

Chapter 4

Ancestral Remains from Oceania

Histories and Relationships in the Collection of the British Museum

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Introduction

The region known as Oceania is a diverse part of the world. Dominated by the Pacific Ocean, it encompasses thousands of islands and atolls, from the Caroline Islands in the west, to Rapa Nui in the east, and the large land masses of Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand. The sequence of human settlement varies greatly for these different areas. Current evidence appears to indicate that the Australian continent was first settled over 60,000 years ago, whereas the outer limits of Polynesia were reached much more recently, with New Zealand being settled last, around 900 years ago.

The people of Oceania, their physical characteristics, societies and practices have engaged the attention of westerners from the earliest moments of contact. From the 16th century onwards, European explorers began recording the similarities and differences between the people they encountered, speculating about their relationships to each other and to the wider world. Oceanic peoples also sought to define the explorers in their own cultural terms and memorialized their visits in oral histories. Over time, missionaries, colonial officials, settlers and later anthropologists were amongst those who continued to observe, question and record, each with their own agenda. Their success depended on the relationships they created and often the prevailing political conditions of the time.

Museum collections originate from these varied encounter situations. Collected human remains often appear to represent the most invasive of cross-cultural investigations, and in recent decades have rightly stimulated discussion amongst museum professionals concerned about their correct curatorship and care, in addition to requests for repatriation. A major preoccupation has been engagement with cultural descendants. In Pacific institutions, indigenous people may be involved with the museum on a variety of levels – as staff, researchers, consultants, visitors and collectively as local communities – enabling curatorship to be more closely aligned with indigenous priorities and observances. In Britain, museums with Oceanic collections must frequently overcome the barrier of distance in order to establish relationships which might similarly add cultural integrity to curatorial practice, and maintain a sense of the contemporary relevance of collections to those with whom they are most closely connected.

While it is a misconception that all indigenous groups in the Pacific are interested in the repatriation of human remains from overseas and local institutions, this has been a priority in Australia, New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands in particular. In these countries, the issue of repatriation of artefacts and human remains forms part of wider efforts to regain control of cultural heritage. National governments have recognized that dispossession – of lands, property and rights – during the colonial area was a historical wrong which can to an extent be rectified in the present through formalized restitution processes (Jenkins 2011). Repatriation programmes have been incorporated into the activities of those departments responsible for cultural heritage, and by extension in national and state museums as potential repositories for returned remains.

The first part of this chapter gives a brief overview of the breadth and diversity of the British Museum collection,

describing the remains within the context of mortuary practices across the Pacific. The second part covers the three repatriation claims for human remains processed by the British Museum since the Human Tissue Act 2004 came into force, all of which have related to the Oceanic collections. This gives some insight into the varied collection histories of the remains, and the relationships of the respective communities to them.

An overview of human remains in the Oceanic collections at the British Museum

The earliest collected human remains in the British Museum's Oceanic collection are from the Pacific voyages of James Cook, undertaken between 1768 and 1779. While human remains continued to enter the collection until the 1960s, in most cases the material had not been collected from its original source later than the early decades of the 20th century. A significant proportion of the remains derive from actual exchanges, rather than through archaeological excavations or other means. Human remains from Oceania are not actively being added to the Museum's collection today.

The collection consists of over 200 remains, almost half of which are from Papua New Guinea, including the Trobriand Islands, the Admiralty Islands, New Britain and New Ireland. Other items are from Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, West Papua, the Solomon Islands and the Santa Cruz group, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Society Islands, the Marquesas Islands, Rapa Nui, Hawaii and New Zealand. There are over 80 skulls or crania, most of which are decorated or modified, in addition to charms, ornaments and implements such as spatulas and fish-hooks. Details of the collection can be accessed via the Museum's Collection Online database (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx); images of some remains are not shown due to relevant cultural sensitivities.

This section describes some of the human remains in the collection, in order to give an insight into the cultural diversity of the Pacific and the ethnographic and cultural value of these collections. Discussion of particular remains enables the appreciation of the social priorities of a particular group in relation to the dead, while the collection history reveals the complexities of interactions between Pacific peoples and outsiders. Pacific scholars have been consulted to ensure that there are in general no cultural objections to the publication of images of the remains shown in this chapter.

