

Human remains of Ovaherero and Nama: transnational dynamics in post-genocidal restitutions

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Abstract

Taking its starting point from a socio-anthropological study combining biographical interviews, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations collected between 2016 and 2018 in Germany, France and the United States among Ovaherero and Nama activists, and also members of different institutions and associations, this article focuses on the question of human remains in the current struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama from a transnational perspective. First, the text shows the ways in which the memory of human remains can be considered as a driving force in the struggle of the affected communities. Second, it outlines the main points of mismatches of perspective between descendants of the survivors and the responsible museums during past restitutions of human remains from German anthropological collections. Third, the article more closely examines the resources of Ovaherero in the United States in the struggle for recognition and reparation, the recent discovery of Namibian human remains in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the questions that it raises.

Key words: Anthropological collections, restitution of human remains, transnational dynamics, post-genocidal memory, Ovaherero and Nama genocide

Introduction¹

Between 1904 and 1908, over 100,000 people were killed in what is today known as the first genocide of the twentieth century, which took place under German colonial rule in today's Namibia.² In January 1904, after the Ovaherero,³ an ethnic group in the central-eastern region of Namibia rebelled against injustices and violence committed under German colonial rule, a war broke out between the Ovaherero and the Germans. After the defeat of the Ovaherero in the decisive battle of Waterberg in August 1904, the war turned into a genocide commanded by General Lothar Von Trotha. German troops sealed off the Omaheke desert through which the Ovaherero tried to flee to Botswana and poisoned the existing water points. The survivors of the massacres were sent to concentration camps that were

set up from 1905 to 1908. A similar fate awaited the Nama, another ethnic group in southern Namibia who took up resistance against German colonial occupation in October 1904. Only 20 per cent of the Ovaherero and about 50 per cent of the Nama survived the mass extermination.⁴ After the genocide, thousands of bones were scattered across the Omaheke desert as well as on the sites of the concentration camps. Furthermore, human remains, the number of which is difficult to estimate, were shipped to Germany to serve as research objects in anthropological collections.⁵ After the First World War, Namibia (at the time South West Africa) was administered by South Africa, and subsequently was subjected to apartheid rule until it gained its independence in 1990. It was only then that the memory of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama, which could not find expression under the apartheid regime, emerged, and that protests by the descendants of the survivors began. Since then, members of the affected communities have been struggling for formal recognition of the genocide by the German government, an apology and reparation for the crimes committed. In July 2015, after debates within the German Parliament on the recognition of the Armenian genocide,⁶ the president of the Bundestag and the spokesperson of the German Foreign Office described the mass crimes committed in Namibia as genocide.⁷ However, up to today the German government has not officially recognised the genocide as such.

Since the 1990s, Ovaherero and Nama have undertaken different actions towards the German government. Many of these have been undertaken by Ovaherero living in the United States. In 2001, a lawsuit against the German government and German companies that had benefited from the genocide was filed in a court in Washington, DC.⁸ In July 2015, four months after an online petition was launched in the United States and was handed in at several German embassies around the world and at the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin, Norbert Lammert, the president of the Bundestag, declared that the crimes committed should be called a genocide.⁹ At the end of 2015, negotiations were set in place between the German and Namibian governments regarding the recognition and reparation of the genocide. To this day, they have not yet been concluded. Before the negotiations started, the German government declared that it was willing to officially recognise the genocide, but that no reparations would be made. An argument frequently evoked by members of the German government is that development aid to Namibia has been augmented over recent decades. However, Ovaherero and Nama communities have stressed that this development aid – which is paid to the Namibian government – has not been redistributed in the areas mostly inhabited by Ovahereros, but in regions less affected by the genocide.¹⁰ Furthermore, development aid does not imply moral recognition, but can be interpreted as patronising charity.¹¹ A second lawsuit against the German government was filed in a court in New York City in January 2017.

Claims by Ovaherero and Nama organisations in recent decades have also been directed towards the Namibian government. Precisely as a consequence of the genocide, the Ovaherero and Nama communities today constitute minority groups in Namibia and are barely represented in the Namibian Parliament. Up to today, the genocide is hardly present in Namibian public institutions and public life, for

instance in school curricula and through memorials.¹² Despite a motion that was passed in the Namibian Parliament in 2006 anticipating the inclusion of Ovaherero and Nama community representatives in the negotiations with the German government, the affected communities have been kept out of the process. Ovaherero and Nama have therefore launched the campaign ‘It cannot be about us without us. Anything about us without us is against us’.

One of the demands of Ovaherero and Nama for reparation is for German financial aid to purchase back the farmland which their ancestors lost during the genocide when it is put up for sale by its current owners. The question of land is all the more relevant because, until today, large areas of the farmland in Namibia, and especially the most fertile areas, remain in the hands of Namibian Germans, some of them the descendants of German settlers.¹³ The demands for repatriation of human remains that are still part of various anthropological collections in Germany have also played a central role in this process. The first restitutions of human skulls and skeletons from German anthropological collections took place in 2011 and 2014.

