SKELETONS IN THE CUPBOARD

South African museums and the trade in human remains, 1907–1917

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Foreword

It is fitting that this volume concerning the issue of human remains in museum collections should be published under the joint imprint of the South African Museum, Cape Town, and the McGregor Museum in Kimberley. Both of these museums are challenged to acknowledge the unscrupulous methods used in the early decades of the twentieth century to obtain skeletons of Khoisan people for their collections. This regrettable chapter in museum history involved the violation of graves in the name of science and the exhumation of recently-buried bodies with the complicity of state authorities. The underlying assumption was that ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentots’ were living examples of a primitive and dying race that should be studied before it became extinct. Uncertainty about the racial typology of Khoisan people motivated the drive by museums in South Africa to acquire skeletal specimens for morphological analysis in Europe. From 1906 onwards Louis Péringuey, director of the South African Museum, argued vigorously for this endeavour and was active in building up the Museum’s physical anthropology collections. By 1917, however, he had to admit that scientific analysis of these collections had yielded nothing conclusive. The skeletons that were amassed in museums at that time remain a testimony to the theories that informed physical anthropology in the early twentieth century but, more significantly in terms of social history, they also tell of colonial power relations and the abuse of Khoisan communities.

This volume documents in historical detail the specific circumstances in which human remains were acquired by museums, and raises the emotive issue of what should be done to redress past wrongs. The research was first presented in 1999 at a conference at the University of the Western Cape. It has not been substantially reworked for publication, but comments by scientists, curators, and a member of the Australian Heritage Commission have been added in order to further public awareness and debate. Intentions to include comments from people of Khoisan descent are not fulfilled here but it is hoped that this publication will encourage wider discussion. Much can be learnt from policies and codes of ethics developed in other parts of the world, but the South African context has its own complexities. A local process of policy development that will lead to negotiations with affected communities was initiated by the South African Museums Association in 1996, and the issue was addressed this year at a consultative forum in Cape Town arranged by the South African Heritage Resources Agency. This publication shows commitment to open discussion regarding sensitive museum collections, and to the implementation of ethical curatorial practices.

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South African Museum
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The research was first presented to the Biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society: ‘Not Telling: Secrecy, Lies and History’, held at the University of the Western Cape from 11–14 July 1999. We would also like to thank Patricia Davison, Gerald Klinghardt and Graham Avery of the South African Museum, Elizabeth Voigt, David Morris, Vida Allen, Brigit Carlstein and Margaret Fouché of the McGregor Museum Kimberley, and the staff of the Cape Archives, especially Erica le Roux and Shevelda George, for their assistance in locating material. Finally we would like to express our appreciation to the South African Museum (now part of Iziko Museums of Cape Town) and the McGregor Museum for their boldness in deciding to publish this study, and for enabling our original arguments to be debated with curators.

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Introduction: South African museums and human remains

Most South African museums contain skeletal remains of the indigenous people, particularly of the Khoisan. The South African Museum in Cape Town has at least 788 specimens, the National Museum Bloemfontein 403, the Department of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand 365, the Department of Anatomy at the University of Cape Town 239, the Albany Museum Grahamstown 168, and the McGregor Museum in Kimberley 150. Museums in Europe also house similar remains. Most people might assume that these remains were excavated by professional archaeologists, and that they are the fossilised remains of long-dead people, collected, perhaps, as part of research on 'pre-history', evolution and human origins. After all, at the very end of the twentieth century, South Africans were being encouraged to view fossil remains of human 'ancestors' as part of South Africa's national heritage; and a lineage of paleoanthropological research – from the early 'discoveries' of Robert Broom and Raymond Dart, to the research of Philip Tobias (recently decorated with the Order of the Southern Cross (silver) by President Mandela), and the more recent findings of Lee Berger and Ron Clarke – as South Africa's most important contribution to science.

