent theme in the responses is the interplay between oral histories and institutional documentation in constructing the provenance of the Mkwati walking stick. Most curators acknowledged that the walking stick, attributed to Chief Mkwati, a notable figure of resistance during the First Chimurenga in present-day Zimbabwe, was acquired during or shortly after the suppression of the 1896–1897 uprising. Curator B explained,

“The earliest written record places the stick in the hands of a British officer, documented in an 1898 colonial inventory. However, community accounts insist it was forcibly taken after the fall of Mkwati's stronghold.”

The contrast between written colonial archives and local oral traditions creates a layered narrative, with curators often positioning themselves as mediators between these sources. Several curators highlighted that while the archival trail is “thin but traceable,” oral testimonies from descendants and community elders offer richer insights into the stick's symbolic value and the circumstances of its removal.

4.6.2 Symbolism and political re-contextualization

Another key analytic thread was the symbolic re-contextualization of the walking stick. Curators emphasized its dual status as both a utilitarian object and a political artefact. One respondent described it as

“A talisman of defiance, passed down through generations as a symbol of leadership and resistance.”

This perception shapes how institutions choose to exhibit the item, whether as a colonial relic, a cultural heirloom, or a political symbol.

Curators from the institution showed differing attitudes toward this symbolism. For instance, curator A acknowledged that,

“Its inclusion in our collection came at a time when indigenous resistance was actively silenced in colonial discourse,”

Whereas another curator C emphasized the object’s spiritual and nationalistic relevance,

“It is not merely a stick. It is Mkwati’s voice, and in a way, his ghost.”

4.6.3 Gaps, silences, and the ethics of ownership

The analysis also revealed awareness of significant gaps and silences in the provenance record. Some curators candidly admitted that beyond the initial acquisition note, little is known about the object's trajectory until its institutional cataloguing in the early 20th century. A few pointed to fragmentary correspondence between colonial officers as supplemental sources, but these are often biased or ambiguous.

This uncertainty has led to ethical debates about ownership and restitution. Curator A noted that,

“Without full provenance, claims of rightful ownership become morally complex but no less urgent.”

Another added that recent collaborations with descendant communities have begun to fill these gaps, often reshaping the object’s status from a static museum piece to an item of active repatriation discourse.

4.6.4 Decolonizing curatorship and the role of the museum

The responses collectively reflect a shift toward decolonizing curatorship practices. Several interviewees mentioned current efforts to involve communities in reinterpreting and, in some cases, reclaiming objects like the Mkwati walking stick. This aligns with broader museum practices seeking to decenter Eurocentric narratives and reinsert indigenous agency.

An example cited by a curator involved a temporary repatriation agreement in which the walking stick was returned for ceremonial use before being displayed in a collaborative exhibit. This act was described not only as “reparative” but as “an essential step toward redefining custodianship.”

4.7: ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL EMBODIMENT AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE MKWATI WALKING STICK.

4.7.1 Symbol of authority and spiritual leadership

Curators widely identified the walking stick as a material symbol of chiefly power and spiritual authority within Mkwati's community. Curator B noted that,

“In many Shona and Ndebele traditions, the walking stick is not just for support, it represents power passed down from ancestors, a visible manifestation of chieftainship.”

The responses consistently aligned the walking stick with a deeper cosmological framework in which leadership is not merely political but profoundly spiritual.

This dual role of the stick, as both an administrative and spiritual emblem, reflects the interconnectedness of governance and belief systems in the community. The act of carrying such a stick marked the bearer as one who mediates between the living and ancestral realms. Curator C explained that,

“To hold that stick was to walk with the authority of the ancestors.”

4.7.2 Cultural craftsmanship and embedded knowledge

Another prominent theme was the walking stick as a vessel of cultural knowledge and craftsmanship. Curators emphasized the stylistic carvings and material selection as evidence of indigenous aesthetic sensibilities and traditional ecological knowledge. One respondent described it as “a walking archive,” noting that the designs etched into the wood may communicate clan lineage, totemic symbols, or historical events.

Several curators mentioned that such sticks were often crafted by community artisans using sacred woods known for their strength and spiritual properties. The process of creating the stick itself was communal and often ritualistic, indicating the object's broader social function beyond its use by a single individual.