Ovaherero and Nama have lived in a widespread diaspora since the beginning of the twentieth century. Many survivors of the genocide were those who were able to flee from the German colonial territory and reach Botswana and South Africa. Later, during South African rule, numerous Ovaherero and Nama – and other Namibians fighting the apartheid system – left the country as refugees. A considerable number of these former migrants and their descendants are still living in the diaspora and reside in countries such as South Africa, Botswana, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. This article argues that the *transnational dimension* is central in the current struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide. Having members in different countries of the world has given the affected communities different resources, including in the question of restitution of human remains. Furthermore, the discovery of skulls and skeletons from Namibia in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (AMNH) in the summer 2017 has put the international scope of the scientific anthropological collections themselves into the foreground.

This article is based on a socio-anthropological study combining biographical interviews, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations collected between 2016 and 2018 in Germany, France and the United States among Ovaherero and Nama activists, as well as members of different institutions and associations. While biographical interviews enable us to go back in time and grasp individuals’ embeddedness in collective processes from a dynamic perspective, ethnographic observations allow us to contrast these accounts with observations of concrete actions that have taken place.¹⁴ Fifteen biographical interviews with Ovaherero men and women of different ages, with different educational and professional backgrounds and who had arrived in the United States at different points in time were conducted in the United States in 2017.¹⁵ All were involved in the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide, although the degree and the forms of their political engagement varied. One biographical interview with an Ovaherero activist living in Germany and ten semi-structured interviews with Ovaherero and Nama

activists living in different countries such as Botswana, Namibia or South Africa were conducted between 2016 and 2018. Ethnographic observations were collected at events such as the two transnational conferences of Ovaherero and Nama in 2016 and 2018 in Berlin and Hamburg, at the conference ‘The Genocide of Herero and Nama’ at the Memorial of the Shoah in Paris in 2017 and at two gatherings organised by different associations for the Ovaherero diaspora in the United States in 2017. Further, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of Jewish organisations in the United States supporting the Ovaherero struggle, with German activists engaged in the demands for recognition and reparation, and one Skype interview with a museum employee in Namibia. Biographical interviews enable researchers to investigate their research questions without imposing their own frame of thinking on their interviewees, letting them tell their story following their own logic.¹⁶ Although I never explicitly questioned my interview partners on human remains, this topic was repeatedly addressed in the accounts and was shown to play a central role in interviewees’ motivation to engage in the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide.

This article first shows the ways in which the memory of human remains can be considered as a driving force in the struggle of the affected communities. Second, it outlines the main points of mismatch of perspective between descendants of the survivors and the museums responsible during past restitutions of human remains from German anthropological collections. Third, the text examines more closely the resources of Ovaherero in the United States in the struggle for recognition and reparation, the recent discovery of Namibian human remains in the AMNH and the questions which it raises.

The memory of human remains: spoken and silent transmission and the burden of memory

The treatment of dead bodies during and after the colonial period forms a nodal point in the motivation of the struggle for recognition of genocide. The spoliation of graves in itself, through which collectors of skulls and skeletons dug out human remains in order to send them to German anthropological collections, is considered as one of the reasons why Ovaherero took up armed resistance against the German occupation in 1904 in the first place.¹⁷

The biographical interviews conducted with Ovaherero activists in the United States showed that the memory concerning human remains is particularly vivid and that it has been transmitted to the descendants of survivors in different ways. Because of the cruelty of the events and the pain that the history-telling triggered, these memories could not always be transmitted directly. In the collected life stories, the memory of the dead bodies has been transmitted in different ways: through a chosen family member (often a woman) who was in charge of passing on the memory of the events; through non-verbal communication; or through the life context itself, such as the names of villages where the persons grew up. The memory of human remains was revealed to be closely linked to the question of land, as will be shown below.

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Scattered bones

When asked about the experience of his ancestors during the genocide, one of the leading Ovaherero activists in the United States recalled the narrations that had been transmitted to him through his grandmother, who was in charge of the passing on of the family history.

My grandmother was seventeen at the time of the genocide. She and her family were running through the desert for their lives. At some point, her uncle stayed back with her mother who was feeling tired and helped her lie down under a tree. Her uncle told my grandma to continue running with the others, that he would look after her mother. In the evening, he joined them, he was alone. She asked him: 'Where is my mom?' He looked at her sadly. Then she started screaming and ran away from the group in the dark, in a random direction, alone, she was so mad at him. People were running in groups. After some time, she found another group, and joined it. At some point, the group was captured by German soldiers. They were taken to the concentration camp of (name of the concentration camp).¹⁸ There, she met my grandfather.

The memory of this woman, who was haunted all her life by the thought of the body of her mother lying in the desert, was transmitted to her children and grandchildren. The scattered bones that are still found in the desert as well as on construction sites in Namibia until today constitute a particularly vivid memory for the descendants of the survivors of the genocide, especially as many of them grew up in rural areas with their grandparents, who were directly affected by the genocide, while their parents pursued their professional life in the cities.

