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Community-Driven Archiving: Safeguarding Intangible Culture through Participatory Documentation in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe, much of the nation's cultural memory and historical knowledge lives beyond official archives and resides in oral traditions, community storytelling, local ceremonies, and the lived experiences of rural and Indigenous populations. This paper explores the rise of community-driven archiving initiatives in Zimbabwe as a means of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage that is often excluded from formal documentary systems. Focusing on grassroots efforts in Zimbabwe, the study examines how communities are using participatory methods to document oral histories, traditional practices, and local knowledge systems. Guided by Post-Custodial Archival Theory, it analyses how these initiatives challenge the dominance of state-controlled archives while redefining archival ownership and agency. These initiatives not only preserve endangered cultural expressions but also serve as acts of resistance against colonial archival legacies that have historically marginalised African voices. Unlike the bureaucratic collections of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, which prioritise textual and governmental records, community-driven archives recognise the legitimacy of embodied knowledge, oral performance, and local epistemologies as valid archival material. Drawing on interviews with local archivists, cultural practitioners, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the paper highlights the ethical, logistical, and technological challenges faced in such efforts, particularly regarding ownership, digital access, and sustainability. It calls for greater institutional support, policy recognition, and collaboration between communities and archival bodies to ensure that Zimbabwe's intangible heritage is preserved as an essential component of its national documentary record.

Keywords

Community-driven, Community archives, Decolonising archives, Intangible cultural heritage, Oral history, Participatory documentation.

Introduction

Archives are more than repositories of documents; they are powerful spaces where societies decide what is remembered and what is forgotten (Murambiwa, 2009; Sibanda & Chiripanhura, 2024). In Zimbabwe, as in many postcolonial African nations, the colonial legacy left a state-controlled archival system that privileged official records while sidelining Indigenous voices and lived experiences (Muchefa, 2019). Much of the nation's cultural memory, oral traditions, storytelling, ceremonies, and local knowledge has therefore remained outside formal archival frameworks. In recent years, however, communities across Zimbabwe have begun reclaiming the right to preserve their histories through grassroots, participatory archiving. From oral history projects to heritage-rich cultural festivals, these initiatives document endangered traditions, safeguard intangible heritage, and challenge historical silences. This article examines the rise of

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such community-driven archives, their role in decolonising memory, the challenges they face, and the pathways for building sustainable, inclusive archival futures in Zimbabwe.

Background

The emergence of community-driven archives in Zimbabwe must be understood within the broader historical continuum of colonialism, state control over memory, and the systematic marginalisation of Indigenous voices. The colonisation of Zimbabwe in 1890 by the British South Africa Company entrenched a Eurocentric archival paradigm that prioritised the preservation of colonial administrative records while excluding African knowledge systems, oral traditions, and community-based memory practices (Murambiwa, 2009; Muchefa, 2019). Far from being neutral repositories, colonial archives functioned as instruments of governance and domination, preserving information valuable to the colonial state while erasing or silencing African histories (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). Following independence in 1980, the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) inherited this custodial framework with minimal reform to its laws, priorities, or institutional culture. Consequently, postcolonial archival practice has continued to privilege state-generated documentation over the lived experiences and cultural heritage of marginalised communities (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). Instances of deliberate archival destruction, such as the burning of politically sensitive records to conceal evidence, underscore the ongoing politicisation of memory and the use of archival control to shape national narratives (Bishi, 2025).

In response to these institutional silences, communities across Zimbabwe, sometimes with support from the NAZ, have initiated grassroots archival projects in areas such as Mount Darwin, Howard, Lupane, Kariba, Chipinge, Gwanda, Zvishavane, and Mbungo. These initiatives document oral histories, Indigenous knowledge systems, and localised cultural identities through participatory methods that centre on community agency (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023; Marowa, 2015). They constitute acts of archival activism that challenge both the colonial legacy and the continued exclusion of minority voices from the official record (Ngoepe & Bhebhe, 2023). Many of these community archives are integrated with cultural festivals that serve as living, performative archives, such as the Matendera Festival, Tonga cultural gatherings, Ndau Festival of the Arts (NdaFA), Hurungwe Arts Festival (HAF), and the Great Limpopo Cultural Trade Fair (GLCTF), now known as the Budula Festival among the Mhlanguleni (Tsonga/Shangani) community in Chiredzi. Through storytelling, music, dance, ritual performance, and craft-making, these events preserve and transmit heritage, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, foster cultural pride, and contribute to local economies through heritage tourism (Chipangura et al., 2019; Kusasa et al., 2022; Muyambo, 2022; Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Sibanda, 2025). Yet despite their significance, these community archives face chronic underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, limited archival expertise, and weak policy support (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023; Chigwada & Chiparausha, 2017). Without intervention, they remain vulnerable to deterioration or loss, highlighting the urgent need for an inclusive archival framework that recognises

community archives as legitimate custodians of Zimbabwe's collective memory.

