

## *Human Remains Management in Southern Africa, a regional attempt at addressing unethical collections made in the colonial period*

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### **Abstract**

Twenty first century museums are shaped by the call to adhere to ethically acceptable collections. For many museums, this means having to redress past human rights violations which were done in the pre-colonial and colonial period. These included treating people as objects and ancestors as specimens. Since 2015, the Human Remains Management project has been exploring the management and potential for repatriation of human remains in museum collections within southern Africa. A series of workshops, in Cape Town (2017), Windhoek (2018) and Gaborone (2019), as well as internships, research, a website and a small mobile display have been organised by an alliance of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, the Iziko Museums of South Africa, the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN), the University of Botswana, ICOM South Africa, ICOM Namibia, ICOM Botswana and ICME. The aim is to review and improve policy and processes for managing human remains in institutions in the region, so that they effectively address the concerns of both responsible institutions and origin communities.

### **Introduction**

A quick look at the histories of many collections in museums which were established during the colonial era shows that many items and human remains were collected unethically and without proper protocols during the colonial era. Moreover, there are countless cases of human remains collected under extremely inhumane conditions including collecting live persons for zoos and subsequent museum displays

(Bergman 2000, Parsons 2002,). Human remains collections range from body parts, full preserved bodies, skeletonised remains mummified remains and many others (Mosothwane 2013). These collections have for many decades if not centuries been objects of emotional and psychological pain to descendant families and communities. Recently, the heritage sector in general has been going through organisational transformations that includes redressing colonial human rights violations that resulted in unethical collections. At the top of the agenda is the human remains and sacred objects collections. In the last few decades it has become increasingly apparent that these collections give museums bad public images and perceptions. At the same time museums have become increasingly sensitive to issues of ethics and morality and the convergence of museum and public concerns is driving museums towards deaccessioning, repatriating and reburying the collections. In order to do this, there is a critical need to do proper investigations on the origins of the collections and individuals in those collections. Such investigations have to be directed by policies, ethics and internationally accepted standards of practice.

It is within this context that the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM), the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography (ICME), ICOM Ethics Committee, ICOM Namibia, ICOM Botswana and ICOM South Africa, in collaboration with the Iziko Museums of South Africa, the University of Botswana (UB), Botswana National Museum (BNM) and the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN), came together in 2016 and initiated a project to address *Human Remains Management in Southern Africa*. The project was aimed as assisting the relevant institutions to share good practice and to develop the necessary policies and guidelines. The project resulted from a CAM workshop on participatory governance and museums, which coincided with a review of the human remains in the collection of the Iziko Museums of South Africa which identified a significant number of individuals whose bodies had been unethically obtained from Namibia, Botswana and rural areas of South Africa for research linked to racist science. The workshop noted a concern on provenance research on the human remains in collections and the development within Africa of policies and guidelines for dealing with the repatriation and management of human remains.

Many southern African countries lack a policy or guidelines on human remains management to set out an agreed procedure for dealing with human remains in museum collections. In Namibia, for example, after independence, the National Museum of Namibia's collection of human remains stood at 55 (minimum) individuals. This number was recently more than doubled by three additional sets of human remains that

have been returned from museums in Germany: 20 in 2011, 35 in 2014 and a further 28 in 2018. These returns are currently in storage at the National Museum of Namibia. Further returns from other countries are extremely likely in the near future, which will be challenging pending the development of a national policy on human remains in Namibia. In Botswana there has been a growing number of human remains at the BNM and UB but there is no policy nor guideline (Mosothwane 2013). As of 2018, the collections in Botswana stood at nearly 150 individuals, mostly from archaeological contexts. There are also some individuals originating from Botswana whose remains are held outside the country such as those at the IZIKO Museum in Cape Town.

Between 2017 and 2019, institutions in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia met on annual basis through the Human remains management workshops to discuss their collections, challenges and draft possible steps to take in future towards harmonising policies. International guidelines recommend that there be cohesive legal frameworks between countries or institutions that house the remains and those that request their returns. Unfortunately, most African countries have no frameworks to drive their requests for repatriations. In southern Africa, is only the country of South Africa that has a policy on human remains and this makes it difficult for its institutions to work with those in neighbouring countries. The following section highlights some of the issues discussed in relation to the possibilities of developing regional policy framework on human remains:

There is varying level of knowledge and records on the identities of the individuals in museums. An example is taken from Namibia where records provided with the returns that have taken place are so scanty that they leave gaps and question marks. Considerable uncertainty surrounds the identity of many of the human remains. For example, of the first 54 people whose remains were returned from Germany to Namibia in the first two returns only four had names. Two of them were Tshū!Kō and! Kai - two young San women. Information from German records shows that most of the remains were collected around 1900 from Otjituo. Where possible, the challenge of 'rehumanising' people whose bodies were treated as museum specimens, should involve *research* into their biographies to try and trace direct historical links with the families or the local communities where they lived but this will not be possible as long as the records are missing or incomplete. In some cases there are fairly good records but host institutions have policies that prohibit access to such records. An example is the case of the five convicts dug up from a prison grave yard in Port Elizabeth, South Africa and now at the Smithsonian Institution in the United