Names of villages

The memory of human remains was also transmitted by the context in which the interviewees grew up, such as the names of villages. Here, the transmission was indirect, but because it was inscribed in the names of villages or other local places themselves, the memory gained an omnipresent dimension. A woman activist began her life story in the following way:

I grew up in a small town, I call it a town, I don't call it a village, in Omanana. Omanana in Otjiherero¹⁹ means bones! So that name of the town is Omanana! And that was because on the road to Botswana! These people were dying along the way. Just bones scattered. (. . .) So it was something I was taught very early. That there was this war.²⁰

German graveyards and non-verbal communication

Another way in which the memory of human remains and the injustice experienced was transmitted was by comparison with the fate of German human remains and through non-verbal communication. While barely any monuments or graves for the Ovaherero and Nama victims of the genocide exist in Namibia, even today, German cemeteries are still well maintained²¹ and are located in central public areas, and are thereby visible to the Namibian population. An Ovaherero activist recalled how, as a child, he gradually understood, by regularly walking past a German

cemetery, that the treatment of Ovaherero and Germans had not been symmetric. His grandparents, with whom he grew up, did not tell him about the genocide. One day a relative of his grandfather, who was visiting the family, spoke with his grandfather about a battle, in front of him. Later on, the non-verbal signs of his grandmother awakened his curiosity as well as his sense that something difficult had happened.

Growing up with my paternal grandmother at Otjihara, Altberg, as the Germans call it, there was a neatly maintained cemetery. One day I asked my grandmother about this cemetery. She replied: 'People are buried there.' I asked if they were our relatives. She said: 'Omuatjengui upura tjinene,' meaning, 'This child asks too many questions.' She finally relented and said German soldiers are buried there. I asked: 'Why would Germans be buried in Namibia and not in Germany?' She said they died in the war. At this point I remembered the battle of Otjihinaparero [the battle the relative of his grandfather had talked about] and I said, 'Who killed them?' After no response, I said 'Did the Ovaherero soldiers kill the German soldiers?' She said yes. I asked her if there was a cemetery for the Ovaherero soldiers and she emphatically said no. I said: 'Why not?' She said: 'Kandu kandje rimue romajuva morihongo,' 'My little one someday you will learn about it.'

Here, the grandmother mainly answered the questions with yes and no. The energetic way in which she stressed her 'no', however, conveyed to her grandson the feeling that something unfair had happened. Furthermore, by delaying her answer and by her repetition of the words 'my little one', she indicated to him that this topic was a serious one that was reserved to grown-ups.

Visiting one's ancestors' land

Another indirect way of conveying the pain that the loss of family members and the fate of their dead bodies had meant consisted in concrete demands engaging action. The above-mentioned activist who recalled the way that his grandmother had lost her mother at the age of seventeen later told about a wish the grandmother had expressed at the end of her life:

When my grandmother turned eighty-five, we asked her what she wished for her birthday. She said she wanted us to take her to the farm where she had grown up. We asked her: 'Are you sure that that is really what you want, don't you want something else?'; because we knew it would be difficult to find the place, and that it would probably be difficult to access it by car. She said: 'Yes, that's what I want.' Finally, after much research and difficulties in reaching the place, we got to the farm. We sank into sand right in front of it. The current owner, of Italian descent, did not seem very pleased about our request but helped us out of the sand. Once we arrived on the farmland, my grandmother walked right through the property, looking for the graves of her grandparents, who had died before the genocide and who were buried there.

Here, the grandmother's wish and the deed – undertaking numerous difficulties in order to see the grave of her grandparents, who, as was customary among

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Ovaherero, had been buried on the family's land and who (contrary to her mother) had graves – spoke for itself. After a pause, the activist concluded: 'That's the burden of memory.'

The demands for monetary reparation, through which Ovaherero aim to purchase back the land they owned before the genocide, are thereby revealed to be closely connected to the question of human remains. Another activist quoted above recalled the moment when her uncle bought a farm close to Waterberg:²²

So my other uncle! Who bought a farm! From Wagner in Waterberg the reason why he bought the farm was because all his family was buried there. During the war! And prewar! So when he bought it, it was to preserve what was really his- his history.

Feeling committed

The atrocities of the crimes committed and the mistreatment of living and dead bodies was described as an important driving force to engage in the struggle for the recognition and reparation of the genocide. One of the practices in the concentration camps that was documented by German soldiers consisted in forcing Ovaherero women to scrape off the flesh of victims' heads with sharp pieces of glass before they were shipped to anthropological collections in Germany. Notably, this was documented on a postcard that was sent at the time, depicting skulls being put into boxes to be sent to the Pathology Institute in Berlin and on which a German soldier had written: 'The skulls, which have been freed from their flesh by Herero women using glass shards, come from Hereros who have been hanged or killed in action.'²³ In some cases, these heads were those of the children, husbands or other relatives of the women. In response to the question whether other Namibians could understand the effects of the genocide, an Ovaherero activist interviewed in the United States explained that she had told some non-Ovaherero and Nama persons in Namibia about the atrocities and that they felt more understanding after hearing about these events. She continued, using the letter 'X' to avoid explicitly naming particularly painful events:

The way in which the crimes were committed is not forgivable! You can't forget. How can you forget women being raped or tortured or families taking the heads of their loved ones and scraping the flesh off. I mean, when you think about it how do you- even if you as a child- and you are being told that this person survived because they did X? There is a magnitude there that is vast! And how do you heal from that? What help came along the way for them to- heal and to come to terms with that! Event. NOTHING!

