

Museums, Colonialism and the Indigenous Ancestral Dead

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I. Museums

The dead have been displayed probably for as long as we have been recognisably human. However, any attempt to consider the question of whether human remains should be exhibited within museums today ought to consider the context in which they have been displayed, and the meanings and values their exhibition have had.

Museums are cultural institutions with complex histories. They have existed for several millennia and served a variety of social and cultural aspirations that have often been subject to substantial change.

Today, museums in Europe, and those regions of the world which historically have been subject to European influence, are commonly institutions founded during the last third of the nineteenth century. Their collections and the manner of their display reflect the prevailing assumptions and concerns of the social elites of that time, among which were curiosity about human diversity, and what were assumed to be the causes of societal progress and the relative superiority of European civilisation. As one prominent Australian colonial museum director observed before a scientific congress in 1893, it was curious and puzzling that Europe's most ancient human inhabitants had eventually become 'a race which can claim a Shakespeare or a Newton', while, as he saw it, the Indigenous peoples of Australia seemed to him to have had not only 'remained practically unchanged through long ages' but also seemed 'doomed to speedy extinction' with the spread of settler society across the vast continent (Stirling 1893).

Questions such as these fed the acquisition by many leading European museums of the later nineteenth century of collections of ethnographic artefacts and anthropological collections of human remains. The collecting of items of material culture and

bodily remains generally reflected the salience of evolutionary thinking about the natural world and also the history of humanity. Those museums which assembled anthropological and ethnological collections, did so believing they were tangible evidence that natural and social phenomena were both historical processes. Just as rock and mineral specimens could be 'read' as evidence of Earth's geological history, so the material culture of Europeans and peoples in other parts of the world could be 'read' as evidence of humankind's progressive development in terms of mental sophistication and social and moral progress. Likewise human remains could be 'read' as the biological basis of human psychology and its progressive sophistication. The human brain was regarded as analogous to the geological structure of the Earth, in that both possessed a primitive core over which 'strata' of greater structural complexity had been laid down over tens of thousands of years by physical, chemical, and biological processes. As Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), a leading champion of Darwinian evolutionary theory, observed 'The doctrine of evolution is the necessary result of the logical principles of [geological] uniformitarianism to the phenomenon of biology.' (Huxley 1899: 232)

The bodily remains and material culture of peoples living beyond Europe were displayed in ways that stimulated the consciousness of museum visitors' that they were the beneficiaries of a history resulting in their inheriting an advanced capacity for self-reflective reasoning and moral judgement. Notably in the case of the peoples indigenous to Australia, present-day Namibia and the sub-Polar regions of North and South America, their bodily remains were thought to confirm that - unlike Europeans - their consciousness of self was, as the historian of museums Tony Bennett has observed, '...lacking in historical depth and complexity, and thereby, not affording the inner space in which a progressive dynamic might emerge from the work of the self on self' (Bennett 2004: 96). Their bones were displayed as evidence that they were peoples in a state of primitivity who were unlikely to experience any substantial degree of intellectual progress before what was widely believed to be the inevitability of their extinction.

Among the clearest illustrations of the work of museums in fostering this vision of the history of humankind is the University of Oxford's Museum. In the 1860s the museum began to amass a substantial anthropological collection of skulls and post-cra-

nial remains of peoples from all over the world. The driving force behind the growth of this collection was George Rolleston (1829-1881), Oxford's Professor of Anatomy at that time. His collecting was typical of curators and other scientists associated with museums who sought to build anthropology collections throughout Europe, the Americas and many other parts of the world in the half-century or so after 1860. Rolleston obtained remains through a network of collectors. In his case the network included students whom he had taught anatomy and who had pursued careers as navy or army medical officers in Britain's spheres of colonial interest, or had come to practise medicine in British colonies or other parts of the world.