This historical and socio-political context underscores the need to rethink what constitutes an archive and who holds the authority to define and preserve cultural memory. In Zimbabwe, where colonial and postcolonial archival paradigms have largely centralised custodianship and excluded community voices, the emergence of grassroots initiatives calls for a theoretical model that legitimises decentralised, participatory preservation practices. Post-Custodial Archival Theory provides such a lens, offering a framework to understand community-driven archives not as peripheral supplements to the national record, but as transformative spaces that redefine archival ownership, agency, and inclusivity.

Theoretical Framework: Post-Custodial Archival Theory

Post-Custodial Archival Theory provides a fitting lens for analysing the emergence and significance of community-driven archives in Zimbabwe. This theoretical approach challenges the traditional custodial model of archiving, where centralised state institutions physically acquire and control archival materials, by recognising that archival stewardship can remain with the originating communities (Cook, 2013; Jimerson, 2013). In the post-custodial paradigm, archivists act as facilitators, collaborators, and capacity builders rather than gatekeepers, ensuring that communities retain agency over their heritage while benefiting from professional support where needed.

In the Zimbabwean context, this framework is particularly relevant given the historical dominance of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), whose mandate and collection practices have been shaped by colonial priorities that privileged state and elite narratives while marginalising Indigenous voices (Murambiwa, 2009; Chaterera & Mutsagondo, 2016; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). The post-custodial approach offers a conceptual pathway to address these historical exclusions, allowing communities to define, curate, and interpret their histories according to culturally appropriate norms and epistemologies.

Community archives linked to cultural festivals illustrate the post-custodial ethos in practice. These initiatives function as "living archives" that safeguard oral histories, music, rituals, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage within the communities where they originate (Chipangura et al., 2025; Kusasa et al., 2022). Rather than transferring such heritage to central repositories where its meaning might be divorced from its cultural context, the post-custodial model supports its preservation *in situ*, ensuring continuity of use, interpretation, and intergenerational transmission.

Moreover, the post-custodial theory aligns with current global shifts towards more inclusive and participatory archival practices, as advocated by UNESCO (2003) which calls for heritage preservation models that empower local stakeholders. For Zimbabwe, adopting a post-custodial perspective not only mitigates the risk of archival silences caused by exclusionary centralised systems but also strengthens cultural sovereignty, fosters resilience against deliberate heritage destruction (Bishi, 2025), and integrates diverse knowledge systems into the broader national

memory landscape.

Post-Custodial Archival Theory therefore offers both a critique of Zimbabwe's historically centralised archival practices and a constructive model for reimagining heritage preservation as a collaborative, community-led process. By foregrounding community agency, shared responsibility, and culturally embedded custodianship, the framework directly informs this study's aim to investigate how grassroots archival initiatives, particularly those integrated into cultural festivals, preserve intangible cultural heritage, resist colonial legacies, and navigate structural challenges.

Related Scholarship and Context

Building on the post-custodial theoretical framework outlined above, this section reviews existing scholarship that informs this study. It situates community-driven archives within broader debates on archival decolonisation, participatory documentation, and intangible cultural heritage, highlighting how previous research has addressed, or overlooked, the dynamics that this article explores in the Zimbabwean context.

Scholarship on archiving in Zimbabwe reveals how colonialism profoundly shaped both the form and ideology of record-keeping. The British South Africa Company's administration from 1890 institutionalised a bureaucratic archival system that served the political and economic interests of the colonial state, systematically excluding African knowledge systems and community-based memory practices (Murambiwa, 2009; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). Archival silences were not accidental but actively produced through selective collection and classification, ensuring that the colonial archive preserved imperial power while marginalising Indigenous epistemologies (Sibanda & Chiripanhura, 2024). Following independence in 1980, the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) inherited this framework with minimal transformation. As a result, archival practice continued to prioritise government and administrative documentation, reproducing what Ketelaar (2012) terms "archival sedimentation," where colonial structures persist under postcolonial governance (Muchefa, 2019; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021).

