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## Lost in Translation

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*Indigenous human remains in museum collections are often treated as if they are unique objects in their own right; their significance only beginning when they enter the precincts of the collecting institution. As Indigenous people are translated into museum objects the humanistic attributes of the remains, such as the history of the lives and cultures of the individuals, and the processes behind the collection and subsequent management of the remains, are ignored. The stories are lost. Because of this limited view many institutions are loath to consider repatriation as anything but a destructive practice. This paper argues that a fuller history of the remains, the history before they entered the institution, encompassing the individual's cultural and social context, and the process of acquisition and management, must be understood. Such research re-translates the museum object into an individual. Often one outcome of such enquiry will be an appreciation that repatriation is warranted and does prove a constructive process, providing a wide reaching and long-lasting contribution to both knowledge and to society.*

### Introduction

The remains of Indigenous people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are amongst the many items held in museums across the world. Most commonly, the Indigenous remains in such collections are treated as representations of the 'other' as a contemporary. That is, they comprise the remains of individuals who were not that far removed in time from the collector. The stories of how these remains arrived in museums and the various events and processes that have characterised those 'accessions', the cultural, social, and historical contexts, have usually been quickly obscured within a relatively short time. At the same time the 'museum property value' of the now de-contextualised remains, has usually increased.

This essay looks at some of the issues surrounding the changes in the perception of those remains, as they become the property of 'the museum'. Their movement from the status of living person, with all the rights and responsibilities that their culture endowed, to objects on the shelves of collecting institutions. A process of translation.

The writing of this essay has been provoked by attendance at a recent international symposium held by the Musee du quai Branly in Paris in February 2008 [1]. This symposium brought together museum and heritage professionals from across the world to discuss the conservation and display of human remains in museums [2]. Coming from Australia, where issues of research, exhibition, and repatriation of Indigenous human remains have been long debated and sympathetically resolved, many of the attitudes expressed at this conference reflected, to be polite, an unfamiliarity with developments across the world – an unfamiliarity bordering on deliberate avoidance of the issues and previous debates. None of the arguments were new; they were merely condensed, repeated, and reinforced during the two days of the symposium. I hope that this paper will assist in identifying and addressing some of the more commonly raised issues, positions and questions that accompany questions of the management and repatriation of Indigenous human remains.

The paper is unapologetically speculative and deliberately subjective. I hope to contribute to a discussion rather than broadcast and impose a disciplinary dogma. The care and management of human remains, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is an ongoing debate in collecting institutions, both in Australia and overseas (e.g. Hicks 2000; Lohman & Goodnow 2006). Previous debates have been characterised, and suffocated, by a tendency for polarisation and a retreat to the 'political agendas masked as disciplinary/community philosophy' dogmas. For example, scientists argue 'to return remains is unscientific' – then cross their arms and legs and lean to the right. Communities argue 'ancestors' spirits must be at rest' – then cross their arms and legs and lean to the left. Between these two irreconcilable positions, there are broader issues of history, ethics, philosophy, culture and methodology that are being neglected in the debate. Some of these issues are raised here.

## **Background**

This paper emerges from my experiences in archaeology, anthropology, history, and repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remains and secret/sacred objects, over many years and in a number of heritage agencies. I have worked closely with Aboriginal people in the documentation and protection of their social and cultural heritage, a task that always revolves around the core principle of religious beliefs being manifest in landscape, objects and people. I have sympathy for the ethical treatment of religious beliefs. Educated in history, archaeology, and anthropology, I have been trained in, and have applied in research (e.g. Pickering 1974, 1985, 1997) scientific

theory and method in the interpretation of phenomena addressed in the humanities. Despite occasionally distasteful and aberrant philosophies and actions, the histories and cultures of religions have made significant contributions to societies through time and across the world. The significance of religion cannot be ignored. Our lives would be colourless and dry without imaginings – of both truths and fictions (to imagine is not necessarily to create a fiction; one can imagine something that is real).

As a museum anthropologist, I am a student of histories, cultures and religions, in particular, those of Indigenous Australians. It does concern me when professionals within the museum industry adhere to philosophies regarding human remains that are tantamount to dogma. Both science and the humanities must be flexible enough to accommodate the intellectual parameters and directions of each other. However, such flexibility is not always a characteristic of many of the professionals in overseas collecting institutions who manage human remains.

