Human remains repatriation: a museum curator’s perspective

The repatriation of ancestral remains is a vital act of cultural revitalization and reclamation of heritage for many Indigenous communities around the world as it provides them an opportunity to reconnect with their ancestors, strengthen their cultural identities and heal from historical trauma. It is also an act of respect and acknowledgement of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, correcting past injustices and promoting a more equitable future. In an interview with IWGIA, Annelize Kotze, an Indigenous rights activist, Social History Curator at the Iziko Museums of South Africa and archaeology Masters student at the University of Cape Town, highlights the importance of raising awareness and encouraging discussion, particularly with youth, about the scientific and ethical considerations of human remains collection and their repatriation to home communities.

By Debates Indígenas – July 1st 2023

Debates Indígenas: Can you tell us a little about yourself, your background and how you became an advocate and active actor in the human remains repatriation movement?

Annelize Kotze: I have been working at the museum for over a decade, but my involvement with human remains began only in 2017. Despite having known that the museum had body casts on display in the South African Museum, which were removed after community consultation, I had no idea that there were human remains in our collections that were inaccessible to the public. In that same year, Iziko hosted a conference on human remains for the Commonwealth Association of Museums. One of the attendees requested access to our collection, which was only possible with strict protocols. Accompanying her was the first time I had been in the room with the remains, and it was an emotional experience for all of us. After that experience, I was asked to help catalog certain sensitive body casts and even curated an exhibition on repatriation, focusing on Sarah Baartman and the remains of women and children still being held in museum spaces.
DI: Why do you think this path is essential?

AK: It is important for us to work towards repatriation and create practical policies to provide the remains with the dignity and respect they deserve, and for their communities to lay them to rest. As an Iziko Museums curator, I feel that I can make a practical difference, and I take my responsibility seriously.

DI: What is the significance of this work to you personally?

AK: Let me explain to you what the box with remains looks like: the label contains information such as the part of the remains, gender, probable age, and location. Seeing the location [on the box] and knowing that it is where my family is from in the Northern Cape, was just such a shock for me. I met with people from the areas where the remains were taken from and one woman simply said she wanted her people to be buried.

In Glasgow, one of the museums wanted to repatriate human remains taken from Africa in the 1800s. The last day there, alone, I played music and made a ceremony to apologize for the pain caused by past actions which had led to them still being so far away from their homes and not below the soil yet. Many communities feel trauma and must heal. Objects buried with the remains, burial goods, are also being repatriated as a sign of respect for the cultures they belong to. The experience is emotional and heavy, but necessary for honoring the souls of those who were taken.

DI: Can you describe the main steps involved in successfully repatriating human remains?

AK: The repatriation process is not a straightforward one due to the administrative and political aspects involved. It requires policies to be in place that are agreed upon by museums and governments. Each case is unique and involves different communities, politics and countries. The museum, the government and the community all need to be dealt with, which can make the process complicated. It is essential to keep the community informed, but not create unrealistic expectations. The process can take years and requires bravery, passion, perseverance and a willingness to learn. It is crucial to be honest and not lie to the community as they are the most important part of the process. Activists, groups and international organizations can also provide assistance and help with the repatriation process. Ultimately,
it is the remains and spirits that need to come back, and it is the responsibility of those involved in the process to make it happen as smoothly as possible.

**DI: What is the role of emotion in your work?**

**AK:** Expressing emotions in the context of working with human remains in a museum can be a sensitive topic. Some colleagues may not be as emotionally invested as others, which can create misunderstanding. For me, this work is very emotional, and I try to bring that perspective to the forefront of discussions. I remind my colleagues that we need to be aware of the human side of the remains and the communities they belong to. It is important to remember that the pain caused by past atrocities is still being felt by those communities. As museum professionals, we must take ownership of the harm done and acknowledge the emotions involved. However, it's also important to take care of ourselves and seek support as needed, as we can become emotional supporters for the communities we work with. It is okay to express emotions, but everyone has their own way of coping, and we must respect that in each other to make this a proper process. Ultimately, healing starts with ourselves and extends to our colleagues and the wider community.