4.7.3 Social cohesion and identity construction

The walking stick also emerged as a symbol of social cohesion and identity. Many curators linked it to rites of passage, initiation ceremonies, and collective memory. As one curator explained,

“The stick is never just the chief’s artefact, it represents the whole community. It carries the burden of shared history, struggles, and victories.”

The object therefore functions as a focal point for group identity, connecting generations through storytelling and ceremonial use.

Moreover, the responses highlighted the role of oral traditions in sustaining the meaning of such artifacts. Curator A elaborated that,

“Even though the stick is no longer in its original community, its story lives on through the songs, proverbs, and memories of the elders. It’s a living legacy.”

4.7.4 Resistance and the politicization of culture

Several curators also addressed how the stick embodies resistance, particularly in the context of colonial encounters. Chief Mkwati is remembered as a key figure in resisting colonial rule, and his walking stick becomes a metonym for this resistance.

“It is both a cultural item and a political weapon,”

Curator B remarked.

“It reminds us of how indigenous authority was challenged but never erased.”

The stick’s removal from the community was seen not just as the loss of an object but as an attempt to suppress a system of knowledge and power. Some curators framed the walking stick as a “survivor of historical trauma,” retaining its defiance even within museum displays. This framing reflects a growing curatorial commitment to decolonizing interpretations and reinserting indigenous perspectives.

4.7.5 The tension between museum display and community meaning

Finally, the interviews highlighted a tension between the curatorial context in which the walking stick is now situated and its original cultural meaning. While museums may categorize it as an “ethnographic artifact,” curators noted that such classification often strips it of its ceremonial and spiritual vitality. Curator D admitted that,

“We place it behind glass, but for the community, it is meant to be held, used, spoken to.”

This tension underscores a broader critique of Western museology, which tends to isolate objects from their performative and communal roles. Curators expressed an emerging awareness of this disjuncture and a willingness to explore alternative display strategies that honor the object's original functions.

4.8: EVALUATION OF THE COLLECTION MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR THE MKWATI WALKING STICK AT THE ZMHS.

4.8.1 Preservation of physical integrity vs. cultural context

A central theme in curator responses was the distinction between the physical preservation of the Mkwati walking stick and the preservation of its cultural meaning. Many curators praised the museum's conservation measures in terms of climate control, handling protocols, and storage conditions. As curator B noted,

“The stick is in good physical condition. We ensure it is kept in a controlled environment and handled only by trained personnel.”

However, several respondents pointed out that while physical preservation is prioritized, cultural context is less systematically preserved. Curator B then stated that,

“We safeguard the object's body, but not always its soul. The spiritual and symbolic meanings are often overlooked in routine documentation.”

This gap between material conservation and cultural continuity was a recurring concern.

4.8.2 Documentation and provenance gaps

Interviewees highlighted that the museum's existing documentation of the Mkwati walking stick is limited, particularly in terms of ethnographic detail. Cataloging practices, while standardized, often lack depth in recording oral histories, community narratives, or symbolic meanings attached to the object. A curator noted,

“The inventory lists date and source, but very little is said about the cultural significance or community perspectives.”

This lack of enriched metadata compromises the stick's accessibility for research that depends on contextual knowledge. Curators called for improved collaboration with community elders,

historians, and anthropologists to supplement institutional records with living memory and interpretive richness.

4.8.3 Accessibility for research and academic use

Curators offered mixed views on the stick's accessibility for academic research. On one hand, the museum allows scholars to request viewings and provides some supporting documentation. On the other hand, limited digitization, bureaucratic procedures, and understaffing were identified as obstacles. Curator B explained that,

“Researchers can access the object, but the process can be slow, and we lack an updated digital archive that would make it easier.”

Another noted that while local researchers occasionally access the stick, international scholars face challenges due to travel and administrative hurdles. There was a general consensus that the museum could do more to facilitate broader access, including the creation of a virtual exhibition or a digitized object profile linked to oral narratives and scholarly interpretations.

4.8.4 Public display and educational outreach

Public education emerged as a contested theme. While the walking stick has been displayed in past exhibitions, its current visibility is minimal. Curators acknowledged that the museum's exhibition strategies have historically emphasized colonial narratives or neutralized the object's political charge. One respondent admitted,

“We haven't done enough to frame it as a symbol of resistance and cultural pride. It's presented more as a relic than a story.”