Later in her narration, the same interviewee recalled seeing skulls in the process of demands for restitution in Berlin. Some skulls from Namibia had scratches on them, and possibly she was hinting that they were the result of the practices named above:

So I mean I think it's worth! Looking at why we are so passionate about it! Because we may not necessarily understand the signs! Behind why we feel this way! But this has

to be- the reason why you feel obligated! And committed! To getting it resolved! To some extent! Because you don't want anyone to go through this trauma! Again.

Restitutions from German collections and mismatches of perspective

For many decades, the fate of human remains was present mainly within the family space and in a wider oral tradition among Ovaherero and Nama communities. This changed in 2006, when numerous human bones were found in the area of a former concentration camp that in the meantime had been a diamond mining site and that had not been accessible for a long time.²⁴ This event marked an important turning point and led to a repositioning of the Namibian government on the issue of recognition and reparation of the genocide, which was connected to the passing of the motion in Parliament in 2006. In 2008, the assumed existence of skulls from Namibia in different German institutions was made public, notably in the German television magazine *FAKT*.²⁵ Discussions started in Namibia concerning the demand for restitution of these human remains. The Namibian government expressed readiness to formally ask for the restitution of the skulls and skeletons. Debates emerged about the fate of the human remains after their return to Namibia. While some voices advocated for burial of the remains, others pleaded that they should be exhibited in a public museum in Namibia in order to remind people of the cruelties committed. A burial, so the supporters of this alternative claimed, would equate to forgetting about the past. In 2009 an agreement was finally reached that the skulls would be housed in a museum after their return. A formal request through diplomatic channels was engaged the same year.²⁶

At the same time, an interdisciplinary research project funded by the German Research Foundation, entitled 'Charité Human Remains Project', was launched at the Charité, Berlin's university hospital.²⁷ The project, conducted from 2010 to 2013 under the leadership of Thomas Schnalke and Andreas Winkelmann, was mainly triggered by restitution claims from Namibia that concerned human remains in two collections held by the Charité. The project aimed to conduct provenance research on relevant parts of the collections from a historical and a physical-anthropological perspective in order to provide a basis for the negotiations concerning the demands for restitution. In 2011, twenty skulls were restituted to Namibia by the Charité. Further human remains of twenty-one persons followed in 2014. The same year, the University of Freiburg also returned fourteen skulls to Namibia.²⁸

The process demonstrated a mismatch of perspectives concerning the status of the human remains. While the holders of anthropological collections tend to consider human remains as objects as long as they have not been identified, the members of affected communities perceive them as the remains of individuals, and potentially of their ancestors. Despite considerable efforts by the researchers engaged in the project, strong disappointment could be identified among the affected communities concerning the results of provenance research. While many had hoped that the identity of the individuals whose bones had been kept in collections could be reconstructed, the reality proved to be quite different. The goal in collecting human remains at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the

twentieth centuries was to identify anthropological differences – and a hierarchy – between different ‘races’²⁹ and to prove the inferiority of persons with a ‘black’ skin colour compared to those with a ‘white’ skin colour.³⁰ Therefore, while collecting human remains, the researchers at the time did not record elements concerning the individual identity of the dead, but most often only those elements related to their ethnic belonging or the region where they lived in. Once cut from their identity, the human remains were considered as objects. The way in which the collecting was done thus de-individualised and de-humanised individuals,³¹ and makes identification of the skulls and skeletons almost impossible. The loss of important parts of catalogues and archives of anthropological collections during both world wars³² has rendered research on identity even more difficult. Extensive provenance research combining a historical and an anthropological approach has shown that it is possible to reconstruct the identity of some human remains in isolated cases, but this, when it occurs, is a very seldom and often almost miraculous result.³³

The near impossibility of identifying the human remains in the collections also contributes to the difficulty in deciding on the fate of the skulls and skeletons and in ‘re-humanising’ them. For example, burial after their return to Namibia was considered to be difficult because the precise place of origin of the remains – and with it the locations where they should be buried – could not be identified. The human remains that have been repatriated until now currently lie in the basement of the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek. The conflict over their fate persists. Some members of the affected communities believe that the remains should be buried in a collective public place.

Many of the remains collected during the genocide are still used for research. In the course of the demands of restitution, for example, activists in Berlin, among them Ovaherero, contacted the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory, requesting to see the human remains from Namibia that were held in its collection. The curators of the collection at first refused, explaining that access to the human remains was possible only for researchers who made a formal request to the institution for scientific investigation. However, debates have also been conducted among the Ovaherero and Nama activists about the meaning of holding the human remains in the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek. While some insist on the importance of reminding about the atrocities committed for research purposes, and while they consider their wish to see the skulls exhibited as an ongoing fight of their ancestors against the mistreatment they have received, others interpret the fact of non-burial and using them for political purposes as a continuing instrumentalisation of the remains.

