

ESARBICA JOURNAL

**JOURNAL OF THE EASTERN
AND SOUTHERN AFRICA
REGIONAL BRANCH OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON
ARCHIVES**

**Volume 44
2025**

ISSN 2220-6442 (Print), ISSN 2220-6450 (Online)

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/esarjo.v44i1.7>

International diplomacy versus Zimbabwean archival heritage: challenges and prospects of repatriating migrated archives in Zimbabwe

Adock Dube

Department of Records and Archives Management: National University of Science and Technology

adock.dube@nust.ac.zw

ORCID: 0000-0002-3723-7613

Trevor Gumbo

National Archives of Zimbabwe

gumbotrevor@gmail.com

Masithokoze Hlabangana

Department of Records and Archives Management: National University of Science and Technology

masithokoze.hlabangana@nust.ac.zw

Received: 3 October 2025

Revised: 17 October 2025

Accepted: 26 November 2025

Abstract

The repatriation of migrated archives has been a longstanding issue in Africa in the context of colonial legacy and international diplomacy. Zimbabwe has experienced significant archival migration, with many historical records relocated to foreign institutions during the colonial era. However, repatriation of these archives remains a complex and contested process. This study adopted the Diplomatic Archive Theory, which provided a structured basis for interpreting the archival repatriation of Zimbabwe as a diplomatic challenge, one where historical injustice intersects with contemporary power politics. This helped to understand the historical context of archival displacement, challenges of their continued inaccessibility and potential solutions to the repatriation of these significant historical records of Zimbabwe. Through a multi-case literature analysis on countries that successfully repatriated their migrated archives and expert interviews with senior management at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, this research aimed to provide actionable recommendations for the effective repatriation and management of Zimbabwe's displaced archives. The findings would contribute to the broader discourse on archival sovereignty, historical justice and national development.

Keywords: International diplomacy, migrated archives, repatriation, access, archival sovereignty

Introduction and background to the study

Archival migration has far-reaching implications for national identity, cultural heritage and historical justice. This issue has garnered increased focus in post-colonial diplomatic discourse as nations confront the lingering effects of the colonial legacy, including the loss of important

historical records. According to Harris (2002) and Peterson (2005), migrated archives as archival materials that were removed from their original context, often during colonial or wartime periods, and are now held in institutions or repositories outside of their country or community of origin. These archives can include records of colonial administrations, cultural artefacts and historical documents that hold significant cultural, historical, and evidential value to the communities from which they were taken. In Zimbabwe, a significant amount of records were funnelled out of the then Rhodesia during the colonial period to mainly the United Kingdom and lately South Africa towards the end of the settler colonial reign. These migrated archives cover a significant epoch of Zimbabwe's colonial history, including the federation era during which a tri-nation administration of Rhodesia and Nyasaland existed, as well as the liberation struggle years of 1966-1979. According to Lowry (2017), the United Kingdom National Archives holds 15 fonds of archives of Zimbabwean origin in its Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 143 series, dating from 1959 to 1968. Moreover, the National Library of Scotland holds archives of Zimbabwe dating from 1951 to 1979. In 2012, the National Archives of Zimbabwe successfully repatriated colonial records covering the last part of Ian Smith's administration, composed of cabinet files, correspondence and policy files that were taken to South Africa and donated to Rhodes University Trust Archives by Ian Smith. This indicates that there could be more such records in South Africa, the United Kingdom and other foreign institutions that remain unknown to Zimbabwe.

According to Ngoepe (2023), repatriating these migrated archives is important for reclaiming national heritage and sovereignty. However, the process is riddled with various challenges, including legal complexities, diplomatic negotiations, a lack of an international ownership framework and resistance from foreign institutions that often cite access and ownership as reasons for retaining these materials. Moreover, Zimbabwe's political landscape and international relations could significantly influence the success of repatriation efforts.

As the discourse on archival sovereignty and historical justice gains traction globally, as highlighted by Mbaye (2016), this study contributes to the crucial dialogue about restoring historical legacy to nations like Zimbabwe. By examining the interplay between international diplomacy, colonial legacy and archival heritage, the research underscores the importance of these materials in shaping national narratives and preserving cultural identity. Ultimately, repatriating Zimbabwe's migrated archives is not merely a logical task; it is an important step towards achieving a fair recognition of the past that supports sovereign completeness and thus supports contemporary Zimbabwe.