Educational programming related to the stick was described as sporadic and not fully integrated into the museum's outreach strategy. Some curators expressed the need for interactive storytelling methods, guided tours centered on anti-colonial resistance, and partnerships with schools to bring the Mkwati story into the curriculum.

4.8.5 Decolonial aspirations and institutional challenges

The interviews revealed a growing awareness among curators of the need to decolonize the museum's approach to collection management. There was recognition that preserving an object's cultural context requires more than archival accuracy, it demands

Chapter 4.9: Discussion of the Findings

This chapter discusses the findings presented in relation to the overarching research objectives of this study, to examine how ethnographic curators interpret the provenance, cultural significance, and collection management practices of the Mkwati walking stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences. Drawing from curator interviews, the discussion engages with broader themes in heritage preservation, postcolonial memory, and museum ethics. The findings reveal not only the complexities of preserving material culture but also the ongoing negotiation between institutional authority and indigenous knowledge systems.

4.9.1 Provenance and the politics of historical narratives

The analysis of responses to the question on provenance demonstrates that the historical journey of the Mkwati walking stick is both documented and contested. While archival evidence traces the stick's acquisition during the colonial era, oral histories provide a counter-narrative that emphasizes cultural loss and dispossession. This duality underscores the limitations of colonial records, which often omit or distort indigenous perspectives.

The findings resonate with critical literature in postcolonial museology, which critiques the Eurocentric construction of provenance as a linear, factual record. Instead, curators in this study acknowledged the importance of engaging with community narratives to create a "living provenance" that reflects both historical truth and cultural continuity. This approach aligns with decolonial theory, which advocates for the restoration of indigenous epistemologies and the deconstruction of colonial power structures in knowledge production.

4.9.2 The Walking stick as a cultural text

The walking stick emerges from the curator responses not merely as an object of historical interest, but as a multi-dimensional cultural text. It embodies spiritual, political, and social meanings within the community of origin. The analysis highlights the object's symbolic function as a representation of ancestral authority, collective identity, and resistance during the First Chimurenga.

This interpretation affirms the notion that material culture is not static but performative, it participates in social life, ceremonies, and memory-making. The walking stick functions as what is termed as a “contact zone” artifact, an object that both connects and contests cultural meanings, particularly when housed in institutions historically shaped by colonialism.

4.9.3 Institutional gaps in collection management

A critical finding concerns the museum’s collection management practices, which, while effective in terms of physical preservation, fall short in preserving cultural context and facilitating public engagement. The lack of detailed documentation, limited digital access, and underdeveloped educational programs inhibit the walking stick’s full potential as a tool for learning, cultural revival, and historical reckoning.

Curators expressed a desire to move toward more inclusive and participatory practices, but also cited institutional constraints, such as funding limitations. This reflects broader challenges faced by museums in the Global South, where efforts to decolonize are often hindered by resource scarcity and legacy systems that prioritize object control over cultural dialogue.

4.9.4 The tension between custodianship and ownership

Another important insight is the ethical tension between institutional custodianship and community ownership. While the museum is the current caretaker of the Mkwati walking stick, several curators acknowledged that true ownership resides with the community from which the object originates. This tension is central to contemporary debates around restitution and the decolonization of heritage.

The findings support calls for shared authority in museum practice, where curators act not as gatekeepers but as facilitators of knowledge exchange and cultural renewal. The notion of “relational curation” becomes critical here, one that emphasizes reciprocity, mutual respect, and community-led interpretation.

4.9.5 Toward a decolonial museum practice

The findings point to an emerging shift in curatorial thinking, from preservation as protection toward preservation as empowerment. There is a growing recognition that the cultural significance of objects like the Mkwati walking stick cannot be maintained without the active

participation of the source communities. Curators are increasingly advocating for practices that include oral history projects, community exhibitions, and ceremonial access to culturally significant artifacts.

These shifts reflect broader movements within global museology that seek to dismantle colonial legacies and reimagine museums as spaces of healing, justice, and intercultural understanding. The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, despite its limitations, is situated within this transformation, and its future relevance may depend on how fully it embraces these changes.

4.10 Chapter Summary

In a bid to tie the knot, this chapter highlights the Mkwati Walking Stick as not just a physical object but a living testament to the social and cultural heritage it represents. Through its preservation and the study of its provenance and significance, the walking stick continues to offer valuable lessons in cultural continuity and historical understanding.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The previous chapter presented, analyzed and interpreted the findings of the study. This chapter is therefore giving a summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. Both the conclusion and the recommendations were established in line with the research objectives found in chapter 1.