It is intriguing how the treatment of human remains can sometimes act as a microcosm of museum issues, encapsulating such a wide range of considerations in what is, to be honest, a relatively minor activity on the world stage. Coming into a mainstream museum career relatively late in life I have been struck by the complex, but often ignored, connections between the ‘bones-in-a-box-in-a-corner-of-a-shelf-in-a-room-in-a-warehouse’ and the real lives and histories of Indigenous people, both dead and living. I am also intrigued by how much the debate over what should happen to those bones excites such passion and disparity of opinion amongst various commentators.

There is no doubt that those countries, institutions and individuals committed to repatriation are typically those that have local Indigenous communities with whom they engage on a day-to-day level. Whereas those with no recognised, or spatially remote, indigenous communities are more likely to be opposed to repatriation. The level of participation, both in repatriation debates and activity, effectively reflects the level of engagement and understanding of cultural and political complexities of the indigenous groups involved.

### **Before Repatriation**

A defining characteristic of many of the collections of Indigenous remains in museums is that they rarely contain remains of great antiquity. In fact, most remains are rarely more than a few hundred years old and are usually a product of selective acquisition based on attributes of pathology and good condition. This distinguishes them from other remains, such as ancient mummies, fossil hominids, and European remains largely in excess of 2000 years old, though admittedly still Indigenous.

How did the remains come to be in museums in the first place? There are many different stories ranging from legitimate, to illegitimate, to downright obscene. Let us look at the most common scenarios in Australia; all are derived from actual cases [3].

*The paths to death*

*Scenario 1.* An elderly Aboriginal person lying in the shade of a tree. They die in the company of their mourning family. The individual is buried with due ceremony and respect. Typically, the ceremony facilitates the separation of flesh from spirit, and sends the soul on its way and acknowledges the unique identity of the deceased. After years, the name of the person, indeed sometimes the site of the grave, fades from memory. People move on. Years later a medical practitioner, seeking an example of a skull for his own collection and perhaps a few more for his friends and old university department, digs up the grave. He has previously dug up several more but none had remains in the good state of preservation that he required (e.g. Robertson 2007). The remains from these earlier graves are left disturbed on the surface or given a cursory reburial.

He finds a complete skull, packs it in his bag and returns home. He is not responsible for the death of the individual. The immediate family of the individual has not suffered any distress, long having passed on themselves. However, the descendants of the descendants of the immediate family are well aware of this practice but are powerless, by the foreign laws of the day, to stop it. Their anger and sadness is suppressed and ignored. The lack of an audible outcry is seen as consent, or a lack of concern, by the perpetrators. The practice continues until thousands of graves are robbed and hundreds of skulls removed.

The skull sits on his shelf until passed on to the Anatomy department of a university. Eventually it is transferred from the university to a museum. In the museum, it is placed in a tray with the label 'Australian Aborigine', and possibly a location, written on the bone.

*Scenario 2.* On the Frontiers of early white settlement sporadic conflicts occur. The reasons are varied and include defence of lands, defence of family, retribution, or just plain local entertainment (see Elder 1998). Many Aboriginal people are killed. A number of these are known individuals who have been declared outlaws and who are deliberately hunted. In these early days before cameras, however, proof of the death of an individual must be obtained. The individual must be identified. And so the police and the military sometimes travel with baskets to hold the heads of the criminals. The heads are cut off the body and taken back to the emerging city, where the individual is identified, justice is declared done, and the head handed over to an interested surgeon who strips and boils off the flesh. Later the skull is gifted to a colleague, or directly to an institution back in England. The

skull arrives on a shelf in the museum. A label describes it as 'Aborigine' and may even include the name of the individual.

*Scenario 3.* News reaches the ears of the police of the killing of one Aboriginal by another. The victim is unnamed and unknown, the body unrecovered, the killing unsubstantiated, but the alleged perpetrator is known. He is arrested and transported to the nearest capital city (Tolcher 2003; Fforde 2004 50-51). Unable to understand what he is being charged with due to being unfamiliar with English or the language of the prosecution, he is determined to be insane and is committed to the asylum. A few years later, after prolonged social and cultural deprivation, he dies. His body is immediately dissected and the skeleton sent overseas to a University anatomy department. He receives no ceremony, from either family or government.

*Scenario 4.* An Aboriginal person, long resident in a city and no stranger to the new world of the white residents, dies in hospital. Rather than have his remains returned to his family he is immediately dissected, his skeleton removed and sent to an anatomy department. His family are provided with a closed coffin to bury – weighted down with remaining soft tissue. It is only a few years later that they find about the interference with the remains (Foster 1998).

