

Human remains from Namibia in German academic collections are an outcome of German colonial rule in South West Africa from 1884 to 1915. A major part was acquired during the colonial genocide from 1904 to 1908. The remains were primarily composed of human skulls and skeletons; however, scalps, soft body parts like larynxes or even intact bodies were also transferred. German soldiers, military surgeons, missionaries, travellers and researchers of various disciplines ‘collected’ human remains from local ethnic groups comprised of men, women, children and elderly people in the colony of German South West Africa. These human remains were then sent to German scientific institutions. There, the remains were stored and used – like remains from almost all parts of the world – for comparative physical-anthropological research and teaching, according to the racist approach of the time. More than one hundred years later, after the remains had been almost completely forgotten, they were rediscovered, were made known to the public and were claimed back by Namibia. After restitutions from the Berlin Charité University Hospital and the University of Freiburg to Namibia in 2011 and 2014, further human remains of colonial origin have been discovered in German ethnological and zoological museums and university institutes, anatomical collections, hospitals, art schools, scientific societies and private holdings. Thus, at the moment, it is not possible to give an exact number of all human remains of Namibian origin that are in German collections today; however, on the basis of various information from different collections, we regard remains from approximately 100–120 persons to be a realistic estimate.

When dealing with anthropological collections from colonial contexts, a special sensitivity is required for several reasons. First, the objects of the collections are mortal remains of human beings. Here the dictates of sensitivity apply all the more, if, as in the case of the remains from Namibia, the persons from whom they originated lived in a near past. In this case, these bones were the remains of actual persons who may still have living relatives and descendants who potentially have memories of them. Since 1986, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has recognised that a special sensitivity towards objects consisting of human remains is needed.<sup>1</sup>

Second, human remains from non-European regions are even more sensitive because of the problematic circumstances of their acquisition. Often, they were acquired or appropriated in colonial contexts, under violence or as a result of

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asymmetric exchange. Certainly, the appropriation practices differed from region to region. Nevertheless, these sensitive objects usually came into museums and collections without the consent of the affected persons and communities; they were stolen, blackmailed, unfairly negotiated, secretly dug up and taken away.<sup>2</sup> This general finding applies basically to all the human remains from the area of today's Namibia whose acquisition contexts could be reconstructed up to now.

Lastly, these are sensitive objects because they were used in colonial metropolises for anthropological research and teaching purposes, as research material and evidence for hierarchies among human races and groups. As several examples show, the research results were usually used against those affected.<sup>3</sup>

This special issue aims to give an overview on human remains from Namibia in German collections. It is structured in the following way: the first two articles present the history of German anthropological collections in Berlin (Stoecker and Winkelmann) and in Freiburg (Kößler). The third article deals with the human remains of three individuals that are part of an anthropological collection in Berlin and shows the complexity of provenance research and the methodological questions it raises (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and Eichab). The fourth article focuses on the fate of the human remains after restitution, from a Namibian perspective (Shigwedha). The fifth and final article opens up the transnational dimension that includes human remains from Namibia in the United States (Pape).

The articles address three major thematic groups of issues.

The first group consists of the multiple aspects of the history of German anthropological collections containing human remains from Namibia: the creation of the collections and biographical information on the founders of these collections and in some cases of the persons who collected the human remains in Namibia and the institutions they were attached to (Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann). The different phases of the collection of human remains in Namibia (Stoecker and Winkelmann), as well as the transatlantic fate of one of the Berlin collections that was sold to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 1923 are evoked (Pape; Shigwedha). The articles also discuss the research that has been done on the human remains in the collections (Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann), as well as the evolution of some of the inventories. One of the articles shows that the index of the Rudolf Virchow collection contained fewer elements of information on the skulls and skeletons in the 1960s than in the 1920s – thereby showing a process of 'dehistorisation' that strove to bypass ethical problems in order to continue to use the human remains for research purposes (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and Eichab). In most of the collections, including the one in New York City, the human remains from Namibia were accessible to researchers until shortly after the demand for restitution by the affected communities.

