

**CURATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS AT THE
NAIROBI MUSEUM, KENYA.**

SUBMITTED BY

MARTIN OWINO TINDI

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DECLARATION

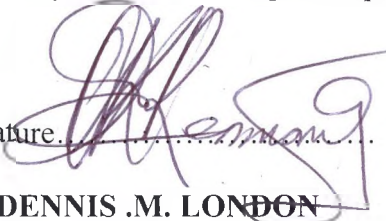
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Date.....15/9/2005

Mr. MARTIN OWINO TINDI

This project report has been submitted for examination with my approval as the University of Nairobi assigned supervisor.

Signature.....

Date.....16/9/05

DR. DENNIS .M. LONDON

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my late father and role model Mr. Mathew Owino Tindi (1941-2004) and my mother Mrs. Lucyline Owino.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.

DG	Director General.
I.A.S	Institute of African Studies.
ICCROM	International Center of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property
ICOM	International Council on Museums
NMK	National Museums of Kenya.
PMDA	Program for Museum Development in Africa.
RCMC	Research and Collection Management Committee.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

ACKNOWLEDMENT.

I'm delighted to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to different individuals and institutions that contributed directly or indirectly to the successful completion of this study. Since it is not possible to mention all of them, I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to all. However I would like to single out some of them. First of all I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Dennis London, who supervised with dedication the entire study, he provided me with scholarly counsel, advice and criticism throughout the development of this research work.

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ABSTRACT.

This study was carried out at the National Museums of Kenya Nairobi and aimed at investigating the reasons why the Nairobi museum Ethnographic collections are not properly stored, documented, preserved and conserved.

The subjects of the study were sampled from the over forty thousand ethnographic collections that are classified on the basis of materials used in their manufacture. The five categories namely, wooden, leather, metallic, textile and basketry were studied.

Stratified sampling method was used and data were collected using various instruments that included conducting interviews, questionnaires, direct observation and focus group discussion. Secondary data were also reviewed

While museum has experienced and knowledgeable staff, lack of proper storage facilities, non implementation of its research and collection management policy, lack of collection policy in the department of Ethnography as well as lack of resources and staff motivation were found to threaten museum ethnographic collections.

The study recommends proper storage methods and additional facilities to decongest the storerooms, implementation of the National Museums of Kenya's collection management policy, motivation of staff and training of staff on modern principles of documentation, care, preservation and conservation of ethnographic collections.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background Information

Curation of Ethnographic collection is a central aspect of the role of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK). Ethnography department of the Nairobi Museum has the mandate to identify and keep the history of various cultural characteristics of Kenyan Communities. This it does through research, collection and acquisition of material cultures of historical and cultural significance, preservation, conservation and documentation of such materials and dissemination of such information to the public. The collections are conserved for research, education and exhibition purposes, and also ensuring preservation of the rich Kenyan traditions in compliance with the Kenyan government policy on cultural protection and national heritage. (Government of Kenya 1984).

Whereas this is the ideal situation, the NMK has consistently failed to attain the required curation standards. This study aimed at investigating why the Nairobi museum Ethnographic collections are not properly stored, documented, preserved and conserved. Contrary to the NMK's mission which states that 'It was established to collect, document, preserve, study and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage, and enhance knowledge, appreciation, respect, management and use of these resources for the benefit of Kenya and the world (Government of Kenya 1984).

It also aims at outlining the important values of the ethnographic objects and provides insight on proper handling, storage, documentation and conservation of these objects that are a valuable resource for public education, scientific research and cultural use.

Ethnographic objects require certain specific environmental conditions after being collected from the field. This facilitates a prolonged life expectancy in the museum environment. However lack of conservation equipment, inadequate storage space and facilities, inadequate staff training on conservation, limited financial resources and absence of implementation of collection management policy, have all contributed to poor curation of the museum collections. This has led to the destruction of Kenyan cultural heritage entrusted on it to safeguard.

Ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museum not only require sufficient storage space and facilities, but also trained and skilled staff members on documentation, resources, proper packaging and handling procedures lastly proper presentation to the public through exhibition and publication.

1.2. The problem statement

The Nairobi Museum has always had difficulties in curation of its Ethnographic collections. Although the museum has a massive collection of over forty thousand ethnographic objects, approximately fifty percent are sufficiently documented and adequately stored, preserved and conserved. Inappropriate and inadequate storage and space facilities are the basic foundation to effective collection preservation and conservation, the Nairobi museum lacks this to some extent. According to the principles of conservation, collections require good spacing and stable environmental conditions

both of which are lacking in the existing collection storerooms, resulting to inaccessibility of collections thus leading to poor preservation and conservation of the collections. Inappropriate storage units like shelves and cabinets have led to placing of collections on the floor causing rapid deterioration of the collections, untimely documentation hence lack of collection records resulting to disappearance of objects. All these challenges face the Nairobi museums ethnographic division and thus call for immediate remedy.

In addition, the unskilled staff members and poor documentation system makes it difficult for researchers to access messages conveyed by the ethnographic objects. Education activities like exhibitions cannot be effectively carried out because the objects lack complete information and scientific value. This leads to the museum's failure to satisfy the needs of her visitors, thus failing to accomplish its mission.

However, by training the staff members on the principles of preservation, conservation and sufficiently documenting the objects, improving on the storage space and facilities, the museum collections would have meaning and would be beneficial to the members of the public, researchers and students and the museum would be able to fulfill its objectives.

The curator of the Nairobi museum concurs with the researcher's observation that Lack of implementation of the museum collection management policy has contributed to an adhoc collection of the ethnographic objects. This has led to continuous collection management problems in the stores and exhibitions, (Gatheru Personal communication, 2004). This project addressed such problems and ethical standards relating to the collection storage, documentation, preservation and conservation.

It is against this background that this study was undertaken to attempt and answer the following questions.

1. What are the challenges facing curation of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museum?
2. Why does the Nairobi museum experience challenges in curating its ethnographic Collections?
3. Why is the museum unable to implement its collection management policy?

1.3 Overall Objective.

The general objective of this study was to investigate the challenges facing the curation of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi museum and explore the reasons why the museum is unable to implement its collection management policy.

1.3.1. Specific objectives.

1. To find out the challenges facing the curation of ethnographic collections.
2. To explore reasons why the museum is experiencing challenges in curating its ethnographic collections.
3. To investigate why the Nairobi museum is unable to implement its collection management policy.