The remains stay on the shelves of the collecting institutions. They receive little or no attention as objects of study, for up to 180 years after their initial collection. They do receive attention *in absentia* as the focus of historical research addressing the histories of their collection and/or soliciting their return (Fforde Op. cit.; Turnbull Op. cit). Eventually a request is received for their return. The first response is always 'No, they're important for scientific research'.

These are syntheses of real cases. They are not unique. Such histories commence with socially and culturally active individuals. People with names and families. Then, through a variety of avenues leading to death, the remains of these individuals have arrived in a collecting institution. It is notable that the bulk of remains were collected by anatomists seeking pathological specimens or 'racial' types. The first home of remains was typically, anatomical departments. The movement of remains to museums came later, and then the transfer was to Natural History museums, driven by the conception of Indigenous peoples as part of the natural fauna and flora of a foreign land. It is only relatively recently that remains have become of interest in archaeology and anthropology.

Some of the older collections show evidence of past examination practices. Remains bear pencil and/or ink writing – sometimes this is important documentation – detailing provenance. Some have scratched grids – useful when sketching them. Some bones have been cut to expose sinuses, cavities, brain cases, or interesting pathology. Some have screws, nuts, bolts, wires, and armatures to articulate them. Some have residual mercury in the sinuses – a

means of measuring sinus capacity. Some have grime from oil-based lamps, soot, even grease and other organic residues oozing from penetrations.

For many years, and in many museums, remains were treated in the same way as were any other objects. Although with the unfortunate distinction that, unlike most objects, and especially during their lives in anatomical or natural history departments, a number of remains were disposed of after outliving their usefulness. Remains were handled carefully, though more for fear of damage than from a philosophy of respect. Occasionally they were (and still are) incidentally arrayed in glass fronted shelves as backdrops to the curatorial workspace.

It is still possible to witness occasions where remains sit on desks while researchers eat their lunches at the same desk. I have known people to refuse to touch a nearby dead mouse while simultaneously holding a skull in their hands. The remains were different because they were clean of the 'soft tissue'. Indeed, the translation of remains is characterised by the removal of soft tissue. The presence or absence of flesh, perhaps reflecting the presence or absence of identity, is a recurring defining criteria in whether remains are human or object.

### **The Indigenous body as museum object**

Death itself is a translation, from living to non-living, from thinking to non-thinking, from the 'named individual' to the 'remains of the named individual'. It is convention to talk about 'the body' of a deceased person, not of 'the person.' This translation, however, is defined by the presence or absence of biological activity. We/they die.

What happens to remains after death is a different sort of translation – from subject to object. Nowhere is this translation more marked, more defined, than with the incorporation of Indigenous human remains into the repositories of collecting institutions. Indeed, modern anatomy departments, where dissection is a day to day activity, assign a greater dignity to the remains of the dead [4], as once living individuals with descendants, than do most museum-style collecting institutions, where the level of respect is commensurate with the status of remains as significant objects.

When remains enter a museum they become 'sacred' objects. Not truly sacred in the sense of spiritual empowerment by a religious being, but rather 'sacred' in the significance assigned to them by the institution and 'sacred' to the wider museum audience. They become inviolable. Typically, they are handled with reverence and gloves, as are all museum objects. They are described, classified and registered. While museums are usually able to deaccession objects, the opposition to such acts is often considerable, although the arguments for the opposition are often weak. The fact that the object/remains are in a museum at all is in itself often considered adequate argument for

why they should continue to be held by the museum. The identity of the remains as an individual is less important than the history of the remains as a museum object.

What makes the translation from person to object so interesting is not so much the initial translation from the secular world to the 'sacred' precinct of the institution, which often occurred decades ago and in a different intellectual environment, but the continuing maintenance of the translation by museum tradition. Many museums, and some individuals, seem to be totally out of step with wider cultural values and norms. Indeed, they are often out of step with industry philosophy and practice and, in some examples, out of step with professionals within their own disciplines but outside of the museum industry. In some museum collections, values and principles of management are assigned to Indigenous human remains that are inferior to those assigned in the wider community, particularly in the area of respect. Although it should be acknowledged that, occasionally, institutional policy and the personal sentiment and opinion of institutional professionals can also be out of step, with the result that the management of remains appears to be driven by a personal opinion of a collection manager or researcher, rather than by a formal, institutional or industry, policy or philosophy.