In response, scholars and practitioners have called for a paradigm shift toward community-driven archives, heritage initiatives established and maintained by communities themselves to document and safeguard their histories, languages, and cultural practices (Flinn, 2007; Lowry & Chaterera-Zambuko, 2023). Across Africa, such archives have emerged as acts of resistance to state neglect and colonial erasure. In Zimbabwe, localised initiatives in Mount Darwin, Lupane, Kariba, Chipinge, Gwanda, Masvingo (Mbungu ZCC Church), and Zvishavane illustrate how oral histories, genealogies, and ritual practices are being recorded and curated at the grassroots level (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023; Marowa, 2015). These projects shift control of heritage from centralised state institutions to local custodians, fostering participatory and inclusive preservation practices (Ngoepe & Bhebhe, 2023). Unlike bureaucratic archives, community-driven efforts prioritise cultural relevance and accessibility, integrating Indigenous languages,

performance, and memory as legitimate archival modes.

A growing body of literature also recognises cultural festivals as "living archives" that sustain intangible cultural heritage through performance, storytelling, music, and craft-making (Chipangura et al., 2019; Kusasa et al., 2022; Muyambo, 2022). These events function as intergenerational classrooms and community repositories, blending celebration with preservation. As Smith (2006) and Hamilton (2002) argue, such performative spaces contest the "authorised heritage discourse" by reaffirming that heritage is dynamic and socially embedded, not confined to written or material records.

Despite these advances, studies consistently highlight persistent structural challenges. Community archives often operate with limited financial resources, inadequate storage infrastructure, and minimal policy recognition (Chigwada & Chiparausha, 2017). Many lack trained archivists and depend on volunteer labour, leaving collections vulnerable to loss or deterioration. Moreover, digital preservation remains constrained by technological inequities, especially in rural areas with poor connectivity (Ndegwa, 2023). Policy frameworks in Zimbabwe have yet to recognise community archives as legitimate custodians of heritage, a gap that perpetuates archival exclusion and limits collaboration between state and community institutions.

Current scholarship thus converges on three key insights. First, colonial archival structures continue to shape the politics of memory and exclusion in Zimbabwe. Second, community-driven archives, particularly those embedded in cultural festivals, represent powerful sites of decolonial resistance and participatory heritage-making. Third, sustainable preservation requires institutional partnerships, capacity-building, and policy reform grounded in post-custodial principles (Caswell, 2014; Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014). However, as few studies examine how these community archives intersect with intangible cultural heritage or how they can be integrated into national frameworks, this study addresses that gap by analysing Zimbabwean examples through a post-custodial lens.

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative multiple case study approach focusing on selected community-driven archival initiatives in Zimbabwe, including those embedded in cultural festivals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with community archivists, festival organisers, elders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); community members; participant observation during festivals; and analysis of archival materials, photographs, and festival programmes. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify information-rich participants. Data were analysed thematically, guided by the post-custodial theory, to identify patterns in how communities preserve intangible cultural heritage, resist colonial archival legacies, and navigate challenges. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of methods, member checking, and detailed contextual descriptions, while ethical

considerations included informed consent, voluntary participation, and respect for community control over cultural knowledge.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents the study's key findings and examines them in relation to the research objectives, drawing connections between participants' perspectives and existing scholarship. The discussion is organised thematically, highlighting the challenges, innovations, and policy implications of community-driven archives in Zimbabwe, and situating these within broader debates on heritage preservation and decolonisation.

Historical Legacies and Political Contexts Informing the Growth of Community-Driven Archives

Interviews with elders, festival organisers, and community archivists consistently revealed a deep and enduring perception that formal archives in Zimbabwe have failed to represent the lived realities, histories, and knowledge systems of their communities. Respondents traced this marginalisation to both the colonial period and the post-independence era, noting that while the nature of exclusion had shifted, its effects remained persistent. Several participants recalled that "*our history was either ignored or destroyed*," a reference not only to the well-documented colonial-era omissions but also to more recent deliberate destruction of records by authorities to eliminate politically inconvenient evidence (Bishi, 2025).

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) was frequently described in interviews as "*a place for government files*" rather than a repository of community memory. For many respondents, the institution's centralised and bureaucratic orientation reinforced a sense of physical, cultural, and epistemic distance, between the state and ordinary citizens. As one elder remarked:

> "*We go there [to NAZ], and they show us papers about ministers and government meetings. But where are our rainmaking songs? Where are the histories of our chiefs? Those things are not there. When they are there, you find them recorded from the perspective of the coloniser*."