1.4. Rationale of the study

The NMK is the government's legal institution charged with the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage of all the ethnic groups in Kenya. It does this through research, collection, documentation, preservation and exhibition of ethnographic collections from different Kenyan ethnic groups. The museum basically exists because of the collections which they treasure, thus they require special care to ensure that they are preserved for future generations, as well as to ensure that the valuable cultural information that they contain and represent is not modified, compromised or lost. Appropriate storage facilities, sufficient documentation of the collections and training of staff enables the preservation and conservation mission of the museum to be achieved.

The ethnographic collections are very important; they have scientific, utilitarian and aesthetic value. They have historical and cultural messages that they communicate to the present and future generations. This can only be achieved if the objects are sufficiently documented, adequately stored, preserved and conserved. The study is therefore important to identify the collection curation challenges facing the museum and make recommendations of finding remedy to these conditions.

The study should also help the Nairobi museum to effectively preserve and conserve its collections fulfilling one of its core missions, thus justifying the existence of the institution and safeguarding its local and international image in the field of education and research.

1.5. Scope and limitation.

The scope of this investigation was limited to the department of ethnography at the Nairobi museum, Kenya. The study was mainly concerned with the storage, care and conservation of ethnographic objects in the museum. Due to limitation of time and resources, it was not possible to visit other museums in Kenya.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature, the theoretical framework and its relevance to this study. It also outlines the assumptions of the study and lastly defines the concepts used.

2.2. Curation of ethnographic collections.

This section reviews the literature on curation of ethnographic collections. It also documents the history of care, preservation and conservation of Ethnographic collections at the Nairobi museums.

2.2.1 Ethnographic collections

Ethnographic collections consist basically of artifacts collected from different Kenyan ethnic groups. They are mainly collected because of their historic, cultural and aesthetic value, for purposes of research, education, exhibition and publication of the findings. The objects have different significance depending on the ethnic groups that they come from.

According to the International Council on Museums (ICOM) standards of documentation, objects are classified either on the basis of their function or on the basis of the raw materials used in their manufacture. Example of the former category includes costumes, furniture, musical instruments, manuscripts, artwork, medicinal,

utensils, tools and games. While the later category includes wooden, leather, ceramics, clothing, textile and basketry.

Curation of ethnographic collections dates back to the period when the department of Ethnography was established in 1970 with Jean Brown as the head. He did massive collection of the objects from mainly Central and Eastern provinces of Kenya. Collaborative ventures on research, collection and publication between the University of Nairobi's Institute of African studies (IAS) and the National Museums of Kenya in the late 1960's and 70's led to the establishment of a project on material culture in which the University of Nairobi was responsible for collection and research while the National Museums of Kenya carried the storage preservation and conservation activities. Between 1977 and 1979 an ethnographer known as Sultan Somjee carried out more material culture collection among the Kalenjin people of the Rift Valley and also among the Bajun of the Lamu Island. In 1989 about four thousand objects of Turkana material culture were donated from a Turkana district project to the Ethnography department. (NMK 1994).

2.2.2 Curation of Ethnographic collections.

A number of published works on museum conservation practices provide information and ideas on curation of ethnographic collections. Adequate curation, including the preservation, management and appropriate use of collections, is an expensive and daunting task. Sally Shelton, Curator of Collections and Conservation at the San Diego Natural History Museum, aptly defined curation crisis during the society for California Archaeology 1998 annual meeting in San Diego, 'We are using eighteenth century budgets for nineteenth century storage technology and hoping to preserve

artifacts for twenty-first century research'. This clearly shows that under funding and in adequate modern technological skills contributes to the curation challenges.

According to Agwal (1977:3, 4) more harm is done to museum objects by neglect and carelessness than anything else. Everyone talks of air conditioning of large conservation laboratories and their costly equipment. Much serious damage can be prevented by taking care and observing simple precautions. It is not commonly realized that there are two aspects of this problem-to remedy the defects already present in the object and then to protect it from further damage and to maintain it in good condition.

Agwal (177:5) Continues to observe that to save objects from further damage, certain precautions have to be taken by the museum curators, so that the process of deterioration is at least slowed down. He explains that if the objects are properly stored, care is taken to ensure that insect attacks do not take place, they are properly handled and displayed they are less likely to be damaged. The curator can certainly protect his collection from destruction if he knows the properties of the objects in his care, their chemical behavior and the likely effect of environment and of other causes of deterioration upon them. With this knowledge one can safeguard the collection effectively.

Stolow (1992:15) explains further that the practice of conservation in the recent times emphasizes certainly the repair of damage arising from whatever causes, but also very

importantly includes preventive measures to minimize the frequency and magnitude of such occurrences. In the technical operation of the museums and art galleries there are many occasions when the intervention of a conservator is necessary, and objects must be examined at the time of acquisition to ascertain its physical state and degree of authenticity. Conservation work or restoration may be required before it can be put safely on storage or exhibition.

Stolow (1992:31) further observes that conservation in the sense of securing the physical well-being of museum objects at all times and in all places, ranges from environmental control to measures to guard against neglect or willful damage. He cannot discharge these tasks alone; it requires the cooperation of technicians, handlers, shippers, registrars, designers and curators.

Bachmann & Konstanze (1992: 2, 5) explains that by providing the best storage possible, we are taking the first and most important step towards preserving our cultural heritage. He states that ideal museum storage space has climatic controls and monitors for relative humidity, temperature, fire and theft. The space should be closed and accessible only to a limited number of staff members. Within this space objects should be accessioned, inventoried and arranged according to a system of organization, whether by material, size or cultural, historical grouping in storage units fabricated from materials that meet strict conservation standards.

They expound that museum storage must be kept free from dust and other airborne particles, since dusts attract insects, is abrasive and contain mold spores. However if

storage space is furnished with cabinets having tight fitting doors and with curtains or venetian blinds for open units, and all vents and windows are sealed, the level of dust and dirt reaching the collection will be minimized. Storage area should also be cleaned regularly and kept in good repair. Standard handling procedures must be followed during condition inspections and whenever objects are moved, only trained personnel should handle collection items. On security they observe that the least costly method of preventing theft however is to limit access to storage areas. All visitors must be accompanied by a staff member. Fire extinguishers should also be installed in the storage. Lastly they conclude that most importantly, every institution must have a flood and fire emergency plan. A well-prepared plan for such occurrences will make it possible to save many materials that would have been otherwise lost.

In his article 'The significance of cultural property' Daifuku: (1968:22) observes that for all institutions in the conservation of cultural property, an adequate and trained staff is a prerequisite for a successful Programme. Lack of technical knowledge and the use of outdated methods can frequently do more harm than good. Even for trained staff, means should be found to maintain contacts and exchange views with colleagues abroad so as to keep abreast of the latest developments. Intellectual isolation is no excuse today when so many means exists for the interchange of information. One such organization is the International Center for Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). Others include various international

non-governmental organizations such as International Council on Museums (ICOM) and the Program for Museum Development in Africa. (PMDA).

