

Human remains

The sacred, museums and archaeology

Neil G.W. Curtis

ABSTRACT

The treatment of human remains has become a very contentious issue, with a range of legal, moral and political pressures now weighing on archaeologists and museum curators. Attempts to respond to this changing cultural context have often tried to show an increased respect for the dead, though it is argued here that these have sometimes had counter-productive results. This paper discusses some of the complex ways in which living people have a stake in human remains, considering particularly the ideas of respect and empathy, and noting the ways in which the treatment of human remains may have changed significantly since they were originally collected. The distinction sometimes made between Western and indigenous practices is queried, with their entanglement being highlighted. It is also argued that the duality between the body and culture prevalent in archaeological accounts and museums is unhelpful. This is followed by a consideration of museums and archaeology as containing sacred practices, while a comparison of 'art' and 'heritage' with the Maori idea of *taonga* is suggested as offering a way of viewing material that recognises its sacred quality. The potential social value of displaying human remains by archaeologists and in museums is also explored. Finally, it is suggested that the debate about the treatment of human remains by archaeologists and in museums is an opportunity to engage with a profound interest in a way that could lead to a more considered interest in the material world.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, museum curators and archaeologists in Europe have been able to avoid discussing their treatment of human remains. Now, however, issues that have been discussed for many years in North America, Australia and New Zealand are being raised both within and without the profession. The establishment of a Working Group on Human Remains by the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Butler, 2001) is perhaps the clearest example, but Hedley Swain's paper on the *London Bodies* exhibition published in a recent issue of *Public Archaeology* (Swain, 2002) and discussions about repatriation and reburial of human remains (e.g. Fforde et al.,

2002) show that this is not just an issue resulting from external pressure.

The 1998–9 *London Bodies* exhibition in the Museum of London 'traced how the appearance of Londoners has changed since prehistoric times, with the central feature a series of skeletons presented below perspex covers ... It drew upon the very large collection of human skeletons (currently about 18,000) within the Museum's archaeological archive, and on the detailed analysis that is currently taking place on this material by Museum of London specialists' (Swain, 2002: 96).

Swain clearly shows the care that lay behind the exhibition as curators and designers took careful decisions about what was displayed and how it was publicised to balance a respect for the human

remains with 'the maximum public access to the stories they told' (*ibid.*).

At the same time as the publication of Swain's paper, March 2002, the *Body Worlds* exhibition had just opened in a London art gallery displaying dissected human remains preserved by the 'plastination' technique, having previously been on show in Japan, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Belgium. In the aftermath of newspaper revelations about the retention of children's organs by a number of British hospitals this exhibition courted controversy (BBC, 2002 and Lusher, 2002): indeed its web page refers to a 'protest against *Body Worlds*' (*Body Worlds*, 2002a). While the motivations may have been different, both exhibitions justified the display of human remains by pointing to the educational benefit of the display of scientific knowledge. Indeed, a public autopsy carried out as part of the *Body Worlds* exhibition in London was claimed to 'share the unique experience by opening a real human body in the presence of non-professionals. The aim of such an autopsy will remain professional, namely to establish the reason of death and to search for abnormalities' (*Body Worlds*, 2002b). The UK's Working Party on Human Remains was, however, established because the claims of education and science are now contested. Although primarily concerned with human remains for which there may be claims of repatriation, the Working Party has offered British archaeologists the opportunity to think carefully about the ideas behind our treatment of all human remains before legal constraints are established.

I am concerned that current practice by museums and archaeology is confused, and many of the reasons for what we do remain unexplored. A desire for clear ethical guidelines could leave these issues unexplored and limit our understanding about the remarkably varied ways in which people have treated human remains. A rigid ethical framework would also limit the potential for continuing debate about this aspect of how we relate to the past and to other cultures.

THE CONFUSION OF CURRENT MUSEUM AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

It has been said that 'of all archaeological activities, the excavation of human remains is perhaps most closely associated in the public imagination

with the role of the archaeologist' (Historic Scotland, 1997: 4). Likewise, many visitors expect that museums will have on display human remains. As Hedley Swain said, '99% of visitors expect to see human remains and don't have any problem with it in an exhibition' (cited in Butler, 2001). Whether they are Egyptian mummies, reconstructed Beaker cists or Jivaro shrunken heads from Ecuador, what they all have in common is a designation as the exotic 'Other', separated from the lives of visitors by time and space.

