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# **The custody question: ownership and control of armed struggle archives in Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

The custody question is axiomatically linked to ownership and control of armed struggle archives. Access to the armed struggle archives in Zimbabwe has always been a challenge, and the armed struggle risks being a historical event without archives. The archives of former nationalist movements in Zimbabwe are inaccessible. The custody issue of archives owned by former nationalist movements in Zimbabwe is examined through the lens of the post-custodial theory. The article examines the need to strike a balance between the privacy and security concerns of armed struggle records and access to information. Case study research focused on the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing, known as the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). Interviews were conducted with war veterans at ZANU-PF headquarters and archivists at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. The Freedom of Information Act of Zimbabwe (2020), the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), and the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act of Zimbabwe (2004) were reviewed to understand the right to access information, including ownership rights in Zimbabwe. The persistent theme throughout the chapter is the deliberate controlled access to armed struggle archives with no access for the public. The findings of the study revealed that organisations that have inherited the archival materials post-independence face challenges characterised by a lack of appropriate infrastructure, poor environmental conditions, and a lack of access to archivally recommended storage materials. The study concludes that custody of the archives has been prioritised by the former nationalist

movements over access demands from researchers, historians, and the general public. There is a need to negotiate access, reconcile, and address the different ownership, management, and accessibility paradigms that currently exist regarding the archives of the former nationalist movements.

**Keywords:** ZANU-PF, liberation archives, custody, access, Museum of African Liberation

## **Introduction**

Various African countries went into armed conflict to displace the colonialists from their motherland. These countries include Frente de Libertação Moçambique (FRELIMO) of Mozambique, ZANU, Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) of Angola, and the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa. In these conflicts, crucial archival materials were created, including artefacts and other memorabilia, constituting a rich heritage of the armed struggles. However, liberation struggle archives are sensitive, as they capture violent episodes of the war, and this primarily reflects the nature of conflict archives. This situation raises the controversial custody question, prompting the researchers to investigate the whereabouts and ownership of armed struggle archives created by the nationalist movements.

The focus of the article was on the archival collections of the ZANU and its military wing, known as the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). After independence, the ZANU/ZANLA opted to keep their war archives in places owned and controlled by them. The post-custodial theory is adopted to examine the custody and ownership of liberation struggle archives. The physical and legal custody of documents in archival repositories is essential in the negotiated power dynamics among creators, repositories, and users (Kelleher, 2017:14). However, in a post-custodial era, custody ceases to function as a means for negotiating and transferring authority from the creator to the archival repository. In a bid to decentralise archival systems, post-custodialism ensures "that records remained close to their point of creation" (Bastian, 2002:88). Following the post-custodial theory, the collections remain with the communities without surrendering them custody to the national archival institution.

## **Background to the study**

Documentation generated in armed conflict provides a critical understanding of the war as the events are taking place, especially when done by the parties involved in the war. In writing about conflict archives, Balcells and Sullivan (2018) emphasise the production of crucial documentation during a conflict, including armed struggles. The authors state that, in pursuit of information, "as combatants deploy violence during conflict, they compose, catalogue and preserve a wide variety of records such as memos, investigative reports and communiques" (Balcells & Sullivan, 2018:1). The former nationalist movements also created records of archival value during the armed struggle in Rhodesia, later named Zimbabwe. Mazarire (2010), Garaba (2010) and Dzimbanhete (2018) identified such records to include video recordings, military operations documents, interview transcripts, manuscripts, field reports, photographs, and tapes. Such liberation records assist historians in understanding the trials and tribulations the former combatants and nationalist movements went through during the struggle, including how independence was achieved.

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Zimbabwe was involved in an armed struggle from 1964 to 1979, when a ceasefire was reached (Bhebe, 1999a). In this war, the two main nationalist movements that participated were the ZANU and its military wing, known as the ZANLA, and the ZAPU with its military wing, known as the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA). When the country attained independence in 1980, some of the colonial records created by the British administration were removed from the country and sent to London. What remained was a fragment of colonial archives on the armed struggle in Zimbabwe, including those archives held by the former nationalist movements. This study argues that a focus on filling the gaps in armed struggle archives should start with an inward-looking approach before chasing after migrated archives. Research initiatives should be geared towards tracing and examining challenges facing the country in attempts to archive the armed struggle heritage created by the former nationalist movements.