(Getty 1995) explains that while conservation is increasingly part of managing museums, libraries, archives and historical societies as well as archaeological sites and historical structures, the challenges to conservation rise to match the efforts. Testing the scientific skills and knowledge of conservation professionals are more and bigger collections, growing numbers of sites and a greater variety of materials requiring conservation such as modern art materials, color photographs, and industrial items needs are on the increase geometrically, while the conservation resources do not, this contributes to endangering the life expectancy of the collections.

However (ICOM 2000) express their view that there is need for two way exchanges between conservators and indigenous peoples regarding the care and conservation of collections. The opportunity to share and disseminate modern technologies while providing an effective experience in real conservation issues, problems and practices is a new challenge for conservators. Examples of indigenous involvement have enabled the inclusion of important cultural perspectives to the conservation plan for a collection. A greater awareness of the life, ways and value systems of indigenous groups whose work is being conserved has offered significant advantages to the conservation process. For example, indigenous opinion regarding appropriate conditions for storage, interpretation while on exhibit, the level of cleaning of objects

or the determination of appropriate levels of loss compensation for damaged painted surfaces, loss feathers, or missing beads can be extremely useful.

In her article in (ICOM 2005) Rose echoes similar sentiments. She suggested three considerations that go beyond the basic conservation approach that assesses the composition, the construction and the deterioration of objects. She proposed that after establishing the nature of the object, conservators should consider the initial use of the object within its culture, the subsequent use of the objects by others and its use in museum education and research.

She elaborates by stating that the care and treatment of indigenous cultural objects by non indigenous conservators calls for sensitivity, a different point of view and different background knowledge from other sub disciplines in conservation. To achieve this goal, aspects of cultural context must be considered by conservator. These include the context of collection or acquisition, the context of current conservation methods or trends at the time of collection and the context of current indigenous issues and priorities including the long term preservation approaches and techniques used by indigenous people.

The reviews of past studies in the curation of ethnographic collections focuses basically on the need for more funding for conservation activities, good storerooms where environments are controlled, training of the staff members and improved security systems in the museums. Lastly the need to incorporate the indigenous knowledge of the ethnic groups where the objects were collected from when caring and conserving the collection.

2.3. Theoretical Framework.

This study will be guided by the systems theory. The theory was proposed in 1940's and 50's by biologists Ludwig Von Bertalanffy and Ross. It is derived from the concept system. System refers to a set of devices functioning together in order to produce some specific products. If they malfunction, then they fail. Systems theory therefore refers to a body of theory relating to in our case management of an organization. The theory sees an organization as a system made up of different subsystems that are linked with one another. The theory concentrates on the connectedness of these subsystems and the variables within each subsystem. When one subsystem stimulates another, which in turn stimulates the first one this creates positive feedback. The museum has three subsystems namely, management, administration, and the staff. All these are interlinked to either produce a product that enables museum to change and grow or remain static. Management in this case the board of governors includes the administration that then induces the staff. If one group is not effective, all the system will be affected. Poor storage and improper documentation of the collections makes other museum operations, such as research, exhibition and conservation difficult. The study of curation of ethnographic collections would be explained by a number of theories however systems theory proves to be the most suitable. To function properly, various units in a system should work supportively together as well coordinated parts. The theory tackles effectively the coordination and corporation activities required in curation of the ethnographic collections.

2.4. Assumptions.

- National museums of Kenya's collection management policy provides for effective preservation and conservation of ethnographic collections.
- Storage conditions of the national Museums ethnographic collections contribute to poor curation of the collections.

2.5. Definition of Concepts

Curation: Preservation, management, care and appropriate use of collections.

Ethnographic Collection: All products of human technology produced and used in a given culture and are in the possession of a museum.

Collection: Group of assorted objects of similar or different characteristics, which are taken care of by the museums.

Policy: Regulations and guidelines put in place to assist museum professionals in carrying out their duties. It guides them on when, where, what and how to collect and manages ethnographic objects.

Documentation: All records written and pictorial accumulated during examination and treatment of a museum object.

Conservation: All actions aimed at the safeguarding of cultural property for the future.

The purpose of conservation is to study, record, retain and restore the cultural significant qualities of the cultural property as embodied in its physical and chemical nature, with the least possible intervention.

Preservation: All actions taken to retard deterioration of, or to prevent damage to cultural property. It involves management of the environment and of the conditions of use, and may include treatment in order to maintain a cultural property as nearly as possible, in a stable physical condition.

CHAPTER THREE.

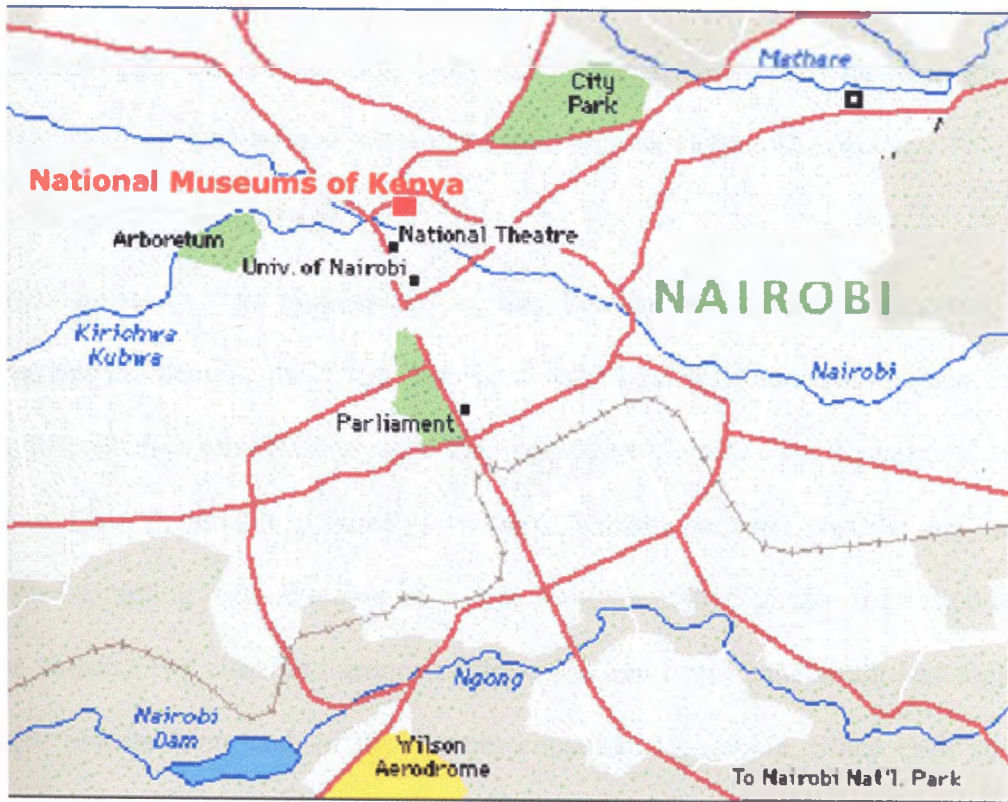
METHODOLOGY.