No-one would disagree that a museum curator who displayed in a glass case the remains of a child who had only just died would be deemed morally repugnant. And yet, in 1998, when the Museum of London displayed the skeletal remains of a medieval mother and child, both of whom had died during the child's birth, no public comment was made. (Swain, 2002: 95)

While the difference between such exceptional cases is clear, the line distinguishing what is acceptable from what is unacceptable is harder to define. As a museum studies student visiting Stoke-on-Trent Museum in 1987, I remember a curator apologising for the display of a monk's skeleton by a previous curator. Historic Scotland's current policy is not to display human remains at any of their properties, although they will allocate human remains to museums that will display them (Historic Scotland, 1997). Underlying these distinctions are a series of cultural pressures on archaeologists and museum curators, some legal, some political and some moral, that arise from cultural expectations about our relationships with the dead.

RELATING TO THE DEAD

The legal status of the dead

The legal constraints governing what can be done with human remains vary from place to place and from time to time. Such constraints were rarely originally intended, however, to control the archaeological treatment of human remains. Instead, they may have originated in the attempt to control the supply of corpses for anatomical study or to ensure that graves were not otherwise disturbed in churchyards. Examples from the UK

include the common law crime of 'violation of sepulchres' in Scotland (Logie, 1992), the Anatomy Act (Parker Pearson, 1999) that was thought to offer a way of banning the *Body Worlds* exhibition, or Church Law in England. As a result, the preparation for the *London Bodies* exhibition included checking with the Home Office that licences granted for their excavation did not preclude display, while Scottish courts have to be satisfied that the treatment of human remains is 'justifiable' and 'decent' to avoid the charge of 'violation of sepulchres'.

Unlike most archaeological material, in both Scots and English law it is normally considered that there are no rights of property in human remains (Garratt-Frost, 1992). The 1998 Anthony-Noel Kelly court case in London can be seen to have underlined this. Kelly, an artist, had obtained portions of cadavers from the stores of the Royal College of Surgeons of London and made casts from moulds of them. If there had been no rights of property in the human remains he could not have been found to have unlawfully removed them. It was found, however, that as the human remains had 'undergone a process of skill ... with the object of preserving it for medical or scientific examination' (Parker Pearson, 1999) they did constitute property. This argument showed that the human remains in their natural state were indeed ownerless, only becoming property through cultural actions that altered them post mortem. As this cannot be expected to be the case for most archaeologically derived human remains, museum curators and archaeologists still cannot consider that they 'own' such material. We thus have a legal obligation to be sensitive to the demands of other people over the treatment of human remains in a way that is not the case with other material that does have a defined owner.

The outcry over the retention of children's organs by some British hospitals has demonstrated how ethical decisions about the treatment of human remains change over time. These decisions now require medical staff to formally ask for 'informed consent' to organ retention and post mortems, as well as a closer public scrutiny than before. Likewise, pressure from indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere has profoundly affected the behaviour of museums, anthropologists and archaeologists (Swain, 2002).

As attitudes have changed over the years, so have the rights of archaeologists and museums, which therefore have to operate within contexts that are rarely entirely coherent, continually changing and deriving from varied traditions. For example, the 'Ethnomuseums' email discussion list focusing on 'sensitivity' (Ethnomuseums, 2001) noted that attempts by museums to respect rules of other cultures that restrict the viewing of material by people of a particular gender, age or ethnicity could fall foul of legislation designed to prevent sex or race discrimination.

Relationships with the ancestors: the impact of Western views

Of direct relevance to the treatment of material, including human remains, by museums and archaeologists are conflicting understandings of indigenous rights. Ingold has considered the ways in which Western notions of what it is to be 'indigenous' are rooted in a model that emphasises linear descent from an ancestral population in a particular place. This is quite unlike the way that many indigenous people have traditionally considered their relationship to a place being linked to their lived experiences of their environment (Ingold, 2000). People with a claim to indigenous status have thus been compelled to articulate this in terms that are incompatible with their experience and understanding of the world. As they try to prove ancestral occupation of land in the pre-colonial past to satisfy judicial processes, they ultimately affect their own view of themselves.