The study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities related to repatriating migrated archives in Zimbabwe. Through critical analysis of existing literature on the repatriation challenges, expert interviews with the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) senior management on the efforts made so far in repatriating archives, this study sought to illuminate the historical context of archival displacement and contemporary challenges. The findings would generate practical recommendations for improving repatriation efforts and effectively managing Zimbabwe's displaced archives.

Problem statement

The displacement of Zimbabwe's archival materials to other countries has resulted in a significant loss of national heritage memory and limited access to essential archival records and historical gaps in Zimbabwe's important epochs in colonial history. Significant volumes of the country's archival collection remain housed in foreign institutions. The archives

migrated to foreign countries could hold critical information on colonial administration, which could help in finding closure and understanding of critical episodes and events in Zimbabwe's colonial history. Since attaining national independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has managed to repatriate only those archives that had been deposited with Rhodes University Trust Archives. Efforts towards the repatriation of Zimbabwe's migrated archival stock have yielded little, in the face of the absence of elaborate policies on repatriation of migrated archives, legal ambiguities, institutional capacity constraints and diplomatic inertia. At the same time, global frameworks for archival restitution remain weak or non-binding, leaving countries like Zimbabwe with little leverage to pursue the repatriation of their displaced archival collections (Savoy, 2018). Therefore, this study was critical in that it examined the efforts Zimbabwe has employed in pursuit of repatriating its migrated diasporic archives. The paper also assessed how diplomatic, legal and institutional challenges have constrained the repatriation of these collections and proposed practical strategies to repatriate migrated archives and advance archival sovereignty, historical justice and inclusive national development.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the study was to assess international diplomacy versus Zimbabwean archival heritage, specifically focusing on challenges and prospects of repatriating migrated archives in Zimbabwe. The specific objectives were to:

- Find out what efforts Zimbabwe has taken to repatriate migrated archives.
- Find out how other African countries have handled repatriation of their migrated archives.
- Determine the role of international diplomacy in the successful repatriation of migrated archives.
- Recommend strategies for effective archival repatriation in the South African context.

Theoretical framework

The discourse on the repatriation of migrated archives has increasingly incorporated theoretical perspectives that position archives as more than mere historical records. Among these perspectives, the Diplomatic Archive Theory has gained prominence for its emphasis on archives as tools of political power, sovereignty and international diplomacy. This theoretical lens asserts that archival custody, particularly concerning colonial archives, reflects global power dynamics and shapes relationships between former colonisers and formerly colonised nations (Ketelaar, 2001; Harris, 2002).

Ketelaar (2001) avers that archives are imbued with "tacit narratives" that define national identity, cultural memory and political legitimacy. Therefore, the colonial archive is not a passive repository of administrative records but an active element in shaping post-colonial power structures. Similarly, Harris (2002) emphasises that archival custody and access are not neutral but are conditioned by the broader context of "power and memory", often perpetuating colonial legacies through the control of historical narratives. The framework provides critical insights into the diplomatic standoffs often observed in repatriation efforts. Bastian (2003) highlights that archival repatriation is often resisted, as it entails a rebalancing of historical authority between former colonial powers and post-colonial nations.

The Diplomatic Archive Theory has also been applied in African contexts. Mbaye (2016) explored how West African states such as Senegal and Nigeria have engaged in diplomatic strategies to reclaim archival records, framing the repatriation as a component of post-colonial

restitution and national sovereignty. These case studies provide critical lessons for Zimbabwe's own archival repatriation strategies.

Therefore, the Diplomatic Archive Theory formed a crucial part of this study. It provided a structured basis for interpreting the archival repatriation of Zimbabwe as a diplomatic challenge, one where historical injustice intersects with contemporary power politics. Understanding these dynamics is essential for formulating effective diplomatic approaches to reclaim Zimbabwe's displaced heritage.