### **Museum Repatriation of Indigenous Human Remains**

The status of Indigenous human remains in museum collections has been thrown into relief in recent years by the debates that accompany repatriation. There is considerable division in world museums over the appropriateness of repatriation. In Australia the situation is good, having come a long way over the past twenty years and Australia is recognised as a world leader in philosophy, policy and practice. Australian museums have good policies and protocols regarding the care, management, display and repatriation of Australian Indigenous human remains characterised by their consideration of Indigenous cultural values. The return of remains is now a key principle of the Australian museums industry (Museums Australia 2004). Returns are typically unconditional. Repatriation of Indigenous remains is now part of 'business as usual' for many Australian museums. It is an activity that is rewarding for both the institutions involved and for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receiving ancestral remains (Pickering 2007). Federal, State, and Territory governments and departments have also given their support to repatriation (DFHCSIA n.d.; DEWHA n.d).

In Australia, repatriation of remains is driven by both industry and personal commitments rather than by legislation. Indeed, at the time of writing there is no legislation in Australia that addresses 'repatriation' of Indigenous remains although there are some cases in which guidelines for the management of discovered remains can be used to facilitate a repatriation like event (e.g. ATSIHPA 1985; AARPA (Vic) 1972; Fforde 2004: 105-118). In making a commitment

to the repatriation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remains most Australian museums will also admit to having a philosophy, if not always a policy, extending to a commitment to the return of remains of Indigenous peoples from overseas Indigenous groups.

In contrast, in the USA repatriation to Native Americans is driven by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a Federal law passed in 1990 (National Parks Service n.d.). This law compels certain American collecting institutions to return remains and grave goods. Interestingly, the legislation is not always supported by institutional or individual philosophy. A number of efforts have been made to recover Australian Indigenous remains from US institutions without success, because US law does not compel it, and the holding museum does not wish to return the remains.

Britain has made admirable advances in addressing the issue of repatriation since 2000. Within a very short time the UK museums industry went from hostile, to understanding, to sympathetic, to now having many UK institutions, though not all, returning remains to Australia. While many institutions in the UK are still reticent, with some hostile, to the notion of repatriation, the UK government and the museums industry in general must be congratulated for the investment they have made in considering the pros and cons of the repatriation issue and developing mechanisms to lubricate, if not compel, the wheels of communication, discussion, and occasional returns. The success of the UK is dependent on the valuable work of the UK Working Group on Human Remains. This group solicited opinions from a variety of stakeholders. In its report it successfully compiled an internationally useful resource in which the key issues of repatriation are discussed at length UK Working Group on Human remains (2003). As noted earlier, there is a tendency for disputants to polarise; the UK experience has managed to capture many of the middle ground discussions and issues so often missing from popular media oriented statements. In three years the UK achieved what it had taken Australia twenty years to do, though admittedly they were greatly informed by the Australian experience and evidence. Today some UK museums are returning remains, some are not, but many obstacles have been removed.

Within Europe, an increasing number of governments and museums are considering repatriation of remains favourably, with returns to Australia from Sweden, and more expected from several other European countries. All of which makes the French position, as dominantly argued at the Musee du quai Branly symposium (Musee du quai Branly 2008), all the more interesting. The title of the conference itself *'From anatomical collections to objects of worship'* was to prove highly partisan, illustrating the direction the institution was advocating, the prevailing view of many of the French museum representatives present, and which they strongly argued, that

repatriation was a surrender of objective science to subjective and foreign religious beliefs. Efforts were made to belittle claims to remains based on Indigenous religious beliefs. The conference was characterised by a national unfamiliarity with the philosophies, policies, protocols, debates, research and experiences of countries such as Australia, the USA, New Zealand, and the UK. Indeed the UK engagement with repatriation was dismissed as 'guilt for its colonial past'. Surprisingly, at least for an Australian thinker, it was the political and legal representatives of the French system [5], rather than the anthropologists and social scientists, which had the most considered arguments and the most open minds on the issues – informed by experience rather than by dogma.

So, what were the predominant arguments against repatriation? There are many. Some of the more popular are briefly discussed here.

*Argument: 'The return of remains is a concession to the religious beliefs of other groups'*

The argument here is that science must remain objective. In the Quai Branly debates, for example, it was a frequent assertion that the French socio-political system relies on separation of church and state; between secular and sacred, and by default, between objective and subjective. Frequent reference was made to the ideals of the enlightenment.

