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Namibia's Ancestral Remains held at the Iziko Museums of South Africa Social History Collection: A Case for Repatriation.

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Abstract

This article critically examines the history of ancestral remains from present-day Namibia that are housed in the Social History Collection of the Iziko Museums of South Africa (hereafter Iziko Museums). Critically, this article aims to contribute to the development of a repatriation and restitution policy in Namibia and to inform a restitution plan for the specific ancestral remains under discussion. By interrogating the colonial and heritage management practices between Namibia and South Africa, the paper underscores the urgency of ethical repatriation and restitution of ancestral remains to their communities of origin. Methodologically, I employ qualitative research methods, drawing on archival sources, museum accession records, informal conversational interviews, and critical discourse analysis to examine the colonial contexts under which Namibian ancestral remains were collected and classified. My findings show that although the ancestral remains housed at the Iziko Museums are not associated with contexts of war, they are still deeply problematic due to the colonial conditions and epistemologies that shaped their acquisition. By addressing colonial legacies through a systematic restitution programme, I contend that Namibia can move from a problematic inheritance and heritage practices toward an ethical, community-centred approach that restores dignity to affected communities and contributes to broader global debates on repatriation and restitution.

Keywords

Namibia, Colonial Anthropology, Decolonisation, Museology, Ancestral remains

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Introduction

The history of collecting ancestral remains in Namibia can be traced back to the early colonial period, before formal colonisation.[1] Namibia underwent multiple colonialisms that were often violent, extractive and dehumanising. The German colonial era lasted from 1884 (officially) to 1915, when the German Empire lost its colonial territories during the First World War. Namibia was then known as Deutsch-Südwestafrika (German South West Africa), and was marked by a violent war that has been recognised as the first genocide of the twentieth century.[2] During this war, thousands of mainly Ovaherero and Nama people were killed and hundreds of their body parts (mainly skulls) were collected by German scientists, after which they were distributed to European museums and universities as 'scientific specimens', as part of a racial science project that sought to prove the racial inferiority of African people. Ancestral remains, natural specimens, and cultural artifacts were regarded as objects of scientific inquiry. German museums actively requested specific specimens from the colony for both exhibition and research purposes.[3] While the ancestral remains that were collected during the German colonial period were almost exclusively associated with colonial wars, the South African colonial period presents a different context of collection. This became evident when studying the ancestral remains held at the Iziko Museums.

South Africa formally colonised Namibia from 1920 to 1990. However, the collection of ancestral remains by colonial officials continued during this intervening period (1915-1920), when South Africa was mandated by the League of Nations to administer Namibia. The drought of 1919 led to the death of hundreds of people, mainly in northern Namibia, and this presented an opportunity for South African officials like the Resident Native Commissioner, Carl 'Cocky' Hahn, to trade in ancestral remains with the South African Museum in Cape Town.[4] These included requests for remains from particular communities that were not well represented in the South African Museum's collection. The historical classification of colonised people into 'neat' taxonomic and ethnic categories reflected the broader scientific interest in racial classification and the objectification or specimenisation, which characterised much of the colonial-era research on ancestral remains. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a surge in efforts to locate and document examples of the

1 D. Henrichsen, 'Demands for Restitution – A Recent Phenomenon? Early Histories of Human Remains Violations in Namibia', *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, 7, 1 (2020), 38-46.

2 G. Steinmetz, 'The First Genocide of the 20th Century and its Postcolonial Afterlives: Germany and the Namibian Ovaherero', *The Journal of the International Institute,* 12, 2 (2005). Available at http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0012.201.

3 National Archives of Namibia, ZBU1005, Kaiserliches Gouvernement für Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Landesmuseum in Windhuk Specialia, 6 June 1902.

4 Carl Hugo Linsingen 'Cocky' Hahn (1886–1948) was a South African colonial administrator who served as Native Commissioner for Ovamboland from 1915 to 1946. Like many colonial officials of his time, he acted as an amateur ethnographer, documenting Owambo political structures, ceremonies, and social life. His extensive photographic archive, known as the Cocky Hahn Collection and now housed at the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST) Library, is an important source on the Owamboland, which also reveals the colonial epistemologies through which African societies were visually recorded, classified, and governed. See: P. Hayes '"Cocky" Hahn and the 'Black Venus': The Making of a Native Commissioner in South West Africa, 1915–46', *Gender & History,* 8, 3, (1996), 364–392; W. Hartmann, J. Silvester, and P. Hayes (eds.), *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1999).

