1. INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has, since the early colonial period been a victim of the illegal trafficking of cultural property that UNESCO and other international organizations as well as national Governments and institutions are fighting to control. The illicit export of the Zimbabwe birds, highly symbolic and spiritual objects from the Great Zimbabwe World Heritage Site is generally well known by most Zimbabweans because of the high profile nature of the objects in question.

However, thousands of other important and significant objects have been looted from Zimbabwe and the illicit export of these cultural treasures continues to this day. This is in spite of the existence of various legislative arrangements that are in place as well as the creation of national institutions such as museums, art galleries and national archives whose basic mandate is the protection of Zimbabwe’s varied cultural resources.

Since Zimbabwe’s attainment of independence in 1980, the Government of Zimbabwe, through the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, National Gallery of Zimbabwe and the National Archives of Zimbabwe invested in capacity development for these institutions so that the human skills to deal with heritage management challenges was locally available. Broadly similar or relevant skills were also developed in other institutions such as universities as these were expected to assist with generation of information on the cultural heritage, which information is valuable in the management and conservation of that heritage.

Whilst significant progress was made in this regard to the extent that relevant institutions subsequently had the required skills for more effective cultural resources management, these gains were significantly eroded from around the year 2000 when the economic environment in Zimbabwe began to deteriorate. The skills flight severely affected existing cultural heritage protection programmes and this was apparent from the more frequent instances of theft of objects from institutions and even communities.

2. CURRENT SITUATION: INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND MANDATES

Legislative arrangements and statutory organizations to protect Zimbabwe’s cultural heritage resources were put in place from the turn of the last century as part of the setting up of colonial administrative systems in the country. The looting of archeological sites especially by the Ancient Ruins Exploration Company that had been formed to seek for gold from heritage sites
was officially stopped in the 1920s. The Historical Monuments Commission and the National Museums of Rhodesia were subsequently constituted and in 1972 with the coming into effect of the National Museums and Monuments Acts, the National Museums and Monuments, the institution mandated to protect Zimbabwe’s cultural heritage was born. At the same time, the National Archives and National Art Gallery were also constituted, the two institutions that have complemented museums in its cultural heritage protection mandate.

Zimbabwe presently has six national museums, 16 sites museums and interpretive centres, three national art galleries and a diversified National Archives with several provincial records centres. The country also has two community museums that have been developed in communities that had become centres for looting of cultural property by local and international dealers in illegal works of art markets.

In total, Zimbabwe has lost more than eight million museums artifacts and objects and these range from ethnographic, historic, archeological to geology, paleontology as well as specimens from different categories of the biological sciences.

Although Zimbabwe has “ratified” the 1970 and 1954 Conventions as well as signed the UNIDROIT Convention, serious problems continue because the illicit trafficking in the country’s cultural objects continues.

Investigations instituted in this area of national concern revealed that Zimbabwe’s vulnerability on these matters could persist unless the relevant institutions addressed the problem by revisiting institutional arrangements for management of collections, the physical or infrastructural aspects about the museum buildings and collections storage facilities as well considering the use of electronic devices to augment monitoring of entry and use of both private and public areas of the museums by visitors and staff. In so doing and by reducing incidences of illicit trafficking of cultural property, the heritage management institutions mentioned herein above would have worked in compliance with their mandates.

3. **SUMMARY OF INCIDENCES OF THEFT OF CULTURAL PROPERTY IN ZIMBABWE**

i. 18 February 1998 – the One Thousand Guinea Trophy containing 175 ounces of gold stolen from its exhibition case following a night time break-in at the Natural History Museum in the city of Bulawayo.

ii. Between 5th and 9th October 2000, two gold crucibles stolen at the National Mining Museum in Kwekwe.

iii. On a day not yet known, Kind Lobengula’s gold bracelet and missionary Robert Moffat’s gold watch stolen from the Natural History Museum’s cultural heritage public galleries.

iv. On Christmas Eve, 24 December 2001, a break-in took place at the National Mining Museum and four gold crucibles were stolen.

v. On 17 June 2002, a gold bracelet on exhibition in the public gallery of the Great Zimbabwe Museum disappeared. A copper replica had taken its place in the
exhibition case. Police investigations quickly established that a museum employee was involved. Further investigations led to the arrest and subsequent court conviction of the employee, the site’s Exhibitions Officer. He was sentenced to 12 months in prison with labour.

vi. On 3 July 2003, seven leopard skins from the Natural History Museum’s animal collection were reported stolen.

vii. On 19 September 2003, a copper cross, an archeological artifact under Accession Number QM1A4469, Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare was stolen. The object had been retrieved from more secure storage area for purposes of study by a Museum archeologist.

viii. During September 2005, National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe received information from a source in South Africa to the effect that objects stolen from the ethnography collection at the museum in Harare were now on sale in Cape Town. A quick audit of the collection confirmed the theft and a team comprising the Chief Security Officer in NMMZ, a curator familiar with the collection and an Officer from Interpol Harare travelled to Cape Town. In the company of South African police, the premises were of the suspected dealer were raided and the ethnographic objects recovered. Subsequent attempts to have the dealer convicted of theft of cultural property as well as having the objects in question repatriated to Zimbabwe collapsed following failure by museum authorities to satisfy South African authorities that the items in question were, without any shadow of doubt, the objects stolen from the museum collection in Harare. The museum’s documentation system was therefore inadequate and failed the recovery process.

4. LESSONS LEARNT WHICH SHOULD INFORM THE WAY FORWARD

The loss of cultural property through illicit trafficking in Zimbabwe could be addressed if the following, among other actions, are taken:

i. All cultural/heritage objects that have value and are housed in institutions must be documented in terms of the object ID guidelines. The underlying principle is that unless museums have a complete inventory of their collection and are able to produce proof that the objects belong to their collection, managing and protecting those objects is near impossible.

ii. Museum buildings must not be the weakest link of the collections management process. Museum buildings should not allow for unauthorized access through break-ins. Where such museum buildings exist, strengthening of such structures through additional physical security should be prioritized.

iii. Electronic systems to assist more effective monitoring of movement; entry and exit into and from different security areas of the museum buildings should be installed. Other institutional measures to regulate access and use as well as accounting for objects need to be institutionalized. Regular physical checks on collections in public areas could also be necessary.
iv. The role of “source” communities in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property also needs to be recognized through conscious efforts to get communities desist from disposing of their cultural objects to dealers.

v. Zimbabwe still needs to further develop the relationship between heritage management and law enforcement authorities so that current leakages of cultural property to external markets is managed and controlled.

vi. Monitoring of archeological excavations should be tighter given that retention of excavated objects by licensed archeologists is yet another loophole through which heritage masterpieces are lost to the countries of origin.

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