

Skulls and skullduggery. The continuing controversy surrounding the return and retention of Namibian skulls from Germany

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I'm going to talk about Namibian skulls that were brought to Germany from German Southwest Africa in the early twentieth century, to be used for pseudo-scientific research. German scientists examined the skulls to prove the racial inferiority of Africans. A lot of these skulls belonged to Herero and Nama victims of the German-Herero war, a genocide which took place between 1904-1908. After more than a century these skulls are now slowly being repatriated.

The first twenty skulls, of which 9 were Herero and 11 Nama, arrived in Namibia in 2011. In March 2014 another 35 skulls as well as three skeletons were repatriated, belonging to Nama, Herero, Ovambo, San and Damara.

2.

I am currently writing my thesis about these Namibian skulls. I want to analyze the different layers of meaning of the skulls sent back in 2011: in the hands of German scientists the skulls became depersonalized objects, anthropological specimens, and now, in modern-day Namibia they are relics, symbols and evidence. Always, underneath these layers, they are primarily human remains, which makes it a complicated and delicate research topic.

3.

A postcard of German soldiers packing the skulls for shipment to Germany gives an idea how the skulls left Namibia more than a hundred years ago. That there was a postcard in the first place indicates both the total disregard for the humanity of the victims and also the broad acceptance of and interest in such anthropological research. At the time, gathering human remains for anthropological research was an international craze, in which many amateurs - mostly colonial medical officers - were involved.

4.

I believe it is crucial to realize that these skulls are first and foremost the remains of human beings, people who suffered a horrible fate under German colonial rule. Before going into detail about the scientific research on the skulls in Germany and the repatriation process, I will therefore briefly discuss the circumstances under which the skulls were collected.

German South-West Africa came under German rule in 1884 following the Berlin Conference, when Bismarck reluctantly agreed to take over territory already claimed by German traders.

The most powerful tribe in the area, the Herero, were cattle breeders and needed large plots of land for their cattle. The German colonizers wanted both their land, and their cattle. Where possible they bought it, otherwise they used trickery or force. Mistreatment of the Herero was widespread: rape of women was common, and so was physical abuse.

5.

In 1904, the German-Herero War erupted quite suddenly after an initial local uprising of the Herero. Chief Samuel Maharero, fed up with the injustices, initiated attacks on European settlers. This provoked outright war fever in Germany. In the press in the home country an image was constructed of the Herero as a fearsome barbarian, a dangerous enemy that did not actually exist.

6.

In response to this public mood Kaiser Wilhelm sent in general Lothar von Trotha to take command of the German troops in Namibia. After defeating the Herero, his troops drove the survivors deep into the Kalahari desert, blocking escape routes by cordoning off huge stretches of land and thereby starving the people.

7.

Von Trotha then issued a proclamation which has become known as the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, declaring that every Herero in German territory would be shot.

8.

Late December 1904 the *Vernichtungsbefehl* was lifted again, but this only meant the start of the last and most destructive phase of the genocide, when the remaining Herero were rounded up and put into concentration camps such as Swakopmund and Shark Island. The prisoners each received a number and were then used as labourers for military and civilian enterprises. Big companies even had their own concentration camps. The majority of the prisoners died of exhaustion.

9.

The Nama became involved in the war a bit later, but suffered much the same fate as the Herero. Nama leader Captain Hendrik Witbooi first tried to maintain his independence by using politics and force and later attempted to join hands with his former enemies, the Herero, in their struggle against the Germans, but to no avail. His defeated people were sent to the same concentration camps, where the majority perished.

10.

It was from these concentration camps, in particular Shark Island, that most of the skulls that were shipped to German scientists and museums came from. The postcard I mentioned earlier was later reproduced in book form: the German book explained how the skulls were scraped clean by Herero women, fellow prisoners, using glass shards – an unimaginable horror.

11.

The majority of the skulls with this terrible story were sent to Berlin, which was the European capital of anthropology at the time. The most prominent anthropologist there was Rudolf Virchow. In 1869 he established the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* and in 1873 he was involved in foundation of the *Museum für Völkerkunde*. The collections of these institutions later became part of the Charité Institute of anthropology. It was from the Charité that the first twenty skulls were sent back.

