

# Imperial skulduggery, science and the issue of provenance and restitution: the fate of Namibian skulls in the Alexander Ecker Collection in Freiburg

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## Abstract

This article explores the history of the Alexander Ecker Collection and situates it within the larger trajectory of global collecting of human remains during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is then linked to the specific context of the genocide in then German South West Africa (1904–8), with the central figure of Eugen Fischer. The later trajectory of the collection leads up to the current issues of restitution. The Freiburg case is instructive since it raises issues about the possibilities and limitations of provenance research. At the same time, the actual restitution of fourteen human remains in 2014 occurred in a way that sparked serious conflict in Namibia which is still on-going four years later. In closing, exigencies as well as pressing needs in connection with the repatriation and (where possible) rehumanisation of human remains are discussed.

**Key words:** Colonialism, genocide, provenance, restitution

## Introduction

On 3 March 2014,<sup>1</sup> a brief ceremony took place in the representative venue of the University of Freiburg, Haus zur Lieben Hand. Those present included Hans-Jochen Schiewer, the Rector of the University; Esther Moombolah-/Goagoses, the Head of the National Museum of Namibia; Jerry Ekandjo, the Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture of the Republic of Namibia; Neville Gertze, the Namibian Ambassador to Germany; Egon Kochanke, the Director of the African Affairs Division of the Foreign Office in Berlin; and Immanuel /Gaseb, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Traditional Leaders in Namibia. The University handed over fourteen human skulls, held by the University Archives as part of the Alexander Ecker Collection (AEC), to the Museums Association of Namibia. The ceremony was meant to mark the end both of more than a century of deportation of the human remains and of a protracted process in which this repatriation had been secured over the better part of a decade. This act of restitution formed part of the protracted and conflictual, even thwarted process of coming to terms with the legacies of German colonialism

in Namibia, most importantly, the genocide of 1904–8. In the case of the repatriation of the skulls from Freiburg, any closure envisaged through the handover very soon proved elusive. Quite the opposite, concerns and agitation were aroused further, rather than assuaged. By this token, hopes were also frustrated that such a step might help to advance a constructive engagement of the overarching issue of the genocide.

Basically, this failure to seriously move forward on the road of reconciliation is rooted in a disregard for the intricacies of the issues involved. Further, both the German and Namibian governments, by making the issue an affair of state, foreclosed important avenues of constructive engagement. The same happened a little later when negotiation on the broader issue of coming to terms with the genocide of 1904–8 in Namibia got underway, and once again, this was treated exclusively as a state affair. In both areas, the overall negotiations and the repatriation of human remains, the problems persist at the time of finalising this text in early May 2018. In the following, I propose to explore the constraints that have led to the predicament I have just outlined. I also discuss alternatives and shall try to move towards an understanding of why these have not been taken. To set out my argument, I give some background on the AEC; this leads to a look at some of the practices of collecting and researching that are also reflected in this collection and which are discussed here with particular respect to Namibia. I then shall briefly recount the process of restitution within the wider context of dealing with colonially deported human remains in Germany, bringing out the specifics of the Freiburg experience. Lastly, I address the way in which, in Namibia, the human remains have become part of the politics that evolved around dealing with the genocide perpetrated by the German colonial power in 1904–8, including the controversial negotiations between the two governments that started in late 2015. This perspective also affords a closer look at the relationship that has evolved between state instances and the victim communities.

### Scientific endeavours

At the dawn of modern science, the English philosopher Francis Bacon proclaimed the need and mission to submit nature to torture in order to literally extort her secrets, with the ultimate aim of mastering the laws that, as Bacon and many after him thought, governed life on earth. Of course, the idea driving Bacon as well as other Enlightenment scholars was to bring human life to perfection. Such perfectibility was seen as a feasible aim which justified all manner of exertions. More recent reflection has thrown into question perfectibility as such, as well as the methods and world-views employed in striving for such aims of enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> From the start, the study of the human body took centre stage in modern scientific endeavours. Opening dead bodies and cutting them up was considered as an essential means to understanding the set-up of the skeleton and the workings of the inner organs. Thus, the practice of anatomy has been considered as quintessential for furthering the knowledge and practice of medicine, and it remains foundational in the training of medical scientists and practitioners. At the same time, anatomy was seen,

from the beginning, as a grave violation, even a desecration of the dead human body, and this transgression was opposed vehemently in many quarters. As a consequence of this situation, materials for anatomic work were procured mainly from those who were least able to resist – apart from the occasional Enlightenment champions who, in their wills, dedicated their bodies to science. To a large extent, the supply of study specimens for medical science was provided by executed criminals – where denial of proper burial could be seen as one more aspect of the demeaning punishment meted out to them – or the poor, who largely were unable to defend the bodies of their deceased against the practice of ‘body snatching’. It seems that the perpetrators were well aware of the transgression they committed. As the sociologist Wulf D. Hund notes, this ‘organised attack on the dead of the poor’ was curtailed by new regulations only at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this change was limited to Western Europe at the time.

This limitation in access to human bodies coincided broadly with the beginning of a new line in anatomical research: comparative study. Initially, this involved mostly bones and particularly skulls, while other body parts came into view later for comparative study. Soon, this activity gave rise to a number of scientific collections. Germany was one of the hubs of these activities at the time. The colonial expansion of Europe, as well as enhanced control and settler expansion in North America and Australia, widened considerably the horizon of collecting human remains, as well as all kinds of anthropological objects. Whereas some decades before, events such as the travels of Captain Cook or occasional migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America had sometimes provided human remains as objects of scientific study, the situation changed dramatically by the mid-nineteenth century. Increasingly, ‘archaeological’ human remains, dug up from cemeteries in the regions where scientific institutions were situated, were supplemented by an array of remains brought from far-away countries, in many cases, from colonies or regions soon to be subjected to European colonialism. For these processes and practices of collection and research, the AEC, today under the care of the University Archives in Freiburg (Germany) can be considered as an exemplar.

The collection was founded by Alexander Ecker, from whom it takes its name. Ecker worked as a professor of anatomy in Freiburg from 1850, and one of his chief concerns was ‘morphological study and ... the area of comparative anthroponomy or race anatomy’.

Accordingly, Ecker reassembled ‘the not very many race skulls’ in the University’s collection. This act marked the beginning of the anthropological collection.<sup>4</sup> By the time of Ecker’s death in 1887, the collection contained 500 skulls. Ecker strove to unveil the ‘secret law of unity in diversity’<sup>5</sup> which he understood to unite all of humankind in the sense of monogenism,<sup>6</sup> as opposed to the idea of a plurality of origins from which some still traced humankind at the time. The bulk of accessions to the collection came from finds from the area around Freiburg and wider regions of Germany, as well as from bodies obtained by the Anatomical Institute. At the same time, a wide network of friends and pupils supplied Ecker with human remains from more remote places. This network covered various parts of Europe, as well as parts of North America, North Africa and Oceania.<sup>7</sup>

After Ecker's death in 1887, activities came largely to a standstill until 1900. Now, the collection was under the care of Eugen Fischer. His line of enquiry was informed by the rising research on eugenics and race hygiene. Later, this work led him to the post of founding Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Genetics and Eugenics from 1927 onwards,<sup>8</sup> and in 1933 he became Rector of Berlin University. His and his Institute's contributions to the conception and execution of racial policies under the Nazis were substantial. With Fischer, collecting drives also apparently gained fresh energy in Freiburg, which became an early hub of race science in Germany and remained so for many decades.<sup>9</sup> While documentation of the collection is notoriously problematic (see below), it can be gauged from research on the changing systems of ordering and numbering the holdings that human remains collected during Ecker's time did not include any from Namibia or indeed from other regions that were to become German colonies, and during the hiatus of 1887–1900 no extra-European remains entered the collection at all. This changed dramatically under Fischer's leadership. Papua New Guinea, then in part the German colony of Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land, and Namibia, at the time officially German Southwest Africa, stand out especially as regions of origin.<sup>10</sup>

### Collecting human remains

As noted above, scientific quests for knowledge often tend to repress qualms and consideration of ethically imposed limits. This is certainly true of the 'collection mania' that gained momentum during the latter part of the nineteenth century and spawned ethnological expeditions. These ventures brought back all manner of exhibits, often also including 'anthropological material'.<sup>11</sup> It may be noted that disregard for ethical standards was pervasive in this frenzy, as testified by the case of Franz Boas, one of the early luminaries of cultural anthropology with a clear anti-racist bent; still, Boas is said to have spent 'unpeaceful nights and bad dreams' on account of the practices that he pursued in collecting human skulls and skeletons in North America.<sup>12</sup>

In particular for German scholars, the acquisition of colonies created new and unprecedented opportunities to pursue their collecting activities,<sup>13</sup> even though the German state had assisted them in these quests prior to formal colonial expansion.<sup>14</sup> Still, the scope for the gathering of study objects, including human remains, expanded. 'Body parts could be acquired from the normal course of colonial rule.'<sup>15</sup> War offered specific opportunities for collecting human remains, and this was certainly true in the case of the Namibian War (1904–8). In putting down anticolonial resistance, offered mainly by Ovaherero and Nama, the German colonial army resorted to genocide.<sup>16</sup> In particular the concentration camps in the coastal spots of Swakopmund and Lüderitz afforded military surgeons the chance of procuring the coveted large series of specimens. Here, entire 'tribes' were imprisoned, and died in their droves. Thus, the zoologist Leonard Schultze, later known as Schultze-Jena, who himself boasted of his 'collecting and hunting',<sup>17</sup> saw his original plan to collect animal and plant life stalled by the war but found himself compensated, since 'I could put to use the victims of the war and take parts from fresh native corpses,

which made a welcome addition to the study of the living body (imprisoned Hottentots [Nama] were often at my disposal).<sup>18</sup> One military officer confirmed that it would be quite possible to procure human skulls, 'since in the concentration camps taking and preserving the skulls of Ovaherero prisoners of war will be more readily possible than in the country, where there is always a danger of offending the ritual feelings of the natives'.<sup>19</sup> In the concentration camps, sick wards were feared by prisoners as places of death, and in a number of cases, human remains sent to Germany originated from there.<sup>20</sup> At least two of the skulls that were in the AEC were registered and marked as having been collected at Swakopmund,<sup>21</sup> which suggests that they were victims of the concentration camps.

Other than in some latter-day myth-making, Eugen Fischer was not present in Namibia during the war. He arrived only in 1908, when the hostilities had been ended officially and the concentration camps had been dissolved. Fischer's main purpose was his genetic study of the Rehoboth Baster population, which established him as a leading figure in his field.<sup>22</sup> This research was explicitly not concerned with dead bodies, and in contradistinction to most collecting activities actually necessitated careful notice of subjects' individual names and their kinship relations. Still, one of Fischer's students extolled this work some thirty years later as having laid the foundations of a 'population policy which today has become self-evident to us,' namely the racist policy of the Nazis.<sup>23</sup> However, his main writ did not keep Fischer from engaging in the collection of human remains in person. In his later autobiographical sketches, entitled 'Encounters with Dead People,' Fischer has left an incisive account of these activities. Thus, he gives the story of how he took bodies from graves in the Namib Desert in the hinterland of Walvis Bay, most likely belonging to members of the ≠Aonin (Kuiseb Topnaar) community. Fischer's account betrays a clear awareness about what he was doing. He claims that the 'small tribe' had disappeared from the area, even though, up to the present, the Kuiseb valley near Walvis Bay is well known to be their residence and traditional centre. In this way, the transgression of robbing 'deserted and forgotten' gravesides is somewhat mitigated. Still, Fischer's further precautions betray again that quite likely he was aware of the full impact of his doings: 'As drivers and diggers I used two Cape boys, since I tried to avoid taking native Hottentots<sup>24</sup> or Hereros in this case, who presumably might have considered it painful that for scientific purposes that were beyond their comprehension we would disturb the peace of the graves of their own kind.'<sup>25</sup> Fischer's actions were of course by no means unusual but, rather, established practice among the international community of his colleagues.<sup>26</sup> His haughty way of combining the admission of his transgression with discriminatory remarks about the sentiments of those whom he deemed incapable of grasping the exigencies of science speaks precisely to the attitude of torch bearers of enlightenment, enforced come what may. Still, as we have noted, some 100 years before, the poor of Europe had mustered as little understanding of these lofty exigencies as Fischer surmised Africans would do. Furthermore, it is revealing to note Fischer's accounts of other instances when his profession confronted him with opened graves. In these cases, the dead whom he 'encountered' were prominent personages from German history, such as the renowned Duke Henry the Lion, whose remains Fischer examined in

Brunswick cathedral. In such cases, the researcher registered an 'awe' (*Scheu*) which is entirely absent when he speaks about his exploits in the Namib. As a matter of course, the remains of medieval nobility were reverently put back into their graves, while 'Hottentots' were considered as fit to be unceremoniously transported to Germany as study material. Apparently, Fischer took a substantial collection back to Germany. Circumstantial evidence suggests that he took 'six almost complete hottentot [sic] skeletons' from the area around Walvis Bay,<sup>27</sup> and there is at least quite strong evidence that five skulls collected in Swakopmund, in one case by a medical practitioner, have a relationship to the concentration camp in that coastal town. The same physician procured one further skull in Lüderitz. These skulls are noted as Fischer's personal property. There are hints that he received skulls of executed Nama.<sup>28</sup> In his quest for human remains, also from Namibia, Fischer went still further. When he turned to 'soft part anthropology'<sup>29</sup> it became ever more important to procure 'fresh' material. Along these lines, the heads of executed persons, in this case in New Guinea, were severed immediately after their deaths, packed into sealed tins and shipped to Freiburg for study. Fischer saw room for improvement. In 1913, he suggested that criminals who had been sentenced to death should be brought to Germany alive to render service to science, while they would inevitably soon succumb to the unaccustomed climatic conditions.<sup>30</sup> To round off, Fischer approached the Governor of German South West Africa, also in 1913, with the request to be sent a 'Bushman penis', with a view of ascertaining a widely held belief about the specific characteristics, and thereby lower evolutionary level, of the Khoi<sup>31</sup> of Southern Africa.<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that in the heyday of race science, the collection was on public display in the Institute of Anatomy. This is quite different from the present-day position, when all human remains are kept in an underground storeroom which is not accessible to the public.

Inevitably, the human remains that had been brought to Germany from various parts of the world shared the fate of the country where they were kept. In the case of the AEC, this meant that in both world wars, in 1917 and in 1944, the premises were hit by aerial bombing. In 1917, large parts of the scientific collections of the Anatomy Institute were lost, and also about one fourth of the anthropological collection went up in flames. So, in particular, did the documentation. Whereas in 1944 the then existing documentation was once again lost, the holdings had been taken to safety beforehand.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence of the losses of 1917, Fischer started an initiative that unveils important aspects of the collecting practice of the time and of the preceding decades. He appealed to his colleagues to make up for the lost exhibits out of their private collections. As the anthropologist Möller notes, this appeal may also point to means by which the collection was brought together in the first place.<sup>34</sup> Private donations may have played an important role. However, Fischer obviously also relied on a knowledge of extensive private holdings.<sup>35</sup> Seen from today's perspective, this circumstance also indicates one obstacle when it comes to restitution, namely, the unknown number of human remains that are in private hands. Any serious endeavour for full-scale restitution would have to take in a wider range than looking merely at the holdings of institutions willing to go along with such requests, or even proactively working in that direction.

When, in his appeal, Fischer pointed explicitly to ‘our beautiful colonies,’ the registries analysed by Möller suggest that he was not very successful.<sup>36</sup> Apparently, few specimens from erstwhile German colonies entered the collection after the First World War. It grew mainly through accessions from regional research and collecting activities and by amalgamation with the formerly private Gabriel von Max collection in 1935.<sup>37</sup> Among the 445 human remains of this group, two were categorised as ‘Ovaherrero [sic].’<sup>38</sup> As Möller takes care to stress very early in his account, in the AEC ‘there are no hints about remains of victims of National Socialism whatsoever’<sup>39</sup> – a clear pointer also to the fact that concern with anthropological collections in Germany has for a long time focused primarily on the consequences of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the collection remained an object of research during Nazi rule, and Fischer, first in his elevated position in Berlin and then after his retirement back in Freiburg, remained in close contact with the AEC. After 1935, further additions are ‘uncertain’ according to recent research.<sup>40</sup> After the war, the collection was unpacked, but apparently largely disregarded. However, a fresh effort was made at cataloguing it in the 1980s and a few doctoral dissertations were based on research on the collection. In 2001, the AEC was transferred into the care of the University Archives and placed in the basement of one of the central buildings of the university (Kollegiengebäude II). There is a stark contrast with the lively scenes above, associated with lecturing and a refectory, as one descends, passing several locked doors, into the sombre atmosphere of the hold which by now is brightly lit and shows orderly shelves and cardboard boxes in which the remains are kept. For 2005, Möller reports ‘narrow shelves’ and human remains that had ‘in part already been placed into closed boxes but were mostly lying on open cardboard . . . fragmentary and deformed skulls, heads of mummies, the skull of a human foetus, here and there furnished with numbers or sometimes with an attached piece of paper and barely legible additional notes.’<sup>41</sup>

### Processes and issues of restitution

Against this backdrop, it might seem that a lack of order and oversight was involved when, in 1997, an enquiry by the Australian Embassy about human remains stemming from Aborigines went completely unanswered. Subsequently, the University’s attitude changed considerably. In 2004, after the AEC had come under the care of the University Archive, the Rectorate took a precautionary decision that established the institution’s readiness for restitution, should at some point such a request be made and the necessary facts be established.<sup>42</sup> The issue gained momentum both on account of initiatives by Nama and Ovaherero traditional leaders in Namibia<sup>43</sup> and through the impact of a broadcast on German public television on 21 July 2008 which dealt with the issue of human remains from Namibia and detailed facts about the skulls held in Freiburg. The broadcast documented a demand by the Namibian Ambassador, Peter Katjavivi, for restitution.<sup>44</sup> This sparked a number of activities. The Namibian Embassy in Berlin pursued the issue. Public attention and pressure around the issue began to build up in Germany. This must be added to the efforts of the emerging movement in Namibia which addresses the wider consequences of the

genocide but came also to vigorously highlight the issue of human remains. In 2009 it was claimed that efforts were underway in Freiburg to establish the provenance of skulls held by the AEC and which might have been deported from Namibia. Any serious steps were hampered by the irksome process of securing funds, even though the University had provided seed money to draft the requisite applications.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Katjavivi's successor as Namibian Ambassador in Berlin, Neville Gertze, noted that no initiative had been forthcoming from Freiburg, while Charité, the renowned Berlin university hospital, had been the only German institution to come forward with such a move.<sup>46</sup> In 2010, an initiative by the Green Party in the regional diet of Baden-Württemberg to enquire about the holdings of cultural institutions in the state of 'objects' from Namibia, including skulls, did not yield much information, nor make headway in other terms.<sup>47</sup>

During the following years, developments in Freiburg were clearly overshadowed by the dramatic events that unfolded in Berlin in late September 2011, when a first group of twenty skulls that had been identified by the Charité as hailing from Namibia were handed over to Namibia. Members of the delegation who arrived to receive the skulls numbered some seventy people in all. They included, besides the Minister of Culture and press people, representatives of the victim communities, among them ritual specialists. Many delegates felt deeply hurt by the treatment meted out to them by German officialdom and, in particular, the government.

Events came to a head in a diplomatic *éclat* when the representative of the Foreign Office walked out of the handover ceremony in the face of protests by local civil society who – in consonance with the sentiments of the Namibian delegation – demanded official recognition of the genocide by the German government, an apology and reparations.

Some two months later, at a point when the excitement about these events, which amounted to some kind of diplomatic crisis, had not yet subsided, Freiburg University moved forward with an important step towards restitution in its own right. The Rector called a press conference where he, jointly with anthropologist Professor Ursula Wittwer-Backofen of the Institute of Anthropology and Anatomy, presented the results of the provenance research that had been undertaken on those skulls kept in the AEC which were considered likely to originate from Namibia and which, consequently, might be repatriated. The press statement issued by the University recalled that most of the skulls in the AEC were 'archaeological' ones, and that some 200 were from Africa, of which eight were marked as 'Herero' and five as 'Hottentot'. Further, it was noted that Fischer, during whose tenure these skulls had in all likelihood been collected, 'never kept a catalogue', and that the largest part of the 'original documentation' had been lost during the wars. The statement noted that nineteen skulls had been 'considered as relevant for research regarding origin in Namibia', of which for fourteen 'a significant likelihood for an origin in the territory of present-day Namibia can be assumed', and for these 'restitution has been recommended by the researchers'.<sup>48</sup> In her report, Wittwer-Backofen stressed that, due to scanty documentation, provenance could be established almost exclusively by natural science methodology, including in particular morphometry, mitochondrial DNA analysis and the analysis of stable isotopes.<sup>49</sup> All of these made it possible to state: 'For 14

skulls, provenance from Namibia is likely.<sup>50</sup> This finding marks a clear contrast to the result of research that the Charité had disclosed only a little earlier and reconfirmed later, in 2014. In these cases, it had been possible to attribute at least ethnic labels to the human remains that were restituted in two groups, and to provide information on the collectors, collecting dates and places.<sup>51</sup> Anything approaching such information could be provided by the provenance research in Freiburg only on the basis of the immediate evidence of inscriptions on the skulls mentioned above. This problem was due to the scanty documentation available. It must be noted that even the attribution of human remains to specific ethnic groups, as well as some of the circumstances of collection as provided by the Charité research, falls far short of the expectations and needs of the victim communities, who had hoped for the actual identification of the heads of their heroes and forebears. Only this would have made it possible for them to be buried in their home communities (see also below). As became clear at the press conference in November 2011, one of Wittwer-Backofen's central concerns was the hope that the AEC could again be used in research, mainly to do with population genetics and developing new methodologies, in understanding historical living conditions, in forensic work and problems of micro-evolution.<sup>52</sup> In Wittwer-Backofen's view, the use of the AEC for such research work would again be possible only once it had been 'established that all holdings had been procured in a rightful manner'.<sup>53</sup> In this vein, she expressed her wish that the collection would be 'cleansed' in order to be of scientific use without ethical problems.<sup>54</sup> As emerged from the press conference, the main actors in Freiburg seemed to envisage a hand-over of the skulls in Namibia, even though the press reported the intention to wait for a response by the 'Namibian Embassy and the [German?] government'.<sup>55</sup> In all these acts and considerations, one conspicuous absence could not be overlooked: there was no involvement at all of the affected communities in Namibia, from whom the persons to whom the skulls belonged most likely originated. Only a few weeks before, the large delegation that came to collect the twenty skulls at the Charité in Berlin had underlined the importance of this issue.

### **Disregard for affected communities and the issue of rehumanisation**

Such concerns had been brought to the attention of a Freiburg audience some fifteen months earlier when Ester Utjua Muinjangué, currently the chair of the Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Genocide Foundation and a long-standing activist in the matter, paid a visit to the Protestant University of Applied Science Freiburg. Muinjangué used her sojourn to enquire about the skulls in the University Archives, where she paid them a visit. She made extensive reference to the issue in a talk which she gave at her host university. In her talk, she unequivocally stated the importance of retrieving the remains of persons who had never been buried properly, and 'never been mourned'.<sup>56</sup> A burial at home would therefore be appropriate, but, as Muinjangué stated, circumstances made this well-nigh impossible. She rejected the idea floated by the Namibian government that the skulls should be buried in Heroes Acre, the monumental memorial site in Windhoek,<sup>57</sup> and expressed her hope that they would be kept in a special room in the Independence Memorial Museum,<sup>58</sup>

then still under construction. Muinjangu placed particular emphasis on the need for the human remains to be transported by 'ourselves': 'We want to come here and receive the skulls.' Vitaly, this would be linked to the necessary rituals connected with dealing with dead bodies and with burials. As has been mentioned, this template was followed in Berlin in 2011.<sup>59</sup> As Muinjangu also stated, these concerns were 'purely cultural and ritualistic', quite removed from politics.

As it turned out, such aloofness from politics could not be maintained. As noted, the circumstances of the restitution in Berlin in 2011 spawned a diplomatic crisis.<sup>60</sup> Most likely, this crisis accounts for the hiatus of some twenty-nine months before a second repatriation of human remains from Germany to Namibia could take place. This time, twenty human remains under the care of Charité were concerned, besides the Freiburg fourteen. In stark contrast to the prolonged preparatory process in 2011,<sup>61</sup> the restitution in 2014 was made known at very short notice, and the activist members of affected communities in Namibia learned about it only when the small delegation was already on its way to Germany.<sup>62</sup> Decisively, no ritual specialists were present to perform the required ceremonies. In Freiburg the handover was staged at the Haus zur Lieben Hand, where the cardboard boxes that contained the skulls were decked out in the Namibian flag and an array of officials from the University and both governments made brief speeches. As noted, these included the Rector, the Head of the National Museum of Namibia, a Namibian cabinet minister and the Namibian Ambassador to Germany, the Deputy Chair of the Council of Traditional Leaders in Namibia and the chair of the Africa desk of the German Foreign Office. The arrangement provided that the actual handover was done between Rector Schiewer and Moombolah-/Goagoses for the National Museum. As in 2011, the German Federal Government denied any direct responsibility in a matter, which was designated as 'cultural' and thus seen to lie with the states (*Länder*). Victim communities were not part of the Namibian delegation, and thus were not represented at the handover ceremony. In this way, *Gaob* (Chief) /Gaseb was the only person present who might possibly have been considered as a representative of traditional communities in Namibia. However, /Gaseb's legitimacy to represent specifically the affected communities was later disputed vehemently by representatives of these communities. Regardless of persistent conflict that has been observed especially among Ovaherero since many years, the rejection of the approach of the Namibian government was unanimous. The government had violated the basic principles of reverently dealing with dead bodies, which called for the participation of relatives and, moreover, for relevant rituals. All of this was missing from the 2014 repatriation.

As it stands, the human remains that have been repatriated to Namibia from Germany are still kept in a storeroom at the National Museum of Namibia.<sup>63</sup> This situation reflects predicaments and controversies, as well as inadequacies in the approaches followed so far.<sup>64</sup> Above all, the idea of a burial at home, in the sense of reintegrating the deported bodies into their communities of origin, has proved elusive. In the great majority of cases, provenance research has not been able to establish the names and, thereby, the personae of the deceased or their appurtenance, over and above ascribing them to ethnic clusters such as Nama and Ovaherero as well

as, in the case of the second group from Berlin, Damara, San and Ndonga. In the case of the fourteen skulls restituted from Freiburg, not even such ethnic ascription has happened, although inscriptions and existing data from catalogues apparently permit such classification in a number of cases. Given this predicament, it is not far fetched that the idea emerges to treat these human remains as one group. However, as intimated already, the question of how to proceed further ignited instant controversy. For the representatives of affected communities, the human remains were also important as testimony of the anticolonial resistance of their forbears – in the words of one activist: ‘If the skulls are buried, our history will be buried.’<sup>65</sup> The emphasis here is on the specific contribution of communities residing in central and southern Namibia to primary anticolonial resistance, as well as the suffering that this entailed, above all through genocide. The claim relates to the widespread feeling that these experiences are being side-lined by official government pronouncements and policies. By 2014, the counter-claim of the Namibian government had emerged clearly, and this claim dovetails with the overall narrative of national history which the South West African People’s Organisation government has pursued since independence. Stressing national unity, anticolonial resistance – where prominently addressed at all – is presented as an act of a Namibian people that, in this view, had been united from the very beginning. The historical record will hardly support such a proposition. In actual fact, historical experiences are quite diverse across the fourteen regions of Namibia’s vast territory; in particular, the Namibian War, as well as settler colonialism, affected only central and southern Namibia, while the more populous northern regions saw other, if equally incisive, forms of colonialism.<sup>66</sup> The idea of some pre-ordained national unity which apparently existed at the latest at the time of colonisation is nevertheless pursued, and has been given monumental expression in relevant representations in the Independence Memorial Museum opened in March 2014, which features huge murals representing, among others, historical personages from a wide range of places and time periods, assembled together as though they formed some united group. This approach also informed the way that the Namibian government staged the 2014 repatriation of human remains. On the part of the affected communities, resistance to this way of addressing the history of anticolonial resistance has been advanced under the watchword of ‘Not About Us Without Us’, and today finds its most conspicuous expression in the conflict over their participation in the negotiations which the two governments have entered into around the genocide issue since November 2015.<sup>67</sup>

Where does this leave the human remains? It seems that the spiritual concerns of receiving the dead and accompanying them on their journey have been all but obscured by political considerations. In the case of the 2014 repatriation, these concerns were clearly linked by the two governments to an attempt to avoid the publicity that obviously was experienced as a problem in 2011. In this way, fundamental issues could not be addressed. In the Freiburg case, the researchers working on the issue of provenance certainly diligently saw to it that all human remains were treated with ‘respect.’<sup>68</sup> Yet such respect, duly shown while – inevitably, at least in the researchers’ view – applying the objectifying and partly invasive methods of a science that had sought out these human remains as objects in the first place, remains part of the

predicament that is germane to the issue of provenance and repatriation. At the same time, avenues for alternatives have been explored, to which I would like to turn briefly.

What happened in Freiburg, as well as in Berlin and later in Windhoek, remains a far cry from the idea of 'return as rehumanisation', as exemplified by the repatriation of the remains of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar from Vienna (Austria) to South Africa in 2012, who 'represented the first case of remains de-accessioned and returned from the patrimony of a European state as those of human beings and not museum objects'.<sup>69</sup> It may be said that such rehumanisation hinges on, or is at least greatly facilitated by, the establishment of the precise identities of the deceased, as was possible in this particular case. Still, to see this pioneer case as a template for which to strive in future cases should become a normative goal, even though it may remain difficult to attain. Again, the rituals that were carried out in Berlin during the 2011 repatriation could be seen to at least go a long way towards rehumanisation.<sup>70</sup> By the same token, the absence of ritual specialists, as well as of any persons who could be construed as 'relatives' of the deceased, from the 2014 repatriation would clearly run counter to the quest for rehumanisation. Meanwhile, the issue of human remains from Namibia in German institutions will not be closed, even after the third repatriation from the Charité, which is expected for late August 2018. Further, in some quarters in Namibia, it is claimed that huge numbers of human remains still are in Germany. While such claims, running into a few thousands, may seem unlikely, the German government's attempt in June 2011 to limit the issue to the Charité and to Freiburg failed miserably, when half a year later, freelance investigator Heiko Wegmann established three skulls held by the University of Greifswald.<sup>71</sup>

This incident, among others, underscores the need for a comprehensive effort to research the issue of human remains in German institutions. This concerns not only Namibia, but the experience in this case has made it particularly clear that any form of closure will be predicated on such an effort. Such a comprehensive research project, duly funded by the German government, would go some way towards acknowledging the postcolonial responsibility which Germany has yet to countenance in a meaningful way. Moreover, a mere focus on institutions cannot be exhaustive, given the existence of all kinds of private holdings. The predicaments that result from such situations became graphically apparent when the heir to a privately held skull which supposedly is Namibian tried, with considerable perseverance, to bring it back to Namibia. Since this particular skull could not be attributed to a specific ethnic group, let alone be identified as belonging to a deceased person, no institution or individual could be found who felt entitled and in a position to receive this skull.<sup>72</sup> The restitution of human remains from Germany to Namibia has specific significance also because it is enmeshed in the broader issue of genocide. Not all of the deceased whose body parts were deported to Germany from Namibia were victims of the genocide. Still, a large part of the human remains that remain in Germany have been deported by scientists, medical people and even the occasional missionary, using the Namibian War as an opportunity to obtain much-coveted study material, or even merely trophies and souvenirs. Any form of closure to deal

with the genocide will be predicated upon an adequate solution of the problem of human remains, as far as this is still possible at all.

It must be noted in closing that the issue of human remains forms part of a wider postcolonial predicament which currently is articulated in the unresolved question of how the consequences of the genocide of 1904–8 should be dealt with. A proper official recognition of the genocide by German authorities, along with attendant consequences, is still held in abeyance. Such a declaration would have to come from the Bundestag as the representative of the German people and would have to involve recognition of the genocide, along with a serious apology and acknowledgement of the need for compensation of damages, as far as this is still possible. Ever since an informal declaration by the German Foreign Office that it would now at least adopt the language of genocide to refer to the crimes perpetrated during the Namibian War, such a declaration has proved elusive. Apparently, this is largely due to reluctance on the part of German diplomacy to seriously accede to the requirements of such a process of apology.<sup>73</sup> A formal official apology that entails material reparations and efforts to develop an adequate memory practice are prerequisites for a constructive solution that may not close this painful chapter, but create foundations for genuine reconciliation, most likely in the form of ‘continuous reclamation processes interrogating the systematic legacies of genocide’<sup>74</sup> – as well as colonialism as such.