3.1. Introduction

This chapter captures the description of the research site, the population universe, sample unit and sampling procedure, data collection method and analysis. It also describes the problems encountered and ethical issues that were taken into consideration during the study.

3.2. Research site.

This research was conducted at the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi museum. The museum is located in the city of Nairobi, which is the capital of Kenya. It is about two kilometers away from the city center (Map 3.1). The city is situated at an elevation of about 1660m (about 5450ft) in the highlands of the Southern part of the country. Nairobi is Kenya's principal economic, administrative and cultural center and is one of the largest and fastest growing cities in Africa.



Map 3.1. Nairobi and location of NMK. Source: "Nairobi" Microsoft® Encarta®.

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3.3. Population Universe and unit of study.

The ethnographic collections of over 40,000 objects at the Nairobi museum formed the universe of study. Unit of analysis was the individual ethnographic object.

3.4. Sampling procedure.

Nairobi museum was purposively chosen because it has the largest number of ethnographic collections in Kenya, estimated to be over forty thousand objects collected from different Kenyan ethnic groups. The objects are classified on the basis of materials used in their manufacture namely, wooden, leather, metallic, textile and basketry. Stratified sampling method was used to obtain representative sample from each category of the objects. The classified groups of the collection formed the strata and each of the selected objects from each of the stratum constituted a sample. Since each stratum is more homogeneous than the total number of collection of study, the researcher got more precise estimates for each stratum and by estimating more accurately each of the component parts, a better estimate of the whole collection was studied. The objects strata studied constituted 1200 wooden objects, 8000 items of leather, 6000 of ceramics and basketry each and 4000 of metallic. 2% of the objects in each strata were randomly sampled resulting into 240 objects from wooden, 160 leather, 120 ceramic, 120 basketry, 80 clothing and metallic objects respectively. Their methods of conservation, storage, documentation and care were analyzed. Analysis of the sampled objects was done and the results presented descriptively and also with pictorial illustrations.

3.5. Methods of data collection.

Various methods were used to ensure effective data collections. These included:

3.5.1 Secondary data.

Secondary data were first of all used to collect the background information of the study, books on conservation of ethnographic records, documented records about the collections i.e. collection inventory books, catalogue cards, object movement books, storage and conservation records, were all studied to assess the conditions of the collections.

3.5.2. Interviews

Museum staff members who deal directly or indirectly with the collections were all interviewed, these included the conservation and documentation staff members in ethnography department and the gallery. The key informants interviewed included the Director research and scientific affairs, head of ethnography department, and curator of the Nairobi Museums. They were selected on the basis of their vast knowledge, experience and administrative positions in relations to policy making and management of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museums. (Appendix 1).

3.5.3. Questionnaires.

Both structured and unstructured questions were used to collect data. The questionnaires were used to collect views of the employees of the NMK who deal directly or indirectly with the storage, care, preservation and documentation of the ethnographic collections.

(Appendix II)

3.5.4. Direct observation.

Personal observation of the methods of storage, preservation, documentation and care of collections also assisted in collecting more data, these were supplemented by Photography in collecting visual data.

3.5.5. Focus group discussion.

This method was used to verify the information collected from various respondents. Since some of the collected data were not consistent, this method was useful in clarifying some of the information. The composition of the group included head of the ethnography department, curator of the Nairobi Museum, two research scientists and two collection assistants from the ethnography department. Through this method the researcher was able to collect vital information as the group exchanged ideas and information regarding the preservation, care, storage and documentation of the ethnographic collections. Only one session of discussion was held and this assisted in effectively verifying the collected data.

(Appendix 3)

3.6. Methods of Data Analysis.

The data collected were mainly qualitative thus its basic method of analysis was by description of the findings, pictorial captions and table presentation

3.7. Problems encountered.

The main problem encountered was that some of the staff members who would have been key informants were reluctant to fill the questionnaire. This could be attributed to the fact that since the investigation was mainly concerned with the challenges facing their department, they were fearing reprisal from the higher authorities of the institution. To overcome this I explained to them that the main purpose of the research was purely for

academic purposes and none of the information was be used for any other purpose apart from what had been explained. Lastly inadequate resources in terms of finances and time to conduct the research were also limiting factors. To overcome these I engaged the services of a research assistant who assisted in the distribution of the questionnaires.

3.8. Ethical Issues

Permission was sought from the National Museums of Kenya authorities to conduct the research by interviewing the staff members and also accessing the ethnographic collection storerooms and records. Conservation ethics were also taken into consideration, in accessing the ethnographic collections storerooms, the researcher was accompanied into the storeroom by the department's curator and occasionally by other senior staff members throughout the period of the exercise.

CHAPTER FOUR.

CURATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS/ STUDY

FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction.

This chapter presents the finding of the study. It first of all presents the information on condition of storage of the ethnographic collections at the Nairobi museum by providing answers that were given in response to the research questions. The pertinent issues concerning the curation of ethnographic collections such as collection, documentation, storage, care, conservation and exhibition, as well as challenges faced by the curators are all presented.

4.2. The department of Ethnography.

Ethnography department of the Nairobi Museums is a research department that takes care of ethnographic collections, within the compound of the National museums of Kenya's headquarters. The department shares the same building with the Institute of African studies of the University of Nairobi. It is located on the first floor of this building. The department takes care of over forty thousand objects from different Kenyan ethnic groups. The objects are kept in the ethnographic storeroom while a few are on exhibition display at the Nairobi museum gallery. The ethnographic storeroom houses both the organic and the inorganic collections. Under this they are categorized on the basis of their material of manufacture and the various categories of objects are in proportions of 30%,

leather 20%, basketry 15%, ceramic 15% and metallic 10% objects, textile and clothing, 10% (Fig 4.1).