I suggest that a similar analysis can be applied to some of the demands for the restitution and reburial of human remains and associated material. As with land right claims, indigenous people have been forced to follow Western quasi-judicial processes. The case of the Lakota Ghost Dance shirt (Fig. 1), in which the shirt was returned recently to the Lakota Sioux from Glasgow Museums, is an excellent example. Five assessment criteria were used to judge the repatriation claim:

- the right of those making the request to represent the community to which the artefact originally belonged



Figure 1. Human remains? The display of the Lakota Ghost Dance Shirt in Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery, Kelvingrove, 2002. (Photo. ©Glasgow City Council [Glasgow Museums])

- ✓ the continuity between the community that created the object and the community on whose behalf the request is being made
- ✓ the cultural and religious importance of the object to the community
- ✓ how the object was acquired by the museum and its subsequent and intended use
- ✓ the likely fate of the object if it is returned. (Falconer, 1998: 31)

It is notable that three out of the five criteria were concerned with the relationship between those demanding the return of material and the material itself, emphasising the importance of legal ownership to the process. When dealing with requests for the return of human remains, museums attempt to judge between their own claims that follow a Western tradition of treating collections as scientific and educational resources and those of indigenous people arguing for an alternative view of the nature of material. Acting as a combination of 'defence', 'judge' and 'jury', museums have developed procedures that are dominated by the Western legal tradition with its emphasis on the ownership of property and an apparently objective procedure.

The practices involved in the claiming and return of human remains have had two significant effects on indigenous views of such remains. Firstly, the treatment of human remains so returned often follows Westernised practices rather than trying to recreate those of the people from whom they were collected. This is most clearly seen when a concern for preservation means that (although repatriated) human remains end up stored in a museum, even if in a consecrated vault (Southworth, 1994), while burial can sometimes show how far indigenous cultures may have adopted elements of Western culture. As such, there are clear parallels with indirect rule as established in British colonies, in which colonised people came to live within a social structure that had been adapted from traditional practices to support colonial rule. Secondly, the importance of the physical remains of ancestors has been emphasised, drawing on Western understandings of material as property, the importance of a line of descent from a distant ancestor and the subsequent importance of such lineal ancestors in land right claims. The evidence of tangible ancestral remains can thus be a powerful way in which an indigenous group can articulate its claim to land in a way that satisfies a Western legal process.

The emphasis on the ownership of human remains by particular indigenous groups has its formal statement in the First Code of Ethics of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) adopted in 1990. It recommends that archaeologists should 'acknowledge the special importance of indigenous ancestral human remains, and sites containing and/or associated with such remains, to indigenous peoples' and 'acknowledge that the indigenous cultural heritage rightfully belongs to the indigenous descendants of that heritage' (Tarlow, 2001 and WAC, 1990). As well as deriving from an essentially Western world view of descent and human remains, this absolute association between a place and an indigenous group of people is one that can be also seen as reflecting the continuing Western tendency to identify an 'Other' which stands outwith history and with the need for exceptional treatment. The WAC First Code of Ethics was conceived as being progressive and sensitive by liberal archaeologists. Tarlow has pointed out, however, that its universal application could be open to abuse in

places such as Europe where it is immigrants, rather than indigenes, who suffer greatest ethnic discrimination, such that 'far right and neo-Nazi groups could employ the WAC Code of Ethics as legitimating their own racially exclusive and discriminatory political claims' (Tarlow, 2001).

Science and education

If we recognise the complexity of the relationships between living people and those they consider to be ancestral, we must also consider the role of archaeologists and museum curators. During the press call for the *London Bodies* exhibition 'only osteologists and conservators handled bones' (Swain, 2002: 97), justifying archaeological and museum practices by appeal to science and education (as does the emphasis on scientific method and techniques on the television programmes *Time Team* and *Meet the Ancestors*). The Vermillion Accord of the World Archaeological Congress in 1989 called for the balancing of 'the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as the legitimate concerns of science and education' (Southworth, 1994: 24 and WAC, 1989). It is also notable that the *Body Worlds* exhibition has been justified by trying 'to teach anatomy to lay people, comparing normal and diseased organs to give them a better health awareness' (BBC, 2002).

