

Human Remains Management and Policy Development in Southern African Museums

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Some of the workshop participants with the 'Who Were They' mobile exhibition.

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Introduction

The workshop was a result of a collaborative project between the Commonwealth Association of Museums, Museums Association of Namibia, IZIKO Museums of South Africa, the Botswana National Museum, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), International Council of Museums of Ethnography (ICME), ICOM Namibia, ICOM South Africa and ICOM Botswana

The aim of the project is to support the development of management guidelines and policy for human remains in museums in Southern Africa. The workshop in Namibia built on a previous workshop that took place in Cape Town, South Africa the 13th-14th February, 2017. The first workshop was hosted by IZIKO Museums of South Africa and focused on sharing information about the history of human remains collecting in southern Africa and management internationally, and the appraisal that IZIKO had conducted of their human remains collection. The appraisal identified 157 remains that had been collected 'unethically' in terms of the ways in which they had been obtained and/or the purpose for which they had been obtained. The majority of these 'unethically' collected human remains were identified as having been obtained from Namibia and Botswana and this was the reason why the project has, initially, concentrated on these three countries

Human Remains Management and Policy in Southern African Museums Workshop

The workshop in Namibia involved thirty-two participants from seven countries (Namibia, Canada, South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and the Seychelles). The ground-breaking workshop was the first to be held in Namibia to deal with the sensitive issue of human remains. The broader geographical participation reflected the growing interest within southern Africa in the Human Remains Management in Southern Africa Project. The provenance of human remains in museums in the region and the need for guidelines and/or policies for dealing with communities in relationship to those being 'returned' from foreign museums is a concern for many museums in the region. The workshop provided a useful platform for a comparative discussion. The workshop organisers were happy that all the invited international speakers and participants were able to attend, including the director of the African Council of Museums (AFRICOM) Rudo Sithole from Zimbabwe who provided the keynote address.

The workshop opened on March 22nd, 2018 with a welcome from Professor Jangira Kangira, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences who spoke about the need for academic institutions, such as the University of Namibia, to tackle sensitive issues such as this and work to move the conversation forward. He highlighted the fact that an academic environment should be able to provide a forum for constructive debate and the airing of different views.

Rudo Sithole of the African Council of Museums (AFRICOM) emphasised the need for inclusivity and understanding regarding the sensitive topic of human remains in museum collections. She contextualised the current initiative by IZIKO Museums to return human remains to Namibia and Botswana in the wider African context.

Finally, Ms Veno Kauaria, the Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, officially opened the workshop with a speech that outlined its importance for Namibia. Ms Kauaria argued that "We need to develop new models for African Museums that are rooted in our traditions and that reflect an African perspective on the past." She explained that "The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture believes strongly in forging partnerships at the national and international

level to help us achieve our goals. I see this workshop as an important step in the right direction where, by working together, we can develop our own solutions and guidelines.”

Ms Kauaria posed some of the key questions that the workshop would have to consider. “We have questions about our own museums: How do we decide whether human remains in our collection were obtained ethically? How do we find out whose human remains are in our museums, how old they are and how they got there? Is there a time period after which human remains can be legitimately excavated for research purposes? If so, what is that time period – 150 years? 200 years? 1,000 years? When, if ever, might it be justified to display human remains in our museums? Internationally many museums display Egyptian mummies which are the human remains of Pharaohs and other wealthy members of Egyptian society from thousands of years ago. Their display helps us appreciate the knowledge and religion of this ancient African civilization, so is the display of human remains justified in this case?

Secondly, we have questions about consultations with communities: How do we decide what should happen to unethically collected human remains after they are returned to our countries or found in our museums? Do we give them a Christian burial, even if they were not Christians? Should we not grant them the respect of a proper burial to recognise that they were people and not specimens? Who should be consulted and how? What do we do when there is insufficient information to trace the descendants? Should unethically collected human remains be returned, as far as possible, to their place of origin?

