Museum Ethnographers' Group Guidelines on Management of Human Remains

Professional Guidelines concerning the storage, display, interpretation and return of human remains in ethnographical collections in the United Kingdom.


Introduction

1.1 Human remains are defined as including both prehistoric and historic biological specimens as well as artefacts (i.e. items made from human remains which have been altered by deliberate intent) in ethnographic collections in British museums. MEG acknowledges that other groups of museum professionals have overlapping areas of interest in human remains as defined above.

1.2 Different practices have commonly been applied in the curatorship of human remains from western and non-western societies. However, not all human remains in museums are problematic.

1.3 A number of interested parties claim rights over human remains. These include: actual and cultural descendants, legal owners and the worldwide scientific community. Governing bodies, museum curators and others have to evaluate these potentially competing interests and acknowledge that ideas about the legal and moral aspects of holding many sorts of material are complex and may not always coincide.

1.4 Human remains in museum collections were often acquired under conditions of unequal relationships. Ethnic and minority peoples are now taking back control over the preservation and interpretation of their heritage. This is part of the growing politicisation and cultural recuperation which is taking place amongst indigenous peoples in various parts of the world. The claim for the return of human remains may in some circumstances be a method of political self-assertion. In order to take these issues forward, it is necessary to open dialogue between museum professionals and indigenous peoples from a position of equality.

1.5 Attitudes to death and human remains differ from one culture to another, and change within cultures overtime. Curators need to address cases both in the light of the present day situation and in a full and deliberate consciousness of all the historical circumstances. The question of human remains in museums is a developing issue. Therefore, policies made now may need to be reviewed in the future.

1.6 Requests concerning the appropriate care or return of particular human remains must be resolved by individual museums on a case by case basis. This will involve the consideration of ownership, cultural significance, the scientific, educational and historical importance of the material, the cultural and religious values of the interested individuals or groups and the strength of their relationship to the remains in question.
Collection management

2.1 Museum collections are in the public domain and bona fide enquirers have the right of access to data on holdings.

2.2 However, it may be appropriate to restrict access to certain specified sacred items where unrestricted access may cause offence or distress to actual or cultural descendants. This may include the provision of separate storage facilities.

2.3 Governing bodies and curators should consider all the ethical and legal implications before considering the active or passive acquisition of human remains.

Display and interpretation

3.1 Curators should take a proactive rather than a reactive position with regard to the display of human remains. Existing display arrangements should be evaluated to consider whether the current treatment is likely to cause offence to actual or cultural descendants.

3.2 The process of preparing a display is a subjective editorial activity. Curators should inform themselves of the concerns of indigenous peoples and where practicable should seek their involvement through consultation.

3.3 Exhibitions in museums carry authority. Curators should be aware of the likely public effects of exhibitions. They should evaluate whether an exhibition is reinforcing cultural stereotypes or broadening an understanding of a particular group of people in a way which is relevant to the present day.

Request for the return of human remains

4.1 All requests for the return of human remains should be accorded respect and treated sensitively.

4.2 It is the responsibility of the curator to assess the validity of the person or group making requests and to establish the credentials of their claim.

4.3 Long-term loans are considered to be an inappropriate method of responding to request for the return of human remains.

4.4 The rules and governance of the museum or institution will dictate the parameters for any action.

4.5 Legal ownership of requested items needs to be established before any transfer can be considered.
4.6 Before any decision is made the curator should establish and inform the governing body of the long-term fate of the items under consideration. This may include either the transfer to a museum or a local keeping place, or the return to the community for customary disposal such as cremation or burial.

4.7 The cost and means of return should be considered before a decision is taken.

4.8 In those cases where a museum is free to dispose of items the Museums Association's Code of Ethics and the Museums & Galleries Commission's Registration Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom should be followed.

4.9 Before any transfer takes place items should be fully documented and a copy should be transferred with them.