San, a so-called 'pure-race', who were perceived to be a 'dying race' in need of preservation through scientific study.[5] This prompted the then director of the South African Museum, Louis Péringuey, to assemble a collection of what was regarded to be 'pure' San and Khoekhoe, as well as other indigenous communities such as the Aawambo.[6] This racialised perspective fuelled unethical collection practices that disregarded the cultural and spiritual significance of the remains to descendant communities.

The repatriation of ancestral remains has become a vital aspect of contemporary heritage management, especially within the context of postcolonial societies grappling with the legacies of colonial exploitation. However, repatriation must not be relegated to heritage management. Rather, it is a human rights issue. Heritage management has a tendency to treat ancestral remains as museum specimens or objects. Repatriation and restitution must go beyond museum curation and be part of transforming museum spaces, create movements for decolonisation, give agency to communities and restore human dignity as Ciraj Rassool aptly argues.[7] In the case of Namibia, the repatriation of ancestral remains from foreign institutions symbolises not only the restitution of physical bodies but also the restoration of cultural identity, dignity, and historical justice for communities long subjected to colonial dehumanisation.

In this article I provide a historical analysis that attempts to make museums recognise the colonial legacies embedded in their collections, and prepare Namibia to engage with the ethical and political dimensions of the process of repatriation and restitution of the particular human remains. Furthermore, the article provides some information about provenance, which is essential for guiding repatriation and restitution policies, allowing Namibia to develop ethical, community-centred practices and policies. By situating these practices within a broader critique of colonial anthropology and racialised scientific classification, the article challenges historical hierarchies and provides theoretical and practical foundation for decolonising museology, ensuring that museums are accountable to the communities from whom the human remains originate.

A brief history of Namibian colonisation by South Africa

South Africa formally took control of German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia) under a mandate from the League of Nations in 1920. This marked the beginning of almost seven decades of South African rule, characterised by racial segregation, land dispossession, and institutionalised control over the indigenous populations. One lesser-known aspect about South African rule in Namibia is that the state actively participated in the collection of ancestral remains of various communities, notably, Aawambo, San, and Damara. After an examination of the

5 P. Davison, 'Typecast: Representations of the Bushmen at the South African Museum', *Public Archaeology*, 2, 1, (2001), 3–20.
6 M. Legassik and C. Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South Africa Museums and the Trade in Human Remains, 1907–1917* (Cape Town, South African Museum, 2000).
7 C. Rassool, 'Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3 (2000), 653-670, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2015.1028002

archival correspondence about the human remains from Namibia that are in the Iziko Museum's collection, it is safe to argue that the collection of ancestral remains was state- sanctioned, since it was mainly implemented by state officials such as magistrates, for example Major Brownlee in Grootfontein,[8] and by native commissioners such as Cocky Hahn in Owamboland. The collection was done at the behest of South African institutions such as the South African Museum, while universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town gained access to ancestral remains from Namibia that were in the South African Museum for purported scientific studies. Institutions from further afield in Europe loaned the ancestral remains for studies, too.

Following the establishment of South African administration in Namibia, the government introduced policies, such as the Native Administration Proclamation (No. 22 of 1922 and the Crown Lands Disposal Proclamation No. 13 of 1920) that laid the foundation for a system of racial segregation through the creation of native reserves and the appointment of native commissioners who essentially replaced the power of chiefs.[9] The administration relied on native commissioners to oversee African communities, regulate labour, and enforce government policies. These officials wielded significant power, acting as intermediaries between the state and local populations, often reinforcing colonial control through taxation, forced labour, and strict movement regulations. In the history of the collection of ancestral remains from Namibia, a prominent collector was the aforementioned Hahn, who was the resident native commissioner for the then Ovamboland between 1915-1946.

In 1919, there was a severe drought that devastated northern Namibia, particularly affecting the former Owambo and Kavango regions. The drought led to widespread famine, displacement, and death. Women in the former Owamboland responded to the drought by being drafted into public service, building earth dams.[10] Many communities suffered extreme hardship as food and water sources dwindled, forcing people to migrate in search of sustenance. Colonial officials documented instances of mass starvation, and reports suggest that in some areas, human remains were collected from the veld. Some of these ancestral remains were used as part of 'scientific' studies conducted by colonial anthropologists and institutions interested in racial classifications.[11] The collection of ancestral remains of people who died of famine in the Owamboland was not peculiar. It is reported that as early as 1916 some cranial remains of at least 27 individuals were collected in the Owamboland and accessioned in the Natural History Museum in Vienna.[12]

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8 In a letter dated 3 April 1917 to the Director of the South African Museum, Louis Péringuey, Major Frank Brownlee confirms 'being sent a skull of a Kalahari bushman 15 years old 4f6" tall who was shot by a German farmer'. BM150, Letter from Major Frank Brownlee to Péringuey, 3 April 1917, Iziko Museums.