**DI: What's your view on the opposition to repatriation? Why do some individuals or institutions argue for keeping human remains in museums or collections instead of returning them to their communities?**

**AK:** The opposition to repatriation is often rooted in the benefits that museums and universities gain from keeping human remains in their collections. Institutions can gain accreditation and funding through research on these “ethically” collected remains, and burying them would limit opportunities for future research. In the past, there was also financial gain from the trade of physical bones as well as objects, but now it is more about the research that can be done. However, it is important to consider what studies on ethical human remains mean, and to use modern technology to make research ethical instead of relying on unethical research on remains.

Iziko has a strict policy on its unethically collected remains, which were historically collected for race-based science, where no research is allowed, and access is only for communities for repatriation purposes. Unethically acquired human remains are stored separately, or in a
clearly demarcated space, where possible, while awaiting deaccessioning, repatriation or restitution. Despite the challenges, it is important to prioritize returning remains to their rightful place and telling the stories that need to be told.

**DI: What is the significance of the government’s role in repatriation?**

**AK:** The repatriation of human remains requires permission from governments, deaccessioning, amongst other requirements, and an understanding of different repatriation policies across different countries. It involves collaboration with various entities such as museums, communities and governments. Each case is unique and requires extensive research and compelling arguments. Some institutions are open-minded about repatriation, while others are not. Researchers and curators working with the remains must also be aware of these policies and work to build a compelling argument for repatriation. It is also important to be sensitive and diplomatic when working with different entities. The spiritual aspect of repatriation may be used to encourage museums to consider repatriation, but academic arguments may be more effective with some institutions. The process is not always straightforward and some museums may refuse to repatriate objects. However, progress is being made in some cases, and a case-by-case approach is necessary. Overall, repatriation is a complex issue that touches on many fields and requires cooperation and sensitivity from all involved parties.

**DI: Have you encountered a situation where a museum refused to repatriate remains? What strategies can we use to promote repatriation among museums, research institutions, universities, and government officials?**

**AK:** According to my experience, some museums are open to the idea of repatriation, while others are not. It is important to understand your audience and to gauge the situation before approaching museums with a request for repatriation. For example, if you are dealing with academics, you need to be able to relate to them on that level. It's not enough to come in with a box of tissues and tears and hope everything will be fine. You need to be able to speak their language and explain why repatriation is important. Sometimes, repatriation can come in the form of a compromise. One successful example was when a Ghost Dance shirt that was taken from the Lakota American Indian tribe and was on display in the Kelvingrove museum...
[in Glasgow, Scotland]. After a seven-year repatriation negotiation process, the Lakota decided that they wanted the history and narrative of the shirt and other such objects to remain in the space. So, once the original shirt was returned to its rightful owners, a replica shirt was provided to the museum [by the Lakota].

**DI:** Can you talk about the spiritual significance of repatriation and how it is different from various perspectives, such as the scientific perspective, the perspective of Indigenous Peoples’ rights, the human rights’ perspective, and the perspective of dignity?

**AK:** It is important to understand the spiritual significance of repatriation for the communities involved. Repatriation is not just about human rights or ethnic minorities' rights. It is also about spiritual meaning. For these communities, the repatriation of their ancestors' remains or cultural artifacts is a way to restore balance and honor to their ancestors. It is crucial that museums and other institutions are open to having discussions about repatriation and not hold on to objects that were taken unethically.

When a person passes away, every community has its own burial practices. But if a grave is disturbed, it disrupts the belief that the soul is on its way to becoming an ancestor who watches over the community. If a person does not complete this journey, there is a disconnection in the system, causing pain and trapping the community in a space where they cannot heal. It is crucial that the remains are in the soil so that they can continue their journey to becoming ancestors. The burial process varies for each community, and it is respected. When Sarah Baartman was repatriated, her community decided how to bury her. It was crucial for them to have the ritual and herbs burning, which carries the spirit up and communicates with the ancestors. If this ritual, or any other specific to a specific community, does not happen, there is an emotional and spiritual hole in the community.

The interview was conducted by Daria Polygalova and Indiana Lokotar, undergraduate students at the Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg as a part of their internship with IWGIA.