5.1 Summary

This section provides summary of findings based on research objectives that were formulated by this study.

5.1.1 Summary on the detailed provenance records and how do they trace its historical journey and ownership.

The walking stick was first documented in the possession of Mkwati during the height of the rebellion against British colonial forces. After his capture and death, colonial officials seized many of his personal items, including the stick, which they viewed as spoils of conquest. From there, it entered the archives of British administrators and was eventually housed in a colonial museum. Detailed inventory records, correspondence between colonial officers, and shipping logs all provide clear evidence of the stick's transfer from Zimbabwe to the United Kingdom. In the postcolonial period, the walking stick became an object of contestation, as Zimbabwean historians and cultural activists began demanding the repatriation of cultural heritage items. The provenance records became critical in these debates, offering proof of the object's original ownership and the colonial mechanisms through which it was taken. There is emphasis that each layer of documentation, ranging from handwritten notes to institutional catalogue entries provides insights not just into the stick's movements, but also into the changing attitudes toward African cultural artifacts. The records show how colonial authorities initially regarded the stick as a mere curiosity or war trophy, whereas modern historians now recognize it as a sacred cultural object. Ultimately, it is argued that understanding the provenance of the Mkwati walking stick is essential for appreciating its symbolic value and for informing ongoing efforts to reconstitute cultural heritage.

5.1.2 Summary on ways the Mkwati Walking Stick embody the cultural practices, beliefs and social dynamics of the community it originates from.

Firstly, the stick is described as a spiritual conduit, traditionally associated with ancestral power and authority. In Mkwati's case, the stick served as a tangible link between him and the ancestral spirits, reinforcing his legitimacy as a spiritual leader during the First Chimurenga uprising. Such walking sticks were often infused with ritual significance, believed to hold protective powers and serve as vessels for spiritual guidance during times of conflict. Secondly, the stick signifies chieftaincy and leadership within the community. In many African societies, particularly among the Ndebele and Shona groups, a walking stick was not just an accessory but a symbol of rank. It embodied the weight of decision-making, wisdom, and community responsibility. Mkwati's walking stick thus symbolized his status not only as a religious figure but also as a socio-political leader resisting colonial invasion. Moreover, the stick embodies the communal values of resistance and unity. Mkwati led a spiritually charged rebellion against colonial forces, and the walking stick came to symbolize the collective struggle for land, autonomy, and dignity. It carries the memory of a community united under spiritual leadership, responding to oppression with cultural strength and determination. The materials and craftsmanship of the stick also reveal aspects of local artistic traditions and symbolic aesthetics. Intricate carvings or specific wood types used in its construction reflected cultural knowledge and beliefs about nature, spirit, and the divine. These physical elements contribute to the object's identity as more than just a leader's tool, it is a cultural artifact embedded with meaning and memory. Finally, it is argued that the Mkwati walking stick holds intergenerational significance. It represents a form of cultural continuity and transmission, embodying oral traditions, ancestral reverence, and the resilience of indigenous governance systems disrupted by colonial rule.

5.1.3 Summary on the effectiveness of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) in preserving the Mkwati walking stick's cultural context and ensuring its accessibility for research and public education.

On the preservation of cultural context, the ZMHS has implemented culturally sensitive practices in the stewardship of the Mkwati walking stick. Following its repatriation from the United Kingdom in 1998, the museum, in agreement with Mkwati's descendants, adheres to specific protocols: the stick remains covered with a black ritual cloth, is only unveiled in the presence of a spirit medium, and is handled exclusively by male staff members. These measures honor the spiritual significance of the artifact and reflect a commitment to indigenous traditions. Moving on accessibility for research and public education, while the museum has made strides in preserving the artifact's cultural integrity, challenges persist in making it

accessible for research and public education. The sacred handling protocols, while respectful, limit direct interaction with the artifact. Additionally, resource constraints and infrastructural limitations hinder the development of comprehensive exhibitions and educational programs that could contextualize the walking stick's historical significance.

5.2 Conclusions

The following conclusions were made based on the study objectives.

5.2.1 Conclusions on the detailed provenance records of the Mkwati Walking stick, and how they trace its historical journey and ownership.