As to how these bones were displayed, we find that they were arranged so as to support the key parts of the 'long argument' of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) for the emergence of new species by evolution. Indeed, these bones were seen as substantially addressing a major weakness of Darwinian theory. The Darwinian account of human natural history and sociocultural evolution was intellectually vulnerable to the criticism that the evidence of gradation in primates strongly indicated that, if humanity had evolved from a lower pithecoïd form, then there should be evidence of a transitional being - 'a missing link' - in the fossil record. (Bowler, 1984; Stocking, 1987: 147-148) Darwinians were forced to concede that none had so far been found. They also faced criticism for positing humanity's essential sociocultural uniformity on the basis of the evolutionary origin of human psychology. Darwinians addressed this weakness by arguing that the bones of peoples inhabiting different parts of the world for many thousands of years had supposedly come to display unique morphological characters. They were seen as distinctive racial types. The form of their bones testified to their ancestry and their point of development on the time-scale of the natural history of humanity. Moreover, in the case of Australian and other Indigenous peoples, their supposed possession of defining morphological characters - in the shape of the skull, and the form of the pelvis, etc. - was represented as proof that they were peoples who were in an early phase of human sociocultural evolution, substantially similar to that of palaeolithic Europeans. As historian of anthropology Stocking has brusquely observed, it was expedient for 'Darwinians to throw living savage races into the fossil gap.' (Stocking, 1987: 148)

Of course there were numerous museum curators who strove to build anthropologi-

cal collections who were among those scientists who rejected Darwinian evolutionary theory. Notably in France and also in German speaking scientific circles, the work of museums reflected the influence of native traditions of biological thought. Even so, within these museums human diversity was explained in terms of human populations possessing unchanging, biologically ingrained bodily and mental differences. And like those who agreed with Darwin, humankind was seen as comprising distinctive racial types, whose supposed typicalities of skull form were interpreted as testifying to psychological differences.

II. Colonialism

One of the most significant events in the history of European colonialism was the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. The conference marked the intensification of the colonial ambitions of Europe's old and newly unified nation states. The conference set in motion events which were to destroyed African polities, or rendered them powerless to curb rapacious economic exploitation by European interests. It also greatly enhanced the opportunities for museums to collect ethnographic artefacts and enlarge collections of human remains. Germany, for example, conquered the regions that are now Tanzania (minus Zanzibar) and incorporated them into German East Africa. By the eve of the First World War, the Übersee-Museum in Bremen had acquired 2,000 skulls of East African people.

Many of these skulls were acquired by the plundering of traditional burial places. But the Übersee-Museum and other German museums also acquired the skulls and and post-cranial material of people killed in violent conflicts, such as the Maji Maji War of resistance against German colonialism in Southern Tanzania (1905–1907), and the contemporaneous genocidal war against the Herero- and Nama-speaking peoples in what was then German South-West Africa. The brutal suppression of Herero and Nama resistance by German colonial troops saw those who survived the conflict and their families herded into concentration camps, where conditions have been described by one historian as 'murder through deliberate neglect' (Zimmerer 2008: 56). The bodies of those who died in the camps were dissected by German military doctors and

then shipped to the Berlin Anatomical Institute. In the aftermath of the war, the Herero and Nama were dispossessed of their land and cattle. Many were subjected to forced labour for settler society with many people confined to reservations. It was not until present-day Namibia gained independence, in 1990, that the descendants of these peoples gained human and citizen rights.

By the turn of the twentieth century, similar substantial anthropological collections of human remains existed in museums in other European states. In the case of Britain and France, the composition of anthropological collections reflected past and ongoing African colonial ambitions, as well as their imperial ventures in North America, the Indian subcontinent, Australasia and the Pacific. We find that curators and scientists in these nations were, with few exceptions, aware of and had no moral reservations about acquiring remains by desecrating Indigenous burial places (Turnbull 2017: esp. 195–257).

There are also a wealth of documented instances of curators of comparative human anatomy and anthropological collections knowingly obtaining skulls and other bodily remains of people killed on the frontiers of colonial settlement (Turnbull 2017: 279–298). London's Museum of Natural History, for example, inherited the collection of bodily remains acquired by the museum of the British army's medical department during the course of the nineteenth century. This collection comprised specimens from various spheres of British military activity, including items acquired by Andrew Smith (1797–1872), who arrived at Cape Town in 1820 as an assistant surgeon with the 72nd Highlanders. He stayed in Southern Africa for sixteen years. During this time, Smith took a keen ethnographic interest in the Xhosa and Khoisan peoples. When he returned to Britain he donated Khoisan crania and other skeletal material to the army's museum. Smith's donations included a skull of a Khoisan man said to have been killed during a commando action (1857: 203). Smith also presented the museum with the 'stuffed' body of a 'hottentot' woman and two dried heads he had himself prepared. As the South African anatomist Alan Morris has observed of these latter items, 'it is difficult to imagine how these how the specimens could have been collected except in a situation of military action or execution of criminals' (Morris 1987: 14).