The way physical anthropologists worked at the time was to gather as many specimens as possible, before drawing conclusions about general characteristics of certain people. Historian

Holger Stöcker (who did extensive research on the Namibian skulls) called this ‘Sammelwut’, collecting frenzy. This is why letters exist of anthropologists eagerly writing to medical officers in the colonies, including the doctors working in concentration camps in German Southwest Africa, requesting them to send as many specimens as possible.

12.

This collecting frenzy came from the aim to be as objective as possible. Of course, this seems paradoxical from a modern viewpoint, because this ‘objective’ research served mostly to prove pre-existing racist theories. Museum displays at the time illustrated this quest for objectivity well: as many examples of objects as possible were thrown together in one cabinet and the lay-out of museums was such that you could see several cabinets at once. Cluttered displays were the result. It is striking however, that ethnological museums today still have similar displays – only slightly less cluttered.

13.

Not only remains and objects, data were also collected, and physical anthropologists used a combination of plaster casts, human remains and measurements to draw their conclusions. There was an international trade in remains, particularly skulls, plaster casts and photographs.

14.

Scientific racism would have disastrous consequences in the Second World War. Already in 1908 future Nazi scientist Eugen Fischer did research on the Rehoboth Bastards, descendants of mixed marriages between Boers and local women in Namibia. This research served to condemn such racial mixing. His ideas about purity of race later influenced Nazi legislation.

It is not surprising that physical anthropology became unfashionable after the Second World War. Skulls, bodily remains, plaster casts and photographs acquired in a colonial context however, remained undisturbed and unquestioned in museum collections throughout Europe until the late twentieth century.

15.

The first case of an African body being repatriated from a European museum was that of El Negro, a Bushman from the border region of South Africa and Botswana, who was stuffed like an animal in 1830 or 1831 and had been on display in a museum in the Spanish town Banyoles since 1916 until the late twentieth century. After years of campaigning by Haitian-born Spanish doctor Alphonse Arcelin he was eventually returned to Botswana under international pressure.

The reburial sparked controversy. First, there had been the problem of locating a suitable burial place, because it was unknown where the man had originally come from. Then, there was outrage because he was not returned in a proper coffin but a simple wooden box and further outrage because only his bones were returned: his skin and possessions had apparently been left behind in Spain. There were even doubts that he really was El Negro. The decision to bury him in a public park was also criticized.

16.

Similar mistakes were avoided in the famous case of Saartjie Baartman. Unlike El Negro, she was a person known by name. In the early nineteenth century she performed as the Hottentot Venus in England and France and after her death her remains came in possession of anatomist Georges Cuvier. Her plaster cast, private parts and skeleton were on display in the Musée de

L'Homme until the 1970s. In this case, it was the post-apartheid government of South Africa that demanded her remains back.

Unlike Spain, France apologized officially and made the process as transparent as possible. In South Africa the burial ceremony coincided with National Women's Day because Baartman had become a symbol of suffering of African women, and her grave was declared a national heritage site. Still there was criticism. Direct descendants of Baartman felt left out in the repatriation process, which they described as 'hijacked by the government' and demanded a formal apology from Britain as well as France.

17.

In the case of the Herero and Nama skulls, the initiative for the repatriation came from the Charité University in Berlin which started the Charité Human Remains Project in 2010, to firstly) research the provenance of human remains acquired in a colonial context and secondly) to explore suitable ways of handling these remains. They were forced to ask these questions because they dissolved their Institute for Anthropology and had to decide what to do with collection. A few years ago the Tropenmuseum found itself in a similar position. This institute was prompted to instigate a similar research project after they got a long-term loan of human remains back from anatomical museum Vrolik.

18.

In Namibia, the hand-over ceremony became a national event on both occasions. However, the events were not without controversy. The first repatriation was widely publicized and the government gave plenty of opportunity to commemorate the return on a local, regional and national level, spiritually and politically. For the second repatriation in 2014 however, the representatives of the Herero and Nama communities were not consulted about the actual process, but only invited to be present at the events. This caused major division among the descendants of the victims. Some Herero representatives were in favor of boycotting the activities, while others agreed to take part.

19.