Decorated skulls from Papua New Guinea

A significant proportion of the Oceanic human remains are from Papua New Guinea. The European colonization of New Guinea began relatively late in comparison to other parts of the Pacific, becoming formalized in the late 19th century, with Dutch, German and British involvement. While the colonial authorities placed restrictions on practices such as exposing corpses on open platforms and the use of traditional repositories such as caves and trees, traditional mortuary practices continued in New Guinea well into the 20th century, in contrast to other parts of the Pacific where suppression occurred much earlier.



Plate 1 Human skull over-modelled with clay, Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, c. 1850–1919. British Museum, London (Oc1919,0718.20)

One such practice was the decoration of skulls for display in or near the communal house for men, sometimes on specially constructed boards and racks. In some places, such as the Sepik region of northern Papua New Guinea, this involved the 'over-modelling' of the skull with clay, the recreation of features such as the eyes with cowrie shell, seeds or imported beads and the painting of the face. The skulls of kin or enemies were treated in this way, and the modelled clay features were intended to create an actual resemblance to the deceased (Greub *et al.* 1985). When displayed on racks as part of large assemblages, they testified to the strength of a particular clan and frequently attracted the interest of outsiders.

In 1919, the Museum acquired a collection of over 200 objects from Mr Frank Streeten. Almost all of the objects are from mainland Papua New Guinea and appear to have been collected by Streeten himself, although there are no specific details about this. Amongst the masks, axes and arrows, there are 11 over-modelled human skulls (**Pl. 1**) and an armband made of human vertebrae. The remains are noted as being from the Sepik River. The style of the skulls' decoration suggests that they may be linked to the Iatmul people of the Middle Sepik. The Iatmul use similar designs on the faces of carved wooden spirit figures, initiates and masks, *mai*, worn during ceremonies as they do on decorated skulls. The designs are thought to have a protective function (d'Alleva 1998). Amongst the Iatmul and other groups in New Guinea, head-hunting was formerly of central importance to the well being of a community, and its suppression led to anxiety and fundamental change. It was considered a necessary redress where relatives had been killed and was regarded as a means of maintaining balance, fertility and prosperity. The display of the heads represented the success and strength of both individual warriors and the clan.



Plate 2 *Agiba*, wooden skull rack, Aird River Delta, Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea, late 19th century. British Museum, London (Oc1906,1013.5)

In the Papuan Gulf region of southern New Guinea, the taking of a head was also used to mark certain junctures such as the completion of a new communal men's house or war canoe. The Kerewa people of the western Papuan Gulf displayed the skulls of head-hunting victims by hanging them from carved, anthropomorphic boards known as *agiba*. These could only be carved by men who had committed a homicide (Haddon 1918). An *agiba* was collected from the Aird River Delta in the Papuan Gulf in 1904 during the Cooke-Daniels Ethnographic Expedition to New Guinea (Pl. 2), in addition to several skulls with long cane loops which had been used to secure them for display (British Museum, Oc1906,1013.93, Oc1906,1013.955.b and Oc1906,1013.1607). Over 1,800 objects from this expedition along the south coast were donated to the Museum in 1906 by the anthropologist and medical doctor Charles Gabriel Seligman and the expedition sponsor Major Cooke-Daniels. The collection also includes another type of decorated skull, which has a wooden projection from the nose in the form of an open

oval and cylindrical sections of wood covered with coix seeds extending from the eye sockets (Oc1906,1013.578).

Preserved heads from Papua New Guinea and West Papua

Missionaries and colonial officials confiscated 'trophy heads' as part of efforts to control and pacify particular areas, and were also the means by which this type of human remains ultimately became part of the collections of overseas museums. In some cases these individuals also engaged in scientific endeavour, writing extensive articles about the communities that they were living amongst and supplying information to others. In the Western Province of Papua New Guinea, certain groups employed a method of preserving heads which attracted particular interest. Reverend E. Baxter Riley, in charge of the Fly River Mission at Daru from 1902, carried out an interview with two men taken into custody at the same time as several 'stuffed heads' had been seized by a Government Patrol Officer. At Baxter Riley's request, they described the techniques of preparation in detail. The interview formed the basis of an article by Baxter Riley, published in the 1923 volume of the anthropological journal *Man*, with accompanying articles on the same topic by anthropologist A.C. Haddon and Resident Magistrate Leo Austen. Baxter Riley was given permission by the Resident Magistrates to send two of the heads to museums in Cambridge and Manchester (see Baxter Riley 1923).