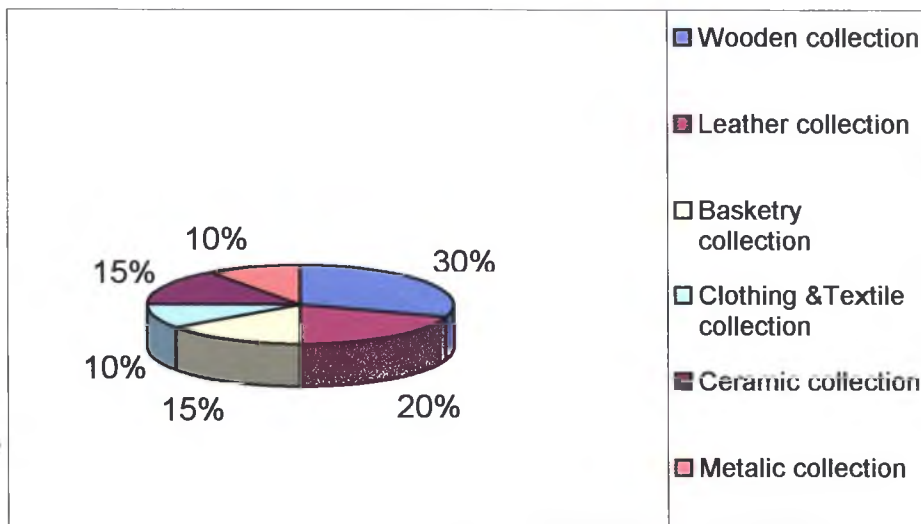


Fig 4.1 Proportions of ethnographic collections by material of manufacture.

The collections are acquired through field ethnographic research, donations, gifts and some are purchased. The first collections were done by the colonial administrators and later on by researchers. The earliest objects date from between the late 1890's and 1904. Between 1968 and 1973 Jean Brown, a collector and Anthropologists who headed the department of Ethnography at this period, also collected objects from communities such as the Pokot, Samburu, Akamba, Turkana, Agikuyu, Maasai, Swahili and the Mijikenda groups among other communities. Most of the objects that were acquired from these communities were mainly made of leather, wooden and composite that included, headrest, leather skirts and beddings, guards, arrows and spears. Other donations during this time came through the University of Nairobi's Institute of African Studies when they carried out research on material cultures of Kenya. They collected artifacts from different ethnic groups including the Luyia, Abagusi, Luo, Nandi, Kipsigis and Kikuyu among

others. These were then donated to the museum. Acquisition rate declined between 1977 and 1984 where only documentation of collections was done among the Marakwet, Rendille, Gabra, Bajun and the pokomo. In 1989 a museum known as Turkana Desert Museum closed down and about four thousand objects of Turkana Material culture were transferred to the Nairobi museums ethnography department. According to the head of the department Mr. Denis Opudo the collections are normally carried out depending on the needs of the researchers, students and the public who visit the department. The exercise also depends on the availability of funds.

In storage some of the collections are placed on shelves while others are stored in boxes then placed on shelves. (Plate 4.1 a b)



a, Pottery Collections on shelves



b. Beads and ornament Collections in boxes covered by polythene sheets

Plate 4.1 Storage units of Ethnographic Collections.

Of the ten employees in the department one is a principle research scientist, whose main duty is to initiate and manage departments' research projects, write proposals and assist in fundraising for the department. The other five research scientists, carry out field

research and also ensure that the collections are well stored, cleaned, documented and are not infested by dust and moulds. The only documentation staff coordinates documentation of the objects with the help of the research scientist and lastly two laboratory assistants and one cleaner who do the daily cleaning of the ethnographic storeroom, under the supervision of the research scientists. The store whose size is approximately 50m² is sufficiently lit by six fluorescent tubes placed on the ceiling of the two rooms at safe distance to avoid the effects of the emitted ultraviolet light, which might have negative effects on the organic objects. The lighting system is then supplemented by a number of glass windows. Lighting is necessary for viewing collections when carrying out curatorial and collection management work. But at times if the windows are opened without control, they on the contrary facilitate entry of excess light and dust that has negative effects on the collections.

According to the acting head of the department, the micro climate in the storeroom is conducive to the collections since Nairobi does not experience extreme weather conditions. However, during the period of high humidity like between April and Augusts, the organic objects experience mould attacks. On the other hand, rodent, insect and dust infestations are also experienced to which fumigation, physical inspection and regular dusting of the collections is always carried out. Under ideal situation the environmental conditions in the storeroom should be stable without variations to avoid deterioration of both the organic and the inorganic objects. According to (De Guichen 1988: 23) ideal preservation of collections require the storeroom environment to be within certain specific controlled limits to avoid deterioration of the collections suitable limits of relative humidity accepted for instance should be between 40-60% for organic objects

like wooden, leather and basketry and 30-50% for textile and clothing. While 15-55% for inorganic collections like metals and 20-60% for ceramic and stone objects. But according to our findings these conditions are lacking in the ethnographic store room to some extent.

During this study various observations were made in the ethnographic storeroom. First of all it was noted that the room lacks some of the required storage facilities. The number and size of shelves, tables and cabinets in comparison with the size of the collection were inadequate hence some of the collections are placed on the floor while others are piled up on top of the shelves. (Plate 4.2)



a. Collections on the floor.



b. Collections on top of the shelves.

Plate 4.2 Storage of Collections.

The windows lack curtains or taint thus too much ultra violet light on the collections, no effective environmental control and monitoring methods and facilities were evident. Congestion of collection was evident hence piling up of collections on the shelves and on the tables (plate 4.3). 80% of the objects are in boxes and placed on shelves because of inadequate space and then covered with polythene sheets to protect them from dusts,

while the remaining 20% are not covered and are in constant threat of dusts and insect attacks.

According to the respondents, the collections have been inadequately stored since 1989 when Turkana desert museum closed. Approximately four thousand objects of Turkana material culture were transferred to Nairobi for storage in the Ethnography Department.



Plate. 4.3 collections piled up on a table in the storeroom.

This study further revealed that objects made of organic materials such as wood, leather, clothing and textile are more vulnerable to deterioration due to poor storage conditions than inorganic objects such as ceramics, stones and metals. This is because organic objects are sensitive to adverse and fluctuating climatic conditions, for example in case of high humidity wooden and leather objects are attacked by molds and are also eaten by insects and rodents as part of their food. While clothing and textile fade when exposed to too much ultra-violet light.

4.3. Documentation of Ethnographic collections.

This is a fundamental process in the curation of ethnographic collections. It is the first step that changes the ownership of collections from the owner to the museum. The first

step of curating a museum collection is by giving it an identification number, which is then tagged on the collection. This enables easy identification in the storeroom and the same number is also recorded on the catalogue card. The catalogue card has the name of the object, date of collection, its location in the storeroom, its use, cultural significance and the picture at the back of the card. The cards are then placed in a catalogue cabinet (Plate 4.4).