Another respondent, a cultural festival organiser, echoed this sentiment:

> "*They keep files that are not ours. Our stories live in the people, not in those shelves in Harare.*"

This perceived exclusion has been a powerful catalyst for the development of local archiving initiatives. Respondents repeatedly cited the urgency of safeguarding oral traditions, family histories, and artefacts that risk disappearing in the absence of deliberate preservation. Such motivations resonate with Murambiwa's (2009) critique of postcolonial archival continuities and with Bhebhe and Ngoepe's (2021) call for participatory models that recognise the agency of local communities. From a post-custodial theoretical perspective, these narratives illustrate the limitations of centralised custodianship in contexts characterised by diverse, decentralised cultural heritage. Post-custodial theory challenges the notion that archives must be physically and administratively controlled by central institutions, advocating instead for

the decentralisation of both control and responsibility for preservation. In the voices of the respondents, this principle was not abstract but lived. Communities saw themselves not as passive "sources" feeding into the national archive, but as rightful owners and custodians of their narratives. As one young community archivist from Chipinge put it:

"*We are not suppliers to the government archive. We are the archive*."

These findings highlight that community-driven archives are not merely stopgap measures to compensate for the inadequacies of formal state archives; rather, they constitute deliberate and strategic acts of reclaiming narrative authority, cultural ownership, and epistemic sovereignty (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021; Harris, 2002). By documenting oral histories, safeguarding traditional practices, and curating heritage through festivals and grassroots initiatives, these communities are actively reconfiguring the archival landscape in Zimbabwe (Chipangura et al., 2025; Kusasa et al., 2022). Their work challenges the monopolisation of memory by centralised state institutions, disrupts the archival silences produced by both colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies (Murambiwa, 2009; Mbembe, 2002), and asserts the legitimacy of alternative custodial models grounded in local agency. Viewed through a post-custodial lens (Duff et al., 2013; Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014), these initiatives are more than acts of heritage preservation; they are political interventions that decentralise archival power, affirm Indigenous modes of knowledge transmission, and create participatory spaces where memory is not simply stored but lived, performed, and continually negotiated.

Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Challenge to Colonial Archival Legacies

In this section, the focus turns to the role of community-driven archives in safeguarding oral traditions, performing arts, Indigenous knowledge, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage, while actively contesting the archival exclusions inherited from the colonial era. The following findings illuminate how these practices are enacted on the ground.

Cultural Festivals as Sites of Archival Practice

Almost all interviewees linked their archiving work to annual or seasonal cultural festivals. Participants described these events as "living archives," spaces where heritage is not passively stored but actively performed, transmitted, and adapted for contemporary audiences. As one festival organiser reflected:

"*When we dance, when we sing the old songs, it's not just entertainment. We are recording, even if the record is in people's hearts and memories*."

These festivals operate as intergenerational classrooms where younger members learn songs, dances, craft techniques, and oral histories directly from elders. Unlike the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), where cultural heritage is mediated through bureaucratic classification systems and often stripped of its performative and communal context, these events embed heritage within its original social and ceremonial setting.

Increasingly, communities are pairing these living traditions with intentional documentation strategies, capturing performances on video, photographing artefacts, and transcribing oral narratives shared during gatherings and posting them on various social media platforms. This hybrid preservation method reflects post-custodial archival principles (Caswell, 2014; Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014), which advocate for the decentralisation of archival authority and the retention of records within the communities of origin. Preservation here happens *in situ* under the custodianship of cultural practitioners themselves, rather than in distant, centralised institutions.

In doing so, these initiatives directly challenge the colonial archival legacy that privileged static, written records controlled by state institutions. Instead, they embrace heritage as dynamic, evolving, and community-owned, resisting the archival silences and cultural flattening inherent in the state's centralised custodianship model. This shift not only safeguards intangible cultural heritage but also reconfigures who has the right to define, record, and transmit Zimbabwe's historical memory.

Analytically, these findings reveal that community-driven archives are not merely cultural preservation projects; they are acts of epistemic resistance. By situating preservation within community contexts and valuing oral, embodied, and multilingual forms of knowledge, these initiatives subvert the colonial archival hierarchy that placed written, state-sanctioned documents at the apex of legitimacy (Harris, 2002; Ngulube, 2012). In line with post-custodial theory, the power to determine what constitutes "the archive" is reclaimed by the communities themselves, redefining archival authority as locally embedded and culturally responsive.