There are two heads of this type in the British Museum from the Fly River area. The heads were prepared using the techniques recorded by Baxter Riley, which according to Austen were techniques reserved for enemies. First they were 'cooked' in order to loosen fat and flesh, then the skull was removed and cleaned before being repositioned and the skin stuffed with bark, vegetable fibre and clay (Vandyke-Lee 1974; Haddon 1923; Baxter Riley 1923). The first (Oc1927,0407.1) is recorded as being from the Lake Murray District. In 1927 this head was donated by Miss Beatrice Ethel Grimshaw, an Irish journalist who had been working in Papua New Guinea since 1907. The head was most likely collected in the 1920s, when she joined an exploring party to the Fly River, which Lake Murray lies beyond (Laracy 1983). In this case, the nose has been replaced with a bound rattan loop, the lower mandible hangs around the neck and there are ear ornaments made of long leaf strips, possibly from the sago palm. The head is painted with a red vertical band down the centre of the face, which broadens to encircle the mouth.

The second (Oc1934,1203.1) is noted to have been 'taken by head-hunters of Suki Creek, lower middle Fly River, from a village lower down the river in 1931' (British Museum Register 1934). The head was donated by Captain F.C. Bradley of the Royal Navy. This head exhibits certain typical features described in the 1923 articles. For example, it seems to have a stone, nut or seed inside the skull, which rattles when moved. The ears, with attachments similar to those described above, are intact in accordance with the description of the removal of the skull from the scalp from Baxter Riley's informants. This is achieved without removing the ears and thus the ear ornaments of the victim

remain in place. A wooden peg protrudes from the back of the skull. This later enabled the head to be suspended using the peg and the nose formed with a rattan loop, for drying over a fire and for display in the ceremonial house (Baxter Riley 1923). A third head, which appears to have been preserved using the same techniques was acquired as part of the 1944 bequest of collector H.G. Beasley. This head (Oc1944,02.2072) is recorded as being from the Marind Anim people, of the south-eastern part of former Dutch New Guinea – now the Indonesian province of West Papua. In 1913 and the years that followed, hundreds of old skulls and ‘fresh heads’ were destroyed in the territory of the Marind Anim by the Dutch authorities, as they responded to complaints from the British government that the Marind Anim were carrying out intensive head-hunting in the areas to the east which were part of British New Guinea (Corbey 2010). Punishments also included imprisonment and death.

A rambaramp from Vanuatu

The human remains from Island Melanesia in the British Museum also include decorated and over-modelled skulls, and a single more elaborate memorial in the form of a *rambaramp* from Vanuatu (Oc1895,0396.1, **Pl. 3**), which was received as a donation in 1895. These human figures are funerary effigies from the island of Malekula in northern Vanuatu. Only the skulls of high-ranking individuals were kept and presented as *rambaramp*, which consist of an over-modelled skull and a body made of plant materials with elements made from clay (Layard 1928). In Malekula, men belong to grade societies, within which they can achieve a higher rank by participating in elaborate ceremonial rites. A person’s grade status was indicated by insignia such as ornaments made from a boar’s tusk, shell armbands and plaited armbands, the use of a particular coloured paint or a painted design for a particular part of the body as well as other body decorations. These were faithfully represented after death in the creation of the *rambaramp*.

In this case, the face and body are painted with orange, blue and black vertical bands. The upper arm on each side has painted-on armbands representing armbands made of black coconut shell and white shell beads, the beads arranged to form geometric patterns. On the left arm there is a boar’s tusk armband. On each shoulder, two small heads moulded from clay face outwards, each having a thick bunch of vegetable fibre projecting upwards from the top of their heads out of cane tubes. These are replicas of heads seen on the dancing sticks associated with one of the three main grade societies (Deacon 1970). *Rambaramp* were displayed in the communal men’s house until they rotted away, at which time the skull was transferred to the clan ossuary.