Human remains in the American Museum of Natural History

Resources of Ovaherero in the United States

In August 2017, an e-mail sent by a German activist who himself had received the information through a researcher in Germany reached the organisation of Ovaherero in the United States that is engaged in the struggle for recognition and

reparation of the genocide, informing it that the AMNH in New York City held human remains from Namibia. This triggered great emotion among the members of the community, especially as the majority of the Ovaherero in the United States lives in this city. An interviewee expressed it this way during an encounter:

I've been living in New York for more than twenty years. And now I hear that my ancestors were next to me all that time.

Today, about 300 Ovaherero live in the United States, making up almost 75 per cent of the Namibian population in that country. The members of this group arrived in the United States at different times. Most arrived in the 1970s and 1980s as refugees fighting against apartheid. Some came through United Nations scholarships dedicated to members of the South West African People's Organisation, others applied for United Nations scholarships on site. Further Ovahereros were selected by traditional leaders and sent at the expense of Ovaherero communities in order to study abroad and contribute to the liberation of Namibia through education. While a number of the Ovaherero who had migrated to the United States during this time returned to Namibia after the country's independence in 1990 or migrated to other countries, others remained in the United States. Further Ovaherero have come to the United States since the 1990s, mainly in the course of family reunification or for university studies. While most live on the East Coast, there are also Ovaherero living on the West Coast and in the Midwest and the South. In 2008, Ovaherero in the United States founded an association for Ovaherero on site engaged in the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide.

The activists in the country have reverted to different resources which the US context has given them. One of them is the freedom of expression which the US context, as well as the distance from their country of origin, has allowed. Some recalled that, especially in the 1990s, civil servants in Namibia could face difficulties in their professional advancement if they engaged in the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide. Another resource is the legal framework. The US American Alien Tort Claims Act enables foreign citizens to file lawsuits from US courts against governments for human rights violations conducted outside of the country. It was on the basis of this legislation that Ovaherero filed a lawsuit against the German government in 2001 and 2017. Another major resource frequently evoked in the interviews consists of economic resources. An income in US dollars has enabled the activists to pay for the travel costs linked to their struggle, including travel expenses for the return of human remains. The difference of value has also permitted them to support actions in Namibia, such as the ongoing creation of a cultural centre on Ovaherero culture and history. Ovaherero activists in the United States have also made donations in order to cover the travel expenses of activists living in Namibia in relation to different actions of the struggle, notably those taking place in the United States, as well as the costs of the lawsuits that have been filed.³⁴ The interviewees also mentioned the importance of a dialogue with different groups of victims of genocides which the US context has fostered. Ovaherero

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in the United States have co-operated with other groups and organisations of victims, mainly with Jewish ones. The members of these organisations have provided the Ovaherero with legal advice on actions concerning reparation, and have also helped them to develop emotional resources to cope with the public expression of the crimes committed. Institutions such as a Memorial Center for the Holocaust on the East Coast have organised a variety of events, such as workshops for victims of genocides, to which descendants of the survivors of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide living in the United States were invited. One interviewee recalled his experience in one of these workshops, during which he gained the resources to express family experiences of genocide in public. He evoked his constant fear of encountering revisionists of the genocide and the feelings that such a position could trigger.

At one of the gatherings, there was a Jewish lady who spoke very openly about what she and her ancestors had experienced. Later, when we were alone, I asked her: ‘How do you do that? Speak so openly? Aren’t you always afraid that there will be someone in the room who will deny that the genocide happened?’ And do you know what she said to me? ‘The cause is bigger than myself. I always remember this when I undertake public actions concerning the genocide.’

Being able to speak about the way the genocide has affected their family past has thereby also become a political resource to which the US context has contributed.

The resources the Ovaherero activists can draw on in their struggle are two-sided: they have used the skills and resources both of their American experiences and of their refugee and migrant experiences. During their anti-apartheid engagement, and later during their survival in refugee camps in different countries where they lived before arriving in the United States, such as in Botswana, Angola or Kenya, they developed skills on how to undertake collective actions, often on a transnational scale, in order to reach their aims. This experience explains the effectiveness of the actions of this relatively small group and their impact on current international political processes.

Human remains in a museum in New York City

Soon after the discovery of the presence of human remains of eight individuals from Namibia in the AMNH, Ovaherero activists contacted the museum. The first two meetings took place in September 2017, during which Ovaherero were able to see the human remains. One meeting was between the Ovaherero who filed the court case and museum personnel; the other meeting, a few days later, was between a delegation comprising thirteen Ovaherero living in the United States and a Jewish museum staff member, and two museum representatives from the AMNH. A third meeting took place in October 2017 between museum representatives and a delegation of thirty Ovaherero and Nama, this time mainly activists living in Namibia or other countries who had travelled to New York in the frame of the lawsuit that has been filed in New York City (see below). Beforehand, through e-mail exchange with the German researcher who had discovered the presence of the remains in the

museum, the activists gained some insight into the transatlantic history of the skulls and skeletons.