Various scholars have researched the history of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe (Dzimbanhete, 2018; Hadebe, 2016; Mlambo, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012; Mazarire, 2011, 2010; Ranger, 2006; Kriger, 1988; 1991; 1995; 2003; White, 2003; Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000; Bhebe, 1999a, 1999b; Bhebe & Ranger, 1995). However, this has been done from different perspectives, resulting in misinterpretations and distortions. Mazarire (2010) asserts that there is increasing alarm from war veterans, heritage institutions, archivists, and historians for the liberation heritage to be collected and preserved for future generations. He further states that archival documentation on the armed struggle needs to be rescued, and such efforts have to start at the country level and spread regionally. Mnjama (2017: 4), however, stated that "while considerable efforts have been made in the collection and preservation of government records, the same has not been done for private collections." Most efforts in safeguarding national heritage have been targeted at government collections, with limited concern over privately held archives such as liberation struggle archives. This article, therefore, examined the custody, ownership, and access to the armed struggle archives of ZANU/ZANLA. The terms armed struggle and liberation struggle are used interchangeably, as adopted from literature.

### **Statement of the problem**

Research evidence, including a preliminary survey of nine Southern African countries in 2020, revealed that most Southern African liberation movement archives are not publicly accessible (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC), 2020:7). These are archives of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), ZANU, and ZAPU, including SWAPO of Namibia. The archives of the ANC of South Africa have been partially opened to the public, while some materials have been embargoed (Stapleton & Maamoe, 1998; Pickover, 2014).

In post-independence Zimbabwe, the government has cached away the ZANU/ZANLA war archives. Bhebe and Ranger (1995:1-3) noted that, "When academic work began on the war after 1980, researchers in Zimbabwe did not have access to the records of any armies. ZANLA's files were unsorted and closed to scholars. ZPRAs' files were seized by the police". The situation has continued over the years, with scholars such as Mazarire (2010), Garaba (2012), Alexander, McGregor, and Tendi (2020), and a UNESCO and SARDC (2020) survey revealing that liberation struggle archives of former nationalist movements such as ZANU and ZAPU are inaccessible. Further concern has been raised that archives created during the armed struggle tend to serve the 'political systems' of the former liberation movements instead of the

nation (Garaba, 2012: 139). He argued that such a liberation war heritage is at risk of loss if left to the fate of the liberation movements and should instead be seen as a national responsibility. The armed struggle archives created in the 1960s and the 1970s have remained with ZANU and ZAPU and are not in the custody of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), home to the national documentary heritage (SARDC 2020:91). Mazarire (2010) observed that these archives of the armed struggle are kept in private collections of the former nationalist movements. Consequently, they are not accessible to the public, and the armed struggle risks being a historical event without archives. This article, therefore, sought to examine why these archives have remained inaccessible for more than 44 years after independence. However, little research has focused on the custody question with regard to access to the liberation struggle heritage in Zimbabwe.

### **Purpose and objectives**

The article sought to assess the state of liberation archives created by the former nationalist movements regarding custody, ownership, and access to the ZANU/ZANLA collections. The specific objectives are meant to:

- (a) Examine legal instruments guiding access and ownership of information in Zimbabwe.
- (b) Examine the custody and access question related to the armed struggle archives.
- (c) Assess the initiatives and associated challenges in managing liberation struggle archives in Zimbabwe.

### **Access to liberation struggle archives: a literature review**

The notion of liberation heritage is deeply rooted in the transnational and globalised expressions of heritage, shaped by UNESCO principles of world heritage, particularly driven by Southern African nations (Mataga, 2019:282). Liberation heritage is diverse and has been defined from various perspectives. Taruvinga and Domingos (2022:204) broadly define African liberation heritage as consisting of “music, graves, detention centres, prisons, poetry, caves, training grounds and centres, refugee camps, meeting places, battle sites, archival documents, audio, films and visual artefacts illustrating the social memory of the liberation struggles.” This definition incorporates various attributes of liberation heritage at the continental level, which includes archival documents that are the focus of this article. Such archives of the liberation struggle are defined as the “official and formally established archives relating to the struggle's history” (Maaba, 2013:1). In the context of this article, liberation struggle heritage in Zimbabwe is defined as documentary heritage created by the former nationalist movements during the armed struggle to constitute war reports, documents, photographs, manuscripts, personal papers, letters, and video recordings, among others.