The second group of issues concerns methodological questions. The complexity of provenance research and possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration are discussed (Stoecker and Winkelmann), especially as the research project 'Human Remains' of the Charité conducted between 2010 and 2013 aimed at establishing research standards for interdisciplinary provenance research. The articles show the difficulty of doing provenance research in a context in which large parts of the

catalogues of the collections were destroyed during the two world wars (Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann). They also show the difficulty of working with archives that mainly represent the points of view of the collectors (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and †Eichab) and often consist of letters or photographs of European missionaries, civil servants or merchants in Namibia, thereby leaving out the perspective of Namibians. The contributors to this issue, however, also show how the voices of the affected communities at some points become visible in the documents (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and †Eichab; Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann), as well as how oral history can be used as complementary documentation in provenance research (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and †Eichab). Interviews with members of the affected communities nowadays, furthermore, show how deeply the memory of the genocide and the fate of human remains of its victims are rooted in the individual and family memory (Pape; Shigwedha) and how the transmission of this memory is marked by silence and non-verbal communication (Pape). The interviews show a mismatch of perspectives between members of the affected communities and museum holders of anthropological collections (Pape; Shigwedha).

The third thematic group of issues concerns the restitution of human remains to Namibia and the fate of the skulls and skeletons after their return. The articles discuss the set-up of the handovers during the first two restitutions of human remains to Namibia that have taken place up to now in Germany. While the first handover in Berlin in 2011 was strongly conflict ridden, the one in Berlin and Freiburg in 2014 took place in a quieter manner (Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann). The handovers took place between members of German institutions (the Charité University Hospital in Berlin and the University of Freiburg) and of the Namibian government or the National Heritage Council of Namibia. The articles in this journal issue argue that the process of restitution has not yet contributed positively to the process of reconciliation, mainly because the affected communities have not been involved in the process of handover and in the wider process of negotiation between the German and Namibian governments on the recognition and reparation of the genocide (Kößler; Shigwedha). One article also shows how the returned human remains that presently lie in the National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek are currently not accessible to the public, including to the descendants of the survivors of the genocide (Shigwedha). The transnational resources of the diaspora of Herero and Nama in different countries, especially in the United States, and their role in the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide, are underlined (Pape). The articles finally mention further human remains in Berlin as well as human remains from Namibia recently discovered in further German universities, hospitals and museums (Kößler; Stoecker and Winkelmann). They also discuss the presence of skulls and skeletons in private collections that present an obstacle to a comprehensive restitution (Kößler). The articles show how the demands for restitution by the affected communities express a criticism towards science and are inscribed in a long tradition. Archives show that family relatives of the persons whose dead bodies were taken from Namibia to Germany already resisted this body snatching and demanded the restitution of the human remains in the late nineteenth century (Förster, Henrichsen, Stoecker and †Eichab).

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Overall, one major theme that the articles address is the contribution of science to the construction of differences and hierarchies between ‘races’, thereby emphasising its responsibility in their current deconstructions. While provenance research and the reconstruction of the identity of the persons who lie behind skulls and skeletons play a major role in re-humanising the human remains and overcoming their status as ‘objects’, it is seldom considered as a priority for museums or academic institutions that in some cases still use them for research. The contributions in this special issue show how deeply science has been rooted in politics in the case of human remains from Namibia in German anthropological collections – before, during the German colonial era and in today’s political negotiations regarding the recognition and the reparation of the genocide of the Herero and Nama.

Elise Pape and Holger Stoecker  
Guest editors  
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## Postscript

After completion of this special issue in May 2018, a further restitution of human remains of Namibian origin took place on 28–29 August 2018 in Berlin. Remains of 27 individuals were handed over from German universities and museums in Berlin, Hamburg, Greifswald, Hanover, Witzenhausen and Jena, but also from a private collection to the Namibian government in a ceremony at the Berlin French Friedrichstadt Church. Because of the recent date of the event, the present issue of HRV could only partly evoke this third handover of human remains to Namibia.

## Notes

- 1 ICOM, *Code of Ethics for Museums* (2006), paragraphs 2.5 and 3.7, <http://archives.icom.museum/ethics.html> (accessed 8 May 2018).
- 2 B. Lange, ‘Sensible Sammlungen’, in M. Berner, A. Hoffmann and B. Lange (eds), *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg, Philo Fine Arts, 2011), p. 19.
- 3 T. Schnalke, ‘“Normale” Wissenschaft. Ein Berlin Beitrag zur “Anthropologie der Herero” von 1914’, in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Ch. Links, 2013), pp. 170–83.