Community Archives as Acts of Resistance and Reclaiming Narrative Authority

Participants frequently framed their work as an assertion of agency and an act of self-determination in the face of historical marginalisation. One community archivist from Lupane put it succinctly:

> "*We don't need Harare to approve our history. We know it. We live it. Not only that, but we keep it.*"

For many, the act of documenting, whether through photography, oral recordings, local museum exhibitions, or digital storytelling, was not only about preservation; it was also a deliberate political stance against historical silencing. This finding resonates with Harris's (2002) argument that the archive has historically functioned as a site of power, privileging certain narratives while excluding others. By choosing to maintain their collections, communities actively contest the centralised, bureaucratic authority of state archives, which have often failed to represent Indigenous experiences (Murambiwa, 2009; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021).

This approach aligns closely with post-custodial theory, which emphasises decentralised custodianship and the recognition of communities as the rightful owners of their heritage. Here, archival authority is redefined: rather than submitting material to distant institutions, communities retain both physical and intellectual control, determining what is collected, how

it is described, and who has access to it. Where external expertise is sought, such as training in digitisation or conservation, it is done on their terms, reinforcing local autonomy while avoiding dependency on state approval or mediation (Caswell, 2014; Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014). In this way, community archives in Zimbabwe become more than repositories; they are spaces of resistance, where marginalised voices actively dismantle the hierarchies of colonial and postcolonial archival practices. By reclaiming narrative authority, these initiatives not only protect cultural memory but also challenge the legitimacy of a state-centred archival model, asserting that memory belongs first and foremost to the people who live it.

Community-Driven Archives as Repositories of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Community-driven archives in Zimbabwe have emerged as crucial mechanisms for safeguarding oral traditions, folklore, Indigenous medicinal knowledge, and ceremonial practices, forms of intangible cultural heritage frequently overlooked or excluded from the formal archival system (Chipangura et al., 2025; Marowa, 2015). Such heritage is not only a repository of historical memory but also a living expression of identity, values, and social cohesion. As one elder explained:

> "*If we do not tell our own stories, they will disappear. Our dances, our medicines, our history, none of that is in the government archives.*"

This statement encapsulates the urgency felt by many communities: without proactive efforts to document, perform, and transmit these cultural forms, the risk of irreversible loss is high. Unlike the bureaucratic collections of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), which prioritise textual records and governmental documents, community-driven archives recognise the legitimacy of embodied knowledge, oral performance, and local epistemologies as valid archival material (Sibanda, 2025; Flinn, 2007).

A distinctive feature of these archives is their integration of heritage preservation into cultural festivals. These events function as "living archives" (Kusasa et al., 2022; Muyambo, 2022), providing spaces where songs, dances, storytelling, and artisanal crafts are not merely displayed but actively performed, taught, and adapted for new generations. Such practices reinforce what Smith (2006) terms the "authorised heritage discourse" from above, redefining who is empowered to decide what counts as heritage and how it should be safeguarded.

By embedding archiving into communal festivities, these initiatives resist the colonial archival tendency to freeze culture into static artefacts, objects divorced from their contexts of use and meaning (Hamilton, 2002; Mbembe, 2002). Instead, they affirm heritage as dynamic and evolving, capable of accommodating innovation while maintaining continuity with the past. In this way, community-driven archives not only preserve intangible cultural heritage but also challenge the epistemic dominance of Western archival traditions that prioritise fixed, object-based memory over fluid, performative cultural practices.

Community-Driven Archives as Challengers of Colonial Archival Legacies

By controlling how their histories are recorded, interpreted, and accessed, community archivists in Zimbabwe actively reclaim narrative authority from both the colonial and postcolonial state. This reclamation is not merely symbolic; it represents a fundamental shift in who determines the parameters of historical truth and cultural memory. As one festival organiser expressed:

> "*For too long, others have told our history for us. Now we decide what is important, how it is kept, and who can use it*."

Such sentiments reflect a conscious rejection of the hegemonic structures that have historically shaped the archival record. Harris (2002) argues that the colonial archive functioned as a "site of power," where the selective inclusion and exclusion of records reinforced imperial authority and legitimised state narratives. In Zimbabwe, this legacy persisted after independence, with the National Archives continuing to privilege bureaucratic documentation over community narratives (Murambiwa, 2009; Chaterera & Mutsagondo, 2016; Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). Community-driven archives directly challenge this epistemic hierarchy. By adopting local classification systems rooted in Indigenous knowledge structures, they replace Eurocentric cataloguing models with culturally resonant frameworks. Through oral record keeping, they ensure that memory is not constrained to written text, thereby disrupting the colonial privilege of literacy over orality as the primary medium of historical legitimacy (Ngulube, 2012; Mbembe, 2002).