The detailed provenance records of the Mkwati walking stick offer a comprehensive timeline of its movement from a sacred object within indigenous Zimbabwean communities to a contested artifact in colonial and postcolonial contexts. These records, comprising museum acquisition logs, colonial correspondence, shipping manifests, catalogue entries, and oral testimonies, are crucial in reconstructing the stick's historical journey and ownership. Initially owned by Mkwati, a revered spiritual and political leader during the First Chimurenga (1896–97), the stick symbolized his authority and spiritual power. After his death, it was confiscated by colonial forces and transported to the United Kingdom, where it became part of a museum collection, treated more as a war trophy than a sacred item. These records not only map the stick's physical journey but also reveal shifts in its meaning, from a symbol of spiritual resistance to a museum artifact, and finally back to a revered cultural heirloom. They highlight broader themes of colonial appropriation, cultural resilience, and the ongoing importance of restitution. Ultimately, the provenance records validate the Mkwati walking stick's historical and cultural significance and support its rightful place in Zimbabwe's heritage.

5.2.2 Conclusions on ways the Mkwati Walking Stick embody the cultural practices, beliefs and social dynamics of the community it originates from.

The Mkwati walking stick is far more than a physical object, it is a profound embodiment of the cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and social structures of the community from which it originates. As a sacred item used by Mkwati, a spiritual leader during the First Chimurenga, the stick symbolizes a deep connection to ancestral power and traditional leadership. It reflects the community's spiritual worldview, where such objects were believed to channel ancestral guidance and protection. Its ritual importance and ceremonial handling underscore its role in

religious and political spheres, particularly in times of resistance. The stick also represents social hierarchy, as it was traditionally carried by individualism in positions of authority, such as chiefs, spirit mediums, and war leaders, signifying wisdom, leadership, and responsibility. Furthermore, the Mkwati walking stick stands as a symbol of collective identity and resistance. It connects to the historical struggle against colonial domination, and through this, embodies a legacy of unity, cultural endurance, and spiritual defiance. Its continued reverence and restricted access today illustrate how cultural memory and indigenous practices remain deeply rooted in the present. In sum, the walking stick is a powerful cultural artifact that encapsulates the intertwined spiritual, political, and communal values of the society it came from. It is both a historical witness and a living symbol of Zimbabwean heritage.

5.2.3 Conclusions on the effectiveness of the current collection management practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in preserving the Mkwati walking stick's cultural context and ensuring its accessibility for research and public education.

The Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) has undertaken commendable steps to preserve the Mkwati walking stick's cultural context. Following its repatriation in 1998, the museum, in collaboration with Mkwati's descendants, established protocols that honor the artifact's spiritual significance. These include keeping the stick covered with a black ritual cloth, unveiling it only in the presence of a spirit medium, and restricting handling to male staff members. However, challenges persist in ensuring the artifact's accessibility for research and public education. The sacred handling protocols, while respectful, limit direct interaction with the artifact. Additionally, the museum has historically lacked comprehensive policies on collection preservation and management, which may hinder systematic research and educational initiatives. While ZMHS demonstrates a strong commitment to preserving the Mkwati walking stick's cultural integrity, further development of collection management practices is essential to enhance its accessibility for scholarly research and public education.

5.2.4 Overall conclusion of the research problem

"Object, Provenance and Biography: An Evaluation of the Ethnographic Collection Management System of the Mkwati Walking Stick at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences" critically explores how the life history of a single cultural artifact can illuminate broader issues of heritage management, cultural representation, and postcolonial restitution. The study concludes that the Mkwati walking stick is not merely an ethnographic object but a

living cultural symbol embodying the spiritual, political, and historical narratives of Zimbabwe. Its provenance from sacred indigenous leadership to colonial appropriation, and finally, to its repatriation highlights the complex journey of cultural artifacts and the shifting meanings they acquire over time. An evaluation of the current collection management practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences reveals a dual reality. On one hand, the museum has taken significant steps to respect the sacred nature of the object through culturally sensitive handling protocols developed in collaboration with traditional authorities. These practices preserve the object's cultural context and reflect a decolonized approach to heritage management. On the other hand, the research identifies gaps in institutional policy, infrastructure, and accessibility. Limited documentation systems, resource constraints, and restricted public engagement limit the object's potential as an educational and research tool. Balancing cultural sensitivity with academic accessibility remains a major challenge. Moving on, the biography of the Mkwati walking stick underscores the need for holistic, culturally grounded, and inclusive museum practices. For ethnographic collections to serve both heritage preservation and knowledge production, institutions must embrace dynamic management systems that honor indigenous worldviews while fostering public understanding and scholarly inquiry.