The human remains come from one of Felix von Luschan's anthropological collections. At the turn of the twentieth century, two main researchers dominated the field of physical anthropology in Germany: Rudolf Virchow and Felix von Luschan. Virchow co-founded the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory in 1869 and instigated the creation of the anthropological collection in this institution. Felix von Luschan, for his part, created an anthropological collection in Berlin's Ethnological Museum after he became a member of the museum at the time of its creation in 1886 and while he was the director of the Africa and Oceania Department of the same institution between 1905 and 1909. When Luschan was appointed Professor of Anthropology at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in 1909, he used his private collection as teaching material. This collection, which he had started to create in the 1870s, contained skulls and skeletons from the entire world that he had purchased with personal funding and was the largest one in Berlin.³⁵ By 1914, the remains of about 15,000 individuals made up Berlin's four anthropological collections.³⁶ At the end of his career, after having spent many years measuring bones and comparing his results, Luschan wrote: 'Thus all attempts to divide humanity into artificial groups according to skin color, the length or width of the cerebral capsule, or the type of hair, etc., are completely misleading.... All humanity consists of only one species: *Homo sapiens*.'³⁷ However, some of his successors, such as Eugen Fischer who took over his chair at the University, had other convictions and held central positions in academic institutions under National Socialism, such as the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics.

In 1923, Luschan put his private collection up for sale. By then, it contained more than 5,600 skulls and skeletons. He set the price at 40,000 dollars, which today equates about half a million dollars. After first offering 30,000 dollars, Henry Osborn, the president of the AMNH at the time, paid the entire amount. In order to cover the costs, he asked for a donation by Felix Warburg, a German-American banker of Jewish descent. When Felix von Luschan died shortly after, in 1924, his wife received the funds.³⁸ The acquisition doubled the physical-anthropological holdings of the AMNH. At the time, the anthropological collection of the AMNH mainly contained human remains from American Indians. Through the purchase of Luschan's collection, the museum acquired human remains of individuals from many different parts of the world.³⁹

During the decades that followed the museum's acquisition, the human remains were used for research. After the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990,⁴⁰ several human remains from the AMNH were returned to the affected communities. In accordance with the law, however, these repatriations concerned only human remains that originated from US territory. Some of the human remains returned in the frame of NAGPRA come from Luschan's collection, for example skulls that the scientist had collected in Hawaii. Until the recent demand of Ovaherero to see the remains, the skulls and skeletons of the eight individuals from Namibia were themselves stored in the collection that a

curator of anthropology at the museum described as the ‘most heavily utilized one,’ a collection used by scientists ‘on a daily basis.’⁴¹

Despite the fact that NAGPRA has resulted in museum personnel in the United States having a longer experience with restitution of human remains and developing a greater sensitivity in this field than in other countries, points of dissent persist between the representatives of the museum and the affected communities. As mentioned in the above, this again concerns the status of the human remains – whether they are objects or the remains of human beings. For example, one of the museum personnel explained that because ‘large parts of the collection are unaffiliated’ they are ‘fair game for study.’⁴² At the same time, museum personnel in different countries have stressed that provenance research concerning human remains cannot be done because of its high cost. Activists engaged in the return of human remains have retorted that the question of costs is foremost a question of prioritisation in the use of the budget. This question is all the more sensitive because Ovaherero and Nama mostly pay the expenses linked to their struggle and the repatriation of human remains, such as regular travel to different continents, from their personal resources, which in some cases is a large part of their private budget. Here, the economic aspect raises the question of whose responsibility it is to work on the provenance and repatriation of human remains: the institutions’, or the individuals’ – mostly members of the affected communities.

The AMNH has expressed an immediate readiness to return the human remains to Namibia and is now waiting for a formal request. Similarly to the repatriation process from German collections since the 2010s, dissent exists concerning the fate of the remains after their restitution. A common wish on the part of the descendants of survivors is that the AMNH should organise a local exhibit on the history of the human remains, thereby making the historical entanglement of US American and German anthropological collections a subject of discussion.

The presence of human remains at the AMNH has also been linked to the court case filed in January 2017. Because the German government sent no representatives to New York City, the court hearings first scheduled in March, July and October 2017 have been delayed three times. The third meeting of Ovaherero and Nama with AMNH personnel coincided with the planned court hearing that had been rescheduled for 12 October 2017. Ovaherero and Nama, including traditional chiefs, travelled to New York City on that occasion. On 13 October, thirty Ovaherero and Nama were received by museum personnel to see the remains. In public speeches given on this occasion as well as in the argumentation of the lawyer defending the descendants of the survivors, the presence of human remains in New York City was linked to the relevance of legally treating the case in the United States. The human remains in anthropological collections in general and at the AMNH in particular are, furthermore, evoked in the class action complaint that was handed in by the Ovaherero’s lawyer at the Court of the Southern District of New York in February 2018. Although the attorney defending the German government has asked for dismissal of the case on the grounds of state immunity, the judge in charge of the court case could indeed rule for confiscations of public and private German goods in New York City. The court case remains unconcluded to this day.

