

Discussion of “Framework Principles”

30 January 2024

**Minutes of discussion with experts in the field of
human remains from colonial contexts**

Participants:

- Experts in the field of human remains from colonial contexts,
- Representatives from the Federal Foreign Office,
- Representatives from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media,
- Representatives from the Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts for Baden-Württemberg and the Ministry of Culture for the City of Hamburg on behalf of the federal-Länder working group for “dealing with collections from colonial contexts”
- Representatives from the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts

List of questions sent

1. What aspects of handling human remains from colonial contexts are particularly important to you? What recommendations for specific measures would you give to the relevant institutions and their governing bodies?
2. What steps must be taken within collections to “rehumanise” human remains so they are once again accorded dignity and respect? What might ethical standards for appropriate preservation look like?
3. The origin of the human remains in German collections is unclear in many cases. What possibilities do the existing methods of analysis offer and what difficulties arise in practice?
4. What opportunities and limitations does provenance research offer? How can experts from countries of origin become involved?
5. How can more transparency be created for the responsible handling of human remains? Does your institution already implement measures to create transparency in this context? If so, what are they?
6. It will probably not be possible to clarify fully the origin of all human remains with the means currently available, and repatriation is unlikely to be possible in all cases. What should be done in these cases?

Question 1

- Universities have complex structures due to the distribution of collections across various, autonomously managed individual collections, so the transfer of information between institutions is not always easy.
- Terminology must be clarified, in particular human remains should not be described as objects; it is important to differentiate between human remains that have been treated or culturally modified and those that are und treated.
- It might be helpful to look at specific regions individually, as perspectives on human remains also differ depending on the cultural background.
- The financial and organisational structures in relation to provenance research and the process for returns are inadequate
 - there needs to be a political commitment to proactive provenance research
 - permanent positions are needed in terms of provenance research
 - financing is needed for returns
 - associated research is needed.
- Morphological-anthropological research may be useful in order to regard human remains as individual people, investigate their history and further confirm their origin.

Question 2

- Using appropriate language in relation to human remains is another aspect of rehumanisation.
- Provenance research is a first and important step towards rehumanisation.

- The preservation/storage of human remains must take place in both a conservationally appropriate and dignified environment.
- The establishment of a central repository for human remains from small and medium-sized collections is desirable for dignified storage and simultaneous accessibility with regard to provenance research.
- The storage of human remains (and sensitive cultural property) should be agreed with societies of origin. Storage facilities for collections should be accessible to them.
- No research may be carried out on human remains from colonial contexts. In terms of osteological/physical types of anthropological research in particular, a clear distinction must be made between which research on human remains is ethically justifiable and which is not.

Question 3

- The triad of historical, scientific and transnational research (including archival research, network research, anthropological-morphological research, oral traditions, interdisciplinary, international and epistemological perspectives) promises the most reliable results.
- The scientific standards that should and must be applied to the results of provenance research are open to debate, and conflicts might arise with other approaches pursued by societies of origin (e.g. the identification of a skull as Hawaiian by a seer, after scientific provenance research has still left doubts about origin); the Western, highly fact-based approach might prioritise objectivity here and thus meet with rejection from societies of origin.
- Invasive methods such as DNA analysis should only be considered if the provenance research already carried out has provided clear indications of the origin of human remains and the consent of the descendant family or society of origin has been obtained.
- Expectations regarding the possibilities of invasive examinations are often too high. DNA analyses are particularly unsuitable for analysing collections on a large scale, as no reliable findings can be expected without sufficient prior information.
- Different academic disciplines have different attitudes to DNA analyses.
- The various morphological-anthropological methods on their own, such as craniometry, do not promise more enlightening findings, given their essential lack of precision.

Question 4

- Cooperation between museum staff, academics and experts from societies of origin is essential for provenance research (teams working in tandem).
- Greater coordination among German museums is necessary to avoid overloading partner countries with similar requests from the 16 individual Länder.
- A sensible division of labour has proven its worth. Archival records for German sources from the 19th century are mostly available in Kurrent script, which can only be read by a few specialists, so the tendency in joint research projects is often to

process these sources on the German side, as well as any morphological-anthropological research. Oral traditions and local knowledge, which are also essential for provenance research, are usually contributed by partner countries. Research should be conducted as a partnership, not least on account of resources.

Question 5

- Transparency is extremely important, e.g. trilingual websites with information on a given topic.
- Advisory boards, made up of experts, for research projects are intended to strengthen transparency.
- Digitised information on collections of human remains in Germany is subject to protected access.

Question 6

- Findings can only be made, if provenance research is underpinned by long-term planning, so long-term financial resources must also be made available.
- Potential novel methods of analysis and chance discoveries may lead to new findings in the long term. Further storage is therefore necessary, therefore premature burial is essentially wrong and not helpful.
- The storage of human remains must be dignified, but at the same time enable further provenance research.
- There are also remains whose origin has been clarified but where repatriation is specifically not desired by societies of origin. The will of societies of origin must always come first.

Finally, one expert suggested the creation of one or more places of remembrance, not in the sense of a monument or memorial and therefore not at a central location, but rather a space for societies of origin to commemorate their ancestors or perform rituals.