Archival repatriation in Africa

The displacement of archives from their country of origin to foreign institutions has emerged as a critical issue in archival scholarship, particularly in post-colonial contexts. These migrated materials are not merely administrative remnants but also form part of the nation's cultural heritage, historical memory and identity. Karinge (2023) posits that a nation without its archives is a body without a soul. This highlights the power of archives and their importance to the nation they belong to. More so, one of the characteristics of a record is its integrity, which speaks to its completeness. Thomassen (2001) is of the view that the completeness of a record is intrinsic to its authenticity and reliability. A partial document cannot serve as a true record, as it fails to present the full account of the transaction or event it presents. This speaks to the Zimbabwean context that their collection is incomplete as long as there are still archives that are housed in foreign institutions that have not yet been repatriated. In facilitating the repatriation of these materials, international diplomacy plays a crucial role. This is where issues of ownership, sovereignty, access and cultural justice are discussed. Lynch (2008) discusses how international diplomacy has facilitated the repatriation of cultural heritage materials, noting that the negotiations often involve broader agreements for partnership and research.

The impact of archival displacement in Zimbabwe

Archival migration and displacement have significant implications for Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, affecting cultural heritage, historical narratives, and national identity. The colonial legacy has contributed to the migration and displacement of archives in Africa. Many archives were taken from their countries of origin to colonial centres, often without documentation or consideration for their cultural significance (Peterson, 2005). Zimbabwe, like many other African countries, has experienced significant archival migration, with many records being taken to the United Kingdom and other European countries.

The migration and displacement of archives have resulted in the loss of cultural heritage and historical records, affecting the ability of communities to connect with their past (Harris, 2002). This has significant implications for cultural revitalisation as the loss of archives hinders efforts to revitalise cultural heritage and promote cultural diversity. It also has implications for historical narratives as the absence of archives can distort historical narratives, perpetuating colonial perspectives and marginalising indigenous voices.

According to Mlambo (2017), archival migration and displacement have also impacted national identity in Zimbabwe. The lack of access to historical records has limited the ability of the nation to construct national narratives since archives play a crucial role in shaping national narratives and promoting national identity. This has also affected the promotion of cultural heritage, as the absence of archives hinders efforts to promote cultural heritage and national pride.

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology with case study design, using a multiple-case literature analysis approach. Kenya, Nigeria, Algeria, Namibia, Ghana and South Africa were conveniently sampled due to their documented efforts and relative success in the repatriation of their migrated archives. These cases provided a comparative framework for identifying common strategies, challenges and the role of international diplomacy in the archival repatriation process across different African contexts. According to Yin (2014), a multi-case study is a research approach that involves an in-depth examination of a phenomenon, context or issue, comparative analysis to identify patterns, themes and insights, and considers the unique contexts and characteristics of each case.

Case selection

The selection of countries was based on the availability of documented evidence of archive repatriation efforts, demonstrated use of international negotiations or diplomatic interventions, and regional and colonial diversity to ensure a broad representation across the African continent. The diversity in colonial histories (for example, British, French and German colonisation) allowed for analysis of how different colonial legacies influence the repatriation processes and outcomes.

In addition to comparative literature analysis, data were gathered from NAZ senior management purposively selected for their strategic role in archival policy planning and administration and previous participation in the archival repatriation exercise. A saturation level was achieved from the National Archives of Zimbabwe management in terms of response rate, which gave important insight into what the organisation is doing to address issues of migrated archives. The sample is as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample distribution

Sample description	Frequency	Responses received	Data collection tool
Director	1	Nil	Questionnaire
Deputy Director	2	2	Questionnaire
Chief Archivists	5	3	Questionnaire
Other Archivists	1	1	Questionnaire
Sample size	9	6	

Findings of the study

The following findings were made in line with the objectives of the study.

Archival repatriation efforts in Zimbabwe

The study found that Zimbabwe has been part of those African countries which have undertaken repatriation programmes for their migrated archival collections. Respondent A said that:

National Archives of Zimbabwe has managed to repatriate cabinet archives for the then Prime Minister Ian Smith's administration, composed of cabinet files, correspondence and policy files, which were taken to South Africa and donated to Rhodes University Trust Archives. It is yet not clear whether this represented all the records taken to South Africa during the colonial reign.