Therefore, several scholars have emphasised the crucial value of war archives and the need to preserve them as a historical record of the nation (Balcels & Sullivan, 2018; Cox, 2010; Garaba, 2010; Nugent, 2005). Furthermore, Netshakhuma (2023:148) elaborates on the value of liberation movement archives in South Africa and states that they aid in documenting the “political history of the apartheid period and the liberation movements.” These war archives are vital, as they document liberation struggle histories across different countries that were involved in armed conflict to gain independence in Southern Africa. However, Ziino and Condé (2020:98) highlight that gaps, silences, and loss of war archives remain underexamined, including archivists’ choices and decisions when building collections. It is crucial, therefore, to understand the circumstances in which war records have been collected, sent to archives, or

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not, and even made accessible or inaccessible to researchers, as explored in this paper (Ziino & Condé 2020). This article, therefore, examined custody and access to the ZANU/ZANLA liberation struggle archives.

In terms of promoting access to archives, the Universal Declaration on Archives emphasises that “open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life” (International Council on Archives, 2011). By implication, access to archival records acknowledges respect for the right to an informed citizen who is more knowledgeable about their society, including past events, and can use that information to make decisions about the future. In addition to the ICA Universal Declaration on Archives, the main legislative instruments that regulate access to information in Zimbabwe are the Constitution of Zimbabwe Act No. 20 of 2013 and the Freedom of Information Act No. 1 of 2020. Further to these legislative instruments, the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act of 2004 protects ownership rights of intellectual and other works.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe, in section 62, addresses the issue of access to information and states that “every Zimbabwean citizen or permanent resident, including juristic persons and the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by the state or by any institution or agency of government at every level, insofar as the information is required in the interests of public accountability” (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2013:31). The constitutional framework cites the need to protect essential rights and public accountability as fundamental reasons for the right to access information (Obert, 2023:2). An informed citizenry is an empowered citizenry. In line with the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which stipulates the need to protect the essential rights of citizens, the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act (2004) protects the ownership rights of creators of various works.

The former nationalist movements during the struggle created various correspondence, audio-visual recordings, photographic archives, musical works (songs), and other archival materials. In section 10, subsection (1), the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act states that works eligible for copyright include literary works, musical works, artistic works, audio-visual works, and sound recordings, including published editions (Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act, 2004:9). The materials that were produced by the former nationalist movements are protected under the copyright law. Section 2 describes that literary works include any works in the form of writings, speech, or songs, regardless of the form in which it was expressed (Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act, 2004:4). Section 14, subsection (1) further states that ownership of copyright “shall vest in the author of the work concerned or in the case of a work of joint authorship, the co-authors of the work” (Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act 2004, Chapter 26:05:11). The copyright legislation is therefore meant to safeguard the legal rights of individuals, collectives, and society at large (Garaba & Ngulube, 2010). On the one hand, ownership rights of creators and holders of liberation struggle archives need to be respected and, on the other hand, such rights affect access claims to these archives.

In compliance with the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act seeks to support the right of access to information held in various entities. The FOI Act was gazetted into law in July 2020 to repeal the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) [Chapter 10:27] (Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) – Zimbabwe, 2021:2). The FOI Act was promulgated to “provide for the constitutional rights of expression and freedom of the media, to provide further for the right of access to information held by entities in the interest of public accountability or for the exercise or protection of a right” (Veritas

Zimbabwe, 2020). The Act broadly defines an entity in section 2 as “a private entity, public entity, public commercial entity or statutory office” (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020:4). Further to this definition, the FOI Act defines a private entity as any other entity which is not “a public entity, public, commercial entity or statutory office” (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020:5). Section 2 defines information to include “any original or copy of documentary material irrespective of its physical characteristics, such as records, correspondence, data, photographs, books, audio and visual records, in the possession or under the control of the entity to which a request is made” (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020:4-5). A review of these definitions of information, including entities, is crucial in interpreting the Act to understand its strengths and weaknesses regarding the right to information access.