9 W. Werner, *Land Governance on Communal Land in Namibia*, *Windhoek, Land, Environment and Development Project*, Legal Assistance Centre (2021). https://www.lac.org.na/projects/lead/Pdf/Land_Governance_on_Communal_Land.pdf

10 P. Hayes, 'The Famine of the Dams: Gender, Labour and Politics in Colonial Owamboland 1919-1930', in P. Hayes et al. (eds), *Namibia Under South African Rule: Mobility and Containment, 1915-1946* (Oxford, James Currey, 1998).

11 J. Silvester and J.-B. Gewald, *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book* (Leiden, Brill, 2003).

12 M. Berner, S. Eggers, P. Klostermann, R. Koger, and W. Sauer. 'Ovambo Human Remains in the Natural History Museum Vienna', *Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums in Wien. Serie A für Mineralogie und Petrographie, Geologie und Paläontologie, Anthropologie und Prähistorie,* 123, (2022), 5-32.

The collection of ancestral remains during this period aligns with broader patterns of colonial scientific exploitation. Since the beginning of colonialism, European anthropologists and museums sought human skulls and skeletal remains for racial studies, a practice that continued throughout the early twentieth century.[13] Ancestral remains that were collected during the famine of 1919 form part of the Namibian individuals who are in the Iziko Museums' Social History collection.

The assemblage of human remains in the Iziko Museums were collected from various parts of Namibia. While most of the ancestral remains were labelled in museum accession records as having been collected from the former Owamboland (forty out of the seventy-seven that are in the Iziko Museums), other remains are labelled as San, Damara, Herero and Khoi. However, assigned community labels must be treated with caution, as they reflect the classificatory imperatives of colonial ethnography and museology rather than verified identity. Migration and incomplete documentation, for example, can mean that remains found in a specific location may not belong to the local community as a matter of fact, except in exceptional cases where provenance records include names of individuals and precise origins.

There was a special interest in collecting and preserving the ancestral remains of San people from Namibia because they represented so-called inland 'bushmen' whose physical features could be compared to those from coastal places in South Africa. The South African Museum was responsible for distributing the ancestral remains to other institutions in South Africa and Europe.[14] One of them was used for craniometric studies by Dr E. Pittard at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. The craniological perforations are discernible on this skull. This particular individual was among skeletal remains that were the subject of custodial conflict between the South African Museum and Dr Pittard, who wanted to have them as part of the newly established school of physical anthropology at the University of Witwatersrand.[15] This can be understood as a proxy battle because, arguably, both of the contesting institutions did not and could not own the ancestral remains.

Colonial collections and the establishment of museums in Namibia

The earliest efforts to establish a museum within Namibia can be traced back to 1902. According to A. Otto-Reiner, Governor Bruno von Schuckmann is credited with initiating the development of the first local museum in 1907.[16] The introduction of a

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13 Ciraj Rassool cautions researchers to contextualise the collection of ancestral remains in Southern Africa with the colonial violence that marked the period of collection. It may sound innocent to argue that the ancestral remains from the former Owamboland, collected in the Iziko Social History Collection, were gathered from the veld after a devastating famine. However, it is important to note it happened in 'a climate of heightened violence and colonial disruption in the first decade of the twentieth century'. See C. Rassool, 'Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum', *African Futures,* 27 (2022), 56–66.

14 A. G. Morris, 'Searching for "Real" Hottentots: The Khoekhoe in the History of South African Physical Anthropology', *Southern African Humanities,* 20,1 (2008), 221-33.

15 There were many letters exchanged between Pittard and the South African Museum in this period. Pittard argued that he had not finished his research. At some point he was concerned that the skeletons may not be safe, since World War One was imminent. The South African Museum resorted to using the political and diplomatic interventions of the Secretary of the Embassy of the Union of South Africa in London to regain the ancestral remains that had been loaned to Dr Pittard. LW21-LW568, Iziko Museums of South Africa.