The study has shown that repatriation of these archives from South Africa by the NAZ is an important milestone that should spur efforts towards full recovery of all migrated archives to Zimbabwe. Respondent B reported that:

Some archives have also been identified in the United Kingdom National Archives, constituting a significant volume of Zimbabwe archives. Efforts are yet to be made towards the repatriation of those archives held in the United Kingdom.

The study has also shown that Zimbabwe has no specific policy on archival repatriation, and that makes it difficult to identify the migrated archives in foreign territories and launch effective repatriation processes. This exacerbates the already complex global archival restorative frameworks, leading to reduced appetite to follow up on this important part of the nation's archival heritage. Respondent C conceded that:

There is no policy to effectively address repatriation of migrated archives and NAZ has to make use of the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act, which has significant gaps when it comes to repatriation of migrated archives.

Section 11 of the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act Chapter 25:06 of 1986 stipulates that:

No person shall remove out of Zimbabwe any public archive or public record unless such public archive or public record is required for any official purpose.

While the proscription of migrating archival materials from Zimbabwe is a positive measure in curtailing the loss of archival heritage in Zimbabwe, it does not address the historical legacies of archival expropriation and the necessary repatriation of these archival collections. Thus the absence of strong legal instruments complicated NAZ's position to effectively execute repatriation programmes for those archives in the United Kingdom.

How African countries handled repatriation of migrated archives

The findings of the study showed that African countries have dealt with issues of repatriation in a variety of ways, given the differing historical contexts of their migration.

Algeria

In Algeria, archives were largely taken to France during its colonisation from 1830 to 1962. The country pursued the return of these archival materials through long-term bilateral negotiations. However, France has repatriated only a portion of the records, such as the remains of resistance fighters and select documents constituting 53 000 cartons out of an estimated 200 000 cartons of archival collection. Repatriation of remaining archives continues to be a contentious issue with discussions focusing on restitution, accessibility and the role of archives in shaping national memory. Sayad (2020) posits that Algeria's case illustrates the importance of presidential diplomacy and symbolic repatriation as steps towards full repatriation.

Ghana

According to Aguolu (2016), Ghana's approach involved diplomatic and institutional cooperation with the UK to obtain microfilmed copies of Gold Coast colonial records. While full physical return was not achieved, the accessible digital and microfilm formats enabled local historical scholarship and education. Ghana's case demonstrates that peaceful and technical solutions can yield practical outcomes.

Kenya

Kenya's successful repatriation of the Mau Mau uprising archives from the UK is a landmark example. Following a legal suit by Mau Mau returns and media exposure in 2011, the British Foreign Office was compelled to acknowledge the existence of over 1 500 previously undisclosed files (Elkins, 2011). This case demonstrates how legal activism, international pressure and diplomatic negotiation can lead to meaningful repatriation. The documents have since been repatriated to Kenya and deposited at the Kenya National Archives, enhancing both historical justice and research access.

Namibia

Colonised by Germany and later administered by South Africa under the League of Nations mandate, many of its archival records were migrated to Germany during its colonial rule. Namibia has pursued the recovery of its archives through diplomatic channels, especially with Germany. Following its independence, it initiated correspondence with German institutions (Wallace, 2011). In 2016, under growing pressure from civil society and international actors, the German government acknowledged the Herero and Nama genocide, and this opened a new diplomatic space for discussing broader restitution, including repatriation of archival materials. As observed by Melber (2019), the dialogue between Germany and Namibia has resulted in increased transparency about archival holdings, and Germany has supported digital repatriation and capacity-building initiatives within Namibia's archival sector.

Nigeria

Nigeria focused on the digital repatriation of its migrated archival stock, which had been taken to the United Kingdom. Through initiatives like the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, Nigeria gained access to colonial administrative documents in digital form (British Library, 2020). More significantly, Nigeria has secured the return of several Benin Bronzes from European museums, reflecting the stretch of cultural diplomacy and ethical discourse (Savay, 2018). Nigeria's strategy highlights the utility of phased and hybrid repatriation of digital records now and physical records later.