In other countries involved in armed conflict, such as South Africa, the armed struggle archives have contributed immensely to writing their history of the war and other events surrounding the apartheid era. Maaba (2013:68) states that in South Africa, “historians have used the struggle archives to produce outstanding works that give readers new insight into the history of the struggle in South Africa. Although books and journal articles have been written using these archives, more use could be made of them”. Unlike in South Africa, where the various political parties agreed to come together and send their archives to the University of Fort Hare, the situation is different in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, there is a lack of exhaustive evidence to reveal that the archives of the former nationalist movements have been used to write books and other publications, as most historians have relied on oral history interviews (Alexander et al., 2020; Alexander & McGregor, 2020). An example is the biography of the former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, written mainly from personal accounts and secondary publications, with little reference to the primary archival materials of the nationalist movements (Onslow & Plaut, 2018). The biography of Robert Mugabe was written mainly using materials from book publications by authors such as Sabelo Gatsheni, Ngwabi Bhebe, David Moore, Iaan Scoones, and others, along with newspaper articles and BBC News reports (Onslow & Plaut, 2018). The primary source archival materials for Robert Mugabe are still in the custody of his family (UNESCO & SARDC, 2020:91). The article, therefore, sought to examine the custody and ownership of the ZANU/ZANLA archives using the lens of the post-custodial theory.

## Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the research. A case study design was used for the study, as it enabled an in-depth description and analysis of issues surrounding the custody, ownership, and access to liberation struggle collections in Zimbabwe. The case study research allows for real-life, contemporary phenomena to be explored through multiple data collection sources to develop a detailed and in-depth analysis of a case, process, activity, or event (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2009). Adopting a case study provided an in-depth probing into armed struggle archives from the perspective of the ZANU-PF and NAZ archivists, ZANLA war veterans, and the Museum of African Liberation (MAL). This approach allowed for an examination of the custody issue that affects the archiving of liberation struggle archives in Zimbabwe.

In conducting the research, permission was obtained from ZANU-PF headquarters through the office of the War Veterans League, Ex-Political Prisoners, Detainees, and Restrictes League. Respondents were asked to sign an informed consent form stating their inclination to participate in the study. The researcher communicated to the respondents that participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any point during and after data collection. Interviews were therefore conducted with three ZANLA veterans, including

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the ZANU-PF archivist, who was a ZANLA veteran in charge of ZANU/ZANLA archives. Data collection from the war veterans started with establishing contacts with key people who introduced the researcher to the study participants. The snowballing technique was applied, where referrals were made for the researchers to reach out to other veterans with relevant information for the research. For anonymity, ZANLA veterans were coded from ZANLA A to ZANLA C. An analysis of the observation of the storage environment was conducted at the ZANU-PF headquarters, although the researchers were not granted permission to browse and read the archival materials. Other interviews were conducted with representatives from the MAL. The archivists at the NAZ were also interviewed, and a documentary review of archival materials was conducted at the NAZ.

### **Presentation and discussion of study findings**

The study findings are presented in line with the research objectives, including the key themes that emerged during the analysis of interview data.

### **Legal instruments and access to the armed struggle archives in Zimbabwe**

The researchers conducted a document analysis of legal instruments to establish how aspects of access to liberation struggle archives are addressed. Section 5 of the FOI Act stipulates that the duty to disclose information only lies with public entities, commercial entities, or holders of a statutory office guided by written information disclosure policies to disclose information in the interests of public accountability (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020: 6). While the constitution states that every Zimbabwean has the right to access information, the FOI Act is not explicit on the function of private entities regarding the duty to disclose information. Although the Act defines a private entity, it does not specify the right to access information held by private entities where that information is needed to exercise or protect rights (MISA – Zimbabwe, 2021:4). The former nationalist movements in Zimbabwe are private entities holding and controlling access to the liberation struggle archives. Therefore, the FOI Act's inexplicitness regarding private entities fails to compel the former nationalist movements to disclose their archives to Zimbabwean citizens.

Section 27 of the FOI Act describes the protection of the defence and international relations of the state. Subsection (1) states that an information officer may refuse a request for access to information of an entity if the disclosure of the information is likely to cause prejudice to the defence or security of the state or is subject to international relations of the state. The security information mentioned in subsection (1) is explained in subsection (2) as relating to military tactics or strategies, military exercises or operations, quantity, characteristics, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and deployment of weapons, including information held for intelligence relating to the state's defence (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020:16). However, the Act further states that access to a record, as explained in subsection (1), may not be denied if it came into existence more than 20 years before the request (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2020:17). Given that armed struggle archives were created more than 44 years ago, even if they contained security information, military operations, strategies, and intelligence information, they should be subject to public access as enshrined in the FOI Act.

Although the Copyright Act protects ownership rights, the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the FOI Act explicitly state that citizens have the right to access information, even military records, created more than 20 years ago. Given such legal provisions from the statutory instruments,

this would imply that armed struggle material would be accessible, as most individuals who could be implicated in the archives have since passed on, but these primary source materials remain closed to the public. In terms of national archival legislation, access conditions for collections are mainly in line with public records. The NAZ Act stipulates a 25-year closure period for public records before they can be accessed as archives, while other countries, such as South Africa, have a 20-year period for closed access to official South African records (Saunders, 2010:62). Liberation struggle collections are produced during a war and do not neatly fall into the category of public records, as defined by the NAZ Act. As a result, the archival legislation does not stipulate access provisions for liberation struggle materials and is silent on this. The former nationalist movements are reluctant to make their collections accessible, and legislation does not compel them to do this. Saunders (2010:62) links this to the secrecy of wartime experiences and states that “the secrecy that was necessary in the struggle itself, a time of war, has undoubtedly flowed over into the time of peace, and there is a general reluctance by liberation movements to make material accessible.” As a result, the archives of ZANU/ZANLA remain inaccessible. There is therefore a need to balance ownership rights, as stipulated by the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act, with respect for the right to access information, as stipulated by the FOI Act and the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

Several scholars, such as Tungamirai (1995), Stapleton (2011), Mlambo (2014), Dzimbanhete (2018), and Chakawa and Nyandoro (2020) have written about ZANLA accounts, including their contribution to the armed struggle. However, with archival evidence locked away, verifying written accounts by historians and oral testimonies from war veterans who may be biased in favour of which side they participated in the struggle, is challenging. The perpetuation of patriotic history by the ZANU-PF government does not allow for diverse and competing historical narratives about the armed struggle (Kriger, 2006; Pinto, 2023; Ranger, 2004). This article, therefore, argues that such contestations around the narratives of the struggle have further contributed to the silencing of the archives. Although the location of the ZANU/ZANLA archives is publicly known as the ZANU-PF headquarters, they have intentionally denied access to most researchers, with a privileged few given access. The few scholars who were granted access included Josephine Simbanegavi and Andrew Dzimbanhete, who had access to ZANLA archives while conducting their doctoral studies (Dzimbanhete, 2018; Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000). Access to these archives depends on political inclinations within the government, and such a scenario violates the Constitution of Zimbabwe, including the FOI Act.

### **The custody and access question: the ZANU and ZANLA archives**

The materials for the liberation struggle of ZANU and ZANLA are housed at the ZANU-PF headquarters. In an interview with the ZANU-PF archivist, when asked about the inaccessibility of their materials, he stated that,

Most of our collections are confidential, very confidential. We have records of military operations. We can not have the public accessing them. We don't know what people may do with that information. Any day, we may see this information all over the media or published somewhere. People can go to the National Archives of Zimbabwe. All our things are there. Our information is sensitive. People cannot access it. This is our information.

The sensitive nature of liberation struggle materials has resulted in these materials being cached out of the public eye. Follow-up interviews with archivists at the NAZ proved that the primary

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source materials of ZANU/ZANLA are not at the national archives. One of the archivists at the Public Archives and Research Section mentioned that,

Usually, these nationalist movements don't want with their documents. It's not an issue of trust but has to do with ownership. You wouldn't know what is in their documents. Maybe they have something that they still want to keep. You talk of ZANU-PF; it's just 2 kilometres away from us, but they have not brought their documents. We have tried to reach out to them and failed.

In terms of liberation struggle collections, archival boxes at the NAZ mainly contain newspaper cuttings of these materials, with most collections being unprocessed. Even those archives at the ZANU-PF headquarters are uncatalogued. A UNESCO and SARDC survey in 2020 revealed that "archives of the ZANU and its military wing ZANLA were stored in unsafe conditions after independence and moved to the party headquarters in Harare. However, they remain uncatalogued and in need of preservation" (UNESCO & SARDC, 2020:91). In an interview at the NAZ, one of the archivists at the audio-visual (AV) unit highlighted that there was a time when they were invited with the former director, the late Mr Murambiwa, to the ZANU-PF headquarters to view their collections. She stated that:

The director tried to convince them to bring their materials to NAZ, but I think he faced resistance because we didn't get anything from them. The ones that we are worried about are the films because they need cold rooms. We wanted to liaise with them to bring the films, but it didn't work. This happened in 2019/2020, just before COVID. When we visited the ZANU-PF, the films were on the floor, the records, photographs, and everything. Their collection has not been arranged and described, so they do not know what they have. If some of their collections are lost, they may not even know what they have lost.

