

On September 30, 2011, Charité has officially handed over 20 skulls of Namibian origin to a delegation from Namibia. Below, we give a short summary of our research results regarding these 20 skulls from the collection of the former Institute of Anatomy of Berlin University (now Center for Anatomy of Charité). More detailed information is given in the documentation accompanying each skull.

Our research started from skulls in Charité's anthropological collections and its first objective was to establish the provenance of these specimens with as much certainty as possible. Our research is not finished yet. As, moreover, documentation is not always accurate and has been partially lost during the world wars, and as there is no central institution or archive in Germany which holds all the information from the colonial period, it will probably not be possible to reconstruct the fate of all human remains ever sent to Germany from Namibia. So far, we can therefore only talk about what we know of the fate of the 20 individuals whose skulls are now repatriated to Namibia.

Among the concerned individuals, nine were Herero, eleven Nama. Four were women, fifteen were men, one was a male child of about 4 years. Most of them were between 20 and 40 years of age.

How did these human remains come to Berlin?

For two of the Herero skulls we only know that they were given from the collector Arthur von Gwinner to Hans Virchow (Berlin anatomist, son of the famous Rudolf Virchow) and that Hans Virchow says of these two skulls that they "stem from the period of the liquidation of the Herero". So far, we were not able to establish the circumstances of their journey to Germany.

For the remaining 18 skulls, we know that they all belonged to individuals having died at the prison camp on Shark Island between 1905 and 1907. The deceased were dissected by German colonial doctors, most likely at *Feldlazarett XII* (Military Hospital 12) on Shark Island, their heads then removed and conserved in formalin. The entire heads were then sent to Paul Bartels, anthropologist and anatomist in Berlin. Together with his doctoral candidates Christian Fetzer and Heinrich Zeidler, Bartels did research on the facial muscles of these specimens. After this research, probably around 1913, the soft tissues were removed and the dry skulls were incorporated into the anthropological collection of the Institute of Anatomy of Berlin University.

In contrast to these 18 cases, most other skulls that may still be in collections today will have been sent to Europe as dried skulls, not as heads in formalin.

The unsettling historical accounts reporting that imprisoned women were forced to deflesh the heads by using shards of glass do not apply to these skulls. This does not exclude that they are true for other cases.

Who were these individuals?

Unfortunately, we have no indication of names or other evidence that would enable us to link these skulls to specific persons. The researchers of the time were interested in ethnic groups, not in individuals, so it was not important for them to know their names or their individual history. Sometimes, names were attached to human remains sent to Germany, but not in these cases.

What research was performed on these remains?

The heads sent to Paul Bartels in Berlin were used for investigations of the facial muscles. This research tried to prove that in terms of evolution, the facial muscles of African peoples were less developed than those of Europeans. This clearly was racist pseudoscience. In the 1920s, the anthropological skull collection, including these 20 skulls, was also used for

studies comparing skulls from different peoples. As far as we can say by now, these 20 skulls were not used for research after that, and were not used by Nazi scientists.

What happened to the brains?

As we can see on the skulls today, most of them were opened at some point for removal of the brain. This is confirmed by the historical publications, which also confirm that in some (but not all) cases, the brain was removed on site in Namibia. There are, however, no traces of these brains neither in our collection, nor the catalogues, nor the historical literature.

Therefore, we do not know for which purpose they were removed and what happened to these specimens.

There are reports of research on other skulls and brains from "Deutsch-Südwestafrika", but these specimens seem to have been lost from the collection. Such research on brains, as much as the mentioned research on muscles, was of racist nature.

What happened to the rest of the body?

There are no bones other than the skulls (and in some cases related vertebrae) in our collection. As the historical publications confirm that only the heads were sent to Berlin, we must assume that the rest of the body was buried near Shark Island.

What was their cause of death?

The historical publications claim that the individuals from Shark Island died "of diseases".

What we can say from our investigation of the skulls remains limited. In six cases (three Nama, three Herero), we found traces of scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C-deficiency, i.e. by malnutrition. Historical sources confirm that scurvy was prevalent on Shark Island.

This disease was of course a consequence of the horrible conditions in the prison camp. Other possible consequences like starvation or emaciation can be neither confirmed nor excluded by an investigation of skulls.

The skulls do not show traces of physical violence, but this does not exclude a violent death.

Which research methods were used to identify the provenance of these skulls?

Our research uses two approaches. On the one hand, we do historical research searching catalogues, archives, and historical publications for relevant information. On the other hand, we look at the skulls to look for historical inscriptions and labels, to determine sex, age and possible traces of disease or violence, and to find out whether the skulls in the collection match descriptions of skulls in historical publications. Finally, we look for traces of typical Herero tooth manipulation.

How many human remains of Namibian origin are still in Germany?

We do not know how many skulls (or other human remains) have been sent to Europe from the area of today's Namibia. We do not know either how many skulls may still be held in collections in Germany. This is difficult to say as collections are very diverse (e.g., owned by museums, universities, private persons) and as there is no central institution overlooking or governing such collections.

Charité still investigates its own collections, and we are currently investigating the provenance of some more skulls possibly stemming from Namibia. As soon as we know with sufficient certainty that they are from Namibia, we will inform the Namibian embassy.

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contact: <http://anatomie.charite.de/index.php?id=29385> or
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