In the 19th and 20th centuries many museums in Africa and Europe bought ‘specimens’ stolen from southern African graves to add to their ethnographic collections. Namibians are aware of the 55 remains returned in 2011 and 2014 from German museums. Many of these were victims of the genocide. This exhibition focuses on another case that also forms part of this sensitive history.

Iziko Museums of South Africa has identified 160 unethically collected human remains in their collection: 81 from Namibia and 6 from Botswana. Museums in Europe and North America have also identified southern African body parts in their collections. Today, museums view this human material as ‘unethical’ because it was looted from their graves without family consent. They are now responding to originating communities who want their ancestors bodies to return home.

This exhibition seeks to educate and open a discussion with YOU, our visitors.

- Who bought and sold human remains?
- Why?
- Who benefited and who suffered?
- What can we do today to address these historic wrongs and prevent future horrors?
- Where should the human remains return: to grave-sites or new Keeping Places?
- What policies or guidelines can we develop to honour our departed?
The collection of human remains has usually been justified in terms of the pursuit of knowledge through archaeology. However, the collection of many southern African remains was fundamentally racist, to support the foundations on which white supremacist policies were built and displayed to satisfy public curiosity.

Reginald Ruggles Gates was a Canadian biologist and eugenicist. He supported the racist eugenics theory that Caucasians were a superior race to Africans based on certain physical attributes. The photo above shows him at the South African Museum. Reginald Ruggles Gates, Iziko Museums of South Africa, SAM 3946.

It would be desirable to secure as soon as possible a larger collection of Herero Skulls for scientific investigation
- A letter from Lushcan to Lieut. Ralf Zum, the district crif of Okahandja, South-West Africa, notorious for racism, 1905.

Why did collection start?
The collection of human remains has usually been justified in terms of the pursuit of knowledge through archaeology. However, the collection of many southern African remains was fundamentally racist, to support the foundations on which white supremacist policies were built and displayed to satisfy public curiosity.

How were they collected?
Museums used 'bone collectors' to locate and exhume skeletons. These collectors would use information from local farmers and Indigenous guides to locate grave sites. Collectors would often locate 'fresh' graves, make a note of the location, and return later to exhume them. Sometimes this happened less than a year after the body was buried.

Collectors also used disasters, such as the 1920s famine in former Ovamboland, as a way to obtain bodies as remains were left in the open and easier to access. During this time there was a lucrative trade in human remains that fueled the need for grave robbing. The popularity of skulls created a 'need' for them worldwide, particularly in South Africa.

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I think I could get Dr. Peringuey a box full of Ovambo skulls as some of the tracks were strewn with them after the starvation of last year– Bushman skulls are not so easy to get, but on my return from the Union I will see what I can do.”
-- Frank Brownlee to Capt Gage, 13th September, 1916.

When were remains collected?
The collection of human remains in southern Africa began as early as 1805 and continued until at least 1957. The then South Africa Museum (now amalgamated as part of Iziko Museums of South Africa) collected its largest volume between 1912 and 1920 when interest was at its peak. Hundreds of skeletons were being taken from Namibia, Botswana and South Africa and displayed and studied in museums and educational institutions around the world.

TIMELINE

1805 Private collection of skulls begins in southern Africa.

1892 A 'Topnaar' man is the first known unethically collected body obtained from Namibia in the collection of the South African Museum (SAM)

1904-1907 Skeletons of Herero, Nama and other prisoners who died in the concentration camps during the genocide are sent to museum collections, mainly in Germany.

1909-1912 Violent attacks on San communities and increase in San remains in SAM collection.

1916-1921 Start of South African rule coincides with famine in northern Namibia and collection of human remains from the Ovambo kingdoms.

1925 Secretary for SWA tells South African Museum that it will no longer permit the export of human remains as the desecration of graves was a major cause of the war of 1904.
"You say in your letter that Bushman skulls are not easy to get. If a small unofficial reward could help in the matter I should be very glad to defray the cost. And the same holds for other races I have mentioned already. You need not appear officially."
- Dr. Peringuey to Major Brownlee, Grootfontein, 21st November, 1916.

THE COLLECTED

Nearly every indigenous group in southern Africa was affected by the collection of skeletal remains, although some groups were more affected than others. San, and Nama groups were particularly targeted. This was because of the museums’ particular research interests and the belief that these groups would become ‘extinct’. However, the skeletons and skulls of Ovambo, Herero, Damara and other communities were also collected.

IMAGINE IF SOMEONE EXHIBITED YOUR FAMILY’S SKULLS IN A MUSEUM. IF THEY HAD SMUGGLED THEM AWAY FROM YOUR HOME AND YOU DIDN’T KNOW WHERE THEY WERE TAKEN.

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL? WHAT ACTION WOULD YOU TAKE TODAY?

"The desecration of their graves by the Germans was one of the main courses of the revolt in 1904."
- West Africa to Director South African Museum, 1925
“We have kept quiet about these issues because we didn’t know about them or we were ashamed. Every other group has histories like this, but they celebrate it, they show it, because it shows where they came from. History will not stand still and we need to show our past.”

– David Tamay Mushavanga, Member of the San Council, Namibia. 2017.

**THE HUMAN REMAINS MANAGEMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA PROJECT**

In a postcolonial context, extensive work is being done in other parts of the world to begin healing the wounds that unethical collections have caused in Indigenous communities. This issue has just begun to be addressed in southern Africa.

In 2016, the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) in collaboration with Iziko Museum of South Africa, the Museums Association of Namibia and the National Museum and Monuments of Botswana (joined in 2017 by the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography (ICME) and the International Council of Museums’ National Committees (ICOM) for Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, and the University of Botswana) initiated a project to develop policy and guidelines for human remains management and repatriation in southern African countries in collaboration with museums, universities, governments, and Indigenous community members.

The project incorporates collections-based research, discussion with regional and international experts, consultation with various Indigenous communities, workshops, a website and this exhibition. For further information, visit www.humanremainsinsouthernAfrica.org

**THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICY**

Museums and governments need to develop policies to meet international standards for the care and management of human remains. Policies provide consistency, structure and guidance when dealing with sensitive issues and will establish a framework for repatriation. Initiating discussion around this issue is the first step towards a transnational policy.

The United Nations Delegation on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 12, states that Indigenous peoples have: the right to the repatriation of their human remains.” It also requires States to work with indigenous peoples to enable access and repatriated these remains and ceremonial objects.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics provides standards that need to be met by international museums. This policy requires that “collections of human remains and material of sacred significance should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully”.

It emphasises the importance of community involvement, and “taking into account the interests and beliefs of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated, where these are known”.

Finally, this policy requires that if remains are displayed “they are presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.” and removed if it is requested.

**THE MUSEUM OF SILENCE**

As I wandered throughout this museum, I recognised many of the displays – these silences were mine as much as they had belonged to the people they had been taken from.

‘Return them,’ I demanded of the proprietors, ‘you must return these silences to their owners. Without their silence these people are less than whole... It had been theft originally, I continued, now it was nothing but intimidation!... It was mine – ours – I challenged, to do with as we pleased – to destroy if we wanted. They told me the silences were best kept where they could be labelled, annotated, dated and catalogued...'

‘It was one of the world’s wonders, they told me, this museum of silence – never had so much silence been gathered together under one roof, and they were proud of it.”