

Interview – discussion : Barbara Teßmann, Charité Berlin (curator of the Berlin collection of Human remains) and Pearl Lamptey, Univ. of Accra/Paris (member of the advisory board Freiburg project)

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Summary and main insights from the interview and discussion within the workshop „On the Restitution of Human Skeletal Remains from Colonial Contexts: Experiences from the Berlin (Virchow) Collection“. [Keywords are **bold**; direct quotes in *italics*]. Based on the full audio file recording.

Interview:

Pearl sees the **collaboration with colleagues** from the community of origin as an important step in the process of approaching the community members within the country of origin. The anthropologists there have the cultural, social and disciplinary (within the field of bioarchaeology/anthropology) knowledge and experience to act as a connection between the people in the local communities and the holding institute (in this case the University of Freiburg).

The **communication** with the communities of origin (made possible through the local anthropologists and colleagues) is essential for projects on provenance research.

The anthropologists “will be like the link between you, colleagues of the holding institution and the ministers of the countries of origin on the receiving side. They would better communicate with their ministers and community representatives on your behalf: ‘this is the situation at hand: the ... institution has human remains belonging to our country in their collection, and they would like to work on them (conduct provenance research) before restitution. How should they go about it?’ The anthropologists can explain to these ministers the processes involved and also make suggestions toward the provenance research and restitution because they understand what goes into it. Then, they can give their colleagues feedback on how to go about the research and get the remains to the country. So, they are the main link to the country.”
(Pearl Lamptey)

Barbara sees the utilization of invasive methods as helpful and appropriate in the assessments of human skeletal remains when there is little or no archival information for the remains. Invasive methods can be implemented as supplementary to the basic analyses. The additional analysis can offer more definitive information about the region of origin. Moreover, it is her professional opinion that **repatriations** should **only** be considered and performed **in cases where there is unambiguous information about the community of origin**.

“Gibt es auch hier keine Hinweise auf eine bestimmte Region oder auf eine bestimmte Ethnie, sollte von einer Rückgabe erst einmal abgesehen werden, denn man weiß nicht, was in 5 oder 10 oder 15 Jahren für Möglichkeiten zur Verfügung stehen, eine Region, eine Ethnie oder Solche näher einzugrenzen.”(Barbara Teßmann)

„If there are no indications for a particular region or a specific ethnicity [after all available and approved methods of analysis have been performed] then the repatriation process should be put on hold since we do not know what kind of possibilities for the determination of particular regions, ethnicities and the like will be available in the next 5, 10 or 15 years.”

Nevertheless, it is of interest in all cases for the anthropologist assessing the human remains to have contact with the respective community of origin to make decisions about the methods utilized in collaboration with descendants and/or affected communities. Furthermore, it is Barbara’s professional opinion based on experience in the repatriation process to only return human remains to government officials, although in some cases (e.g. Rwanda) this also proves difficult.

Ursula recognizes the **challenging circumstances surrounding the repatriation of individual skulls from the Alexander Ecker Collection** based on the lack of documentary information about the skulls

and their acquisition. This fact stands in stark comparison to the Berlin (Virchow) Collection which has retained original documentary information for a large amount of the remains which provides indications about the country of origin and, in some cases, the identification of the deceased person. In the Alexander Ecker Collection, the lack of archival information complicates the process of approaching potential respective communities of origin.

“The next step would be trying to approach populations of origin, as far as that would be possible. That is the reason why in this project we installed an advisory board with different colleagues from Africa, from different disciplines, and from different regions from Africa to get some advice [on] how to handle this situation. I think, we don’t expect them to give us clear recommendations – ‘do this or do that with that specific skull or skeleton’, but we rather try to get an idea [of] how to proceed.” (Ursula Wittwer)

Communication with the communities of origin is important for the project on the Alexander Ecker Collection and takes place through the **collaboration with an advisory board** via regular meetings. The advisory board is composed of representatives, community members and colleagues from different African countries and German institutions. As a result of the mixed composition of the advisory board, varying opinions, experience and disciplinary knowledge are able to be considered.

Discussion:

There are quite a few **similarities** between the Berlin (Virchow) and Freiburg (Ecker) collections; namely, **the time frame and the history of the collections**.

The **differences** between the collections have to do with **the archival documents** for the collections – Berlin has retained a large amount of documentation, while the Freiburg collection lost a significant amount of documentation about the collection as a result of World War II. Moreover, Rudolf Virchow, the first curator of the **Berlin collection**, was more **interested in the analysis of the human remains**, while Alexander Ecker, the first curator of the **Freiburg collection**, was more **interested in the inventory and categorization of the human remains** in this collection.

It might be possible to use **the Berlin collection as a reference collection** for the Freiburg collection on the basis of the more detailed archival information for the individual human remains (i.e. skulls). Through the utilization of the Berlin collection as a reference, it may be possible to attain missing information about the region of origin or the ethnicity of some of the skulls in the Freiburg collection.

During the advisory board meetings critical questions are posed and discussions of difficult topics take place. For example, questions about the information collected from previous analyses on the Ecker collection have been posed and varying answers given from members of the board: such as, enough information has been collected on the skulls and they should be returned without any further assessments. The topic of which methods (if any) should be implemented on the skulls to attain indications about the country/community of origin has been discussed as well as what kind of information should be collected from the examinations of the skulls and what kind of results can be hoped for.

The possibility of a **re-personalization process** for the deceased based on physical anthropology methods was mentioned, although:

„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.“ (Ursula Wittwer)

Transparency, contact and communication with the communities of origin is required and essential for research on the provenance of human remains and the subsequent repatriation process.

The **contextualization** of archival information/documentation, former processes of acquisition, paradigms/theories and cultural practices in the past, etc. **is important to consider when utilizing archive data** about collecting and storing human remains in Germany.

There is **no singular definition** of the consequence and respective action required in collections with a **colonial context**.

„Die Grenzen zwischen was historisch und – möglicherweise kriminell – und was als Resultat des Kolonialismus zu sehen ist, sind nicht klar definiert.“ (Dieter Speck)

“The boundaries between what is historical (and – potentially – criminal) and what is a result of colonialization are not clear cut.”

The (interdisciplinary) exchange between researcher and colleagues is essential for engagement with the topic of provenance research.