

# Repatriation of Ancestral Remains From Germany to the Pacific

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## Introduction

Indigenous people's artifacts and images have had a strong appeal to the popular imagination of the West for centuries. However, in recent years, the question of ownership of intellectual property rights has emerged as many Indigenous groups around the world call for the repatriation of their cultural objects that were taken away, with or without their ancestors' consent, as a way of reasserting their cultural rights and in rediscovery of their cultural roots and identity. Also included under the category of cultural objects are ancestral remains, mostly consisting of bones that were dug, looted, or stolen from graves and caves. This report will mainly focus on the study of the repatriation of ancestral remains.

The question of repatriation of ancestral remains is now a contentious issue, as Indigenous peoples demand the immediate return of their ancestors from metropolitan museums while museum owners still claim ownership of the objects. The creation of Indigenous museums adds to this contention as these museums are still deeply entrenched in colonial legacies. It has however shifted indigenous peoples' views of museum collections and artifacts. The development of cultural centers and the increasing number of Indigenous people trained in museology and archaeology goes

hand in hand with the political shift in Indigenous leadership and self-determination.

In 2020, a repatriation research project was created in Gottingen, Germany. The University of Gottingen, with the financial support of the Volkswagen Foundation, fulfilled a research plan that eventuated with the support of research fellows from Africa and Oceania. I was fortunate to be selected as the research fellow from Oceania with the responsibilities to connect with heritage institutions and communities in the Pacific. My role as an intermediary between the project base in Germany and those of our communities in the Pacific was a fulfilling one.

As part of the research project Sensitive Provenances, there was a call for seven research fellowships in order to enter into a close dialogue with scholars from the Global South. In this way, representatives of the countries of origin, from which the human remains originally came, become closely involved in the project and bring in their different perspectives on the human remains of the Blumenbach Skull Collection and the Anthropological Collection, both housed and managed by academic staff at the University of Gottingen.

## Background of the Project

The project aims to examine their provenance, the circumstances of their acquisition, how they became ‘objects’ in academic collections and their past and current employment for teaching and research purposes. The project is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation for a duration of three years. Of the two collections, the first is the Blumenbach Skull Collection that dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century and was founded by the naturalist and one of the founders of the discipline of physical anthropology, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840). In his lifetime, he added about 245 skulls to the collection. After Blumenbach’s death, his successors pursued the collection until the 1940s. Today the collection contains about 800 skulls, of which about 200 are of non-European provenance. The second collection in the focus of our project is a large collection of human skulls and skull fragments that was gathered at the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (Hamburg Museum of Ethnology) at the time of colonialism between 1890 and the 1920s. This collection was handed over from the Hamburg Museum to the University of Göttingen in 1953. An initial research revealed that the bones originated primarily from the regions of Africa, Australia/New Zealand, and Oceania, and were mainly from the former German colonies.

## Repatriation of Human Remains

The repatriation of human remains continues to be the most sensitive type of repatriation around the world. Debates on the reburial of human remains stored in ethnographic and other museums arose in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1850 and

1950, human remains were taken from one country to another with scientists attempting to explain human diversity by measuring and comparing physical differences (Bouquet, 2012, p. 153). In the Pacific, museums, such as the Bishop Museum in the State of Hawai‘i, have proactively contacted other Pacific museums with the intention of returning human remains that were excavated during archaeological excavations in the early 1900s. Human remains have been returned to Tonga, while Vanuatu and Fiji are in preparation for the return of human remains from Honolulu, Hawai‘i. These human remains were collected through archaeological excavations on these islands in the early 1900s. The human remains that were returned to Tonga now remain at the Tonga National Museum in Nuku‘alofa. As for the Vanuatu and Fiji human remains, both museum directors were discussing with their respective boards as to what they would do, whether to keep them in the collection store for further research or to prepare the remains for reburial in their respective homelands.

In 2022, a fellowship program at the University of Göttingen was initiated. These fellowships were awarded to junior scholars and museum professionals from Africa and Oceania for independent study or research. It was envisaged that the selected scholars will become closely involved in the project and bring in their different perspectives on the human remains of the so-called Blumenbach Skull Collection and the Anthropological Collection. The organizers of the project were very fortunate when they received a number of high-quality applications. A fellowship committee was formed to assess all submissions. Out of the

seven fellows, four were from the Pacific representing Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Palau, and New Zealand. It was important to select those that are active in the field of repatriation research. They were able to be in Gottingen during the fall semester of 2022, researching their own collections and facilitating repatriation as well.

In June of 2023, ancestral remains from New Zealand were successfully repatriated through the hard work of Dr Te Herekiele Herewini.

On March 25, 2024, the repatriation ceremonies of 14 ancestors from Palau took place in Gottingen. This is the first time for a repatriation like this to happen for Palau. Australia and Nauru repatriation will be taking place soon. These are the direct results of this fellowship and I would like to

thank the Volkswagen Foundation and the University of Gottingen for facilitating this repatriation and fellowships for us in the Pacific.

### References

Bouquet, M. (2012). *Museums: A visual anthropology*. New York: Berg.

Vunidilo, T. (2015). *iYau Vakaviti: Fijian Treasures in International Museums- A Study of Repatriation, Ownership and Cultural Rights* (PhD thesis). Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.



Group photo of the Fellows (in the front row-missing is Dr. Te Herekiele Herewini, who was in Norway at this time) in Gottingen, in Germany during the 'media day' for the project (September 2022). *Photo courtesy of the University of Gottingen.*