Furthermore, the deliberate use of multiple languages in documentation reflects an inclusive ethos, countering the archival marginalisation of non-English and non-Shona/Ndebele languages that has historically silenced minority groups (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023). These practices not only preserve heritage in culturally meaningful ways but also represent acts of epistemic resistance. As Ketelaar (2012) notes, archives are not passive repositories; they are active sites where societal values, identities, and power relations are negotiated. In this sense, community archives in Zimbabwe do more than fill in the silences of the national record; they rewrite the terms of archival engagement, positioning local communities as the legitimate custodians and interpreters of their histories.

The findings reveal that community-driven archives are not merely stopgap measures filling a gap left by the state. They are deliberate acts of reclaiming narrative authority and reshaping the archival landscape in Zimbabwe. In doing so, they subvert both the historical marginalisation of African voices and the present-day structural biases of national heritage institutions. As Mbembe (2002) notes, confronting archival silences requires not only filling gaps but transforming the very frameworks through which memory is constructed. From the post-custodial lens, these archives exemplify a shift from hierarchical, centre-periphery models toward collaborative, decentralised systems of heritage management. This repositioning creates possibilities for an inclusive archival ecosystem in Zimbabwe, one in which communities are active agents in shaping, owning, and transmitting their histories.

Challenges and Limitations of Community-Driven Archives

The research revealed that while community-driven archives in Zimbabwe play an essential role in safeguarding marginalised histories and intangible cultural heritage, they operate under significant constraints that threaten their sustainability and long-term impact. Below are the challenges that were most cited by the participants.

Limited Financial Resources

Nearly all participants cited inadequate and unstable funding as the most significant constraint on the sustainability of community-driven archives. This financial precarity was described not only as a logistical challenge but also as a constant source of stress for organisers. As one organiser of the festival expressed:

> "*We do this work from our own pockets. Sometimes we have to choose between buying food for our families and printing posters for the festival*."

Such stark trade-offs illustrate the deeply personal sacrifices made by community archivists, who often rely on volunteer labour and personal savings to sustain their work. Without consistent and reliable funding streams, communities face severe limitations in acquiring essential equipment such as audio recorders, cameras, and storage facilities; preserving delicate artefacts; and covering operational costs for cultural festivals or community museums.

This situation mirrors Bhebhe & Ngoepe's (2023) observation that community archives in Zimbabwe tend to operate on fragile financial models, heavily dependent on sporadic donor assistance, fundraising events, or ad hoc community contributions. The absence of institutional funding or state support means that even well-intentioned initiatives remain vulnerable to collapse when individual organisers face personal economic hardship. From a post-custodial perspective, while decentralising archival custodianship empowers communities, it also exposes them to the inequities of resource distribution, especially when national heritage funding remains concentrated in centralised state institutions. Unless financial support mechanisms are decentralised alongside archival authority, the long-term sustainability of these archives will remain uncertain.

Inadequate Archival Infrastructure

Participants consistently identified the lack of proper archival infrastructure as a major obstacle to the preservation of community heritage. Many community archivists explained that they lacked secure storage spaces, appropriate shelving, climate control systems, and reliable digital preservation tools. As one archivist from Chipinge remarked:

> "*We keep tapes and photographs in our homes. If there is a fire or flood, all is lost.*"

This reliance on domestic spaces for storing fragile materials, such as photographs, cassette tapes, and manuscripts, leaves collections highly vulnerable to environmental damage, pests, and accidental loss. In many cases, storage areas are neither temperature- nor humidity-controlled, accelerating the deterioration of organic materials like paper and film. These

challenges also extend to the digital sphere. Limited access to reliable electricity and stable internet connectivity, particularly in rural and remote areas, makes it difficult to implement sustainable digital preservation practices, such as cloud backups, redundant storage, and migration of data to updated formats. As Ndegwa (2023) notes, preservation without adequate infrastructure risks creating a "false sense of security," where materials may be collected but remain equally at risk of loss or degradation.

From a post-custodial perspective, this infrastructural gap underscores the tension between decentralised custodianship and preservation requirements. While empowering communities to hold and interpret their records is a powerful corrective to colonial archival exclusion, without parallel investment in physical and digital infrastructure, such empowerment remains precarious. Long-term solutions require not only training and awareness but also the provision of durable storage facilities, digitisation equipment, and reliable power and internet access to safeguard heritage materials for future generations.