Both repatriation ceremonies were an opportunity for Herero and Nama to draw attention to their demands for monetary recompense for suffering of their people under the colonial regime. This indicates one layer of meaning the skulls acquired in Namibia: they became evidence of this suffering. Nama Genocide Committee Chairperson Ida Hoffman spoke at a commemoration event a few weeks after the official return of the skulls in 2014. Having been excluded in the process of repatriation of the remains, she called for 'urgent round-table discussions with the German government' and for reparations 'including the purchase of land and construction of schools, houses, roads and clinics for the affected communities'.

20.

The Herero have been on a quest for monetary recompense for the past decade, because their ancestral land is still to this day in the hands of white, mostly German, farmers. They want to buy back the land with money from the German government. They argue that Germany should be prepared to pay, because they also paid reparations to the Jewish community after the Second World War.

21.

In September 2001 the Herero People's Reparations Corporation made a claim against three German companies and the German government, each for \$2 billion in reparations. They were

dismissed one by one, the last ones in 2007. The lack of cohesive support proved fatal for the case. The claims were exclusive to Herero people and any reparations would flow directly into the Herero community – to the dismay of other ethnic communities, particularly the Nama, and the national government, which is careful to guard the political balance in the country.

22.

The Namibian government wants to make the genocide a matter of national, rather than Herero or Nama, concern. In the Independence Memorial Museum, which opened in March 2014, the history of the genocide is incorporated in the Namibian history of the struggle for independence. When President Pohamba inaugurated the museum, he also unveiled a set of two new statues, replacing the German Reiterdenkmal: one celebrating the independence of Namibia, the other commemorating the genocide.

23.

The skulls likewise seem to have been incorporated in the Namibian history of the struggle for independence. This indicates another layer of meaning. While descendants see the skulls as evidence of suffering and also as ancestral remains, the official language describes the skulls as relics of heroes fallen in the struggle for independence. This brings to mind complaints of descendants of Baartman that the event of her burial was ‘hijacked by the government’.

24.

By now it must be clear how difficult it is to do justice to all parties involved in this complex process. Historian Ciraj Rassool has criticized the repatriation process initiated by the Charité University for yet another reason. Rassool himself initiated the repatriation of Khoisan couple Klaas and Trooi Pienaar, after he had identified their skeletons in the natural history museum of Vienna. Their bodies had been dug up and conserved by anthropologist Rudolf Pöch between 1907 and 1909. For the first time, a conscious effort was made to change the object’s status from a human remain back to a corpse.

Rassool criticizes the Charité for repatriating the skulls not as corpses to Namibia but human remains –still “objects”. The return, he complains, was enacted on a scientific level, not as an act of state.

25.

He has a point. Because the return was enacted on a scientific level, the German government was not closely involved and refrained from a formal apology. In August 2004 the German minister of economic cooperation and development Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul did apologize for the colonial crimes committed a century earlier under the colonial regime of German South-West Africa, but she was careful to blame general Lothar von Trotha personally, not the German authorities, for the atrocities.

The 2014 return was only accompanied by an apology from Professor Karl Einhaupl of the Charité for the role his predecessors played in the experiments on the remains of the victims.

26.

I want to conclude this presentation with a quick survey of the way this sensitive subject is dealt with in present-day museums in Berlin. In the German Historical Museum, Germany’s colonial history is only a footnote. Only one glass cabinet in the entire museum is dedicated to the colonies, and it is tucked away under a staircase. The information given is fragmentary. A

photo album with gruesome pictures of executed Namibians is described as belonging to a soldier taking part in a punitive campaign. No mention is made of concentration camps or scientific racism.

27.

In the Ethnological Museum, the only object from Namibia currently on display is a Herero spoon, acquired in 1903. No mention is made anywhere of German Southwest Africa, let alone of the fate of Herero and Nama in the colony.

28.

In the Pathological Museum, which houses the collection of Rudolf Virchow, two artificially deformed skulls from Peru are still on display. The accompanying text is neutral: “Virchow did not just collect pathological specimens. At the end of the 1860s he became increasingly interested in contemporary ‘races’ (note the brackets) and prehistoric peoples, the particular characteristics of population groups and their relationship to one another”. No mention is made of scientific racism and its terrible outcome.

It seems that Germany is not yet ready to deal with the crimes against humanity committed in the name of science in German colonies - at least not in public institutions such as these.

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