What has been largely left unexamined in the history of anthropology, archaeology, and museums is the way that many of these remains were acquired, particularly around the turn of the century. This study uncovers a little of the evidence of an incipient trade in human remains at this time, between grave-robbers and South African museums as well as museums in Europe. It reveals, moreover, that there was intense rivalry and competition among museums about future possession of the skeletons of still-living persons, as well as the digging up of very recently buried bodies. It shows that the Bushman Relics Act of 1911, the first conservation legislation in South Africa, presented publicly at the time and generally interpreted since as a measure designed to conserve rock art, was also directed against the foreign trade in skeletons, and was introduced as a direct consequence of what even officials regarded as a 'ghastly business', of 'unwholesome and reprehensible trafficking' in human remains.

What is at stake is a conspiracy of silence. There were silences and cover-ups at the time as we shall see. More serious is the obliviousness to the problem in the discipline of physical anthropology and in museums almost to the present day. It is only really since 1990 that museums in South Africa have found it inappropriate to display human remains, largely as the result of protest by indigenous people. There has been very little examination of the history of the collections of remains held by museums. With some partial exceptions, public institutions in South Africa have not been made to account for the human remains that are housed in their storage vaults. Part of such an enquiry would need to be an examination of the conditions of acquisition of human remains, as well as their utilisation in racial research within museums. Indeed, it might be the case that the entry of such remains into museums and such racial research at the beginning of
the twentieth century were at the centre of the transformation of the museum in South Africa as an institution of order, knowledge and classification.9

Even Alan Morris, the writer most sensitive to the problem, does not really grapple with it in depth. The ‘real focus’ (our emphasis) of his main article on the question, in Miscast, is on ‘trophy skulls’, skulls in museums in Europe acquired in the frontier wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a process of what he calls ‘genocidal mayhem’.10 (He links this to the twentieth-century case of Koos Sas, a ‘Bushman murderer’ who was shot in Namaqualand in 1922 and whose skull was exhibited in the Montagu museum between 1975 and 1993.)11 Elsewhere Morris makes clear that the ‘active collection and curation of skeletons in South Africa did not begin until late in the nineteenth century ... by 1910 large series were present in Cape Town, Kimberley and Grahamstown, and within another two decades Johannesburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein could each boast an appreciable sample of Khoisan crania.’12 But his Miscast article does not focus on problems centring around this much more systematic collection of human remains after the turn of the twentieth century, largely for South African museums (though he gives examples from this period).13 Indeed he celebrates the fact that ‘the level of brutality decreased substantially, at least in South Africa itself, after the turn of the twentieth century’ – because there were ‘no longer any independent Khoisan groups ... [in a position] to challenge the state’.14 However, this paper shows precisely the opposite to be the case. Neutralised as a military threat, the subjugated Khoisan were opened to the scientific gaze of the all-powerful coloniser in a variety of ways. Not the least was in the mass violation of their remains – collected to form statistical samples of significant size for craniometric research, rather than as trophies of war.

This paper examines the early twentieth century history of the collection of Khoisan remains. It is also concerned to examine the ethics of these exhumations and, in the light of this, to ask what the appropriate steps are for placing the issue of human remains in museums on the agenda of both the academy and museums. Beyond moral questions, this paper is concerned to strip back the mystique and the presumed authority of science, to ask questions about the nature of scientific research on the indigenous human body under colonial conditions. These are also questions which try to understand the history of the museum and the nature of collecting and collections. At the heart of the institutional history of the museum in South Africa in the twentieth century lies a competitive and insatiable trade in human remains, largely of the newly dead, and in some cases, of the still-living. This trade involved very close connections which men and women of science in South African museums and beyond had with gross acts of plunder and defilement of human bodies. The southern Kalahari and the northern Cape more generally were part of an enormous field site, stretching from southern Namibia across to then Bechuanaland, for the acquisition of human remains which were central to racial research in South Africa and Europe. In a phenomenon which has been referred to as the ‘South Africanisation of Science’, South African scientific institutions were beginning to assert a special institutional claim on research on South African issues and on access to artefacts found in South Africa.15 The failure of the academy and museums to examine these political questions squarely, derives from a perpetuation of the idea that the bones and skulls of Khoisan people in the twentieth century are natural history fossils, referred to as ‘relics’ at the beginning of the twentieth century.