16 A. Otto-Reiner. *From Landesmuseum to National Museum of Namibia: 100 years (1907-2007): A Chronology of an African Museum* (Windhoek: National Museum of Namibia, 2007).

museum into the colony was integral to the broader colonial enterprise, serving as a mechanism for envisioning and constructing the imperial order. It functioned as a repository of material evidence used to legitimise colonial conquest and domination. A particularly significant aspect of the Namibian case is that the concept of a museum emerged in the aftermath of the 1904 genocide. There is no direct evidence that human remains collected during the genocide were transferred to this particular museum, but the space that the museum occupies was a concentration camp at the time of the 1904–1908 genocide.[17] Today, the institution displays artefacts associated with genocide such as chains.

Notably, the museum was not intended for use by the indigenous population. Rather, it was designed to exhibit ethnographic representations of indigenous communities and reinforce colonial narratives. The museum's objective, as explicitly stated in Governor Von Schuckmann's call to establish a scientific collection in Windhoek, was to document and preserve what were perceived as the 'ethnographic peculiarities' of indigenous communities, which colonial authorities believed were in decline.[18] During both the German and South African colonial periods, human beings were 'ethnographised' as museum specimens. Indigenous people were positioned as subjects of study rather than as participants or audiences of the museum. Ethnography became a euphemism for collecting information about the people and classifying them for the colonial project. The history of Namibian ancestral remains and cultural possessions in foreign institutions, including the Iziko Museums, is deeply entwined with the broader history of colonialism in Namibia.

Currently, the National Museum of Namibia is home to remains of more than 50 repatriated ancestors from Germany that were collected in the context of the 1904 genocide. The return of Namibian ancestral remains from Germany has not resolved debates over their appropriate custodianship and memorialisation. Since the first repatriations in 2011 and subsequent returns in 2014 and 2018, these remains have been housed in a designated room at the National Museum of Namibia, where they are maintained in a temporary repository while the government, traditional authorities, and affected communities continue to negotiate their ultimate fate. The remains are not displayed publicly, and access is restricted, highlighting ongoing challenges in establishing a clear national policy on the care of ancestral remains repatriated from colonial collections.

Namibian ancestral remains in the Social History collection at the Iziko Museums

An examination of the Iziko Museums' database of Namibian human remains, together with an analysis of colonial correspondence files in the museum archives, reveals that the Museum holds remains for seventy-six individuals from Namibia

17 H. Becker, 'Changing Urbanscapes: Colonial and Postcolonial Monuments in Windhoek', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 27, 1 (2018), 1-21.

18 National Archives of Namibia ZBU1005, Kaiserliches Gouvernement für Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Landesmuseum in Windhuk Specialia, 6 June 1902.

– mostly skulls and jaws. All the seventy-six individuals have been deaccessioned from the main collection and are stored in a special room waiting for repatriation to Namibia. According to the accession records, seven females and four males were ascribed a gender. The gender of the rest of the remains was not noted.[19] The collection primarily reflects the colonial-era practice of collecting ancestral remains for scientific study, often without the consent of the communities involved. Colonial administration staff and the museum determined which remains were of interest at any given time.

To trace the contexts in which ancestral remains were collected from Namibia, archival sources that include museum accession records, databases and correspondences from the colonial period of the Iziko Museums were examined. In addition, published historical work was consulted to situate the case under consideration within the wider colonial practices of museum collection in southern Africa. Access to the physical collection was limited due to its sensitive and ethically contested status. However, during a single permitted visit, I engaged in informal conversational interviews with the collections manager, which allowed for documenting handling practices, classification systems, and policy decisions. These interactions were complemented by further conversational interviews and meetings with museum staff outside the collection, including sessions with visiting Museum Anthropology students from the University of Cologne, Germany, who discussed the collection and its potential repatriation. Detailed field notes and reflective observations were maintained throughout. This methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of both the historical and contemporary management of ancestral remains and informed recommendations for ethical repatriation.

The remains in the collection were primarily collected from northern Namibia, particularly from the Ondonga region. Historical records indicate that these remains were sent to the South African Museum by Hahn, the Resident Commissioner for the Owamboland, in response to a request from the museum for a representative sample of Aawambo remains.[20] In my reading, the fact that the collection of human remains in the Owamboland coincided with military operations in the region suggests that these remains were acquired within the broader context of colonial violence. It is therefore unlikely that these humans remains were collected under ethical conditions.

The collection of Namibian ancestral remains was facilitated through various means, many of which raise ethical concerns. Some remains were acquired through purchases made by the then South African Museum (now the Iziko Museums), while others were obtained as donations from archaeologists. Additionally, certain remains entered the collection as part of institutional exchanges, including loans from the University of Cape Town. The largest number of ancestral remains from Namibia that are in the Iziko collection were classified as Owambo people from Ondonga.