States of America. The American record has the names of the individuals but does not allow researchers access to that information. Moreover, most human remains are labelled with broad 'ethnic' labels as examples of broad ethnic types - 'Herero' or 'Ovambo', "Bantu" "Khoekhoe", "Bushman", "Sotho", "Griqua". Geographical locations are also, often, vague making it difficult to, for example, know which of the many kingdoms a person might have come from. Not only are the ethnicities broad, there is also a challenge of random change of labels from ethnic groups to language groups. Many of the ethnic and language groups cut across modern day national boundaries and thereby making it more difficult to discern the correct location for repatriation. International boundaries pose an additional challenge in cases where true identities of the individuals are known. For example, there is a strong belief that the head of Ohamba (King) Mandume ya Ndemufayo was removed by South African troops in February 1917. Historically his kingdom, Uukwamyama, was cut in two by the Angolan-Namibian border. He is recognised a national hero in Namibia, but his grave is in Angola.

The second challenge in the region relates to existing legislative and policy frameworks. For example, Namibia and Botswana (Mosothwane 2016) have no legislation or policy that provides guidelines on the procedure to be followed when human remains are discovered, returned and handled. There is therefore, a need to develop a common 'Code of Practice' in relation to the discovery, exhumation and reburial of human remains in the two countries. As already indicated, South Africa has a working policy and therefore, it can be used as a reference guide. They also have to develop separate policies to help guide the international return of human remains.

It is difficult to reconcile arguments about the way in which the human remains should be treated after their return. For instance, there have been demands that some of the human remains which are directly linked to the genocide should be displayed, and not buried, as evidence of the genocide. Such arguments follow the logic of, for example, the Genocide Museum in Kigali in Rwanda. Each time human remains have been returned people have driven to the airport to welcome them (e.g Parsons 2002), as was the practice when people returned from exile. After this the remains have been made available for the public to visit and pay their respects - by being laid in state - the same practice that has been bestowed on individuals who have been recognised as national heroes. A policy document will definitely help in guiding what is to be done with the remains once returned.

Archaeologists and forensic scientists argue that the study of human remains provides one of the most direct and insightful sources of information on the deep history of southern Africa. In addition to furthering the public understanding of other cultures, human remains in museum collections can also help advance important research in fields such as the history of disease, changing epidemiological patterns, forensics and genetics as well as diet and growth and activity patterns. Further scientific analyses of human remains and their context are an important source of direct evidence about the past, including:

- a) Biological profiles of the deceased: establishing the age, sex, diet, ethnic origin and possible cause of death. Such scientific analysis can also uncover clues of trauma or secrets surrounding the circumstances that occurred around the time of death. It can also evaluate and recognise how environmental conditions alter the appearance and composition of remains over the span of time since death.
- b) DNA from the teeth and skulls: DNA samples from the originating communities where remains are believed to have come from i.e. biological relatives and descendants in order to establish associations can be performed. DNA analysis are performed on micro samples and small as the samples are, some people argue that they are destructive. Some descendent community member debate the need for DNA arguing that their ancestors have suffered enough and need not be subjected to destructive studies. Some find the vital need for DNA analysis and thus establishing guidelines to deal with this matter is essential.
- c) Digital reconstructions of the skulls: through CT scanners and medical modelling, virtual models can be reconstructed to create a forensic facial reconstruction of the deceased's appearance. Scans are non-destructive but they bring about the never ending debate on copyright and ownership of the scans, community access to such and their usefulness for future studies.

In summary, it is evident that while the museum is correctly driving towards decolonisation by dealing with their colonial collections it is very important to deal with legalities and ethical implications of new dispensations. Emotional and psychological trauma and its resultant reactions by descendant communities have to be taken into account and handled with the best care. The project is ongoing and at this stage it is important to note that there have been some discussions between archaeologists, museums and policy makers in southern Africa emanating from the Human Remains Management project.

Further Reading

- Bergman J. 2000. Ota Benga: the pygmy put on display in a zoo. *CEN Technical Journal* 14: 81-90
- Parsons N. 2002. One body playing many parts-Ie Betjouana, el Negro, and il Bosquimano, *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 16; 19-29
- Mosothwane M.N. 2016 A Review of statutes and administrative jurisdictions on graves, burial grounds and human remains in Botswana. *Botswana Notes and Records*, Volume 47: