

**Protocol of the Discussion/afternoon Session from the  
Workshop “On the Restitution of Human Skeletal Remains from Colonial Contexts:  
Experiences from the Berlin (Virchow) Collection” on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021 (Audio file):**

- **(Ursula Wittwer-Backofen)** Recap of some discussion points from the morning session: Main Question – How reliable will the information from the collection be? → During World War 2, significant amounts of information went missing. Attempts have been made (and are being made) to locate documents and objects from the collection that went missing. For this reason, the data/information that we do have is flawed, partial or missing entirely. That is why provenience research is essential.

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- Difference between Berlin collection & Ecker → Both have a similar time span, started at around the same time. Virchow was more focused on studying the skulls while Ecker was more invested in the inventory and categorization of the collection. Moreover, Berlin has more documentary information, which is generally missing in the Ecker collection.
  - Different approaches utilized in the two collections – the Berlin collection could be utilized for the research on the Ecker collection as a sort of reference collection in which anthropological methods (traits) can deliver information about specific groups (i.e. reference to the origin/provenience/specific populations).

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- **(Anna Lagia)** Question/Statement: How are the questions (from the morning session) received by Pearl – questions about how we should do research on the skulls and discussing different aspects of cultural anthropology?
- **(Andreas Mehler)** – Similar questions/critical aspects are being discussed in the advisory board meetings.
  - Introduction to the advisory board – Composition: Representatives from communities of origin, scholars and activists from different countries, a German studies scholar (Albert Gouaffo from Cameroon – restitution of art objects), Flower Manase (curator from museum in Tanzania), Ciraj Rassool (sociologist, activist – involved in repatriation from France to South Africa), Memory Biwa (representative of Namibia), Kokou Azamede (from Togo cultural studies), an Anthropologist from Gabon (research on contemporary grave robbery), Wazi Apoh (forensic archaeologist), Reinhart Köbler (sociologist, ABI), Holger Stoecker (colonial historian).
  - Critical debate (within the advisory board): Enough research on those skulls has already been done; why not give them back? Enough information has been collected from them; wouldn't it be time to give them back? → The discussion arises: Do we have enough information?
    - ◇ Critical debate: Regarding the discipline of biological anthropology and methods (to be used (i.e. invasive methods), what is being done to human remains is (seen by some as) a violation of the body.
    - ◇ Not objects, we're talking about humans, people. → Depersonalization in the process of getting the remains here (Germany). This process could be remedied (?) – in discussion in the advisory board meetings. (Biological anthropology could initiate this process by using techniques to RE-personalize these individuals).
  - **Andreas'** interest (as political scientist): Process of how communities of origin (COO) get contacted, participation of COO, and if there are there best practices to do this, etc.

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- Experience from **Barbara Teßmann** on contact/communication with COO, what did the process look like?
  - **(Barbara)** The East Africa project has now ended. Colleagues in Rwanda collaborated on the project and worked in the field there, conducting ethnographic interviews with the COO

inquiring about any memories, stories, information about the German colonial rulers and/or how the skulls were collected.

- Some skulls in the Berlin collection are from Kenya or Tanzania – here there were no collaborators who could work with the German anthropologists.
    - ◇ The skulls from this project were analyzed in the normal way all human remains are examined, but the project didn't have a contact person to ask if this was wanted or okay. (Which is a shame and isn't a very good feeling for the anthropologist working on these remains.)
  - Opinion: there may be more interest in collaborations on provenience research from COO and researchers from West Africa as compared to East Africa.
  - Contact with the COO directly is preferable – not embassies or the like.
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- Ecker collection has contact (with scholars & COOs) from the get-go, i.e. advisory board. → Different perspectives, exchange with scholarly participants & non-scholarly individuals.
    - Difference between approaching COOs in the Berlin & Ecker collection: Berlin has more documentary information about the region from which the remains come & can approach contemporary people living there. Ecker lacks this narrow perspective – members of the advisory board come from many different countries/ scholarly backgrounds which provide multiple and oftentimes differing opinions.
    - (**Ursula**) Two-step complexity with the current project in the Ecker collection: 1) the information/documentation is too broad, we know only that the remains should come from Africa; 2) different opinions – do whatever is needed to do to identify the remains versus don't do anything, just return them. → Trying to find our way through these issues.
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- (**Andreas**) Important – Anticipating what happens after (the project ends): we have done provenience research, will we go for restitution, what type of repatriation, what kind of ceremonial act will be done and what kind of information will be left here (in Germany)? → what kind of information is needed once the objects are not here anymore?
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- How can we approach the COOs and what would be important in this process?
    - (**Pearl Lamptey**) Aim of restitution, get as close to the COOs as possible (with little documentary information) two ways: Bottom-up & Top-down approaches
      - ◇ Top-down: Start with anthropologists/colleagues in the field – they can collaborate with the community
      - ◇ Bottom-up: Trace the remains to a certain region, contact anthropologists (in this region) who use the language of anthropologists to relate that to the communities
      - ◇ Communication is important – Involving the communities is important and using the right (appropriate) language with them is essential (involvement of anthropologists from the region – “one of their own”). Main link is the colleagues from the country (as middleman for the COOs and the scientific language of the anthropologists).
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- **Barbara's** experience with this process in the East Africa Project in Berlin – There was a collaboration with colleagues (but not with the COO) in form from a workshop in Rwanda, but no contact person was found in Tanzania or Kenya. Colleagues in Rwanda conducted interview about colonial times in Rwanda – but most interviewees have no living memory of that time (maybe their grandparents heard about it from older generations), but the interview are to be utilized with caution. Information from the interviews was partially just jokingly said – the contact with COOs is difficult.
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- (**Andreas**) we are demanding a lot (from the COOs) – “This is my problem. What is your answer to my problem?”.

- Different arenas, different actors have different roles, interests, conflicts with each other, which makes it difficult.
  - Issue of timing – The project has been funded for two years, but we will not be done with everything in that timeframe. Urge to come to terms and to already start with repatriations. But the question of prioritization comes up – how do we prioritize which human remains will be repatriated. → Opinion: we should do an initial repatriation to legitimize what we are doing and get acceptance for our research. Documentation for everything and transparency is very important.
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- New documents (found within the archives), which role will they play in the whole process?
    - **(Dieter Speck)** Until we found the inventory list, we didn't have any information about the collection, about the individual objects. In most cases we only have the general region, from which the object originates. In a few single cases we have the names (identities) of the individuals and their age. This is the case for North Africa, primarily the coastal regions, mostly soldiers from the French army who died in the war between Germany and France in 1870-71 and died in Europe.
    - We have some slightly more detailed information about individuals from Southeast Asia who also died in clinics.
    - Many objects that didn't come from a teacher-student exchange but came from sellers. The list of the sellers is very long and there are more and more that are added to the list. The information from the sellers has to be accepted at face-value (or not), but you can't verify this information anywhere (with any sources). → For example, a private professor funded a quasi-private expedition to Southeast Asia and bought 100 skulls all at once. There's no other documentation and there seems to be no way to gain any more information about these skulls (individuals). If someone bought 100+ skulls from a headhunter, how can you search for and find information about the individual skulls? It's not possible.
  - **(Ursula)** The information we have about the collection is not really suitable for the identification of the individuals. In most cases we only have information about the continent or region or sometimes information about a certain event (like the war in 1870-71).
    - There were not only exchanges/purchases between doctors/professors/researchers and their students/colleagues/sellers, but also between the collections within Germany.
      - ◇ One example from a cranium from a Mahehe man (who died in hospital in Dar es Salam and was macerated by the practicing doctor there and the skeletal remains sent to Germany) is in the collection in Freiburg while the post-cranial remains are in the Rudolf Virchow collection in Berlin. The remains of some of the young man's relative are also in the Berliner collection...
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- **(Dieter)** In cases like the Mahehe example, the remains were macerated and sent to Germany without consent, but until 1945 human remains were collected from the autopsy rooms (from poor, suicide victims, homeless, executed individuals, etc.) and were kept in anatomical collections without consent. This was a normal and legal practice by German anatomists. This was not only the case for remains from other countries/populations.
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- **(Andreas)** The example (of the Mahehe) demonstrates a condescending view of other cultures/"races" since an emissary from a European country would not have been macerated after death and the skeletal remains sent to Germany to be added to a skull/skeletal collection.
    - Provenance of the skeletal remains (from an autopsy because the person was poor, committed suicide, was executed, etc. or the remains were collected, traded, sold) in the German collections tells us something about the culture doing the collecting and the feelings/opinions regarding the (collection of) human remains.

- ◇ **(Pearl)** People (from the COOs) do want to know what happened, how the remains came to be in the collection. But this is also a sensitive subject for the majority of people. We have to make sure that in our research for the provenance of the remains, that we do not commit the same mistreatment of the remains that were utilized to bring them into the collection in the first place.
- ◇ **(Dieter)** Some human remains were collected from execution sites in other countries (i.e. Japan, the Philippines) and it seems difficult to utilize methods of determining the provenance without employing methods that might be similar to those used to get the remains into the collection in the first place.
  - **(Andreas)** Criminal acts did take place in the COO from the population there without the influence of a colonizer. What does that mean for this skull today? → There's no direct context of colonialization. Does this change everything? Or is this (colonialization) the determining factor?
  - **(Dieter)** The boundaries/lines between what is historical (and, potentially, criminal) and what is a result of colonialization are not clear cut. For example, the anatomical preparations (from murderers of German missionaries) from Papua New Guinea or the remains from executed individuals from the Nazi (National socialist) era. → Moreover, the 19<sup>th</sup> century professors had a private collection and curated the collection of the university and the two were not clearly defined, which makes the inventory or the tracing of the historical documents for the collection difficult.