Bone flutes from New Zealand

With the exception of the preserved human heads from New Zealand discussed below, the remains from Polynesia in the British Museum collection are in the form of objects. Māori cultural treasures are considered to have a sacred, or *tapu* quality, which derives from the material used as well as the process of making itself, and the individuals with whom the object has been associated during its existence. Objects made from human bone are particularly *tapu*. The bones of



Plate 3 *Rambaramp*, funerary effigy incorporating an over-modelled skull, Vanuatu, c. 1850–93. British Museum, London (Oc1895,0316.1)

enemies could be used to make a range of objects, serving both a practical and derisory function. These included fish hooks, personal ornaments and musical instruments, which are represented in the collection, as well as needles and cloak pins (Te Awekotuku 1996). There are four human bone flutes in the collection, all of the type known as *koauau*, which are straight flutes typically carved from one piece of wood or bone, made in the early to mid-19th century (Oc1850,0206.1, Oc1896,-.930, Oc.1716, Oc,LMS.145). One of the flutes is known to have originally belonged to a chief, Titore Tākiri of the Ngāpuhi tribe in the far north of the North Island (**Pl. 4**). Titore developed a friendship with Captain F.W. Sadler, who regularly sailed between the Bay of Islands and Sydney during the 1830s, and gifted several prestigious objects to him. These included a rare type of nephrite neck ornament, a nephrite club, a bone cloak pin and a flute. The objects were sold to the Museum in 1896 by Captain Sadler’s granddaughter. The flute is elaborately carved with human figures. Another flute (Oc,LMS.145),



Plate 4 *Koauau*, flute, carved from human bone, New Zealand, early 19th century. British Museum, London (Oc1896,-.930)

formerly in the collection of the London Missionary Society, is relief-carved with a lizard. This may be a reference to human mortality, as lizards were regarded as being symbolic of death and misfortune (Te Awakotuku 1996, 48). It is thought to have been made in the early 19th century in the Taranaki region of the North Island (Starzecka, Neich and Pendergrast 2010).

Feather sceptres from the Hawaiian Islands

The Hawaiian collection in the British Museum also includes human bone fish hooks, personal ornaments incorporating bone, wooden bowls inlaid with human teeth and carved human figures made of wood, with real human teeth set in the mouth. Another striking object type is the *kāhili*, which are often described as sceptres or standards because of their form and their association with those of high rank. They consist of a straight staff, topped with neatly arranged feathers. They were owned by chiefs, *aliʻi*, but were carried by their attendants, and were also used in funeral processions (Buck 1957). In the past, the staff was formed of a wooden or whalebone core, mounted with rings of turtle shell, bone or ivory. The feathers of tropic birds, frigate birds and the Hawaiian honeycreepers and honeyeaters were amongst the types which were tied in bunches to form the cylindrical plume. In contrast to the derisory use of teeth or bone to inlay bowls or as fish hooks, the use of leg bones to make *kāhili* was an honour to the deceased (Buck 1957). One of the two sceptres which definitely include human bone is thought to have been collected on James Cook's third Pacific voyage (1776–9), when he visited the Hawaiian Islands and where he met his death (Oc,HAW.167, **Pl. 5**). A robust bone, probably the right humerus,² forms the core of the staff and the rounded joint is visible at the base. The upper section is covered with rings of turtle shell, neatly sectioned and flush with the surface of the bone; black feathers form the plume. A *kāhili* of this kind carried the name of the ancestor whose bones they were, and was used at the funerals of his descendants as a continuing commemoration (Buck 1957).

Claims for human remains from Oceania

When considering repatriation claims, an institution must operate within the legal boundaries pertaining to the de-accession of collection material. The British Museum Act 1963 clearly states that objects may only be disposed of in a very limited range of circumstances.³ However, from October 2005, Section 47 of the Human Tissue Act 2004 gave the Board of Trustees of the British Museum and eight other national museums the power to authorize the de-

accession of human remains less than 1,000 years old. The return of human remains, whether subject to a claim or not, was not made mandatory, however. A decision to authorize de-accession could be made by Trustees 'if it appears to them to be appropriate to do so for any reason' (Section 47, Subsection 2). In order to ensure that decisions would be made in a diligent and transparent manner, the British Museum developed a policy on human remains, approved by the Trustees in October 2006 and updated in 2013. The policy relates closely to the recommendations in the *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*, a Code of Practice which was released by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and which aims to support all UK museums in managing collections of human remains and in exercising the power to de-accession (DCMS 2005; see Chapter One, this volume).