The study findings confirmed the disorderly nature of the archival materials when the researcher visited the ZANU-PF headquarters during data collection. Archives at the ZANU-PF headquarters are at risk of loss. There are preservation concerns for these archives regarding the infrastructure, environment, and types of equipment that house the collections. Observations made at the ZANU-PF headquarters revealed that office space in the CBD houses the archival materials composed of photographs, books, booklets, and correspondence in lever arch files and flat files. This is not a dedicated storage facility per the records and archives management standards. Files are haphazardly piled on the floor. Everything is mixed and jumbled up. Other papers are piled up on tabletops and exposed to dust without a ventilation system. There are no storage cabinets. Files are exposed to direct sunlight entering through the windows with no curtains. In a study on the Mozambican state administration, Machava and Gonçalves (2021) equated such a scenario of poor records management to a dead archive. They stated that the dead archive is characterised by poor storage facilities, poor equipment, and the lack of classification and cataloguing schemes to support records and archives management (Machava & Gonçalves, 2021).

Similar to a dead archive, at the ZANU-PF headquarters, there is a lack of proper storage and shelving equipment in use for storing archival files, exposing them to termites and rodents. The absence of proper facilities and a preservation plan for the records exposes them to a high risk of loss. Photographs of combatants taken during the struggle, including pictures cut from newspapers, are pasted on the walls of the corridor leading to an office, which is used as a

storage unit. Such photographs are exposed to dust, wear, and tear. The office is kept under lock and key with controlled access, and high-security screening is conducted when a person enters the ZANU-PF headquarters building. The researchers were not permitted to take any photographs of the archival materials; as a result, we depicted the state of archives at the ZANU-PF headquarters using an image of a dead archive. Figure 1 below shows a depiction of a dead archive, which, in the context of this research, is one that is dysfunctional and lacks proper archival care.



Figure 1: The dead archive in Lichinga, Niassa province, Mozambique  
Source: Machava and Gonçalves (2021)

The figure above represents a dead archive in one of the government provinces in the Niassa province of Mozambique. In the depiction shown, there is a resemblance to the archives that the researcher found at the ZANU-PF headquarters. Similar to the characteristics of a dead archive described by Machava and Gonçalves (2021), the archives at the ZANU-PF headquarters are exposed to unfavourable environmental and storage conditions. Ziini and Condé state that “while some records are loved and used over and over, others remain locked away in uncatalogued backlogs” (Ziino & Condé, 2020:104). This has been the case with liberation struggle archives in Zimbabwe, where many collections are uncatalogued and inaccessible. Interviews with archives staff revealed that collections of the former nationalist movements remain unprocessed. Archives at the ZANU-PF headquarters have not been catalogued and organised in a manner that allows researchers to access them. Hence, the archives remain locked away, and if lost, it may be hard to trace what has been lost, as they are unprocessed. Howard (2022) argued that the history of the liberation struggle remains unwritten, as researchers do not have access to archival materials. As far as the liberation movements are concerned, their archives remain closed to all but a handful. Access depends on who you are, who you know, and other political connections, as in the case of Dzimbanhete (2018), who states that he had the ‘privilege’ to access the ZANU-PF archives.

### **Preservation is political: initiatives amidst challenges**

In line with the third objective of the study, it was crucial for the researchers to assess the initiatives and associated challenges that have been encountered in the management of liberation struggle heritage by various stakeholders. Over the years, the government has

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undertaken some efforts to preserve the liberation struggle heritage, and this includes the construction of the MAL (MAL, 2024). Other initiatives have been undertaken by the ZANU-PF as a political party to safeguard the heritage of the liberation struggle. Such efforts are examined through the lens of the critical archival praxis since they are intertwined with political interests and power dynamics.