19 Namibian Human Remains Repatriation list, Iziko Museum.
20 Letter from Director of South African Museum, Péringuey to C.H., Iziko Museums, CS82.1/ SAM3467

These are followed in quantity by those classified in the accession records of the Iziko Museums as San, many of whom were obtained through the involvement of state officials, such as magistrates stationed across Namibia. The ancestral remains that are deemed ethically problematic predominantly consist of skulls. However, museum records also document the presence of post-cranial skeletal remains associated with certain skulls. Notably, among the remains designated for repatriation to Namibia, there is a preserved head that retains both hair and skin which was collected from Grootfonetin.[21]

The documentation of ancestral remains collected from Namibia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often minimal and lacked specificity. This practice, which was common in colonial contexts, presents significant challenges for contemporary provenance research. Accession records frequently provided only broad geographic description, such as "Damaraland" or "Grootfontein", and, in some cases, even more ambiguous descriptions like "West Coast" or "Northern Part". Such vague attributions obscure the precise origins of the remains and complicate efforts to trace them back to specific communities or individuals. Building on Quijano's notion of the coloniality of being, I argue that such anonymisation was a strategy in which ancestral remains were transformed from persons to scientific specimens.[22] It was a form of active epistemic practice that was aimed at facilitating dehumanisation and objectification of ancestral remains. As a consequence, it stripped the ancestors of personal identity.

Within the Iziko Museums' collection of ancestral remains from Namibia, there is a notable exception: the skull of a young San man whose profile remains traceable. Identified as N'cani or Agarob, he was reportedly shot by a German farmer in 1916 after being accused of theft and was accessioned in the museum a year later.[23] Agarob's remains were among many others that were subjected to extensive craniometric examination by Eugéne Pittard in Switzerland.[24] This case serves as a compelling example of how ancestral remains were exchanged across international scientific networks for research purposes. The reluctance of the scientist responsible for these studies to repatriate the remains until his retirement further illustrates the enduring legacy of colonial-era racial science and the ethical challenges surrounding restitution efforts. Agarob's place of origin is recorded as Choiganab, providing a rare opportunity for restitution to a known locality. Other cases with established provenance include the remains of an individual from Aus, believed to be of Herero descent, who is thought to have succumbed to illness.[25] Additionally, there are ancestral remains recovered from excavations in the Numas Valley of the Brandberg. Other remains include individuals from Otjito, Swakopmund, Angra Pequena (Lüderitz), Bogenfels,

21 Namibian Human Remains Repatriation List, Iziko Museum.
22 A. Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South,* 1, 3 (2000), 533-580.
23 Letter from Major Brownlee to Péringuey, 3 April 1917, BM150/ SAM AP1876, Iziko Museums.
24 List of skulls and skeletons sent to Pittard, November and December 1923, LW520-520.1. PA Pittard, Iziko Museums.
25 W. Kasibe, 'Museums and the Construction of Race Ideologies: The Case of Natural History and Ethnographic Museums in South Africa' (PhD Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2020).

Grootfontein and Dordabis. Unlike the majority of remains in the collection, these have identifiable places of origin, offering potential pathways for restitution. This diversity makes the repatriation of these remains to Namibia distinctive, as their places of origin can be identified to some extent, even though some remains cannot be definitively linked to a specific community. In certain instances, population movements may have resulted in the displacement of earlier groups by new communities with no direct ancestral ties to the remains. Nevertheless, what is significant in this context is that the general place of origin is known, allowing for the respectful reinterment of the remains in a designated burial site within the relevant geographic area.

In my examination of the accession data concerning ancestral remains from Namibia, I observed a notable practice of distinguishing between different San communities based on their regional origins. This pattern of classification in the accession records highlights the colonial emphasis on regional and ethnic categorisation, which often informed collection practices and continues to shape the archival and museum record. This practice was consistent with physical anthropology's focus on types instead of populations. Classification into types was at the core of physical anthropology before the 1950s[26] and continued into the post-independence era in southern African museology.