The policy describes the criteria under which the Trustees will consider a request for the transfer of human remains, with the aim to ensure that the Museum is liaising with the most appropriate community (see paragraphs 5.14–5.16, Trustees of the British Museum 2013). It requires claimants to demonstrate that there is a continuity of cultural beliefs and practices between themselves and the community from which the remains originate (termed 'Cultural Continuity'), and that the remains are culturally important to the claimant community in the present. It is suggested that the significance or 'Cultural Importance' of the remains may relate to the fact that the remains were removed in a manner which was inconsistent with the customs and practices of the people concerned, or that customary mortuary processes or ceremonies were interrupted by the collection of the remains (see section 5.15.4⁴). Consideration of these important points has been central to all three of the claims to date, with the Trustees making specific reference to the circumstances of collection and how these related to the documented practices of the respective groups in the minutes of their decisions (see http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/human_remains.aspx for further details of each of the claims described here).

The Tasmanian cremation ash bundles

In July 2005, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) restated a claim first made in 1985 for the return of two cremation ash bundles, which had entered the Museum's collection in 1882. Wrapped in animal skin, the remains were in the form of amulets, which could be worn to ward off illness and as mementoes of the relative whose ashes they

held. The ash bundles were very likely collected by George Augustus Robinson during the period which he spent as ‘conciliator’ in Tasmania between 1829 and 1839.⁵ Robinson’s remit was to reduce the violence between settlers and the Aborigines so that land could be acquired by the settlers through the use of more peaceful methods. Robinson’s activities included moving as many groups as possible away from mainland Tasmania to a new settlement, Wybalenna, on Flinders Island to the north-east, a place which Robinson later managed. Separated from their lands and customary practices, many Tasmanians died of disease in poor living conditions (Robinson, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 1967).

The ash bundles were the only two known to exist, but they appear from Robinson’s own accounts to have once been in fairly common usage (TAC 2005). In Robinson’s journal entry for 9 July 1829, he describes observing a woman preparing a bundle. From her basket she took two circular pieces of kangaroo skin, into which she gathered the ashes from a recent cremation of a man. She drew together the skins by threading the sinews of a kangaroo tail through perforations around the circular edge, pulling them tight to create the charm – one for her sick husband and one for herself (Plomley 2008). On several occasions during his travels around Tasmania, Robinson described seeing the amulets being made or used. A possible link has been identified between Robinson’s journal entries in late May and early June 1838 and the collection of one of the amulets (Plomley 1962). On 25 May 1838 Robinson writes about a woman referred to as Ellen,⁶ who was dying of consumption. She wore an amulet around her neck and a human bone charm to alleviate back pain. Robinson tried to acquire the bone charm without success (Ellen replied that he had one already). Robinson reports Ellen’s death on 13 June. On the original label and the British Museum registration slip for the amulet formerly registered with the number Oc1882,1214, the date ‘June 26th 1838’ is noted. Because this date is close to that of Ellen’s death, it has been suggested that the bundle was a possession of hers and may have been taken without consent (perhaps explicitly so) (Plomley 1962, 10).

Following their probable collection by Robinson, the ash bundles were donated to the Museum in 1882 by the Royal College of Surgeons (Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London), having been purchased as part of the extensive collection of the Staffordshire surgeon, Dr Joseph Barnard Davis, before his death in 1881. Davis, a renowned craniologist, had purchased the bundles from Rose Robinson, the widow of George Augustus Robinson (1791–1866), in 1867 as part of the Australian collections of her late husband.

On 23 March 2006, the Museum’s Trustees decided to accept the claim for the return of the ash bundles. Several key points were pertinent to the decision (British Museum 2006). In collecting the remains, Robinson had caused the mortuary process, as practised by Tasmanians, to be interrupted, which prevented the remains from eventual natural disposal within the ancestral landscape. Importantly, the nature of the interruption (which in this case, is likely to have meant acquisition by coercion or without consent) was inconsistent with Tasmanian practices



Plate 5 Kāhili, feather sceptre with human bone handle, Hawaiian Islands, 18th century. British Museum, London (Oc,HAW.167)

– that is, it does not appear that Tasmanian Aborigines ever willingly traded or exchanged these sacred items with outsiders. Robinson’s own accounts detail people’s reluctance to part with them. In accordance with the British Museum Policy on Human Remains, independent advice was provided to the Trustees in the form of reports on the wider scientific value of the remains and the cultural value of the remains to the claimant group (British Museum 2006). Dr Robert Foley, Professor of Human Evolution at the University of Cambridge, noted that the research potential of cremation ash is currently limited, in contrast to intact skeletal material (Foley 2005). The cultural and spiritual significance of the remains to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people was ultimately judged to outweigh the public benefit of retaining them (Besterman 2005; Akerman 2006). The ash bundles were repatriated to Tasmania in September 2006 by two representatives from the TAC.

