

**Human Remains in Museums and Collections. A Critical Engagement with the „Recommendations“ of the German Museums Association (2013). Editorial**  
*by Larissa Förster, Sarah Fründt*

Since the 1970s, the right of museums to house, exhibit, and research human remains, in particular those from Indigenous peoples collected during colonial times, has been questioned and fundamentally challenged in many parts of the world. As a result of this, one of the most important international guidelines for museum work, the „Code of Ethics“, initially published by the International Council of Museums in 1986, postulated that human remains and materials of sacred significance must be acquired, researched, displayed or returned „in a manner consistent with professional standards“ that takes „into account the interests and beliefs of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated, where these are known“ (art. 2.5., 3.7. and 4.3.).<sup>1</sup> The code also recommended that museums „should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin“ (art. 6.2). In 2005, after a long process of consultations, the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport published a „Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums“, turning the United Kingdom into the first European nation to profoundly engage with the topic. Two years later, the „United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples“ for the first time established the right to the repatriation of Indigenous remains „through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with the Indigenous peoples concerned“ on the level of international laws.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International Council of Museums (ICOM), Code of Ethics, 1986 (current version available at [http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/Codes/code\\_ethics2013\\_eng.pdf](http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/code_ethics2013_eng.pdf) (12.12.2016).

<sup>2</sup>UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums, 2005; United Nations, United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007; Deutscher Museumsbund, Empfehlungen zum Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Museen und Sammlungen, 2013,

The German museum community has been somewhat slow with entering the debate, but it has recently started to catch up with international standards. In particular the heated debate on the return of Namibian human remains from the Charité University Hospital Berlin in 2011, but also repatriation requests from other countries, provided strong incentives for concerted action. In 2013, the German Museums Association (Deutscher Museumsbund, DMB) published the „Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections“. Through this publication, compiled by a selected working group, the debate on the care and return of human remains of Indigenous people or those acquired under colonial circumstances finally reached German museums properly. There had already been a different set of guidelines in 2003, called „Recommendations for the care of specimens made from human tissue in collections, museums and public spaces“ and published by the Working Group on Anatomical Specimens in Collections.<sup>3</sup> However, this was aimed at collections holding human remains from the Nazi era, and mostly overlooked the issue of racist research in colonial times.

This forum publication is the result of a workshop in Cologne in November 2013 aimed at critically discussing the DMB „recommendations“. It was organized to combine the expertise of colleagues from various disciplines such as social and biological anthropology, anatomy, philosophy, history and art, and discuss the „recommendations“ that had been published only a few months earlier. All of the participants had made their own theoretical or practical experiences with the topic in the past, for example during the repatriations of human remains from Germany to Namibia, Australia, New Zealand and

current version online at [http://www.museumsbund.de/fileadmin/geschaefte/dokumente/Leitfaeden\\_und\\_anderes/2013\\_Empfehlungen\\_zum\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_menschl\\_Ueberresten.pdf](http://www.museumsbund.de/fileadmin/geschaefte/dokumente/Leitfaeden_und_anderes/2013_Empfehlungen_zum_Umgang_mit_menschl_Ueberresten.pdf) (in German) and [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) (in English) (12.12.2016).

<sup>3</sup>Working Group on Anatomical Specimens in Collections, Recommendations for the care of specimens made from human tissue in collections, museums and public spaces, 2003.

Paraguay between 2011 and 2014 or from Austria to South Africa in 2012. It was against this background that discussion proved to be most fertile as these experiences were used by all participants to critically engage with either certain parts of the „recommendations“, or terms and concepts employed in them. Each scholar presented a short impulse on some point he/she deemed worthy of discussion.<sup>4</sup> Thus, five to ten minutes of talk were followed by sometimes an hour of group discussion, juxtaposing practical, theoretical and empirical work done by participants with the ideas set down by the „recommendations“. Astonished by the potential for critical discussion and exchange this format provided us with, and thrilled by the new perspectives and insights it created, we now want to continue this discussion and at the same time broaden the circle.

