

Living Things, With No Bone or Tissue, Pose a Quandary for Museums



Britain's National Army Museum on Wednesday returned locks of hair belonging to Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia, who died in 1868, to Ethiopia's government. CreditCreditNational Army Museum

By Alex Marshall
21 March 2019

In April 1868, Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia killed himself with a pistol that had been given to him by Queen Victoria, so that he didn't have to surrender to an invading British force.

A British military officer painted the emperor on his deathbed and then cut two locks of hair from his head.

The hair spent 60 years in the collection of Britain's National Army Museum in London. On Wednesday, it was returned to Ethiopia.

It was an important, and sensitive, moment. "Tewodros is seen by many Ethiopians as a father of the country," said Ababi Demissie, a spokesman for the Ethiopian Embassy in London.

But the return of the hair was also a simple case in the wider debate about what to do with human remains in European museums that were removed without the consent of their countries of origin. Others are more complicated.

“Many objects that are seen to be ethnographic items are actually considered to be people’s grandparents,” Christoph Balzar, a doctoral student in art history at the University of Bonn, Germany, said by telephone.

For example, he said, consider a girdle made from human hair. “What is that? Is it remains? Is it not?” he asked. “You can destroy a museum’s collection with a definition.”

In the restitution debate swirling through European museums, the treatment of human remains has been cited as an area of steady progress. Museums say that putting skeletons and relics on display aids understanding of world cultures and scientific development throughout history. But some were taken from indigenous groups.



Human remains are among the items on display in a vitrine called “Treatment of Dead Enemies” at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England. Credit Pitt Rivers Museum

Last year, a report commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron of France that recommended returning artifacts to Africa highlighted France’s plan to return the skulls of Algerian resistance fighters taken during its rule of the country. It also mentioned actions by European museums to return preserved, tattooed Maori heads to New Zealand and to send the bones of indigenous people slaughtered by German colonial troops back to Namibia.

But the report focused only on the narrow definition of bodies, or parts of bodies, of people who once lived. But not all revered objects come from bone or tissue.

Churingas — artifacts created by the Aranda people of what is now Australia — are an example of such an item, Mr. Balzar said.

Churingas, or “soul wood,” are created after a pregnant woman feels movement in her womb for the first time, he explained, adding that they are seen as “almost the soul of the child.”

The father-to-be goes to the place where his partner felt the movement, and finds an item — a stone, a piece of wood — said to have been dropped by the spirit as it enters the womb. That item is turned into the churinga.

“They’re human remains in my opinion,” Mr. Balzar said.

Most major European museums have churingas in their collections, Mr. Balzar said, adding that he thought very few, if any, are on display.

Some museums are making efforts to return them. Gilbert Lupfer, head of research and scientific cooperation for the Dresden State Art Collection in Germany, said in an email that his museum was in discussions with the Australian government on returning its churingas.

Laura Van Broekhoven, director of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England, said in a telephone interview that the museum was drawing up a policy for the return of similar items. “We often invite indigenous peoples to the museum,” she said, “and we see on a quite regular basis that things that look like things are more than that: They are ancestors. They are spirits.”

“It can be very emotional for people meeting their ancestors again,” she added.

Ms. Van Broekhoven said some museums had been long aware of this issue. She previously worked at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, and said a shaman from the Wayana people, in what is now Suriname, once came to view an olok, a feathered headdress used in initiation rituals. The Wayana consider it to be a person, she said.



The Emperor Tewodros, whose hair was returned on Wednesday, is seen by many Ethiopians as a father of the country, a spokesman for its embassy in London said. CreditNational Army Museum

The shaman spoke and sung to the headdress, sprinkled it with water and blew smoke at it. Afterward, he asked the museum to treat it similarly, Ms. Van Broekhoven said. “He said to me, ‘Laura, if I was to invite you to my house and I did not feed you, talk to you, or give you water, would you want to stay?’”

The Pitt Rivers Museum is also reviewing its policy on how it displays more obvious human remains. One of its most popular display cases shows how different cultures treated enemies killed in battle, she said. It includes shrunken heads made by the Shuar and Ashuar, indigenous peoples of what is now Ecuador and Peru. Some visitors have called the case a “freak show,” Ms. Van Broekhoven said, so the museum is reviewing the display to inform visitors about the practice of headhunting.

Daniel Antoine, curator of bioarchaeology at the British Museum, said by telephone that discussions around human remains may have to be extended to photographs and 3D-printed objects.

He said he was involved in a project a few years ago that involved a CT scan of a 4,000-year-old mummy from the Nile Valley and then recreated an amulet placed on the body with a 3D printer. “We need to display things like that with the same care, respect and dignity we would human remains,” he added.

The British Museum has 5,320 human remains in its collection, including some objects like the preserved, tattooed Maori heads. But it also has sacred objects that some groups consider almost human. Last year, the Chilean government said it wanted a statue known as “Hoa Hakananai’a” to be returned to the Rapa Nui, the indigenous people of Easter Island. Paz Zarate, a lawyer working on the campaign, said by telephone this week that the statue was a spiritual object that the Rapa Nui consider to be a living object.

The case of Britain’s National Army Museum, which decided to return the emperor’s hair, seems straightforward. But even what were clearly body parts are not always considered human remains. The British government’s Human Tissue Act, adopted in 2004 to help museums return remains, excludes hair or nails from a living person.

The National Army Museum has some fingers and toes in its collection, amputated from a man who had frostbite, said Claire Blackshaw, the museum’s spokeswoman. “But he’s still alive,” she added, “so we don’t consider them remains.”

Mr. Demissie, the spokesman for the Ethiopian Embassy, said the country planned to seek the return of other items, including the remains of Tewodros’s son, who is buried in a chapel at Windsor Castle. The country is also seeking artifacts taken from the emperor’s fortress. These include 11 replicas of the ark of the covenant that are now at the British Museum.

None of the treasures are considered human, Mr. Demissie said. But, he added, “They are sacred objects. We have asked for them back.”