The kōiwi tangata (human remains) from New Zealand

In June 2006 a repatriation request was made for seven preserved human heads and nine skeletal remains from New Zealand. The claim was received from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, which in 2003 was mandated by the New Zealand government to establish a repatriation programme seeking the return of human remains from international and domestic institutions to Māori tribes.

The Māori practice of preserving the heads of ancestors has parallels elsewhere in Polynesia and the wider Pacific. The head was considered the most sacred part of the body, and the heads of chiefs, warriors or particularly revered kin were treated in this way. Warriors’ heads might be preserved at a battle site, so that they could be mourned over once

returned home as well as to prevent them from being taken by their enemies (Starzecka 1992). Enemy heads were preserved and displayed for the purposes of derision and bore witness to the prowess of a particular group (Orchiston 1967). Facial tattooing, *moko*, communicated individual identity and enhanced the impressive appearance of Māori men. This aesthetic appeal was retained in death by careful preparation of the heads through a process of steaming in an earth oven and drying with the aid of sun and sometimes smoke, and the reinforcement of nose and cheeks with small wood strips and flax (Orchiston 1967). For some early European visitors to New Zealand, the heads, now referred to as *toi moko*, were immediately recognized as potential curios and attempts were made to trade them away from their owners.⁷ The desire to obtain European muskets later increased the willingness of Māori to engage in this trade, to the degree that some heads are thought to have been prepared deliberately for sale.

The seven heads now in the British Museum collection were all likely traded out of New Zealand in the early decades of the 19th century. While a certain amount is known about the history of four of the heads within Britain, it has not been possible to trace any of the heads to a specific exchange or location in New Zealand and links to a particular tribe have not been made.⁸ The Trustees of the British Museum concluded their decision on this claim in April 2008. In deciding against the repatriation of the *toi moko*, they stated that it was not clear to them that the process of mortuary disposal had been interrupted or disturbed by their original collection (British Museum 2008). In addition, it was unclear whether the importance of the remains to an originating community outweighed the importance of the remains as information sources about human history. In this particular matter the Trustees were informed by a report by Dr Lissant Bolton, head of the Oceania section (and now Keeper of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas), resulting from consultation work carried out in New Zealand. The report concluded that Māori may favour the identification of the specific tribe to which the heads are related *prior* to any repatriation to New Zealand, and the need to definitively provenance remains before any burial of remains in a particular tribal area was of great concern (Bolton 2007). The independent reports argued equally strongly for the scientific value of the remains and conversely their cultural importance to Māori (Endicott 2007; Besterman 2007). In contrast to the preserved heads, the nine human bone sections and fragments which were part of the claim were judged by the Trustees to be more clearly intended for mortuary disposal and so the claim for these was accepted. In November 2008 the repatriation was carried out from the British Museum by staff from Te Papa Tongarewa, according to Māori protocols. There is ongoing contact between research staff at both institutions in relation to human remains and other aspects of the Māori collection.

The Torres Strait Islands claim

A third claim was received in June 2011 for two human skulls from the Torres Strait Islands, which are politically part of Australia. The claim was submitted by the Torres Strait Islands Repatriation Working Group, as representatives of

the Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners, specifically of the islands of Nagir and Mer. The two skulls were collected by marine biologist Alfred Cort Haddon, on his first field research visit to the Torres Strait Islands in 1888–9. At this time Haddon was Professor of Zoology at the Royal College of Science, Dublin, but his experiences in the Torres Strait Islands increased his interest in ethnography, and he later led the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Islands (1898). The first skull was identified by Haddon as a young man named Magau, who had died at the end of 1887. Haddon purchased this skull in August 1888 while on the island of Nagir. The type of skull is known as a *pada kuik* and was used for divination. Haddon published accounts of the preparation of Magau's skull, his funeral ceremony and the collection of his skull (Haddon 1904, 258–9; Haddon 1893, 154–6). The second skull is one of five purchased by Haddon on Mer in 1889. Haddon describes 'one or two' of these skulls being decorated for him. This type of skull was known as a *lamar marik*, and the skull, which is now in the Museum, was used by Haddon to demonstrate the exact method of divination as carried out on Mer (Haddon 1908, 266–8; Haddon 1932, 92–3). The preparation and decoration of skulls after death in this manner was the task of close relatives of the deceased. The skulls were then presented back to the immediate kin at a funeral ceremony which took place a few months following death. Skulls were presented in specially made baskets, and were then kept in the family home or a clan repository (McKinney 2011).