Skills Gaps and Training Needs

A recurring theme in the interviews was the shortage of archival and preservation expertise within community initiatives. While participants demonstrated strong commitment and deep cultural knowledge, many acknowledged gaps in the technical skills required for cataloguing, digitisation, metadata creation, and long-term preservation planning. A festival organiser explained:

> "*We know the stories, the songs, and the history. But when it comes to making a proper archive, filing, scanning, and storing, we are learning as we go.*"

This skills gap often results in inconsistent documentation standards, incomplete metadata, and ad hoc digitisation processes, making collections difficult to access or integrate into broader archival networks. Such challenges mirror findings by Sibanda (2025), who argues that without structured capacity-building programmes, community archives risk producing materials that cannot be sustainably preserved or effectively retrieved. In some cases, communities rely on volunteers or short-term partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities, or cultural organisations to provide technical support. While these collaborations can be valuable, they are often irregular and dependent on external project funding cycles, which undermine continuity. Moreover, the absence of formal training opportunities in rural and marginalised areas perpetuates inequities in archival knowledge distribution, leaving communities less equipped to safeguard their heritage over time.

From a post-custodial perspective, technical training is not only an operational necessity but a matter of archival justice. By equipping community archivists with skills in both analogue and digital preservation, institutions can help ensure that decentralised custodianship is accompanied by robust preservation practices. Sustainable solutions might include mobile training workshops, mentorship programmes linking experienced archivists with community practitioners, and the development of low-cost, locally appropriate preservation technologies.

Minimal Policy Recognition and State Support

Many participants expressed frustration at the lack of formal recognition of their archives by the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) and other heritage institutions. This lack of acknowledgement often leaves community archivists operating on the periphery of the national heritage framework, without access to institutional resources, training opportunities, or preservation infrastructure. As one festival organiser explained:

"*They treat us like hobbyists, not archivists.*"

This perception reflects a deeper systemic issue where state policies remain largely centralised and oriented toward formal, document-based archives, an approach rooted in colonial administrative traditions (Harris, 2002; Ngulube, 2012). In practice, this means that oral histories, ritual practices, Indigenous medicinal knowledge, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage preserved in community archives are undervalued as legitimate archival records.

Chigwada and Chiparausha (2017) argue that the absence of inclusive, decentralised policy frameworks perpetuates archival exclusion, limiting opportunities for collaborative partnerships between state and community archives. This policy gap not only weakens the preservation of diverse heritage forms but also undermines the legitimacy of community-driven archival work in the eyes of potential funders and the broader public. Without explicit policy recognition, community archives remain vulnerable to erasure, particularly when leadership changes or donor priorities shift.

Risks of Knowledge Loss and Generational Disconnect

Elders in several communities expressed concern that younger generations were showing declining interest in traditional cultural practices, thereby threatening the continuity of intangible heritage. As one community leader explained:

"*If the young ones do not learn now, the songs and medicines will vanish with us.*"

This sentiment reflects a wider cultural shift driven by rural-to-urban migration, formal education systems that prioritise Western knowledge frameworks, and the pervasive influence of globalised media (Hafstein, 2018; Keitumetse, 2016). Younger people are often physically distant from the settings where heritage practices occur, or socially detached due to the perception that traditional knowledge is outdated or irrelevant in modern economic contexts. Such generational gaps pose significant challenges for community archives, which rely heavily on oral transmission, apprenticeship, and participatory performance to sustain cultural memory (Chipangura et al., 2025). Without structured intergenerational engagement through initiatives such as youth-focused cultural workshops, school partnerships, or digital storytelling platforms, the risk of irreversible knowledge loss intensifies significantly. In the context of post-custodial theory, bridging this gap is not only a matter of preservation but also of empowering communities to ensure that cultural transmission remains an active, living process under their control, rather than a belated salvage operation after traditions have faded.

Addressing the Challenges: Pathways Forward

Drawing from participant recommendations and literature, the following strategies could ensure the sustainable integration of community-driven archives into the national heritage framework:

Institutional Partnerships

Participants consistently stressed the need for formal, mutually respectful collaborations between the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) and community-driven archival initiatives. Such partnerships could include joint training programmes in archival management, access to digitisation facilities, and technical advice on preservation standards, while ensuring that communities retain intellectual property rights and custodianship over their materials. Rather than centralising collections in Harare or regional NAZ offices, participants advocated for a decentralised support model, where resources and expertise are taken to communities *in situ*, aligning with the post-custodial principle that preservation should happen under local stewardship (Caswell, 2014; Ngulube, 2012). These partnerships could also facilitate co-curated exhibitions, shared metadata systems, and the development of policies that formally recognise community archives as legitimate custodians within the national heritage landscape. In turn, NAZ could benefit from enriched collections that reflect Zimbabwe's diverse cultural histories, while communities gain long-term technical resilience and visibility without compromising their autonomy.