Why then does Historic Scotland not want to 'draw attention to the remains and encourage public curiosity' (Historic Scotland, 1997:6) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics of 1986 state that human remains should be available to qualified researchers and educators 'but not to the morbidly curious' (Parker Pearson, 1999: 185)? Is the aim to distinguish between respectful scholars and disrespectful ghouls? Such a distinction between education and entertainment in displays for the public has roots in the 19th-century great exhibitions in Britain, one that Greenhalgh (1989) has seen as emblematic of the moral divide between work and pleasure. It also assumes that it is possible to classify people into those who are creating original research, those who are learning from that research and those who are only interested in superficial entertainment. It is striking how often this is portrayed as a moral distinction, reiterated, for

example, in the many concerns that archaeologists and museum curators have raised about the 'Disneyfication' of presentations of the past.

By emphasising the importance of objectivity, the scientific and educational approach explicitly values an emotional and spiritual distance from the human remains being studied. It regards the underlying motivations for study as unimportant, though presumably assumes that scholars such as archaeologists are immune to morbid curiosity, and privileges a particular way of dealing with human remains. When speaking of the research *potential* of material in museum collections or their value to *posterity*, we are making a claim about the future, rather than the present. As criteria that cannot be empirically tested in the present and that reflect hope rather than certainty, they can be difficult to justify to people claiming the return of human remains. See, for example, the recent statement by Rodney Dillon, the Commissioner for Tasmania of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC), that he was 'not aware of any scientific breakthroughs which followed from examinations or experiments on them' (ATSIC, 2002). As I will argue below, it is not possible to draw a line between rational and irrational approaches to the treatment of human remains: both the scientific/educational approach and that of indigenous groups treat them as sacred.

Respect and empathy

Increasingly archaeologists and museum curators talk of 'respecting the dead', though this can take curious forms. An unwrapped Egyptian mummy in the Manchester Museum continues to be on display (at least until the end of 2001), but now sports a linen sheet draped across his groin. While reflecting an admirable concern with ethics, it strikes me as confusing to visitors, as the drapery looks like an ancient Egyptian cloth yet displays a late 20th-century prudery, quite unlike some hugely phallic images from ancient Egypt. Both the open display of the body to the curious public and the method of concealment are unlikely to correspond with the wishes of those who once buried that body. Addressing contemporary anxieties about such exhibitions, the *Digging for Dreams* touring exhibition of treasures from the Petrie Museum asked visitors to consider the ethics

of displaying mummies (Vaswani, 2001). Displaying the head of a mummy behind a curtain paradoxically made that exhibit more like a Victorian peep show. Likewise, the recent practice of excavating skeletons behind screens while wearing face-masks and gloves creates a clinical, dehumanising process that is perhaps no more respectful to the wishes of the dead than is the tradition on archaeological excavations of naming skeletons and adorning them with hats and sunglasses.

In discussing the ethical codes governing the display of human remains, Swain draws distinctions between those 'from particular ethnic, cultural or religious groups which hold strong beliefs as to the treatment of the dead', those 'where the existing relatives might still be alive' and 'earlier generations of Britons' (Swain, 2002: 98). As with the criteria used by Glasgow Museums when discussing repatriation, these three categories all share the desire to make links between living people and the dead. Such links are, however, neither automatic nor uncontentious, nor can we see them as offering a hierarchy of closeness. As we have seen with the debates over repatriation, competing groups of people can claim rights to the same material. It is also striking how the feelings of attachment can change over time. While some human remains in museums were acquired by grave-robbing, it was also possible for them to have been legally acquired from indigenous people in the 19th century, though this kind of transaction can now be seen as having been unequal and so perhaps illegitimate. This is the case with tattooed Maori heads which many museums have already returned to New Zealand. Some of these were bought by collectors from Maori people who had added post mortem tattooing to increase their value, but it can be queried whether this commodification of ancestral remains would have occurred without the severe social disruption caused by European colonisation. While it is vital to understand the historical context within which each transaction took place, we must also explore current perceptions of that history to understand the importance of particular items to different people today.