South Africa

South Africa's efforts to reclaim the African National Congress (ANC) exile archives were multilateral and systematic. These archives, once scattered across Tanzania, Russia and Zambia, were repatriated through collaboration between the ANC, universities and international bodies like UNESCO (Harris, 2020). The archives are now preserved at institutions such as Fort Hare University and the National Archives of South Africa. The case

underscores the need for national coordination and a strong archival infrastructure. Table 2 below shows a summary repatriation strategies used by other African countries.

Table 2: Strategies for archival repatriation used by other countries

Country	Legal action	Diplomatic negotiation	Digital/microfilm access	Multilateral support	Cultural/Media advocacy
Algeria	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Ghana	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Kenya	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Namibia	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Nigeria	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
South Africa	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓

Impact of international diplomacy on archival repatriation outcomes

The repatriation of cultural heritage, including archival materials, has become an increasingly important issue in international relations. International diplomacy plays a crucial role in facilitating the return of cultural artefacts and archival materials to their countries of origin. The multiple cases exhibited in these studies demonstrate the unimpeachable role of international diplomacy in the successful repatriation of migrated archives.

Peterson (2005) buttresses that diplomatic relations between countries can facilitate the return of cultural heritage. Similarly, a study by the International Council of Museums (2019) highlighted the importance of diplomatic dialogue in resolving repatriation disputes. As shown in this study, all the countries in Africa that had successes in repatriating migrated archives used diplomatic negotiation to arrive at agreed repatriation outcomes and strategies. Respondent D agreed that:

The successful repatriation of archives migrated to South Africa was as a result of diplomatic negotiation. Without international diplomacy and engagement between the government of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the archives could not have been successfully repatriated. Again, the National Archives of Zimbabwe alone could not have succeeded without support of the government of South Africa and the National Archives and Records Services of South Africa.

International diplomacy thus plays a vital role in facilitating the repatriation of archival materials. By fostering diplomatic relations, negotiating agreements, and promoting cultural cooperation, countries can work together to resolve repatriation disputes and return cultural heritage to its rightful owners.

Key Lessons for Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a lot to learn from countries which have undertaken repatriation programmes for their displaced archives. These lessons are varied and could include repatriation of digital surrogates, putting in place comprehensive policies to guide repatriation efforts, multilateral

and diplomatic engagements with host countries and institutions which own these archival collections and integrating repatriation programmes in the national development agenda. These issues are discussed more broadly below;

Digital repatriation

As has been shown in Nigeria and Namibia cases, inadequate archival infrastructure can delay or undermine repatriation efforts. In Zimbabwe, the National Archives must be capacitated through government and donor funding to store and preserve repatriated documents. A phased approach could involve upgrading physical facilities while launching a National Digital Archive to host surrogates in the interim (Aguolu, 2016). Namibia's acceptance of microfilm copies reflects the dilemma of authenticity versus access. Zimbabwe can request both digital and physical repatriation, ensuring high-resolution copies are provided while continuing diplomatic efforts for the originals. A two-track system helps maintain momentum while awaiting diplomatic breakthroughs (Melber, 2019). From the findings of the study, the National Archives can take advantage of its envisaged EDRMS programme to create digital capacity for the repatriation of digital copies of migrated archives.

Comprehensive archival repatriation policy

Algeria's struggle with ambiguous archival ownership laws, particularly in negotiating with France, underscores the need for clear legal instruments. Zimbabwe should develop a national archival repatriation policy with a defined legal mandate for the Ministry of Home Affairs and the National Archives of Zimbabwe to pursue and receive historical archives. This legal clarity will reduce bureaucratic resistance and facilitate international negotiation with institutions holding the migrated archives. (Harris, 2002).

Diplomatic and multilateral advocacy

Kenya's success in retrieving colonial-era documents came after international litigation and pressure. Zimbabwe can leverage its international stature and presence in multilateral bodies to exert diplomatic pressure for the release of its migrated archives. In addition, the repatriation of migrated archives in Africa has been a concerted effort in Zimbabwe. Fiona (2021) notes that the East and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) has played a significant role in promoting the return of these archives, bringing attention to the issue through conferences and publications. The International Council on Archives (ICA) has also been instrumental in seeking solutions to the problem of migrated archives, working closely with member states and regional branches like ESARBICA to facilitate the repatriation process.