Conclusion

The treatment of human remains during and after German colonial rule in Namibia, in particular the skulls and skeletons that until today are part of anthropological collections throughout the world, constitutes a central motivation for descendants of the survivors to struggle for recognition, an apology and reparation of the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama by the German government. The discovery of human remains at the AMNH in August 2017 has stressed the transnational scope of the collecting of human remains and the global dimension of the construction of a racist ideology in the name of science. At the same time, the struggle for the recognition of the genocide and the demands for restitution of human remains to Namibia are facilitated precisely by the transnational dimension of the Ovaherero and Nama communities.

Furthermore, different national standards in different countries of the world concerning the treatment of human remains have led to advancement on an international scale and pressure on different countries to address the history of their collections and develop guidelines concerning the return of human remains. Also here, the repatriation demands of the activists of the affected communities are at the origin of this process. In the United States and in Australia, for example, movements of American Indians and of First Nations people explain a more progressive stance concerning human remains in public collections than in other countries of the world. Despite these developments, the ongoing discoveries in museums of human remains collected in contexts of violence point to differences in perspective between the members of affected communities and museum holders. While the first consider them as potentially their ancestors, whom their parents or grandparents have mourned all their lives, the second mainly consider them as objects, as long as their identity has not been revealed. This identity can be reconstructed only through extensive provenance research that is, however, only seldom defined as a financial priority by the institutions concerned.

What is particularly at stake here is the way science and knowledge have been constructed. While high-ranked academic institutions have participated in constructing a hierarchy between individuals coming from different parts of the world, not proactively engaging with this past can be seen as not actively engaging in a deconstruction of this ideology. At the same time, because of the cruelty of the past events, the transmitted memory of the effects of the genocide and of the treatment of dead bodies is difficult to put into words for the descendants of the survivors. Expressing this memory in public political negotiations can therefore be a challenge for the actors and actresses of the struggle for recognition and reparation of the genocide. Perhaps the skulls of Ovaherero and Nama that have been returned to Namibia up to now will one day be buried – once they have said the inexpressible, and once post-genocidal dynamics can be transcended.

Notes

- 1 Some aspects of this article were published in an online text that was written following a fellowship at the American Institute for Contemporary German

- Studies at Johns Hopkins University in July–August 2017, see E. Pape, ‘Herero Activists in the United States: Demanding Recognition and Reparation for the First Genocide of the Twentieth Century’, first published online 1 November 2018, www.aicgs.org/publication/herero-activists-in-the-united-states/.
- 2 J. B. Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890–1923* (Oxford, James Currey, 1999); J. Zimmerer and J. Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and its Aftermath* (Monmouth, Merlin Press, 2008).
 - 3 The original name of this ethnic group is Ovaherero, meaning ‘the people’ (Ova) ‘of Herero’. It was shortened by Germans to Herero during colonial rule. Both names are used interchangeably today. However, even though the name Herero is most commonly used by non-Otjherero speaking people, the Ovaherero themselves use the name Ovaherero when they speak Otjherero as well as other languages, including English.
 - 4 Current debates among affected communities and historians suggest speaking of two genocides: the one of the Ovaherero and the other of the Nama. This article will speak of ‘the’ genocide in order to designate the massacres committed against both ethnic groups.
 - 5 The human remains taken from Namibia to different parts of the world were seized not only during the genocide, but also before the beginning of the German–Namibian war, in the frame of spoliation of graves.
 - 6 The Bundestag passed a resolution in May 2016 in which it officially recognised the Armenian genocide as such. This led to augmented pressure by activists for the German government to recognise the Ovaherero and Nama genocide.
 - 7 N. Lammert, ‘Deutsche ohne Gnade. Wer in der Bundesrepublik vom Armenier-Genozid Spricht, Darf vom Deutschen Völkermord an den Herero und Nama nicht Schweigen’, first published online 23 July 2015, www.zeit.de/2015/28/voelkermord-armenier-herero-nama-norbert-lammert;Regierungspressekonferenz,Regierungspressekonferenz_vom_10._Juli,http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/07/2015-07-10-regpk.html, accessed 23 April 2018.
 - 8 J. Sarkin, *Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21st Century: The Socio-Legal Context of Claims under International Law by the Herero against Germany for Genocide in Namibia, 1904–1908* (Westport, CT, Praeger Security International, 2009).
 - 9 Lammert, ‘Deutsche ohne Gnade’.
 - 10 S. Harring, ‘German Reparations to the Herero Nation: An Assertion of Herero Nationhood in the Path of Namibian Development’, *West Virginia Law Review*, 104 (2002), 393–417.
 - 11 K. de Wolff, ‘The Politics of *Cosmopolitan Memory* from a Postcolonial Perspective’, in M. Henderson and J. Lange (eds), *Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age* (Heidelberg, Winter Verlag, 2017), pp. 387–427.
 - 12 N. Sprenger, R. Rodriguez and N. Kamatuka, ‘The Ovaherero/Nama Genocide: A Case for an Apology and Reparations’, *European Scientific Journal*, June (2017), 120–46.