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- ◇ **(Andreas)** Are there analogies between cultural objects in museums like those found in the main point from Dan Hicks book "The British Museums"? Is that what you see in the museums, the result of a context of violence and a trophy? Does this make sense in relation to more anatomical collections (of human remains)? Maybe similar context for the setup of the anatomical collections – the remains as trophies from disputes or as symbols for the inferiority of those individuals in comparison to the collecting (German) individuals.
  - → **(Dieter)** Fischer might have been thankful that he received the two anatomical preparations from the Papua New Guinea individuals ("trophies"), but this is not the main point of the collection. Ecker was not so much interested in where the remains come from, but rather what kind of scientific analysis he could do on them. Collections and the intentions of the collectors/curators are not uniform or consistent. → The "trophy"/superiority aspect is probably (possibly) there for a small amount of remains, but not all remains come from this context or have this connotation.
  - **(Gerhard Hotz)** As a curator for an anthropological collection in Basel, Switzerland I would estimate that a maximum of 5% of such collections have such a background/aspect. → 95% do not have such a context and this aspect should be handled carefully and not projected onto all collections/human remains.

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- ◇ **(Ursula)** These varying aspects mirror the paradigm changes of medicine, of the legislation, of the collecting culture, of society in regard to the collection of human remains. It shows violence that is present in some examples of research collections, but also a change in the practices/paradigm of the time when the remains were collected/added to the collection/acquired.
  - For example: Phrenology theories from the 1800s; race theories that a population represents a distinct group of people without overlapping at all; categorization of these populations into groups/types; paradigm change in 1970s into the genetic

approach with significant overlap of variability of people and frequencies in genetic variation within certain areas/populations.

- These past approaches seem brutal and dramatic (and false), but it was through these paradigm changes that we came to our contemporary understanding of people (population genetics, etc.) and the history/historical facts from the collections (and the accompanying theories of the time). All of this can help us understand our research now through the consideration of the background from these now outdated theories/paradigms. Interdisciplinary projects (like the one now) can look into the development of the disciplines and the past theories that were utilized for research, which were sometimes shared and in other instances completely different. → Maybe this is part of the expectations or anticipations of the current project.
- The challenge of current the project regarding physical anthropology as a discipline is looking /reassessing the methods (normally) used and utilizing them in a planned and organized way, including with consent and consultation with COOs. This is not possible for this project and leaves a rather unsecure feeling about the work to be done, but this is also exciting and interesting.

- View from Switzerland about colonial requests/contexts in collections:
  - **(Gerhard)** Switzerland is just now starting to look into such requests/ or potential contexts. Switzerland doesn't have the same (intensive) colonial background that Germany (and other European countries) has.
  - **(Dieter)** Switzerland was not a colonial power like Germany, but the physicians from Switzerland (at that time) nevertheless had (good) connections to physicians (collectors) in Germany and had exchanges/trade, etc. with each other. The country borders don't change the fact that there were private connections/friendships between those working in the two countries.
    - ◇ Networks like the Netherlands-East-India Company which were utilized by physicians and collectors from various European countries make the issue of colonial contexts in (anthropological) collections one of numerous countries (a worldwide issue) and not just those who had colonies.

- **(Dieter)** Regarding the paradigm changes over the years – there's a part of the Ecker collection consisting of contemporary human remains from willing donors who donated their remains to the anatomical collection. For those which we cannot verify the provenience, the remains end up in the anthropological collection. In some of these cases we cannot definitively verify the provenience of the remains and so they were added to the (historical?) (anthropological) collection.

- **(Gerhard)** My expectations from this workshop/this discussion were to see what kind of topics are discussed in Germany around the issue of colonial contexts in collections; what is said about the topics. Moreover, the exchange with colleagues on the issue of colonial contexts/inventory (i.e. provenience research) of collections is essential. There is a databank from Vienna, Austria: *Anthropology for Mus* (for museums) in which the collectors (of the objects) are listed with a short bibliography for the Vienna collection.
  - **(Ursula)** Exchange of information between colleagues, museums, etc. within Germany/Europe (worldwide?) is essential for this project and the issue of colonial contexts in collections (i.e. provenience research).

- Summarized input from all participants: Exchange of information the main point for all individuals – we can learn from each other and get new perspectives, collaborate on certain topics.