Regarding the potential for restitution, the ancestral remains from Namibia housed in the Iziko Museums present a viable opportunity for restitution to at least the geographic areas from which they were originally collected. Although establishing direct familial lineage may be challenging, there are contemporary communities in these regions that maintain cultural connections with the ancestral remains. Consequently, reburial can be facilitated in accordance with the ancestral traditions of the affected communities, ensuring a respectful and culturally appropriate process. The process of repatriation and restitution of ancestral remains and cultural possessions from museums to their countries of origin is complex and fraught with difficulties. In the case of repatriations from South African museums to Namibia, the issues extend beyond mere logistics and involve deep-seated historical, ethical, and social challenges. When considering returning the ancestral remains from the Iziko Museums to Namibia, officials from both countries have to confront the legacy of colonialism, the problems with derogatory terminology in museum documentation, and the practical aspects of repatriation and reburial.[27]

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26 A. G. Morris. 'Searching for 'Real' Hottentots'.

27 Since 2011, Germany has returned ten sets of ancestral remains to Namibia, some of which were prominent while others received less public attention. It would appear from the histories of these returns that the question of restorative justice was not considered during discussions on reparations. In fact, according to Shigwedha, any suggestions about using the returns of the ancestral remains as a basis for seeking reparations were suppressed. Kössler, on the other hand, argues that there must be a direct connection between the return of ancestral remains or cultural possessions and reparations. Both scholars make a compelling argument that the early returns of ancestral remains missed an opportunity for engaging with issues of restorative justice. It is crucial that Iziko learns from earlier processes and considers these arguments when carrying out repatriations to Namibia. See: V. A. Shigwedha, 'The Return of the Herero and Nama Bones from Germany: The Victims' Struggle for Recognition and Recurring Genocide Memories in Namibia', In *Human Remains in Society: Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass Violence*, edited by J.-M. Dreyfus and E. Anstett. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016); R. Kössler, 'Genocide, Apology and Reparation – The Linkage between Images of the Past in Namibia and Germany', *AEGIS European Conference on African Studies,* 11-14 July 2007, Leiden. Accessed [24 June 2025]. http://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/koessler-linkage-2007.pdf .

Colonialism's long-lasting influence is one of the central challenges in the process of repatriation. During the colonial era, ancestral remains and cultural possessions were collected by South African and European colonisers under often violent and oppressive circumstances. Some of these items and ancestral remains were transported to South African museums, where they were exhibited, studied or stored. The justification for these actions often reflected racist ideologies that sought to dehumanise and devalue African cultures and objectify humans as scientific museum specimens. When the remains are repatriated, they must be removed from the status of anonymous biological specimens, restoring their identity as individuals with social, cultural, and spiritual significance to descendant communities. This process has been framed as rehumanisation by Rassool.[28] For Namibia to prepare well for the rehumanised return of the ancestral remains that are in the Iziko collection, there must be a policy in place that ensures that the process is followed, otherwise Namibia will perpetuate the perception of ancestral remains as museum objetcs or specimens.

One of the most significant challenges in the restitution process is the lingering effect of coloniality – the continuation of colonial-era power dynamics and thinking patterns. Even today, museums and institutions in South Africa often hold onto the authority to decide whether to return ancestral remains and cultural objects to Namibia. This scenario of unequal power dynamics reinforces the colonial relationship where the former colonisers retain control over the formerly colonised after independence. While some museums, such as the Iziko Museums, may recognise the need for repatriation, the bureaucratic, legal, and political processes involved can be slow, cumbersome, and obstructive. Thus, the return of ancestral remains must be framed as a practice of decoloniality, which in itself must confront the architecture and the regulatory and administrative structures of colonialism. Considering that the human remains that this paper discusses were collected in the context of colonial knowledge production, it is plausible to argue that processes of repatriation and restitution of ancestral remains must frame a decolonial museology in Namibia. Such museology, following Mbembe's discourse on decolonising university education in South Africa, seeks to dismantle the institutional and epistemic structures through which colonialism shaped knowledge production.[29] Returning ancestral remains in these same contexts that are still embedded in colonial curatorial practices perpetuates rather than transforms the coloniality of knowledge production in museums. In that case the museum remains a centre of knowledge production about cultures and communities, which is consistent with Quijano's argument about the coloniality of power, being and knowledge.[30]

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28 C. Rassool, 'Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3 (2015), 653-670, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2015.1028002

29 A. Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive', lecture delivered at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (May 2, 2015), https://wiser.wits.ac.za/sites/default/files/private/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf

30 A. Quijano. 'Coloniality and Modernity/rationality', *Cultural Studies,* 21, 2-3 (2007), 168-178.

Decolonisation is a process of confronting the structures of colonialism.[31] In terms of repatriation and restitution of ancestral remains, the museum is a structure that must be rethought as a transitional resting space, where the ancestral remains are placed in temporary custodial care while waiting to be reburied. Being a transitional resting place requires the museum to have spaces for reflection, mourning and other rituals that the affected communities may wish to perform.