Policy Reform

Participants and scholars stressed that without legislative and policy reform, community-driven archives will remain marginalised in Zimbabwe's heritage sector. Existing archival laws, rooted in the colonial era, centralise authority in state institutions such as the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) (Murambiwa, 2009; Chigwada & Chiparausha, 2017), excluding decentralised, community-led initiatives from formal recognition, funding, and collaboration. To counter this, participants called for inclusive heritage policies that explicitly define and legitimise community archives as recognised custodians of cultural memory, mandating their integration into the national archival ecosystem while safeguarding local ownership, decision-making, and culturally specific practices. Such recognition could be formalised through statutory provisions allowing NAZ to accredit community archives, provide preservation grants, and include them in national heritage inventories. These frameworks would also offer legal protections against unauthorised use of materials and ensure the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in ways consistent with local epistemologies. Embedding these measures in policy would address historical exclusions while aligning with UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which affirms communities as primary custodians of their heritage.

Targeted Funding Models

Participants highlighted the precarious, self-funded nature of most community archival initiatives, with organisers relying on personal savings, small community contributions, or

occasional NGO assistance, an arrangement that severely constrains their capacity to acquire equipment, maintain storage, train volunteers, or host cultural events (Chigwada & Chiparaushe, 2017). To address this, they proposed dedicated grant schemes and microfinance initiatives prioritising rural and marginalised areas, administered collaboratively by the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), local authorities, and heritage-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Such funding models, structured as small, repeatable grants for operational and capacity-building needs, alongside low-interest loans or revolving community funds, could enable archives to sustain core activities and invest in income-generating projects. Embedding these mechanisms within a broader heritage development strategy would help ensure that community archives are recognised as integral components of national heritage preservation rather than symbolic cultural gestures.

Capacity-Building Initiatives

Participants stressed that sustainable heritage preservation requires not only financial resources but also the development of technical skills. Most community archivists lack formal training in core areas such as digitisation, metadata creation, cataloguing, and conservation, which are essential for long-term preservation and accessibility. To bridge this gap, they recommended culturally relevant workshops, mentorship programmes, and on-site training delivered in local languages, incorporating Indigenous classification systems rather than imposing rigid, state-centric models. These initiatives could be implemented through partnerships between the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), universities, NGOs, and experienced community archivists as peer mentors. Strengthening such capacity would empower communities to maintain physical and intellectual control over their heritage, reduce dependence on external custodians, and ensure the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage on their terms.

Intergenerational Engagement

A recurring theme in participant interviews was the need to bridge the generational gap in cultural knowledge transmission. Participants emphasised that this requires engaging youth in heritage preservation. Festivals serve as “living classrooms” where young people can learn traditional practices directly from elders. Schools and youth clubs can also integrate Indigenous knowledge into activities such as storytelling, oral history projects, and digital preservation tasks, fostering both skills and cultural pride. These strategies promote knowledge continuity and enhance the sustainability of community-driven archives.

Integrating International Exemplars

Comparable initiatives in other regions demonstrate how community-based documentation of intangible heritage can thrive through equitable partnerships between local custodians and archival institutions. For instance, the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (n.d.) in Australia and the Endangered Languages Archive (n.d.) in the United Kingdom provide models for digitally preserving oral traditions and linguistic heritage

while maintaining community ownership and consent over materials. Similarly, the Western Desert Verbal Arts Collection, inscribed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World (n.d.) Register, exemplifies how collaborative archiving of oral traditions can safeguard endangered cultural expressions through rigorous metadata standards, open access frameworks, and culturally sensitive preservation. These international exemplars illustrate that Zimbabwe's community-driven archives could benefit from adopting similar hybrid strategies that combine community custodianship with technical and institutional support to ensure the long-term safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage without compromising local autonomy.

Conclusion

Community-driven archives in Zimbabwe are essential for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, challenging colonial archival legacies, and strengthening local identity. Despite their value, they face chronic underfunding (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023), inadequate infrastructure, limited technical capacity, minimal policy recognition (Sibanda, 2025; Chigwada & Chiparausha, 2017), and intergenerational disengagement. Sustainable integration into the national heritage framework requires targeted funding for marginalised areas, culturally grounded capacity-building, respectful institutional partnerships, intergenerational engagement, and inclusive policy reform in line with UNESCO's safeguarding principles (2003). Recognising these archives as legitimate custodians would help decentralise authority, validate diverse knowledge systems, and ensure the survival of Zimbabwe's living heritage for future generations.

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