### Museum of African Liberation and the Government of Zimbabwe

At the national level, the government has made efforts to safeguard and preserve the heritage of the liberation struggle. One of the initiatives currently underway is the MAL, which is envisioned to be a central hub for preserving and showcasing the history of Africa's liberation struggles (The Zimbabwe Independent, 2024). The Institute of African Knowledge (INSTAK) administers the MAL, which is a research think tank with a Pan-African agenda whose primary focus is to collect, present, and preserve African knowledge (MAL, 2024). In February 2024, the SADC Committee endorsed the construction of the MAL in Zimbabwe. In a ceremony for the SADC Liberation Square at the MAL in August 2024, the president of the country, Emmerson Mnangagwa, stated that the museum aims to “institutionalise African narratives and perspectives on decolonisation” (The Zimbabwe Independent, 2024). He further lamented, “It is time that we set the record straight. Otherwise, history will judge our generation harshly for having watched with disinterest while our history is falsified” (The Zimbabwe Independent, 2024). The need to set the record straight for the history of the war of liberation in Zimbabwe cannot be overemphasised. The president's speech raises the question of whether Zimbabweans should anticipate the MAL to be built to set the record straight. The same government confiscated the ZAPU/ZPRA archives and made the collections, including those of ZANU/ZANLA, inaccessible to researchers and historians in Zimbabwe. Yet the rhetoric on constructing a MAL sets the tone of support for all initiatives geared towards preserving the liberation struggle heritage.

The construction of the MAL, however, provides the impetus for a preservation programme for archival materials and other artefacts from liberation struggles across Africa. In support of the construction of the MAL in Zimbabwe, the SADC Secretariat on 26 August 2024 handed over the Southern African Liberation Struggles publication, popularly known as the Hashim Mbita Publication, to the MAL in Harare, Zimbabwe. The publication was presented by the SADC Regional Peace and Training Centre (RPTC) commandant, Rear Admiral Gottfried Pandeni, on behalf of the SADC Secretariat. This fulfilled the call of the 44<sup>th</sup> SADC Summit of the Heads of State and Government held in August 2024 in Harare (SADC Secretariat [@SADC\_News], 2024). The call was for the provision of materials and artefacts for the MAL. The publication sought to “assist present and future generations remember the sacrifices made by the millions of their forefathers and mothers in the liberation struggles” for African independence (SADC Secretariat [@SADC\_News], 2024). However, in a review of the publication, Limb (2018) critiques the publication and states that the reader is unaware of the selection criteria that were used in selecting the participants for interviews for the Hashim Mbita project.

In a bid to develop collections for the MAL, the public relations manager indicated that the Zimbabwean collection currently relies on the goodwill of war veterans and other institutions willing to donate materials to the museum. When questioned about the project's inclusivity, the director stated that all Zimbabweans, including families of former nationalist leaders with materials to donate, could send them to the museum. At the time of data collection, families

that had sent materials to the museum included those of former nationalist leaders such as Joshua Nkomo and Josiah Tongogara. Unfortunately, not all stakeholders are willing to donate their archives to the MAL. The public relations manager for the MAL, however, pointed out that,

We receive information from any stakeholder who was involved in the armed struggle and has a story to tell; for example, physical artefacts, pictures, or anything that documents their stories. We are very open to the extent that we are inviting anyone who may not even have held a gun but saw something happening at their homestead, and we are saying, please come and tell us your story. Whatever recording we are getting, we want to extract different themes such as spirituality, women's involvement, training methodology, demobilisation methodology and so on. Various people are invited to come and tell their stories on the liberation struggle, even those who witnessed certain events.

The MAL public relations manager further stated that due to resource challenges, they currently rely on people to volunteer and approach the museum to tell their stories and donate materials about the liberation struggle. He raised concerns about the authenticity of some of the accounts of the war of liberation they received and underscored the need to verify certain accounts. The MAL public relations manager stated, "We need to find ways of verifying or confirming information that we get from individuals so that we carry a narrative that doesn't misrepresent facts from the past. We must double-check with other stakeholders." When further questioned about why it has taken more than 44 years to spearhead initiatives to preserve the liberation struggle, he indicated that,

We may need to ask ourselves why some information may continue to be kept secret and may not be ideal for public consumption. Still, the general information can and should be shared with the general public. At times, it becomes a trend where some information can be withheld but released years later through a movie being done. It may just be a matter of time before the information is released when the timing is right.