It must be acknowledged that the rhetoric of repatriation of remains does often rely heavily on the issue of a residual spiritual element of the remains, emphasising the religious over ethical and legal. 'Putting the spirits to rest' is a major motivator for many Aboriginal people, particularly in cases where the individuals were never subject to culturally appropriate mortuary ceremonies, such as with victims of massacres, institutionalisation, and all forms of removal. However, this is a more complex issue than would first appear.

For those Aboriginal societies where so-called traditional mortuary beliefs (e.g. Maddock 1974; Morphy 1984) and funeral ceremonies, as practised before extensive influence by western culture, have been able to be sustained, there is often a common theme that the ceremonies facilitate the separation of body and spirit. The body is a vessel for the spirit and, subject to appropriate ceremonies, the spirits shall depart the body completely. In due course, either as part of the ceremonial process or as part of the decomposition of the flesh, only the bones remain. The separation of flesh from bone reflects the separation of body and spirit. So, in principle, the bones are no longer spiritually empowered. Belief in this principle is reflected in the final management of remains. In my own field experiences I have observed remains being picked up from the ground, where they had been displaced by animals, and placed carefully back in a rock shelter without a break in the unrelated conversation. Responses to 'What's in there' were along the lines of 'dead man's bones'. Indeed, some

collections of Indigenous remains from Northern Australia, held by Australian museums, derive from gifts or purchases given with free and informed consent and not in violation of tradition.

Interestingly, this strongly reflects the views of many Christian Churches. Take for example the deliberations of English Heritage and The Church of England (2005) who stated:

In summary, it is central to Christian theology that, after death, the human body ceases to have any significance for the ongoing resurrected spiritual life of the individual. However, following death, the physical remains should be treated with respect and reverence, even though ultimately it is the fate of the soul, rather than of the physical remains, which matters.

In both traditions Aboriginal and Christian, there is a fundamental principle of respect. Remains are treated with a care that is not dependant upon recognition of a religious or spiritual component to the remains. This principle of respect applies not only to the remains of the dead but also to the descendants of the dead, both biological and cultural.

To be fair, attitudes toward the care and management of human remains in collecting institutions worldwide have changed over the years. The majority of major institutions, even those institutions opposed to repatriation, indeed those deliberately avoiding any engagement at all with the issue, will still demand a degree of professionalism from researchers and curators that includes a principal of respect. Respect in such cases is typically defined as respect for the human dignity they had, (or were, in theory, entitled to), when alive (see Walker 2008). This principle applies regardless of religious affiliation.

*Argument: 'The ethics and legality of collection should not be an issue when considering the future of museum collections of remains'*

The presumption that repatriation is a surrender to religious beliefs strategically ignores associated issues of the ethics and legality of initial collection. Even if these aspects are not argued by claimants they still need to be considered by collecting institutions.

It is often claimed that actions of the past must not be evaluated by the ethics or laws of the present. All laws, and all ethics, differ and change, both over time and between cultures. A decision made according to the ethics and philosophies of today may be considered inappropriate in years to come. This is true enough, however, it is also a convenient argument for avoiding the professional obligation to be introspective and to consider and reconsider what we do as museum professionals. Again, it must be asked whether this attitude reflects the position of the institution or of particular individuals within the institution. Indeed such a philosophy smothers discussion, as the world must wait for final revelation of the proper ethical position.

The history of collection must be a consideration in the management of remains. Indeed for all collection objects. By far the majority of Indigenous objects *were* acquired with free and informed consent or by legal means, such as gifts, purchases, even found items. Some, however, and Indigenous human remains in particular, were rarely acquired without creating some cultural distress. Fforde (2004:95) concisely notes:

The necessity of according the dead appropriate treatment is fundamental to requests for the return of human remains, but other ethical considerations also play a significant role. Collections of Aboriginal human remains symbolise the past subjugation of Aboriginal people, not least because of the manner in which much of their contents was obtained.

While western secular and sacred sensitivities saw the desecration of graves within their own cultural sphere as abhorrent, the disturbance of the graves of 'others', even when contemporaries in time, was nonetheless acceptable, if illegal. Although unwilling subjects of the colonial Crown, and not considered true 'citizens', Australian Aboriginal people were nonetheless still subjects of the Crown and thus subject to its laws and, theoretically, to its protection, which included regulations to prevent the unauthorised interference with graves [6].