A further limitation in restitution efforts stems from the continued use of derogatory and offensive terminology to classify and describe indigenous peoples and cultures. Terms such as 'Hottentot' and 'Bushmen', which are still found in museum records and academic descriptions, reflect the deeply ingrained racist and derogatory attitudes that characterised the colonial period. These offensive terminologies not only distort the cultural identities of the people whose artifacts and remains are being repatriated. They also contribute to a broader erasure of their history and dignity. To speak of 'human remains' also risks referring to people as biological material and specimens for scientific study, and potentially alienates the dead from people who may have cultural ties to the remains. Ancestral remains appear to be a more appropriate term as it has the potential to restore the connection between the living and those remains that remain in museum collections.

Museological terminologies remain a challenge, and not only when it concerns returned ancestral remains and cultural possessions. Archives face the same challenges when archival documents are repatriated. Namibian museums are increasingly confronted with the need to decolonise their epistemologies to avoid reinforcing the ideological frameworks of colonial ethnography. This concern has become central to the ongoing debates on restitution, where the Museums Association of Namibia has been critical of certain modes of provenance research. The Association contends that traditional provenance methodologies, when uncritically applied, risk reproducing colonial classifications and narratives.[32] During the process of restitution, communities may find it distressing and disrespectful to encounter such terminology in the documentation and dialogue surrounding their ancestors or cultural heritage. As part of the repatriation process, South African museums and Namibian authorities must grapple with how to rewrite these colonial narratives, while respecting the cultural identities of the communities involved. Attention to a decolonial practice therefore requires actively rewriting museum histories and rejecting colonial terminologies and classifications that dehumanised indigenous Namibians.

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31 W. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26, 7-8 (2009), 1-23.

32 There has been a debate concerning the reproduction of terms that are regarded as derogatory when cultural possessions are returned or researched. A case in point was the publication of 'Locating Namibian Cultural Heritage in Museums and Universities in German-speaking Countries: A Finding Aid for Provenance Research'. The debate has not been concluded as Namibian heritage institutions, particularly the Museums Association and the National Museum of Namibia, still insist that there is a need to revisit the terminologies before the finding aid can be used widely in Namibia. Similarly, the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg is engaged in a project with the National Archives of Namibia that aims to find a sensitive approach to dealing with colonial terminology that is no longer acceptable. See: G. Grimme and L. Förster, 'Locating Namibian Cultural Heritage in Museums and Universities in German-Speaking Countries. See: 'A Finding Aid for Provenance Research', Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste, 2024. https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet_derivate_00006785/DZK_Working%20Paper%206-24_Grimme_Foerster.pdf

For Namibia, the question of terminology must be considered critically in the process of developing a policy on repatriation and restitution of ancestral remains and cultural properties. The term 'ancestral remains' will frame the remains as belonging to communities which in turn centres communities in repatriation and restitution by invoking mandatory community consultation and participation in the processes.

While the ideological and historical challenges of restitution and reburial are significant, practical difficulties also abound. The physical conditions of the ancestral remains must be taken into account when being repatriated. Some ancestral remains have been in museum collections for more than a century and are fragile. In at least one case among the ancestral remains to be returned to Namibia, the mandible and the skull do not belong to the same individual but are paired together as the same individual, which begs proper and thorough provenance research before the restitution process once they arrive in Namibia.[33] Some items may have been altered, damaged, or lost over time. Some ancestral remains were associated with cultural possessions but museum practice imposed the separation of possessions from their owners. In the case of the individual who was collected from Aus, the database of ancestral remains from Namibia in the Iziko Museums is silent on the issue of where the possessions are, yet it was documented that he had his clothes under a stone when he was collected.[34]

Reburial is a sensitive and highly complex process. Returning remains to Namibia for reburial can be both logistically and ceremonially challenging. There may be difficulties in identifying the appropriate descendants. However, the geographical information regarding where the remains were collected may point to communities who can conduct the reburial. Namibia has no precedence in restitution of ancestral remains from a museum to a community or family for reburial. However, Namibia can learn from South African examples or can develop their own guidelines that include community consultation. South African approaches prioritise decisions about restitution and reburial that are driven by descendant communities and not by state actors such as museum curators. Annelize Kotze has argued for community-led processes and has demonstrated how this was successfully implemented by the Iziko Museums as a way of restoring dignity and determining how burial and even memorialisation must be driven by communities.[35] Community-driven restitution must include creating formal, transparent agreements for transfer, custody and reburial protocols with communities. Another stark difference between Namibia and South Africa's restitution programmes is that South African institutions such as the Iziko Museums have coupled repatriation with public engagement programmes such as the Inter-Resting Times exhibition which was held at the Castle of Good Hope in 2018. Namibia could develop its own public learning and awareness programmes about issues relating to restitution.