There have been some collaborative efforts between the ZANU-PF and the MAL to preserve the liberation struggle archives. In an interview, ZANLA B stated that an MOU was signed between the INSTAK and the government of Zimbabwe. Interviews at ZANU-PF headquarters revealed that efforts are underway to engage INSTAK to digitise the liberation struggle collections. However, previous projects conducted under the ALUKA project to digitise liberation struggle collections in Southern Africa have failed (Isaacman, Lalu & Nygren, 2005). Various stakeholders involved in the ALUKA project raised concerns and fears of creating a digital collection of African heritage materials that would not be accessible to African scholars and would only benefit Western researchers (Isaacman et al., 2005:6). However, under the MAL spearheaded by INSTAK, confidence could be restored to digitise liberation struggle collections since the vision is supported by African leaders. Currently, liberation struggle collections remain at risk of loss in Zimbabwe if no efforts are made to safeguard them. Amidst efforts by SADC nations to preserve their liberation struggle heritage at the MAL, the key question that still lingers is whether primary source archival materials of the key nationalist movements from the various African countries will be deposited in the museum. One would imagine that the ZANU-PF government would make its primary source materials of the war publicly accessible, as the host country of the MAL. However, these key historical materials remain locked away.

## **Ownership and control of armed struggle archives**

### **A turn to oral history**

A key theme that emerged from the analysis of data under the objective regarding initiatives and challenges that affect the management of liberation struggle archives was that of oral history. At a time when the ZANU/ZANLA archives are not accessible, historians and researchers of Zimbabwe's armed struggle are left with the option of turning to alternative sources. This is because, as researchers seek knowledge at the NAZ, they are met with disappointment. At the NAZ, there is an assemblage of colonial archives characterised by the voices of the Smith regime in the archival collections (UNESCO & SARDC, 2020). Study findings revealed that there are newspaper cuttings abound in the archival files of the armed struggle at the NAZ. When one hopes to come across primary collections created by the guerrillas fighting in Zambia, Mozambique, and other frontline states, these materials are unavailable. This, therefore, implies that any researcher who is interested in knowing more about the armed struggle is left with the option of turning to oral history interviews.

Historians and researchers like Nyathi (2025), Jocelyn Alexander et al. (2020), Alexander and McGregor, (2004; 2017), Mazarire (2011), Mazarire (2010), and others are instrumental figures who have used oral history interviews to tell the story of Zimbabwe's war of liberation. Such oral testimonies are premised on the extent of remembering certain accounts of the armed struggle by the ex-combatants and former nationalist leaders. In his critique of oral history, Gordon (2023:196) states, "Oral history is not uniform. Interviewers, subjects, discussion topics, time, and memory affect the craft. This is especially true when interviewing veterans." While oral history testimonies help reconstruct the historical record of the war, due to memory loss, there is a need for corroboration with other published secondary sources to validate the information received.

The reliance on oral history interviews presents another challenge, where most of the war veterans are either dead or dying because of old age and other ailments. At the time of data collection in 2024, several war veterans who had been instrumental in the struggle, such as Comrade Tshinga Dube and former Vice President Comrade Phelekezela Mphoko, had already died. A prominent historian, Phathisa Nyathi, who was deeply engrossed in writing the armed struggle stories in Zimbabwe, also died in 2024 (Ncube, 2024). One of the researchers was fortunate to interview the historian earlier in the year before his death. Such unfortunate events of death rob future historians of access to the wealth of oral history testimonies that could be extracted from the participants of the struggle. Away from oral history interviews, researchers need to turn back to these primary source materials created by the former nationalist movements, but the question of access remains critical.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Armed struggle archives are at risk of loss in the battle between custody, preservation, and the need to provide access. Ownership and control considerations are prioritised at the expense of setting up proper facilities to care for the materials. The primary source materials of the ZANU-PF are kept at the ZANU-PF headquarters, where they are not accessible to researchers. The post-custodial theory was adopted to examine the complicated nature of custody and ownership of armed struggle archives. Access to the archival materials is not easily granted, as they are cached out of the public eye. Institutions like the MAL have taken over other archival materials, but their collections remain limited. Despite government efforts to construct the MAL, most

African countries, including the ZANU-PF political party, have kept their primary source materials of the struggle hidden away.

This study, therefore, recommends urgent interventions by the surviving war veterans, the NAZ, and the government to safeguard armed struggle archives. There is a need to negotiate access conditions to armed struggle collections held by the different stakeholders. The post-custodial approach to archiving should be implemented to allow for shared custodianship of liberation struggle archives. Access restrictions should ultimately be revised to allow wider access to the public and other scholars researching the history of Zimbabwe. Open access to liberation struggle materials will also aid in the teaching of Zimbabwean history in schools, where future generations will learn more about the history of the armed struggle and how the country achieved independence.

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