Plate 4.4 Documented catalogue cards stored in the cabinets

Documentation gives a collection all the necessary data hence its scientific value and identity to the museum staff and its audience. Documentation also facilitates periodic inventorying of the collections, which is an annual inspection and checking of the collections. This helps in identifying loaned, missing, misplaced and deteriorating or infested objects. It also helps in recording the movements of the collection and also records the total number of collection in the museum in its inventory book. The objects are documented in line with the International Council On Museums (ICOM) recommended standards.

During this study the respondents interviewed acknowledged that only 50% of the collections are sufficiently documented in line with the ICOM standards. The remaining

50% have scanty information and the museum plans to invite elders from communities of their origin to assist in providing useful information about them, so as to be of value to the institution. While for the objects that they will be unable to document a committee will be constituted by the Director Research and Scientific affairs to decide on their fate. Regular stocktaking is not also carried out; this is due to lack of proper training of the ethnography staff members on documentation and stocktaking skills. This has made those wishing to access the collection for research to face difficulties. Exhibiting of the collection is also impossible because of insufficient information data on them. Some of the shelves that the objects are placed on are not well labeled, making it hard to access some of the collections. The existing cataloguing system is also not well updated. At the moment the division is computerizing its documentation system which has been manually done in the past, but only one computer is available, this slows the computation process and only a few documentation staff members are computer literate.

4.4. Storage of ethnographic collections.

The ethnographic collections in storage are placed in boxes, shelves, on tables and cabinets. The storage has fourteen shelves, which are about 5 and 1 meters long and wide respectively, and ten 1m² size cabinets. The storage appears to be well organized in that most of the shelves are well arranged in rows. The collections are arranged in the shelves on the basis of the ethnic groups that they originate from. The shelves are also labeled with the names of the ethnic group, whose object are placed on them. The shelves also allow for access to a number of collections during research and inspection of the collection and there is also good use of the available space. (Plate 4.5a b c). 80% of the

collections are placed on boxes and also well covered by polythene sheets thus protecting them from dust which might cause deterioration. (Plate 4.5a).

The study observed that the storeroom is packed with the existing shelves, cabinets and tables thus cannot accommodate any additional furniture. The collections are thus piled up on the shelves and tables. This causes problems during the conservation processes of the collections. This is a major challenge to the departments' massive collection, all the respondents in the department concur with these observations.



a: collection covered with polythene

b: Space in the storeroom

c: Collections in open cabinets

Sheets

Plate 4.5 Shelves and cabinet in the ethnographic storeroom.

The study further revealed that the storeroom was not purposefully built for the ethnographic collections. It lacks many ideal storage environmental control and monitoring facilities such as the humidifiers, dehumidifiers and thermo hygrometers. Though there is only one small size electric heater it is not enough to warm the whole of storeroom equally.

4.5 Conservation and care of the ethnographic collections

There are two conservation methods namely remedial and preventive conservation. The study revealed that the department mainly emphasizes on the use of preventive conservation.

In his article on preventive conservation, retrieved from website [www.meaco.com/preventive conservation](http://www.meaco.com/preventive-conservation), Fergus Read defines preventive conservation as a process that seeks to prevent, reduce or mitigate the effect of all the factors that everyday, threatens an objects' continued survival. It requires an all-embracing approach, a constant assessment of how collections are stored, handled, displayed and maintained. Good building repairs and maintenance routines are as necessary as the more obvious and immediate issues of object handling, storage and security. Nairobi museum practices the basic principles of preventive conservation. After collecting objects from the field, they are first of all quarantined before being put into the storeroom. This involves taking the collections to the conservation laboratory where they are placed in polythene bags then deep-frozen. This process exposes the insects that accompany the collection from the field to the extremely cold condition of -30° Celsius, thus eliminating all of them. The collections are then documented, marked with tags and then catalogued. Whereas the smaller objects are then placed in boxes before putting them on shelves, the bigger ones are placed directly on the shelves. The collections are basically located on the basis of the ethnic groups that they originate from. The regular preventive conservation practices performed by the department include dusting of the shelves and cleaning of the objects. On the shelves the objects are protected by polythene sheets from dusts. There is regular inspection of the collection by the laboratory assistant's and the research

scientists, ensuring that the collections are not attacked by mould, insects and rodents. According to the respondents the department also carries out regular fumigation of the storage, this eliminates all the insects that might have attacked the collections. The study further observed that due to lack of adequate space for the objects on shelves due to congestion, organic objects like leather, wood, basketry are constantly attacked by moulds. Thus the department has lost a number of its collection due to congestion, there are also constant breakages of fragile collections like beads since they are piled up on each other. (Plate 4.6).



Plate 4.6 shelves congested with collections.

The department also lacks basic conservation protection facilities for handling the collection like gloves, masks and laboratory coats. Lastly it was observed that lack of training on basic principles of conservation for some of the staff members who deal directly with the collection posed a serious challenge to the department. Interview with some of the staff members also revealed that lack of motivation in form of good remuneration and promotion reduced the morale of the staff

4.6. Exhibition of ethnographic collections.

Exhibition is defined as spaces that communicate ideas primarily through the use of objects, text and graphics. Exhibitions provide access to and interpretation of museum

collections for the purpose of education and entertainment. It is one of the tools of transmitting museum education to students and members of the public who visit the museum. The ethnographic objects have messages that they communicate to the museum visitors. The messages are documented and some are observable. The collections are displayed in glass showcases at the Nairobi museum gallery. (Plate 4.7a b). They are displayed on the basis of their functions. For example collections of medicinal value are placed in one showcase, the same to costumes, weapons and basketry. All the displays are documented hence the visitors can read all the information about the collection.