Other sources not only attest to the acquisition of remains in violent circumstances,

but disturbingly illustrate how science benefitted from frontier pacification in European settler colonies, as well as conflicts in other spheres of European and American colonial interest. In 1867, the newly established United States Army Medical Museum issued a request to Army medical personnel situated in 'Indian country' to obtain the skulls of deceased Native Americans. By 1900, anthropological collecting ceased and the many crania obtained mostly by plundering Native American burial places were transferred to the Smithsonian Museum between 1900-1904. However, among the remains transferred were the skulls of Filipinos who died resisting the United States' occupation of the Philippines in 1899-1902. In 1878, clans of the Kanak peoples of New Caledonia rose up against French colonial rule. The uprising was suppressed after 200 Europeans and over 1,000 Kanak were killed. Skulls of Kanak men killed were sent to Paris's Museum of Natural History. The head of Atai, a leader of the uprising, was cut off after he died in a clash with French military forces and preserved in alcohol. It came to be displayed in Paris's Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, before being transferred in the mid-1930s to the Musée de l'Homme, and eventually repatriated in 2014.

These are, admittedly, extreme examples. Generally, the collecting of remains involved the plundering of traditional burial places. Even so, collecting did frequently occur at some remove from colonial frontier violence. And how collectors typically regarded the fact that they were potential beneficiaries of violence is well illustrated by the reminiscences of the German embryologist Richard Semon (1859–1918). While undertaking zoological fieldwork in northern Australia in 1892, Semon learnt that he might be able to secure for Munich's Royal Museum of Ethnology skeletal remains of people shot by frontier police. Semon also claimed that he was told that one local man would have been willing to kill local Indigenous people to supply him with skulls had he not recently been shot by a young Indigenous man whom he threatened to murder (Semon 1899: 266). Understandably, he was shocked to hear that there were settlers who would have committed murder to supply him with skulls. He was also appalled to learn of the police killing and that the bones of those killed 'had for a long time been left to bleach in the open bush.' Even so, he later wrote:

My humanity did not go so far as to make a special effort to give them a burial, but I at least wanted to win the remains of these poor victims for

science. For the study of a larger quantity of Australian skulls would be anthropologically most interesting. I therefore got in touch with various people to find out where the site was, but it had been forgotten or the bones had been scattered and covered up by some interference. In short, we were unable to find anything.' (Semon 1899: 266)

III. Ancestral Remains

The campaigning by Indigenous peoples to have the remains of their ancestors' remains returned to their care for burial is often discussed as if it were a relatively recent phenomenon. Critics of repatriation have encouraged this perception of repatriation as a relatively recently phenomenon, some going as far as to suggest that the presence of remains in museums and other scientific collections was not an issue prior to the 1970s, and that campaigns for their reburial has been orchestrated by Indigenous political activists with little or no connection to the culture of their ancestors.

Several observations are worth making by way of response here. Firstly, it was only in the 1970s that Indigenous peoples in former settler colonies secured the political power and resources to begin campaigning for the return of their ancestors's remains. One can find many examples of Indigenous communities seeking the return of the dead long before the 1970s. As early the 1830s that efforts were made by one chief of the north island of New Zealand to enlist the support of the governor of New South Wales to gain the return of Toi moko, ritually prepared heads, stolen by British traders. In Australia, we find that as far back as the 1890s one Indigenous community sought to have a magistrate enforce their right in common law - as British subjects - to have the remains of one of their ancestors returned by Sydney's Australian Museum, after staff of the museum had obtained his skeleton by plundering his burial place.