It is, therefore, interesting to see the attitudes of some European museum professionals today. Many are from European states that have suffered occupation and slaughter of sections of their populace, and abuse of their bodies and remains in manners that included the use of victims for unethical so-called research, in the not so distant past. To be so unsympathetic to the similar, but older, experiences of the Indigenous 'others' has to be of concern to modern scholars. Indeed in some instances the abuses suffered by Europe and the similar abuses suffered by Indigenous peoples elsewhere were separated by less than fifty years.

However, there are notable exceptions and precedents. The UK moved on repatriation stimulated by outcries over the treatment of the remains of stillborn infants in British Hospitals. It was determined that the values the nation applied to the remains of its own dead could not be applied inequitably, and that the remains of the 'others' must be accorded the same values. As a result of debate and changes in legislation a number of British institutions have returned remains because they have determined that it is the right thing to do, not because they have been forced to.

In 2004 and 2007 the Swedish Museum of Ethnography and National Museum for World Culture returned the remains of a number of individuals back to Australia (Museum of Ethnography 2007). This return was initiated by Swedish authorities and was not a response to a request for return – a significant milestone. An acknowledged key motivation behind the returns was that it was clear the remains were

acquired unethically, plundered from graves and tree platforms and then secretly and illicitly removed from Australia. An outcome of this event has been the development of close relationships between Swedish professionals and the communities involved (Pickering 2007).

*Argument: 'New techniques in the future will reveal new information'*

The newest argument against return is that new scientific techniques will emerge that we do not yet know about. Any arguments that the remains are biased in their collection, contaminated by substances that compromise their dating potential, and so on, are countered by the argument that the emerging developments in such techniques as DNA analysis and isotope analysis bypass such concerns.

There can be no argument that DNA is a powerful scientific tool. However, the history of human biology is not the only knowledge we require to reveal the past. DNA tells us what we are but it does not tell us who we are. Humans and human remains are, first and foremost, products of culture. While the return of remains will lose some minor resource of interest to human biological studies it will nonetheless produce greater knowledge of cultural, social and historical phenomena. The return is greater than the cost.

*Argument: 'The return of remains is the destruction of knowledge'*

This is the big one. Such statements are common. The opinion is that the return of remains leads to their destruction, through reburial or cremation, and with the destruction goes the loss of the information they can, or will provide.

This is a particularly powerful allegation, and illustrates the power of the translation from human to object within a museum environment. The 'object', in this case the remains, is re-imbued with 100% integrity by the institution. All reference to research potential is to the 'object' alone; as it stands on the table before the researcher. What 'it' was is irrelevant, what 'it' is all-important. However, when the history of the human/object is examined it can be demonstrated that the museum is the last stage in a sequence of 'destructive' events, defined by the increasing removal of the remains from their original contexts. In the case of burials, for example, the individual has gone from being an active to passive participant in cultural life, and then excavation in later years is performed without regard to location, stratigraphic context, or the cultural attributes of the burial. Then, typically, only the elements of specific interest were removed, such as the skull or long bones, and then only particularly interesting examples, such as those with unusual pathologies. Take for example, a statement by George Murray Black (1940), writing to the Director of the Australian Institute of Anatomy in 1940:

I dumped all the incomplete skeletons except long bones into the creek – back bones, feet, hands, ribs, etc. as you appear to only require complete skeletons.

There was no regard for contamination, with remains exposed to cigarette smoke, unprotected handling, glues, varnishes, cleaning chemicals, insecticides, paints, and so on. Most remains of indigenous people in museum collections were, after all, initially anatomical, rather than anthropological, collections.

The same trail of ‘destruction’ applies to remains acquired through more brutal means, such as deaths in hospitals or asylums. Often, however, the remains in these instances were preserved as complete articulated skeletons, and similarly exposed to organic and inorganic contamination. The result is that the remains sitting on museum shelves are already highly compromised with regard to their scientific potential.

There is, however, the capacity for the ‘constructive use’ of those remains. The repatriation process involves researching the provenance and history of remains. Then it involves direct engagement with prospective Indigenous custodians. The process is one of collaboration. The museum researcher carries out anthropological and historical research with living and dynamic cultures. Both sides contribute to the accumulation of knowledge through mutual and equal engagement (Pickering 2007).