The study revealed that the exhibitions were mounted in the early seventies and they have become too monotonous to the museum audience. (Verbal communication: Daniel Mitei, assistant curator, Nairobi museum). A number of the showcases have too many objects and their labels are written in small fonts that cannot be read by some of the museum visitors, thus negating the museum education value since the collections cannot communicate effectively to the museum audience (Plate 4.7 b).



a. Well spaced collection displays



b. Congested collection displays

Plate 4.7 objects on exhibition showcases in the gallery

4.7. National museums of Kenya collection management policy.

The National museum of Kenya has a draft collection management policy document. The purpose of the document is to provide policy guidelines covering all aspects of research

and collection management at the NMK. The philosophy behind the research activities at NMK is that research should build internal capacities of departments through training, acquisition of materials and equipment and generation of relevant information and specimens. Research should also strengthen and compliment the collections, exhibitions and education programs, including publications in journals and textbooks at the NMK. The document also provides policies and guidelines for acquisition, care, use and disposition of objects for which NMK is permanent or temporary guardian. It also sets forth regulations for the curation, maintenance, care and use of the records for such objects. Further the document establishes the policies for accessions to the collections, for incoming and outgoing loans of objects, and for maintaining inventory control. It specifies the circumstances and procedures of de accessioning objects from the collection and provides conditions for access, to collected objects and records. It recognizes the triple goals of access responsibility and accountability. (NMK, 2000). However, this investigation notes that this policy document states that, the Director General (DG) of NMK shall appoint a Research and Collection Management Committee (RCMC) to oversee the implementation of the research and collection policy. It is this committee that shall be charged with the approval of departmental research and collection rules and regulations and make recommendations to advisory committee and regularly guide the DG on all short term measures necessary to improve research activities and collection management. These specific collection policies are to be developed by different departments and submitted for approval and ratification by the research and collection management committee. (RCMC).

In the study, the interview carried out with the acting head of the Ethnography department and the assistant curator Nairobi museum, revealed that though the collection management policy draft document exists it has not been implemented. They explained that the (RCMC) committee had been appointed by the Director Research and Scientific Affairs, in consultation with the DG and the draft will soon be ratified and approved so as to be operational. In connection to this the ethnography department thus does not have a collection policy. Collections are mainly carried out with the guidance of the head of the department in consultation with the research collection staff without making reference to a document.

Summary of challenges facing curation of ethnographic collections.

Table 4.1 shows summary of care, conservation and storage challenges facing curation of ethnographic collections.

Table 4.1 Challenges facing curation of ethnographic collections

Problem observed/ Threats.	Damage	Causes	Possible Solution.
1. Staff and visitors.	Breakages and theft	Poor handling Congested storeroom Inadequate labeling Inadequate physical protection.	Handle only as required. Using approved procedures Reorganize the store Label stored objects clearly. Upgrade physical facilities. Train staff.

Problem Observed /Threats	Damage	Causes	Possible Solution.
2. Relative Humidity (RH)	High humidity causes Mould growth Corrosion Low humidity causes Embitterment	Weather changes Leakages on the roof Wet cleaning of floors Lack of humidifiers and dehumidifies	Regularly record RH Repair the leakages Impose (RH) control by humidifier/ dehumidifier /Heater.
3. Temperature (High and Low)	Increase in degradation Embitterment	Weather changes	Regularly measure and record temperature Control temperature by air conditioning/ heating.
4. Light (Exposure to excessive light)	Fading Discoloration	Too many glass windows without taints.	Reduce light intensity by use of taints/curtains
5. Pests (Insects, fungus, moulds, rats, beetles)	Objects eaten Damaged/Soiled	Attracted by food sources i.e. kitchen next to storeroom, Staff carrying food to storeroom	Regularly monitor with traps. Label & regularly inspect vulnerable items Staff should avoid food stuff in storage.

CHAPTER FIVE.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation.

5.1. Discussion

This study was concerned with the documentation, care, storage and conservation of Ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museum. The study identified and pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of these practices at the Nairobi museum. The investigation revealed that Nairobi Museum faces many challenges in documentation, care, storage and conservation of its ethnographic collections and this threaten the survival of the priceless and invaluable collections. The collections are congested in the storeroom and a number of them are not sufficiently documented according to the (ICOM) standards. The storeroom lacks environmental control facilities thus the conservation process is heavily compromised hence deterioration of some of the collections. Non implementation of collection policy guide and lack of staff training on basic conservation skills also contributes to poor collection curation systems.

Daifuku (1968:22) observes that for all institutions in the conservation of cultural property an adequate and trained staff is a prerequisite for a successful program. Lack of knowledge and use of outdated methods of conservation can always course damage to the collections. This observation concurs with the findings of the study, where it was noted that lack of staff training on the basic principles of conservation has contributed to the poor curation of the ethnographic collections. However (Getty 2000) in the article conservation at the crossroads argues that, while conservation is increasingly a part of managing museum collections and archives the challenges to conservation rise to match

the efforts. Testing the scientific skills and knowledge of conservation professionals are more with bigger collections such as, ethnographic and contemporary collections. While the needs seem to increase geometrically the resources do not. His sentiments concur with observations made during the study, in that the ethnographic collections are increasing in size while the funds allocated for conservation at the Nairobi museum are not increased. Thus there is need for allocation of more funds for the preservation and conservation activities to ensure proper storage of the collections

Bachman and Konstanze (1999: 2, 5) further explains that the best storage possible is the first step towards conserving our cultural heritage, he explains that ideal museum storage space has climate controls and monitors for relative humidity and temperatures. The space should be closed and accessible only to a limited number of staff members. This argument however is contrary to the study findings. The ethnography storeroom lacks the environmental control facilities hence the collections are at risk due to climatic changes. Further, access to the storeroom is not properly controlled. All staff members have access to the storage and this compromises the security of the collections and it shows that the store room is not ideal for the collections.

(ICOM 2000) Observes that there is need for two way exchanges between conservators and indigenous peoples regarding the care and conservation of collections. Examples of indigenous involvement have enabled the inclusion of important cultural perspectives to the conservation plan for a collection. For example, indigenous opinion regarding appropriate conditions for storage, interpretation while on exhibit, the level of cleaning of objects or the determination of appropriate levels of loss compensation for damaged objects. According to the study finding this is also an area of knowledge that the Nairobi

museum has not ventured into. The ethnographic collections are taken care of by the conservators at the museum, the findings noted that the indigenous knowledge of the ethnic groups where the collections originate from are never taken into consideration and the people are never consulted on conservation and storage methods, the museum methods are all based on ICCROM models of conservation.

In her article in (ICOM 2005) Rose echoes similar sentiments. She suggested three considerations that go beyond the basic conservation approach that assesses the composition, the construction and the deterioration of objects. She proposes that after establishing the nature of the object, conservators should consider the initial use of the object within its culture. The subsequent use of the objects by others and its use in museum education and research. Lastly the context of current indigenous issues and priorities including the long term preservation approaches and techniques used by indigenous people. This is a challenge to the Nairobi museum conservators, the need to incorporate the indigenous knowledge in their methods of storage, care and conservation practices, since it is an area that the finding discovered that is heavily ignored and is very important in the current research and conservation methods.

The study findings thus agree in part with the previous studies carried out by other scholars and differ with others as explained. I would thus recommend for further research in these areas that do not agree with my findings at the Nairobi museums.

5.2. CONCLUSIONS

It is an open fact that ethnographic collections are very important for scientific study and understanding of cultural practices of different Kenyan Ethnic groups.