## Notes

- 1 Many of the observations in this paper go back to work carried out in the context of the research project ‘Reconciliation and Social Conflict in the Aftermath of Large-scale Violence in Southern Africa. The Cases of Angola and Namibia’ at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, Germany, under the auspices of the funding initiative ‘Knowledge for Tomorrow’ of the Volkswagen Foundation; see generally, R. Kößler, *Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past* (Windhoek, University of Namibia Press and Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2015), especially ch. 12. Thanks are due to Heiko Wegmann for long years of cooperation, numerous insights on the subject, as well as practical help in providing some of the documentation.
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- 4 A. Ecker, *Hundert Jahre einer Freiburger Professoren-Familie. Biographische Aufzeichnungen* (Freiburg i. Breisgau, Mohr, 1886), pp. 115–16; D. Möller, ‘Die Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung in Freiburg’, in Stoecker et al. (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Ch. Links, 2013), pp. 106–20, p. 109; the following factual account relies mainly on D. Möller, ‘Die

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Rekonstruktion von Herkunft und Erwerbungskontext der Schädel, MA thesis  
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anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg. Entstehung, Zusammenführung, Verlust*  
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- 5 Ecker, *Hundert Jahre einer Freiburger Professoren-Familie*, p. 52, quoted by Möller,  
'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg'.
  - 6 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 40.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–53.
  - 8 Since the Second World War the tradition of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute has  
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Instituten vor und nach 1933* (Göttingen, Wallstein, 2003).
  - 9 P. Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and  
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142–4.
  - 10 See the lists provided in Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg',  
pp. 46–7, 65–6 as well as Appendices I–III; see also V. A. Shigweda, 'The Return of  
Herero and Nama Bones from Germany: The Victims' Struggle for Recognition  
and Recurring Genocide Memories in Namibia', in J.-M. Dreyfus and E. Anstett  
(eds), *Human Remains in Society. Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of  
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  - 11 A. Laukötter, 'Gefühle im Feld: Die "Sammelwut" der Anthropologie in Bezug auf  
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  - 12 F. Pöhl, 'Franz Boas, ein Anwalt der indigenen Kulturen Amerikas?', in H.-W.  
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  - 13 H. Wegmann, 'Die Freiburger Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung, koloniales  
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pp. 392–418, p. 394; D. Henrichsen (ed.), *Hans Schinz: Bruchstücke –  
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  - 14 A. Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Anti-humanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago,  
University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 159.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
  - 16 J. Zimmerer and J. Zeller (eds.), *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The  
Colonial War of 1904–08 in Namibia and Its Aftermath* (Monmouth, Merlin, 2008)  
(German original 2003, 3rd rev. edn 2016).

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- 21 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 116 ; Wegmann, 'Die Freiburger Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung', p. 398.
- 22 E. Fischer, *Die Rehobother Baster und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnographische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Jena, Gustav Fischer, 2014).
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- 29 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 63.
- 30 Wegmann, 'Die Freiburger Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung', pp. 394–5, 398.
- 31 Non-discriminatory term for groups otherwise referred to as 'Bushmen'.
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- 33 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', pp. 11, 12–13, 80; Möller, *Die Geschichte der anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg*, pp. 15, 83 ; D. Möller, 'Die Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung in Freiburg', pp. 111–12.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 35 Wegmann, 'Die Freiburger Alexander-Ecker-Sammlung', p. 400.
- 36 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 6 ; Möller, *Die Geschichte der anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg*, p. 9.
- 37 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 77 ; Möller, *Die Geschichte der anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg*, p. 87.
- 38 Möller, *Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg*, p. 137 ; U. Wittwer-Backofen and S. Schlager, 'Anthropologische Zugänge zur Provenienzerklärung menschlicher Skelettüberreste in Sammlungen', in Stoecker et al. (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Ch.Links, 2013), pp. 224–43, p. 71.
- 39 Möller, *Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg*, p. 7; Möller, 'Die Geschichte der anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg', p. 9.
- 40 Wittwer-Backofen and Schlager, 'Anthropologische Zugänge zur Provenienzerklärung menschlicher Skelettüberreste in Sammlungen', pp. 66, 73.
- 41 Möller, 'Die anthropologische Schädelammlung Freiburg', p. 4; Möller *Die Geschichte der anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg*, p. 7.
- 42 H. Wegmann, 'Die Schädelammlung im Freiburger Universitätsarchiv und namibische Rückgabeforderungen.' Interview mit dem Leiter des Universitätsarchivs und Uniseums Freiburg, Dieter Speck, 11.11. 2009, [www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/dl.htm#2009uniarchiv](http://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/dl.htm#2009uniarchiv) (accessed 26 December 2017); H. Wegmann, 'Leichen im Keller.' *Badische Zeitung* (Freiburg), 14 November 2009, [www.badische-zeitung.de/freiburg/leichen-im-keller](http://www.badische-zeitung.de/freiburg/leichen-im-keller) (accessed 27 December 2017).
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- 53 A. Bochtler, 'Herero-Schädel.'
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- 58 For similar sentiments also by others, see Kößler, *Namibia and Germany*, p. 285; M. Biwa, 'Afterlives of Genocide: Return of Human Bodies from Berlin to Windhoek 2011', in M. Fazil, R. Buchenhorst and M. Six-Hohenbalken (eds), *Memory and Genocide. On What Remains and the Possibility of Representation* (London and New York, Routledge, 2017), pp. 91–106, p. 101.
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- 67 R. Kößler, 'Diversität und Erinnerung. Zur Auseinandersetzung um die Konsequenzen des kolonialen Völkermordes (1904–1908) in Namibia', forthcoming.
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