The opening of the workshop was also used to launch the travelling exhibition *Who were they?: An exhibition on human remains collection in southern Africa* and the project website, both of had been designed by the project intern provided by the Commonwealth Association of Museums, Ms Paige Linner. Dr Jeremy Silvester, Director of the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN), spoke about MAN and its goals and invited participants to suggest ways in which the project website and travelling exhibition might be used and expanded to assist with the development of guidelines and/or policy on human remains management.

Dr Wendy Black provided an overview of the Human Remains Management in Southern Africa project, its current partners, aims and objectives. She explained that the project was, initially, intended to run for three years with workshops in South Africa in 2017, Namibia in 2018 and Botswana in 2019

Dr Alma Nankela, Archaeologist and Rock Art Specialist at the National Heritage Council, gave a presentation that considered fundamental questions about the form that human remains take and the uses that are made of them in the field of archaeology. She provided an overview of what can be classified as human remains, how they are typically discovered in Namibia and how they need to be treated and stored. Her presentation helped to set the stage for the rest of the workshop.

Goodman Gwasira, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Namibia, discussed the language that is used to speak about human remains and the importance of terminology. His presentation brought up issues that many of the workshop participants had not considered and revealed that the sensitive nature of this topic, and the complexity of policy, is so fundamental that it extends to the words that are used to describe human remains.

Finally, Ms Rooksana Omar, Chief Executive Officer, IZIKO Museums of South Africa and a member of the Ethics Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) spoke about museum ethics and the basic standards that should be adhered to with reference to human remains in museum collections. Ms Omar made particular reference to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the ICOM Code of Ethics as setting benchmarks that should inform the development of any policy on human remains at either the institutional or national level.

Dr Paul Ludik, Head of the National Forensic Science Institute in Namibia, gave a presentation about how human remains can and have been used to further scientific and historic knowledge. His presentation was dynamic and informative and explained the process followed when human remains are discovered which determines whether the discovery leads to a court case or whether the museum is informed. He outlined existing laws and regulations in Namibia and the key points that, he believes, will need to be considered when writing a policy. He also informed workshop participants that there are multiple archaeological sites in Namibia with reinterred human remains that have not yet been examined by the National Heritage Council due to the limited human resources available.

Following Dr Ludik's presentation, there was a roundtable discussion with Dr Petrus Mbenzi (Senior Lecturer at the University of Namibia and Head of the Oshiwambo Section), Ms Sarah Zungu (Member of the Namibian San Council), Mr Fritz Isak Dirkse (Nama Traditional Leaders Association), Ms Esther Muinjangu (University of Namibia) and Dr Sem Shikongo (Director of Tourism). The roundtable was chaired by Nzila Marina Mubisi (Acting Deputy Director, National Museum of Namibia) and shed light on the various cultural practices surrounding death and burial, and community perspectives on how repatriated human remains should be approached. The discussion highlighted the variety of traditional beliefs about death and burial found in different communities in Namibia.

On the second day of the workshop, Ms Catherine C. Cole, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, gave an introduction to policy development. She explained the processes that should be followed and described a framework that might be used to develop a policy for human remains management in museums in southern Africa.

Dr Wendy Black, Curator of Archaeology, Iziko Museums of South Africa, spoke about the IZIKO collection of unethically collected human remains, the history of IZIKO and the route that had been taken in the development and implementation of the IZIKO Policy on Human Remains. Her presentation sparked a lot of discussion, particularly about how IZIKO policies and methods, with a particular emphasis on transparency, might be adopted by other museums throughout southern Africa.

Dr Morongwa Mosothwane, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology (Forensic Archaeology) at the University of Botswana, outlined the policies used in Botswana and the unique challenges that the country faces. She provided a particularly useful overview of the relevant legislation in Botswana. Dr Emma Haitengi argued the need for a wide-ranging policy on human remains in Namibia. Finally, Mr George Mudenda, Director of the Livingstone Museum, spoke about the context of human remains policy in museums in Zambia and how the Livingstone Museums is dealing with these issues. Each presenter provided a different perspective that helped to highlight the similarities and differences that need to be considered if southern Africa is going to have a uniform policy.