- 13 Harring, 'German Reparations to the Herero Nation'.
- 14 S. Juan, 'La "Socio-Anthropologie": Champ, Paradigme ou Discipline? Regards Particuliers sur les Entretien de Longue Durée', *Bulletin de Méthode Sociologique*, 87 (2005), 61–79.
- 15 As the group of Nama in the United States appears to be very small, the research focused on Ovaherero.
- 16 D. Bertaux, *Le Récit de Vie* (Paris, Armand Colin, 2016, 4th edn); F. Schütze, 'Biographieforschung und Narratives Interview', *Neue Praxis*, 13 (1983), 283–93.
- 17 G. Pool, *Samuel Maharero* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1991).
- 18 All names of persons or places have been removed or substituted with fictitious names in order to ensure anonymity.
- 19 Otjiherero is the language spoken by the Ovaherero and Mbanderu people in Namibia.
- 20 For reasons of space, it cannot be analysed in detail here why the interviewed woman spoke of war and not of genocide. However, two reasons can be briefly mentioned. First, speaking of a 'war' underlines the active dimension of resistance of the Ovaherero, presenting them not just as victims. Second, the word 'genocide' does not exist in the Otjiherero language, and the Ovaherero – even when speaking in English – at times revert to the word 'war', which they are accustomed to use when speaking in their mother tongue.
- 21 L. Förster, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften. Wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 Gedenken* (Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2010).
- 22 As mentioned in the above, Waterberg is the name of the place where the decisive battle that led to German victory took place. Mass killings of Ovaherero began shortly after this battle.
- 23 G. Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstsein: Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des Deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), p. 98.
- 24 R. Kößler, *Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past* (Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2015).
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 See the article by H. Stoecker and A. Winkelmann in this issue.
- 28 See the articles by R. Kößler and by H. Stoecker and A. Winkelmann in this issue.
- 29 As Colette Guillaumin has shown, the division of humans into 'races' is often presented as a biological fact. However, the division originates from a social construction. It is racism that creates 'races' and not 'races' that precede racism; C. Guillaumin, *L'Idéologie Raciste: Genèse et Langage Actuel* (Paris, Mouton, 1972). In a similar vein, Christine Delphy has demonstrated that the process of othering precedes all forms of domination; C. Delphy, *Classer, Dominer. Qui Sont les 'Autres'?* (Paris, La Fabrique, 2008).
- 30 See for example T. Schnalke, "'Normale' Wissenschaft: Ein Berliner Beitrag zur 'Anthropologie der Herero' von 1914", in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine*

- aus der Kolonialzeit in Akademischen und Musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Links, 2013), pp. 170–81.
- 31 G. Krüger, 'Knochen im Transfer: Zur Restitution Sterblicher Überreste in Historischer Perspektive', in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in Akademischen und Musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Links, 2013), pp. 477–92; H. Stoecker, 'Human Remains als Historische Quellen zur Namibisch-Deutschen Geschichte: Ergebnisse und Erfahrungen aus einem Interdisziplinären Forschungsprojekt', in G. Castryck, S. Strickrodt and K. Werthmann (eds), *Sources and Methods for African History and Culture. Essays in Honour of Adam Jones* (Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2016), pp. 469–91.
- 32 B. Kunst and U. Creutz, 'Geschichte der Berliner Anthropologischen Sammlungen von Rudolf Virchow und Felix von Luschan', in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in Akademischen und Musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Links, 2013), pp. 84–105.
- 33 H. Stoecker and B. Teßmann, 'Namibische Gebeine in Berlin: Methoden und Recherchewege der Provenienzforschung', in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in Akademischen und Musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Links, 2013), pp. 199–223.
- 34 For more details see Pape, 'Herero Activists in the United States'.
- 35 Stoecker, 'Human Remains als Historische Quellen'.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 F. von Luschan, *Völker Rassen Sprachen* (Berlin, Welt, 1922), pp. 13 and 187. Quotation translated by the author.
- 38 D. Gross, 'The Troubling Origins of the Skeletons in a New York Museum', first published online 24 January 2018, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-troubling-origins-of-the-skeletons-in-a-new-york-museum; Stoecker, 'Human Remains als Historische Quellen'.
- 39 Gross, 'The Troubling Origins of the Skeletons'.
- 40 NAGPRA was passed in 1990 on a national level in the United States. It provides that all federal museums in the United States should repatriate human remains taken from inside of the national territory. The US is thereby the first country in the world to have a proactive legal stance on the repatriation of human remains, even though limited to certain museums (those funded at a federal level) and to certain human remains (those from inside the territory) (see S. Fründt 'Alle anders, alle gleich? Internationale Repatriierungsbewegungen', in H. Stoecker, T. Schnalke and A. Winkelmann (eds), *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in Akademischen und Musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin, Links, 2013), pp. 323–38.
- 41 Cited in Gross, 'The Troubling Origins of the Skeletons'.
- 42 Cited in *ibid.*