The Trustees decided in December 2012 that this claim would not be accepted. In this case they felt the evidence was insufficient for them to agree to repatriation and that it was unclear that the process of mortuary disposal had been interrupted (British Museum 2012). The independent report by bioarchaeologist Professor Simon Hillson of University College London stated that the remains were relatively rare in collections, and were an important resource which may contribute to studies of the early human settlement of Australia through morphological and possibly genetic analysis (Hillson 2012). Anthropologist Dr Richard Davis of the University of Western Australia wrote an extensive report on the cultural significance of the remains, contextualizing the skulls within Torres Strait Islander mortuary practice of the late 19th century (Davis 2011). Importantly, Davis notes that the preparation of skulls following death was not only a process intended to ensure the proper passage of the person's spirit, but that the stages in the mortuary ceremonies served to re-establish the deceased's new spiritual identity in relation to their kin and community. This process contributed to the skull's efficacy. Laws relating to the disposal of dead bodies and Christian burial practices led to the cessation of mortuary rituals including the preparation of skulls, as they had been carried out prior to 1900. However, Davis points out that the secondary stage of mortuary ceremonies today takes the form of a tombstone unveiling, which as in the past is prepared for long in advance and is accompanied by feasting and dance. These points reinforce the claimants' case for both Cultural Continuity and Cultural Importance as described in the Museum's policy (as discussed above). However, in stating that it was unclear whether the process

of mortuary disposal had been interrupted by collection, the Trustees implied that the active participation of Islanders in exchanges with the collector, Haddon, may have influenced their decision against repatriation.

In the Torres Strait Islands case, as in the Tasmanian example, the accounts of the collectors themselves played a pivotal role in discussions and ultimately the decision of the claim. A major challenge in assessing claims is the interpretation of the available documentation, which is often fragmented or extremely limited, as in the New Zealand case. Collectors' own assessments of particular exchanges must be balanced with knowledge relating to customary practices in relation to the dead and traditional exchange systems. Consideration should also be made of the fact that contact and colonization led to major disruptions in Oceanic societies, whereby exchanges sometimes took place while established spheres of authority and exchange systems were in a state of flux.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the Oceanic human remains in the British Museum highlights the significant diversity in the treatment of the body after death in different parts of the Pacific as well as for different members of society. In many places, the process of colonization and conversion to Christianity has meant that today burial and cremation are the most common practices regardless of a person's social status. However, as seen in the Torres Strait, the nature of ceremonies associated with death and commemoration may have strong resonance with the past and represent new formulations of cultural identity.

The British Museum's Oceania collection in its present state will continue to grow in importance rather than size or scope, as the gap of time increases since remains were prepared in these ways and some of the associated beliefs and practices were current. In the future it is hoped that opportunities for collaborative research with indigenous scholars and communities will bring new perspectives and insights into parts of the collection, and that relationships with cultural descendants will continue to be positive and multifaceted.

Notes

- 1 In historic records, including those of the Museum, this chief is referred to as Titore or variations of this name, such as 'Tetoro'.
- 2 Information from British Museum Curator of Physical Anthropologist, Daniel Antoine, 2010.
- 3 See Section 5 of the British Museum Act 1963, and the British Museum Policy on De-accession of Registered Objects from the Collection (Trustees of the British Museum 2010).
- 4 Or section 5.14.4 in the 2006 policy under which the three claims were considered.
- 5 Robinson is often referred to by his later title, 'Protector of the Aborigines', a role which he took up in 1839 at Port Phillip, Victoria.
- 6 Ellen's Aboriginal names were Pealurerner and Nertateerner (TAC 2005; see Plomley 1987, 885, and also 859 and 880).
- 7 On James Cook's first Pacific voyage, the naturalist Joseph Banks forcibly acquired a head at Queen Charlotte Sound in the South Island in January 1770 (Banks 1962, 457). The whereabouts of this head is unknown.
- 8 The analysis of tattooing styles in relation to region is a continuing area of research at Te Papa Tongarewa.

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