According to Mnjama (2017), the African Union has further bolstered these efforts through its focus on cultural heritage and repatriation of cultural artefacts, which includes archival materials. Although specific initiatives solely targeting migrated archives may not be explicitly detailed on the African Union's (AU) platforms, their broader cultural repatriation and heritage preservation agenda indirectly supports the cause. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) contributes to this endeavour through its promotion of regional cooperation and development, which includes cultural heritage preservation. While the SADC's primary focus is on economic and social development, its initiatives on culture and heritage could potentially encompass the repatriation of archives as part of its broader goals for regional integration and cooperation.

Mbaye (2016) submits that these organisations collectively contribute to a framework that supports the repatriation of migrated archives, emphasising the importance of cultural heritage and historical memory for African nations. Their efforts underscore the need for a coordinated approach to address the complex issues surrounding the return of these archives by various organisations that could engage through UNESCO, WIPO, ICA and other such agencies and link archival claims with broader cultural or trade agreements. (Anderson & Branch, 2012).

Integration of archival repatriation in national heritage policy

In Ghana and Nigeria, the absence of strong political commitment delayed progress. In order to accentuate its commitment to archival repatriation, Zimbabwe must integrate archival repatriation into national identity and heritage policies, as advised by Prott (2018). This can be achieved through strategic advocacy to policymakers so that archival repatriation becomes part of Vision 2030, better still, be part of the national peace and reconciliation framework.

Recommended strategies to overcome challenges to archival repatriation

As has been shown in this study, there were different historical contexts in all the countries which undertook repatriation programmes for their displaced or migrated archives. The differing historical backgrounds gave rise to differing challenges which required appropriate repatriation strategies. Zimbabwe could adopt and refine the following strategies which were successfully used by other African countries as shown in Table 3 below;

Table 3: Possible interventions

Challenge faced	Country	Zimbabwe's possible response strategy
Inadequate archival infrastructure	Nigeria, Ghana and Namibia	Invest in modern archival facilities, expand digitisation capacity at the NAZ, partner with UNESCO and ICA for technical aid.
Legal ambiguity over ownership	Algeria, Nigeria	Develop national repatriation policy, enact legislation defining archive ownership and retrieval processes.
Diplomatic power imbalances	Algeria, Kenya	Use multilateral diplomacy (UNESCO, AU), align repatriation with broader diplomatic talks and trade agreements.
Limited political will or priority	Ghana, Nigeria	Integrate repatriation into national development and reconciliation plans, advocate through Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage.
Digital repatriation	Namibia, Ghana	Negotiate for both digital and phased physical return, establish conditions for long-term stewardship of originals.
Poor or Limited public engagement	Nigeria, Ghana	Launch awareness campaigns involving universities, schools and civil society, linking archives to national identity.

International diplomacy versus Zimbabwean archival heritage

Ownership disputes over liberation archives	South Africa	Establish clear stakeholder frameworks with former liberation movements (for example, ANLA, ZIPRA archives).
Fragile international legal frameworks	Kenya, Algeria	Pursue bilateral and multilateral agreements with custodial countries, consider strategic litigation if diplomacy fails.

Conclusion

This study indicated the complex dynamics surrounding the repatriation of migrated archives in Zimbabwe, highlighting the intricate interplay between international diplomacy, cultural heritage, and national sovereignty. The findings underscore the significance of repatriating migrated archives as a means of reclaiming and preserving Zimbabwe's cultural and historical identity. The challenges identified, including diplomatic hurdles, legal complexities, and institutional capacity constraints, necessitate a multifaceted approach to address the repatriation impasse. Nonetheless, the prospects for repatriation remain promising, driven by growing global recognition of cultural heritage rights and the increasing importance of archival materials in shaping national narratives.

To advance the repatriation agenda, Zimbabwe must navigate international diplomatic channels, leveraging bilateral and multilateral partnerships to facilitate the return of its archival heritage. Strengthening institutional capacity, promoting cultural diplomacy, and engaging diverse stakeholders will be crucial in this endeavour. Ultimately, the repatriation of migrated archives holds profound implications for Zimbabwe's cultural revitalisation, historical preservation, and national development. By reclaiming its archival heritage, Zimbabwe can reclaim its past, inform its present, and shape its future.

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