



OvaHerero, Mbanderu and Nama Genocides Institute

Press Release: Genocides Human Remains Discovered at American Museum of Natural History, New York City

The human remains of 8 Namibians have been discovered recently at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (AMNH) – NYC. Two of the remains have been identified as OvaHerero, two have been identified as Hai//om San, one is Nama and one is Damara. The ethnic and cultural identities of the other two remains are unknown and require further research.

The OvaHerero/Mbanderu and Nama Genocides Institute (ONGI), the Otjiherero Speaking Community in the US (OSCU) and the Namibian community in the U.S. hope that the American Museum of Natural History will work with us to ensure the rightful recognition and ultimate repatriation of our ancestors' remains to Namibia in order to help bring some closure to this painful chapter in our history.

Namibians living in the U.S. recently confirmed the existence of the remains after being alerted in late August 2017 by the NGO Berlin Postkolonial. According to Dr. Holger Stoecker, a German historian, who discovered the remains after visiting the museum several years ago, the Namibian remains in the possession of the American Museum of Natural History were part of the private collection of Felix von Luschan in Berlin, Germany. Luschan, a prolific and notorious collector of human remains from around the world, was an anthropologist and ethnologist at the Royal Museum for Ethnology in Berlin from 1885-1910 and a professor of physical anthropology at the Berlin University between 1910-1922.

The period covered by Luschan's collection corresponds to the period before, during and after the 1904-1908 OvaHerero and Nama genocides. Faced with killings, theft of cattle and land, and other abuses, the OvaHerero rose up against German oppression. Germany responded by launching a brutal war of annihilation against the OvaHerero and Nama, in which General von Trotha issued orders to the German forces to "exterminate" the OvaHerero and Nama people.

After the battle of Waterberg, the OvaHerero were pushed into the Kalahari desert to die of hunger and thirst; water wells were poisoned, and captured men were shot or hung. Women and children were put in concentration camps where most perished. The same fate awaited the Nama. In concentration camps, female prisoners were forced to boil severed heads of murdered OvaHerero and Nama prisoners and clean them with sharp glass – sometimes these victims were family members and often acquaintances.

When the concentrations camps were abolished in 1908, more than 80% of the OvaHerero and more than 50% of the Nama had been killed in what has become known as the first genocides of the 21st century, with numerous antecedents to the Holocaust. During this period, German forces also committed massacres and atrocities against thousands of San and Damara people.

To date the German government has refused to formally acknowledge and apologize for the genocide. Descendants of the OvaHerero and Nama continue to seek restorative justice and have called on the German government to officially recognize the genocide, issue a formal apology, pay compensation and return stolen artifacts and human remains that are still lingering in museums or institutions of higher learning in Germany including the Berliner Gesellschaft für



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Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (BGAEU). The OvaHerero and Nama have called on the Namibian government to take home the remains of 15 Namibians that have been waiting for repatriation since 2014 at the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin.

Earlier this year the OvaHerero and Nama people filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Southern District of New York against the German government seeking justice and reparations. The first court hearing was scheduled for July 21, 2017, but the German government ignored the court order to appear. The German government's arrogance to defy a court's orders is consistent with its pattern to deny and hide the genocide of the 1904-1908 from the international public and its citizens. Another court hearing is scheduled for October 13, in New York City.

The discovery of the Namibian human remains at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City is a vivid reminder of the ongoing legacy of racism and injustice. Germany must assume responsibility for the 1904-1908 OvaHerero and Nama genocides. Museums and institutions of higher learning that have been recipients of Namibian human remains and artifacts have a critical role to play in bringing closure to this painful chapter in our history.

We trust the American Museum of Natural History will work with us to verify and document these remains as victims of German colonial era atrocities and to provide as much information as possible, including how they died, where they came from, and the path they took to get to the AMNH – NYC, so that they can be returned with dignity to Namibia.

Telling their stories will ensure their journey to the American Museum of Natural History and their long silent suffering in the AMNH-NYC was not in vain. We hope their stories become a permanent and public part of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. In this way, current and future generations of museum visitors will be able to learn about the past abuses committed in the name of science and notions of racial superiority and the ongoing struggle of the OvaHerero and Nama people for Restorative Justice.

We welcome the transparency of the American Museum of Natural History on this issue and we look forward to enter into a dialogue to map the way forward about these remains.

Thank you!

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Eine Kiste mit Hereroschädeln wurde kürzlich von den Truppen in Deutsch-Süd-West-Afrika verpackt und an das Pathologische Institut zu Berlin gesandt, wo sie zu wissenschaftlichen Messungen verwandt werden sollen. Die Schädel, die von Hererofrauen mittels Glascherben vom Fleisch befreit und versandfähig gemacht wurden, stammen von gehängten oder gefallenen Hereros.

The picture above is from a post-card of German Troops in Namibia reads:
(A case with Herero skulls
was recently packed through the troops in Deutsch-Süd-West-Afrika and sent to the
Institute of Pathology of Berlin, where they are to be used for scientific
measurements. The skulls, that were cleansed from their flesh and made
transportable by Herero women using glass shards, are the ones of Herero who were
hanged or who fell).