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33 Namibian Human Remains Repatriation list, Accession Number 1876, Iziko Museum.
34 Ibid.
35 A. Kotze, 'The bones are speaking: community engagement, Ancestral Remains and restoration', *Archaeological review from Cambridge*, 39, 2 (2024), 58-71.

Central to the process of restitution and reburial, is the involvement of local communities. The return of ancestral remains is not just a political or legal process but a deeply personal and spiritual one for the communities involved. As such, community leaders, elders, and cultural practitioners must play a central role in deciding how restitution and reburial are carried out. In 2024, Namibia constituted a Repatriation and Restitution Committee for ancestral remains housed at the Iziko Museums, consisting solely of academics, bureaucrats, and heritage practitioners. The committee would greatly benefit from the inclusion of cultural representatives from the affected communities, ensuring a more inclusive and community-centred approach to the restitution process. However, colonial legacies of marginalisation and dispossession mean that these communities may be under-resourced, lack political representation, or have limited access to the decision-making processes that impact their heritage. Moreover, the transnational nature of the repatriation process introduces additional hurdles. When cultural objects and ancestral remains are located in South African museums, the legal and diplomatic processes involved can be extensive. Not only are the two countries unequal in terms of the existence of policies, they also have different heritage management regimes. These unequal terms need to be considered in the whole process of repatriation and restitution.

Nevertheless, the case of ancestral remains from the Iziko Museums presents opportunities for Namibia to develop a local template for repatriation and restitution. The Iziko Museums have demonstrated a willingness to repatriate Namibian remains. The deaccessioning of these remains from the main collection is an important first step in this process. Repatriation should be approached on a case-by-case basis, with particular attention to the documentation and historical context of each individual's remains. For example, the case of Agarob, a 15-year-old San boy from Choigunab in the Grootfontein area, is well-documented and could serve as a starting point for repatriation efforts. However, to achieve this, Namibia has to first establish structures such as a comprehensive policy on ancestral remains in museums and other institutions. Such a policy must cover institutions in the country as well, instead of focusing on ancestral remains being repatriated from other countries only.

There are several key actions that Namibia should take to ensure that repatriation is conducted ethically and with the full participation of the affected communities. A Restitution Research Unit (RRU) should be established at the University of Namibia (UNAM), in collaboration with the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN) and the relevant government ministries. This unit would be responsible for conducting further provenance research and facilitating the repatriation process. The RRU can develop short courses for community researchers who will be responsible for provenance and other research in their respective communities. Provenance research should be extended to other South African institutions, including universities and museums, to identify additional Namibian remains and cultural possessions that may be eligible for repatriation. This will result in a comprehensive database of Namibian ancestral remains, including geo-referenced locations of where the remains were collected. This will facilitate discussions with local communities and help ensure that repatriation is conducted in a manner that respects the cultural significance of the remains.

Conclusion

My research in the Iziko Social History Collection provided valuable insights into the representation of Namibian ancestral remains at the Iziko Museums and the challenges associated with their repatriation. By addressing the colonial legacies embedded within these collections and developing a systematic restitution program, Namibia can transition from a problematic history to a programmatic approach that prioritises ethical and respectful treatment of ancestral remains. This process will not only restore dignity to the affected communities but also contribute to the broader global discourse on repatriation and restitution.

The restitution and reburial of Namibian ancestral remains from South African museums face numerous difficulties and limits, both ideological and practical. Colonial legacies continue to influence the power dynamics between South African institutions and Namibian communities, creating obstacles in the restitution process. The use of derogatory terminology in museum records and the broader narrative surrounding these remains further complicates efforts to restore dignity to Namibia's indigenous communities. Practical challenges such as funding, logistics, and community involvement further highlight the complexity of the restitution process. However, through careful negotiation, empowerment of local communities, and the rejection of colonial terminologies, there is hope that these challenges can be addressed, allowing for a meaningful and dignified return of Namibia's ancestors and cultural heritage.