Participants were then invited to join in a Commonwealth Big Lunch. This initiative is about celebrating being part of the Commonwealth, encouraging people to come together and making new connections. Workshop participants enjoyed eating lunch together and had some decorative cupcakes to make the event a little more special. The Commonwealth Big Lunches initiative worked seamlessly with what the workshop was trying to promote; togetherness and making connections.

The last half of the day was spent in group discussion. Participants split into small groups to think and talk about various questions that had been raised both before and during the workshop. They were then asked to present their opinions to with the rest of the workshop and lead a group discussion. These discussions were recorded so that they can be used to help direct a policy in the future. The five questions considered by the groups were:

- How do we determine to whom ancestral remains belong?
- Should scientific research on human remains be allowed and what benefit could it provide?
- How do we involve communities in policy development and what role do local communities play in identifying collections?
- What are the commonalities between the issues affecting southern African countries?
- What are the pros/cons of displaying remains in museums and how should we approach this issue? If they are not to be displayed, what should be done with them once they are returned?

The workshop closed with the participants giving recommendations for policy (these were subsequently consolidated into a Declaration – see Appendix 1). These recommendation were:

- 1.The project should establish a network and continue to expand it by encouraging relevant institutions in southern African to join.
- 2.The network should share information about relevant national and international legislation, policies and guidelines.
- 3.The network should proactively research and share information about other unethical human remains in foreign museums i.e., the research reportedly carried out by the University of Pretoria.
- 4.Museums in southern Africa should review their own collections and the provenance of human remains and associated burial goods to ensure that they do not include any unethical remains.
- 5.Agree on a declaration on the management of human remains in southern African museums.
- 6.Organise training on issues relating to human remains in museums in southern Africa.
- 7.Draft a set of guidelines for southern African museums.
- 8.Encourage the establishment of Human Remains Advisory Committees at the museum and/or national level, as appropriate and a mechanism for cross-border collaboration and consultation, when required. Such committees should include museum workers, academics and community representatives.

9. Agree on a common definition of 'human remains' and other relevant terminology for southern Africa (and research relevant names in local languages).
10. Build stronger mechanisms for community consultation on human remains issues between museums and descendent communities.
11. Ensure that any human remains in museums are stored in a dedicated, separate space.
12. Academic research relating to human remains should be made accessible and digestible.
13. The project should strengthen and expand the project website as a resource.
14. A project workshop should be organised to take place in Botswana in 2019.
15. CAM should seek funding for an intern to be based in Botswana and South Africa in 2019.

Outcomes

It is always difficult to estimate the impact that these workshops have on participants and their future work within their own institutions. In some cases it will take years to fully appreciate the outcome of the workshop. However, the press release produced at the end of the workshop generated considerable media coverage with a particular interest on the issue of the human remains from Namibia held in the IZIKO collection. The main NBC television news covered the issue on 3rd April with an additional discussion with the Head of the National Museum of Namibia on 4th April. The workshop also featured on local radio stations such as RadioWave (29th March, 2018) and Radio Energy (3rd April, 2018). The workshop was reported on by The Namibian (4th April, 2018), Namibian Economist (29th March, 2018) and by NAMPA (the Namibian Press Agency) what is NAMPA? (3rd April, 2018) as well as online news sites such as Namibia Daily News (4th April, 2018) and Lela Mobile Online (3rd April, 2018).

Immediate outcomes include:

1. The official recommendations from the workshop participants will help shape the creation of guidelines and policy for southern Africa and also provide direction for the next year of the project.
2. Government representatives were able to meet with community representatives, and international guests in a constructive way to further this issue in Namibia and southern Africa.
3. Participants have begun to share resources and opinions, and create open lines of communication to provide the basis for a network of stakeholders in southern Africa.
4. The Commonwealth Association of Museums was able to liaise and meet with the representative from AFRICOM to discuss future collaboration.
5. CAM gained members and hosted an AGM to update members on upcoming meetings and workshops.
6. The creation of a declaration provides a document that reflects the consensus of the workshop and that can be used to facilitate further work on this i