

**Human Remains in Museums and Collections. A Critical Engagement with the „Recommendations“ of the German Museums Association (2013)**  
*von Redaktion H-Soz-Kult*

Tens of thousands of human remains – from bones to mummies, from modified pieces of hair to bodily organs – are part of museum and scientific collections at German institutions, and Germany is no exception in that respect. These human remains date from early human history to the 20th century. They are stored in the collections, some of them may be displayed publicly, and some are used for research on issues such as the development of civilizations, human migration, the spread of diseases, or human nutrition. The care for these human remains in collections at Berlin's Charité and other institutions spurred a debate surrounding the status of human remains and the respect and dignity they deserve to be treated with.<sup>1</sup> Ethical questions on human remains touch upon the status a society is giving to the remains of the deceased, and norms and values relating to the deceased. The issue is complex, even more so because many of these human remains were acquired as part of the European colonial expansion or under colonial rule, often against the wishes of indigenous societies. Ethics, law and science all play a part in the debate on human remains. Universities, research institutions, museums, municipal and governmental institutions as well as activist groups, representatives of Indigenous communities, and the media have an impact on the treatment of human remains in museums and scientific collections. Calls for the repatriation of human remains to their native societies from governments or NGOs have arisen more frequently in the 21st century, and have been met with very different responses.

In order to provide guidelines for the treatment of human remains

<sup>1</sup>Reinhart Kössler / Heiko Wegmann, Schädel im Schrank, in: Die Zeit 42 (2011), 13.10.2011, <http://www.zeit.de/2011/42/Schaedelsammlungen> (23.01.2017); Urs Willmann, Das Grab in der Vitrine, in: Die Zeit 19 (2013), <http://www.zeit.de/2013/19/mumien-museen-grab> (23.01.2017).

and the decision-making on their possible repatriation, the German Museums Association (Deutscher Museumsbund, DMB) in 2011 installed a working group on human remains. The results of the working group's deliberations, the (non-binding) „Empfehlungen zum Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Museen und Sammlungen“ („Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections“), were published in early 2013.<sup>2</sup>

The inevitable disparities and limitations of the generalizing „recommendations“ for decisions in individual cases should be analyzed in a broad dialogue in order to gain insight into shortcomings and options for further developments. This is what this discussion series „Human Remains in Museums and Collections. A Critical Engagement with the „Recommendations“ of the German Museums Association (2013)“ aims to do. The editors of H-Soz-Kult believe that this is a relevant discussion for the historical community, the social sciences, and cultural studies. When Larissa Förster (Humboldt University of Berlin) and Sarah Fründt (Freiburg University) contacted us and suggested to publish a series of articles they had convened, we were more than willing to do so. This discussion series is the result of their efforts, and we are thankful to them and to all of the contributors. We very much enjoyed working closely with them on this discussion series.

We commend Larissa Förster and Sarah Fründt for the quality of the contributions and for their truly international outlook. The complexities of the care for human remains become especially apparent in an international perspective: On the one hand, a comparison of the German „recommendations“ to similar documents in other countries can highlight the particularities of the process in Germany; on the other hand, human remains that became part of German collections as a result of colonial rule pose specific ethical problems and raise the

<sup>2</sup>German Museums Association / Deutscher Museumsbund, 2013 Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections, April 2013. See [http://www.museumsbund.de/fileadmin/geschaefte/dokumente/Leitfaeden\\_und\\_anderes/2013\\_Recommendations\\_for\\_the\\_Care\\_of\\_Human\\_Remains.pdf](http://www.museumsbund.de/fileadmin/geschaefte/dokumente/Leitfaeden_und_anderes/2013_Recommendations_for_the_Care_of_Human_Remains.pdf) (23.01.2017).

question of repatriation. We will publish the thought-provoking articles over the course of the next few weeks and, as always, encourage our readers to comment on the discussion series.