But, it is still argued, ‘all that may be true, but these remains are all that we have’. Not true. Remains are uncovered weekly in Australia, some reported in popular press, most not. During the course of heritage assessments, parks management, and development monitoring, remains are located or exposed. In most circumstances it is possible to prevent further disturbance to the remains, preserving both their archaeological and scientific integrity but, more importantly, respecting the right of Indigenous custodians to make decisions regarding the management of those remains. Australian heritage legislation in all states and territories now involves Aboriginal people in determining the appropriate actions for discovered remains (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act Government 1984). Remains will continue to be exposed and, on occasion, custodians may permit certain research. Access to such remains for future research is not guaranteed and will always require a close and respectful agreement between the Indigenous custodians and the researcher.

## **Conclusion**

Skulls, limb bones, skeletons, even organs, rest on shelves in museum collections worldwide. What are they? Are they still people or are they just de-sacralised remains of people? Are they coordinated concretions of organic material and minerals? How does, or should,

the identification of biological, social, or cultural attributes of such 'items' affect their management. Is the transformation from person to object complete? Is it a one way process? What philosophies should drive the way in which remains are treated: Scientific? Religious? Or Humanist? Should they be managed by Natural History professionals or Social History Professional? There are many questions that emerge in the engagement.

A key to cultural survival is the capacity to accommodate change, both physical and philosophical. Collecting institutions are no different, their members forming, as they do, some of the many sub-cultures that characterise our societies. Life-long engagement with a particular discipline or group leads to adoption of its rules, values and norms. However, accepting such values unconditionally is dangerous. Denying the need for change is dangerous. After all, history shows that change is traditional.

Collecting institutions, and many of the professions represented within them, must constantly engage with and debate their values if they are to survive.

In recent years the desire by Indigenous communities for the return of remains has provided challenges for museums. The remains debates have not only compelled thinking about should remains be returned or not, but also a deeper consideration of what they are and where their true values lie. Left to sit untouched and unconsidered for decades, remains have become part of the sacred background frescoes of museum life, ignored until attention is drawn to them. They have become sacred, not in the context of who they were, or what histories they tell, but simply in the context of being 'museum objects'. Indeed the language of debate is often the language of the sacred. The term 'heresy' has been replaced by the term 'that's unscientific'. However, science does not have a monopoly on the creation of new knowledge.

However, the 'translation' of remains need not be one way. We have seen how the cultural and social identity of the individual is often suffocated and discarded by the process of integration into the museum collections. Conversely, through the research required for the return of remains, many of the cultural variables can be re-identified. Perhaps more significantly, more knowledge can be acquired, not just about the past, but about contemporary cultures, societies, beliefs, and practices.

In the translation of remains from their cultural and social contexts into museum biological objects much has been lost. In translating the objects back into their social and cultural contexts, and engaging with their cultural descendants, much will be gained. Much will be 'found in translation'.

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### Notes

[1] Details of the symposium, including a list of participants can be found at <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/programmation/scientific-events/past-events/international-symposium-from-anatomic-collections-to-objects-of-worship/index.html>

[2] The symposium was stimulated by a decision by the French Government to prevent the repatriation of a tattooed Maori head by the city of Rouen. See: 'Rouen, first city in France to restore a Maori head to New Zealand' <http://rouen.blogs.com/tetemaori/rouen-first-city-in-franc.html>; and Sciolino, Elaine 2007 French Debate: Is Maori Head Body part or Art? In *'The New York Times'* <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/26/world/europe/26france.html?n=Top/Referene/Times%20Topics/People/S/Sciolino,%20Elaine>.

[3] Histories of the various methods of acquisitions of remains can be found in greater detail in: Fforde, C. 2004; Fforde, C., Hubert, J., and Turnbull, P. 2002; Turnbull, P. 1991a, 1991b, 1994, 1997, 1998.

[4] For example, see various Anatomy Acts, Coroners Acts, and Human Tissue Acts, all of which require respect for the dead subject to scientific dissection.

[5] I particularly identify Senator Catherine Morin-Desailly, the Deputy Mayor of Rouen and Senator, who spoke passionately in support of repatriation, and the participating Jurists and ethicists Marie Cornu, Renaud Denoix de Saint Marc, and Michel Van Praet. While not necessarily in support of repatriation, they did provide important considerations based on evidence from judicial and ethical process rather than personal opinion.

[6] For example, the British Anatomy Act of 1832. While designed to make bodies available for dissection under certain circumstances of acquisition, it was a response to prohibit the surreptitious exhumation of, or illegal interference with, remains.

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