

## Abstract

Larissa Foerster: Contact history in the making: the return of colonial anthropological collections from German museums to Namibia

Contact history in the making: the return of colonial anthropological collections from German museums to Namibia  
In his seminal essay Clifford laconically stated: "Objects in museums can still go elsewhere". However, deaccession and in particular repatriation are among the most contested fields of museum anthropology – not the least because they destabilise the very idea or rather ideology of the museum. On the other hand the return of objects to their source communities facilitates the reworking of the contact history between collecting societies and "collected" societies, and allows for the re-entanglement of formerly disentangled objects and collections, requiring from all parties involved considerable skills in negotiating differing interests, notions and practices, navigating conflictive situations and making compromises in order to make out common ground with their respective counterparts.

At least this can be said to be true for a very recent repatriation case currently under negotiation between Germany and Namibia (the actual return is scheduled to take place in mid 2011). In this case, the "bones of contention" are some 20 Namibian skulls that have been spotted in the anthropological collection of the Berlin Medical Historical Museum. They are currently demanded back by Namibian source communities and the Namibian government and are likely to be returned soon. The history of this collection is very unambiguously connected to the history of colonialism and racism and the physical and epistemic violence underlying both: The skulls/corpses of Hereros and Namas were "purloined" by German military doctors in Namibian concentration camps during the colonial war of 1904-1908 in then German South West Africa (today Namibia) and were subsequently delivered to German scientists in Berlin, who made use of them as specimens in order to prove theories of race.

It was not before 2008 that the skulls were re-discovered in the collection of the Berlin Medical Historical Museum and that claims for repatriation were made. While the Berlin Medical Historical Museum has in the meantime engaged in a research project that aims to clarify the provenance of the skulls, the affected communities in Namibia have started to develop scenarios for the return of the skulls and come up with suggestions for the final destination of these human remains in Namibia. On either side there is much need for discussion and negotiation – also due to the fact that there are hardly any precedents in Germany that this case can be compared to. This also opens up new possibilities in writing or rather enacting contact history.