5.3 Recommendations

The study identified various issues which affect the ethnographic collection management system at the ZHMS. The study therefore makes recommendations to address the ethnographic collection management issues identified. The recommendations were made in line with the research objectives.

5.3.1 Recommendations to the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences

Develop a Biographical Collection Management Framework

The museum should adopt an object-biography-based system that goes beyond cataloging physical attributes. This approach would document the life history of artifacts including cultural use, ownership changes, and political symbolism to provide richer context and deeper engagement with collections.

Strengthen Provenance Research and Transparency

A dedicated provenance research unit should be established or supported to thoroughly investigate and record the origins, acquisition methods, and ownership histories of key artifacts like the Mkwati walking stick. These findings should be made accessible to the public through exhibitions and digital platforms, promoting transparency and trust.

Incorporate Community Voices and Oral Histories

Engage local communities, especially those with historical, cultural, or ancestral ties to the artifacts in narrating and interpreting their meanings. This can be done through interviews, collaborative curation, and public programming that foregrounds indigenous knowledge and memory.

Establish Ethical Review Mechanisms for Display and Interpretation

Create an internal committee to review the display narratives and ensure they respect the cultural, political, and historical significance of objects. This committee should include curators, historians, cultural practitioners, and representatives from relevant communities.

Digitize Collections with Contextual Storytelling

Develop an interactive, digital platform for ethnographic collections that includes not just images and physical descriptions, but also the stories, biographies, and contested meanings associated with each object. This can broaden access, especially for diasporic communities and researchers.

Prioritize Decolonial and Restitution Dialogues

Proactively engage in conversations around the decolonization of museum practices. This includes acknowledging colonial-era collecting, reassessing ownership claims, and participating in regional or international restitution processes where appropriate.

Curatorial Training in Critical Museology

Train museum staff in contemporary museological theories and practices, especially in areas like critical heritage studies, postcolonial theory, and ethnographic methods. This will better equip curators to manage and interpret complex objects like the Mkwati walking stick with nuance and sensitivity.

Create Rotational or Thematic Exhibitions Focused on Resistance and Memory

Use objects like the Mkwati walking stick as focal points in curated exhibitions that explore Zimbabwe's anti-colonial resistance, national identity, and memory politics. These exhibitions should be updated periodically to reflect new research and perspectives.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

Comparative Object Biographies in Postcolonial African Museums

Future research can examine how other national or regional museums in Africa handle politically significant artifacts comparing approaches to provenance, curation, and biography. This could reveal broader patterns or divergences in postcolonial memory practices.

The Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Museum Curation

A focused study on how traditional knowledge, oral histories, and indigenous epistemologies can be formally integrated into museum cataloging and exhibition design would enhance understanding of culturally respectful curation.

Public Reception and Interpretation of Ethnographic Exhibits

Investigating how visitors, especially local communities and youth interpret and engage with objects like the Mkwati walking stick can provide insight into the museum's effectiveness in conveying historical narratives and cultural identity.

Decolonizing Museum Practices in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa

A broader analysis of decolonial methodologies in museum policy, restitution efforts, and representation across Zimbabwe and neighboring countries would contribute to critical museology and heritage studies.

Digital Storytelling and Technology in Ethnographic Collections

Exploring how digital platforms, augmented reality, or interactive databases can be used to tell complex object biographies and make them more accessible to diverse audiences, both locally and internationally.

Political Symbolism and Material Culture in Anti-Colonial Struggles

An in-depth historical study of similar objects of resistance across liberation movements in Africa could contextualize the Mkwati walking stick within a pan-African heritage of symbolic material culture.

Institutional Memory and Museum Governance

Research could investigate how internal museum structures, policies, and leadership affect the documentation, interpretation, and exhibition of politically charged artifacts over time.

Ethics of Acquisition and Ownership in Zimbabwean Museums

A legal and ethical review of how Zimbabwean museums acquired their collections especially under colonial rule, could inform ongoing debates on restitution and heritage rights.