Secondly, and importantly, when Indigenous communities were in a position to defend their dead from desecration by would-be collectors they invariably did so. For Native Americans, removing human remains from burial places was among the worst offences imaginable. John Kirk Townsend, an American ornithologist, for example,

recalled trying to get skulls from a Chinook burial place in the Oregon territory in the 1830s. However, he was prevented by his being discovered by Chinook men.

Townsend fully understood how great an outrage he was committing. He knew it was very likely he would be shot before he could bargain for his life. (Lindquist 2014)

Between 1877-1889, the Austrian naturalist Andreas Reischek (1845-1902) collecting Māori material culture and human remains, mainly in the North Island of New Zealand. His diary reveals that he was warned by white settlers and Māori not to trespass on their wāhi tapu (sacred places), and certainly not take away any things he found there. But Reischek nonetheless took remains from burial places. When Māori tribal elders learnt that he had intruded on burial places they demanded he leave. But this did not stop him from removing two mummified bodies from a burial cave. As he wrote in his journal,

The undertaking was a dangerous one, for discovery might have cost me my life. In the night I had the mummies removed from the spot and then well hidden; during the next night they were carried still farther away, and so on until they had been brought safely over the boundaries of Māoriland. But even then I kept them cautiously hidden from sight right up to the time of my departure from New Zealand. (Reischek 1952: 215)

A third point concerns the fact that Indigenous campaigning for the return of the ancestral dead has been led over the past forty years by experienced political activists. Politics occur in every aspect of human existence. Any social relationship which involves power differentials is necessarily political. What is more, in post settler societies, repatriation arises out of the fact that the connectivity that Indigenous peoples have to their ancestral land continues to be the source of meaning from which they derive their sense of themselves and their relations to all other living beings. The removal of the dead from their ancestral land places where custom dictated is seen as having ruptured that relationship, condemning the spirits of those who remains to torment by taking them from the spiritual care of the country which gave them life. This in turn weakens the ability of the land to fulfil its obligation to care for the living. As ethnographer Stephen Muecke has observed, ‘ [t]he safe return of [an ancestor’s] spirit is imperative to the wellbeing of the place so that it may continue as an enduring

life source.’ (Muecke 2004:16)

What, then, are the obligations of museums? Obviously first and foremost is the ethical necessity of respecting the wishes of Indigenous people to rebury their ancestral dead. But as can be seen in in post settler societies such as Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia, museums since the 1980s have adopted what is commonly described as postcolonial museology. This has involved addressing the issue that many items in collections were collecting in circumstances of colonial duress or injustice, and transforming the museum into a site wherein visitors are presented with items contextualised from the cultural perspectives of the communities in which objects originated. As anthropologist Emma Kowal have observed, the didactic goal of post-colonial museology has been to ‘cultivate progressive and reflexive non-indigenous identities.’ (Neale and Kowal 2020: 408) Even so, as Kowal points out, museums in post settler societies are moving to adopt a more decolonial outlook, in which institutional power over Indigenous objects is ceded to Indigenous curators, community reference groups and following Indigenous protocols in respect of the curation and exhibition of objects. Implicit in this ‘decolonial turn’ is recognition of the self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

Decolonising the museum is not without its difficulties, which unfortunately there is no time to discuss here. It seems best to conclude by noting that the transformation of museums from how they engaged in the later nineteenth century to the postcolonial and increasingly decolonial institutions of today has been achieved by Indigenous peoples drawing attention to their past complicity in colonialism. As to what relevance this history has in respect of the exhibition of Egyptian remains by museums, I must confess to having no firm views. But it does seem to me that the history of their acquisition, which largely occurred in the context of colonial ambitions, should be an integral dimension of their display, if museums choose to display them. It also seems to me that the experiences in moving museums in post-settler societies raises the question of whether cultivating public interest in and knowledge of ancient Egyptian religion and funerary culture requires the display of the remains of the dead. Certainly the presentation of Indigenous cultures within museums has not been diminished by the repatriation of the dead. Rather it has been the basis for new relations grounded in mutual trust arising from shared respect for Indigenous dead. And as my friend and

co-researcher, Lyndon Ormond-Parker recently observed, ‘the way that we treat our dead is a reflection of the society we live in.’ (Barker 2019)

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