In the following we want to present points of contention and ideas that we feel relevant and important for the debate on human remains in museums and institutions. This is an open invitation to scholars working on related topics as well as interested audiences to not only critically follow the „recommendations“ themselves, but also past, present and future provenance research and/or negotiations for the return and care of remains. Most of the processes are not standardized yet, so there is ample opportunity to critically engage with the topic and make sure that outcomes can be supported by all of us. Volker Rodekamp, then president of the DMB, ends his foreword to the „recommendations“ with the following quote: „We view these recommendations not as the end of the debate, but rather as its beginning“ (p. 5). We would like to take him by his word and make sure that the existing controversies do not remain hidden from the public

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<sup>4</sup>Participants of the workshop were Margit Berner, Larissa Förster, Sarah Fründt, Brigitta Kuster, Markus Lindner, Ronja Metzger, Dirk Preuss, Eva Raabe, Regina Sarreiter, Dierk Schmidt, Katharina Schramm, Holger Stoecker, Estella Weiss-Krejci and Andreas Winkelmann. We would like to express our gratitude to those members of the group who were not able to contribute to this publication (mainly for timing reasons). Their input during the discussion was very valuable and we hope that their ideas are still reflected in our arguments.

eye, as it currently seems to be the case.<sup>5</sup>

For this very reason we are also very interested in the use of the DMB „recommendations“ as a point of reference for the development of individual guidelines by other institutions. As encouraged by the authors of the „recommendations“ themselves, by now some collections have published their own statements or standards for dealing with human remains in their collections. In our forum, colleagues from the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Karl-May-Museum in Radebeul report the respective processes in their institutions and present the outcomes. Via the Fachgruppe Restaurierung (committee for conservation and restoration) of the DMB we also see the introduction of some aspects from their area of expertise that have apparently been overlooked in previous debates.<sup>6</sup>

Without anticipating too much of the critical debate to come, there is an additional concern we want to address with this platform, and we think this matters not only to us, but to a much wider audience: the curiously blank spot in the DMB „recommendations“ when it comes to an active dialogue with those countries, peoples, institutions and initiatives that are responsible for return requests. This omission is all the more remarkable because they not only have their own perspectives (which would feel crucial in such a discussion – if only to have another position to argue against), but also because many of them have years of experience with provenance research and restitution and thus might not only bring their perspectives, but also some interesting expertise to the questions at stake. As a first step we thus invited colleagues from South Africa, the USA, Australia and New Zealand

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. Wiebke Ahrndt, Introduction, in: *Museumskunde* 81,1 (2016), Positioning Ethnological Museums in the 21st Century, pp. 10-13.

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that in the meantime the AG Restitution und Provenienzforschung (working group on restitution and provenance research) of the Fachgruppe Naturkundemuseen (section for natural history museums) of the German Museums Association has also produced a guideline for restitution and provenance research for natural history museums, in which they not only refer to NS-provenance but also colonial origin. Available at: [http://www.museumbund.de/fileadmin/fg\\_natur/DMB\\_Provenienzforschung.pdf](http://www.museumbund.de/fileadmin/fg_natur/DMB_Provenienzforschung.pdf) (12.12.2016).

to critically engage with the „recommendations“ and evaluate if they were indeed also useful guidelines for the international partners of German institutions and if they had the potential to make German institutions and processes more transparent. Their perspectives on the matter as well as ours are necessarily only a section of those existing globally and we sincerely hope that this forum will merely provide the starting point for a broader dialogue. The floor is open!

Last but not least we would like to mention that the process of finding suitable authors for this endeavor has not always been without difficulties. Several troubles had to be overcome, resulting in a much later publication than originally anticipated. Human remains are a sensitive issue and talking about them can be troublesome or even painful. Additionally, there are often also political or diplomatic reasons to consider: while we write, several processes of repatriation are pending, for many of which the outcomes are far from being certain. Talking about them publicly always includes certain risks. We would thus like to express our honest gratitude to all our authors for their readiness to openly describe problems they see and to express their opinion on difficult matters. By doing so, they have positioned themselves in a potentially vulnerable spot, but we trust that their input will enhance and enrich the debate greatly.

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