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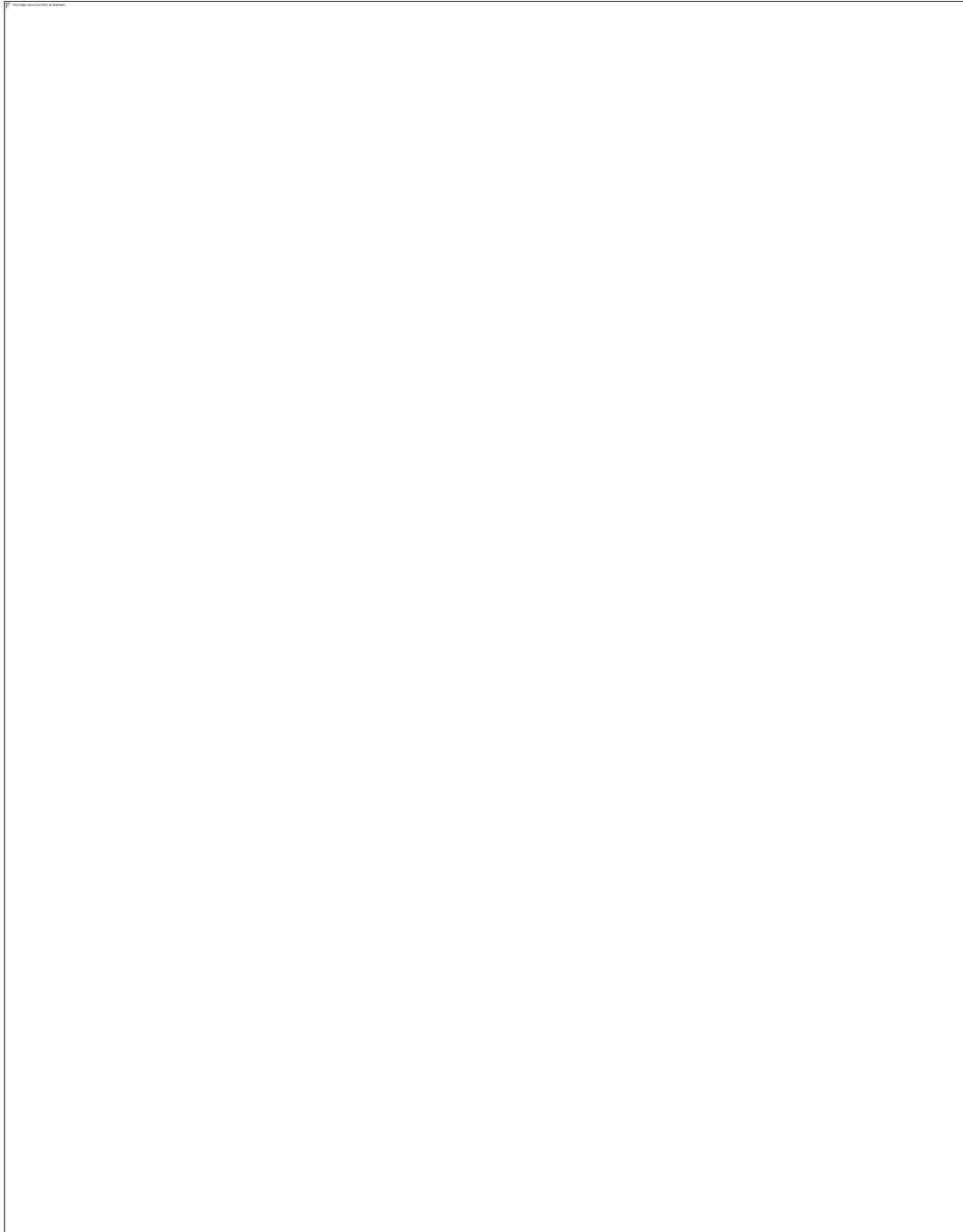
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR CURATORS AT THE ZMHS

1. What are the detailed provenance records of the Mkwati Walking Stick, and how do they trace its historical journey and ownership?
2. In what ways does the Mkwati Walking Stick embody the cultural practices, beliefs, and social dynamics of the community it originates from?
3. How effective are the current collection management practices at the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in preserving the Mkwati Walking Stick's cultural context and ensuring its accessibility for research and public education?

Appendix 2: Research letter from the department



Appendix 3: Research letter from the ZMHS