From the study we find that the Nairobi museum has not taken care of the collection with the respect that they deserve. Thus it faces a number of challenges in documentation, care, storage and conservation of its ethnographic collections. The investigation revealed that this is because the museum lacks large storeroom that have a carrying capacity that can effectively store all the ethnographic collections, it also lacks conservation facilities in the present storeroom i.e. climate control equipment like humidifier and dehumidifiers. It also found out that the ethnographic staff members lack training on conservation skills and the NMK does not allocate enough funds for the conservation of the ethnographic collections. Lastly the findings revealed that NMK has not implemented its collection management policy, because the Director Research and scientific affairs constituted a committee to study the draft and do the necessary amendments and recommendations before it is implemented.

5.3. Recommendations

First of all the NMK should come up with a conservation department and allocate it staff members and specific funds for its operations. Since the study observed that there is a room and a few equipment for a yet to be established conservation laboratory, staff members with basic knowledge on conservation should be trained and assisted in setting up a fully-fledged and active conservation laboratory to facilitate its operations.

Secondly all the staff members dealing directly or indirectly with the ethnographic collections should be trained on the basic skills of conservation. Research scientists in the

same unit should be trained in advanced skills of conservation. Thirdly the NMK should construct a purposefully build ethnographic storeroom with all the required conservation facilities and equipment, this will assist in increasing the life expectancy of the collections. I would also recommend that the draft collection management policy should be studied and structured to suite the present needs of the museum staff members and that of the collection and be put in operation. This will assist in efficient and organized ways of managing the collections. In conclusion, it should be mentioned that this research was carried out in the Nairobi museum and only the staff members dealing directly or indirectly with the ethnographic collections were interviewed. Their perceptions may not be representative enough for generalization of the conditions of ethnographic collections in other regional museums under the management of the NMK. Therefore there is room for further but similar studies to be undertaken within other museums outside Nairobi. There is also room for carrying out investigations on the indigenous methods of curation of the ethnographic collections, since this study observed that there is no study that has been undertaken in this area of knowledge.

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APPENDIX 1

Key informant Interview guide

1. Position of the informant _____

2. How long have you served in that position _____

3. Does the museum have a collection management policy?

No

Yes

If No, what guides on how to carry out your collections?

4. If yes, what does it state regarding

a, Acquisition of collections ?

b, Documentation ?

c, Preservation ?

d, Storage ?

e, Conservation. of collections ?

5. Who ensures that the collection management policies are implemented?

6. What are the storage, preservation, documentation and care of ethnographic
Collection challenges experienced by the Nairobi Museums?

7. What are the main causes of these challenges _____
8. How does the museum address these challenges?

9. What are your views on the storage conditions of the ethnographic collections at the museums? _____
10. What is your opinion on the preservation, storage and care of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museums?

11. What improvements would you recommend to ensure sufficient care, storage and Preservation of collections?

Thank you for your cooperation and patience.

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONNAIRE

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES

The aim of this questionnaire is to solicit views of the employees of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) on Curation of Ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museum.

Note: Answer all the questions accurately and as detailed as possible. Information collected will be highly confidential and is only for the purpose of this research.

Where applicable put a cross X in the box or write your answer in the space provided.

A. Personal details of the informant.

1. Name of the respondent. _____
2. Sex _____
3. Highest level of Education completed _____
4. When were you employed at the museum _____
5. What is your employment designation _____
6. What is your area of professional training _____

B. Details of the Division of Ethnography.

1. When was the division of Ethnography established _____
2. How many of the following categories of ethnographic objects do you have in the department a, Wooden _____ b, leather _____
c, metallic _____ d, Basketry _____ e, Textile _____ f, Others _____
3. What is the size of the ethnographic storeroom _____ m
4. How are the objects stored in the storeroom? On the shelves Cabinets
Floor Cartons Polythene bags Sacks Others _____
5. What problems do you have in the storeroom _____
6. How do you address the problem _____
7. Does the division have a curator in charge of preservation and care of the collections _____
8. What is his/her level of academic and professional training _____
9. Who else is concerned with the care and preservation of the collections _____
10. Have they undergone through any kind of training on preservation and care of collections _____
11. What are the regular care and preservation practices that are normally carried out to ensure safety of the collections in the storeroom and exhibition?

12. How do you regulate the environmental conditions in the storeroom _____?

13. Does the museum have a conservation laboratory Yes No

If yes, what are the qualifications of the officer in charge of the laboratory?

If No, How do you cure your damaged collections _____?

C. Collections.

1. How regular do you carry out your collections? _____

2. What system do you use in documenting your collections?

3. Who is responsible for documentation of the collections? _____

4. What is the person's professional qualification? _____

5. How many staff members are responsible for the

a, Care and Preservation _____

b, Storage _____

c, Documentation _____

of the whole of the ethnographic collections?

6. What kind of equipment do you normally use for documentation _____

7. Are all your collections documented _____?

If No, why are others not documented _____?

8. Are you satisfied with the a, documentation _____ b, storage _____ and c, preservation _____ of the collection at the Nairobi museum?

Yes No

If yes, explain _____

If No, what are the challenges that you experience _____?

What solutions would you propose for these challenges? _____

9. How do you address these problems? _____

10. Does the museum have a collection management policy? Yes No

If yes, who ensures that the policies are implemented _____?

If no, what document guides the museum when carrying out its collection? _____

11. What are your final comments regarding storage, documentation, preservation and care of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi museum?

Thank you for your cooperation.

APPENDIX 3

QUESTION GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION.

The information to be gathered will only be used for study purposes.

The objective of this method of data collection is to verify information pertaining to:

- ❖ Challenges facing the curation of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi Museum
- ❖ Reasons why the Nairobi museum is experiencing these challenges.
- ❖ Why the museum is unable to implement its collection management policy.

1. When was the department of ethnography established?
2. What is the approximate size of the ethnographic collection?
3. Are the collections categorized in different groups?

If yes, what are the main categories?

Approximately how many are they per category?

4. What challenges do you experience in care and storage of the collections?

5. What challenges do you experience in preservation and documentation of the collections?
6. What are the causes of these challenges?
7. How do you respond to these challenges?
8. Do you have a collection management policy?
9. If yes, what does it state on a, Acquisition of the collection b, documentation of collection, c, conservation of the collection
10. If no, what guides how you carry out your collection?
11. Does Nairobi museum have a conservator?
12. If yes, what is his/her level of professional training?
13. If no, how does the museum perform its conservation activities?
14. In your views, what can you comment on the: a, storage, b, documentation, c, conservation of ethnographic collections at the Nairobi museum.

Thank you for your cooperation