But what about the 'significant communities of people ... who follow ancient Egyptian belief (who are) respiritualising it' (Montserrat, cited in Vaswani, 2001: 35)? What rights do they have

over the treatment of ancient Egyptian remains, compared with the rights of Egyptologists or of Egyptian Muslims? The difficulties of defining 'cultural or religious groups which hold strong beliefs as to the treatment of the dead' (Swain, 2002: 98) are even more difficult, as was seen by the arguments surrounding 'Seahenge' in Norfolk in which modern druids and pagans claimed rights over the treatment of the remains of a timber circle. Given the vigorous argument this created, it is not hard to imagine the vitriol had there been human remains on the site. What is clear is that beliefs that existed in the past are not being brought to life. For example, the traces of textiles found on some metal axes in early Bronze Age burials show that they were intended to be hidden from view, even from the body alongside which they lay (Barrett, 1985). Indeed, I wonder whether some of the items buried as grave goods in prehistory may have been seen as more sacred than the human remains they accompanied. Certainly, grave goods are often regarded as being of equal importance to human remains in repatriation claims. If we decide not to display a Beaker skeleton or the genitals of an unwrapped mummy 'out of respect for the dead', logically neither should we display any material from tombs or burials.

The first four of the six principles of the Vermilion Accord (Southworth, 1994 and WAC, 1989) speak of 'respect'. Of these it is striking that items 2, 3 and 4 refer to what can be clearly articulated by people (the wishes of the dead, the wishes of the local community and scientific research value). Item 1 uses a very different meaning by its demand that archaeologists should show 'respect for the mortal remains of the dead'. This is much more abstracted and ambiguous. 'Do we have to show respect in ways that they themselves would have recognised as respectful, or in the terms of those who claim cultural descent from the dead, or should we show respect by acting in ways that we, the modern scientific community, customarily and culturally understand as appropriately "respectful"?' (Tarlow, 2001: 249).

Underlying this call for respect by archaeologists is a wish to demonstrate empathy with the people being studied. I have tried to show how current practice is highly variable, dependent upon the ways in which people understand their relationship to the remains of people of the past.

Setting aside the philosophical question as to whether it is truly possible to feel empathy with another person, it is essential that we are critical of attempts to empathise with people in the archaeological past. Archaeologists work with material evidence to identify patterns; we do not discover what was inside people's heads. 'Meanings were never fixed in the thing itself, but were "read" from the experiences and expectations gained from elsewhere' (Barrett, 1994: 170). Without access to those experiences and expectations, we cannot claim to have knowledge of their beliefs and thus 'respect' their wishes. Indeed, I would argue that in a Western secular tradition that does not see the dead as being active agents in the world today, it is difficult to see how they can be offered respect. What we can do is to acknowledge that our ethical decisions are constantly being reassessed and renegotiated in the changing contexts of the present. By opening this process to the public we are offering respect to the living in a way that we never could to the dead.

HUMAN REMAINS AND SACRED OBJECTS

The body and culture

Much of the archaeological and museological discussion about the remains of human bodies has understood them to be different from cultural material. I have attempted to show that a range of material can be treated in ways that are hard to distinguish from those afforded to human remains. Indeed, the distinction between the body and culture is a product of Western thinking that sees a number of dualities, such as mind:body and nature:culture, thoroughly critiqued by Ingold (in a number of recent papers, e.g. Ingold, 2000) and is clearly seen in the restriction of the term 'human remains' to the remains of the body, rather than encompassing the material remains of human action as well. A consequence of this distinction is the placing of human remains within the remit of the natural sciences while cultural material is studied by the humanities and social sciences. This can mean that the finds from an excavated grave can be split into human remains and grave goods for curation by different museum departments. While in the early 20th century comparative anatomical studies made use of museum collec-

tions of human remains and anthropology included both the study of the body and culture, such studies now have to address the taints of racism. The view of the human body as being on the natural side of a nature:culture duality is a powerful factor in the way in which people today identify with human remains. The description of 40,000 year-old skeletal remains as being of 'anatomically modern humans' emphasises their similarity to the human body of today, even though they are described as having had a cultural life very unlike our own.

The form of a particular human body is not simply the product of its genetic inheritance, but also of its growth in response to factors such as diet, conscious bodily modification or the development of muscles caused by carrying heavy weights. Nor can we see personhood as a feature restricted to the human form. For example,

... among the Ojibwa, hunters of subarctic Canada, personhood is envisaged as an inner essence, embracing the powers of sentience, volition, memory and speech, which is quite different to the particular species it may outwardly assume. The human form is merely one of many guises in which persons may materially manifest themselves, and anyone can change his or her form for that of an animal more or less at will. (Ingold, 1994: 24)

Likewise, the naming of animals and the treatment of pets by many people in the West shows a similar lack of distinction between people and other animals.

While living persons would seem to be recognised as social agents in all societies, it is commonly held that Western society lays particular stress on individuality. As Clifford Geertz (1984) put it: 'The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe ... is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures' (cited in Poole, 1994: 844). Although Poole has argued that this is an over-simplification of Western concepts of the individual, it nonetheless demonstrates how human remains have come to be seen as representing individual people, while 'material culture' represents a cultural commonality. This has been eloquently demonstrated by the BBC television programme *Meet the Ancestors*, which uses tech-

niques of facial reconstruction to create an image of an individual person and sometimes creates narratives of the possible life of the individual based on an excavated skeleton. Excavated and landscape evidence is used to create an image of society and environment, often combining both in a composite image at the conclusion of the programme.

Likewise, the ways in which time is expressed in presentations of the past can also reveal a distinction between the individual person and their culture. For example, in the *London Bodies* exhibition the past was dated in 'generations', rather than the more conventional 'years', 'centuries' or 'millennia' that do not relate to human life spans (Swain, 2002). I suggest that this reflects a distinction between the 'cultural time' in which archaeologists usually deal and the 'human time' that was highlighted in an exhibition focusing on human remains.

Many museum curators and archaeologists concede that requests for repatriation or reburial should be treated more sympathetically than similar requests for other material. This is fostered by two Western understandings. Drawing on the Cartesian dualities, human remains have been defined as part of nature, thus resulting in arguments for their retention in museum collections phrased in terms of their scientific research potential. Secondly, human remains have been seen as representative of individual people in a way that other material remains are not, so adding weight to demands for their special treatment. As I have suggested above, even the claims of indigenous groups for the repatriation of human remains have come to be discussed in terms that derive from a tradition other than their own. The statement by the Australian and UK governments that they 'recognise the special connection that indigenous people have with ancestral remains' (Butler, 2001: 24) therefore derives from a simplistic position that fails to recognise the complexities of either Western or Aboriginal Australian attitudes to human remains.

Art, heritage and taonga

Just as relationships with the dead are more complex than is usually acknowledged, so too are some of the ways in which other material is described as 'art' or as 'heritage'. If Western

secular culture puts little faith in the sacred, 'art' is seen as carrying some of its intangible power. It is striking that the *Body Worlds* exhibition in London has been held in an art gallery, not a science museum, while the creator, Gunther von Hagens, has described it as 'anatomy art' (Lusher, 2002: 17). 'Art' is a crude category, however, compared with the subtleties embedded within the Maori concept of *taonga* (roughly translated as 'treasure'). Hirini Moko Mead (1991) and Te Awakotuku (1996) have discussed the nature of *taonga*, a term that has come into prominence in recent decades as an alternative to the practice of labelling Maori material as 'primitive art'. As well as having some parallels with Western art, such as the beauty of an object, the quality of creativity it embodies, its history and its iconography, *taonga* can also be seen as having some parallels with 'heritage' in the way that they are passed down like heirlooms from one generation to the next. More than mere antiquity, this is important because it demonstrates a link between the founding ancestors and people alive today. Close association with human remains is also important, such as carved chests used to contain human bones. The spiritual essence of *taonga* is, however, the most telling attribute and one that has much greater force than do 'art' and 'heritage'.

The sanctity of material is something that Western museums and archaeologists would do well to try to understand. Hirini Moko Mead commented that recognising something as *taonga* gives people obligations, such as:

keeping close to their *taonga*, bringing an elder to clear away the *tapu* so they could interact with it safely, holding a church service to control the awesome powers of the ancestors, talking to the *taonga* as though it were an ancestor, bringing green leaves to lay at the feet or generally behaving in a very affectionate manner to their *taonga*. (Mead, 1991: 167)

Most archaeologists now recognise that ritual should not be seen as something separate from daily life. Likewise, we should acknowledge that many objects have been treated as sacred, not just those obviously associated with death or religion. The levels of sanctity vary from object to object and may also change over time, just as Hirini Moko Mead noted that 'in a sense all Maori art

has increased *mana* since (the exhibition) *Te Maori* opened in New York in September 1984' (Mead, 1991: 166), giving international prestige to Maori art. We should also consider whether the treatment of objects in museums and by archaeologists is not that dissimilar to their treatment as sacred objects by others.

*The sacred rituals and places of museums
and archaeology*

If a consideration of the sacred enriches understandings of the material investigated by archaeologists and curated by museums, the practices of archaeology and museums can themselves also be considered to involve the sacred. Jack D. Elliott Jr has shown that although the language of the historic preservation movement is based on what claims to be an objective historiography, this is belied by the frequent use of the term 'significance': one which emphasises the power of places and objects 'to manifest a sense of something that is beyond and involves a very complex relationship between past events, specific places and conscious humans' (Elliott, 1994: 28). Discussing the work of Mircea Eliade, Elliott pointed out that 'the sacred is not absent in moderns but is only hidden and experienced in the form of "imaginary universes" which are the products of creative or artistic endeavors. Indeed, (Eliade) has seen our experience of history as perhaps the most important element in our hidden sense of the sacred' (Elliott, 2000: 7). It is perhaps noteworthy that the growth of museums in Western society from the 17th century to the present day parallels the development of the novel, also creating imaginary worlds that can be seen as a pursuit of the sacred, and the fragmentation of formal religion as the provider of a shared, universal view of the sacred.

As I have indicated above, perhaps by seeing 'art' and 'heritage' as sacred, rather than rational, categories, we would be better placed to understand how the material cared for by archaeologists and museums is treated. Charles Hunt has argued that museum collections

belong to a category of taboo material. They share this category with corpses, household refuse, bodily excretions, etc which have in common the property of being regarded as polluting, ie as being dangerous to touch, smell, see or

mention. As such, materials are kept within explicitly defined locations whose boundaries are signified and protected by more or less complex rites of passage. (Hunt 1993: 122)

Nick Merriman's 1989 classic discussion showed that 44% of people identified museums with churches, temples or monuments to the dead, while the architecture of archetypal museums often resembles classical temples or gothic cathedrals within which visitors speak in hushed tones in front of barely visible iconic treasures, while the attempts of conservators to prevent decay and the invocation of posterity as our goal speaks of a timelessness that is a common attribute of the sacred. While Merriman identified the accumulation of 'cultural capital' as underlying museum visiting, that collections and museums offer this potential can best be explained in terms that refer to their sacred aspects. Certainly, it is otherwise difficult to explain the amassing of collections of material that are unlikely ever to be used for research, let alone public display, even though these are the normal justifications for their preservation.

To pursue the idea that archaeology and museums act as sacred arenas, it is worth briefly considering the roles of archaeologists and museum curators. Along with the obvious link between the job titles 'curator' and 'curate', church ministers and priests played an important part in the history of museum collections and archaeology. One only has to think of the interest in antiquities shown by the reports of parish ministers in the *Old Statistical Account* of Scotland and the many papers by ministers in 19th-century scholarly journals such as the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. Today, part of the role of archaeologists and museum curators has what is almost a religious aspect, such as the skills of connoisseurship by which they can identify objects offered for identification. Rather than being quickly taught, these skills are the product of a long familiarity with material and do not need to be explained to the public. This is unlike the way in which libraries offer access to information; indeed 'in museums it is acknowledged that the great majority of visitors are not equipped educationally or emotionally to grasp the totality of ideas and sentiments which objects are capable of

generating and which must remain a preserve of a class of experts who interpret on behalf of the masses' (Hunt, 1994: 1223). The word 'interpretation' is widely used in discussions about archaeological landscapes and museums, such as 'interpretation is the single most basic purpose of an exhibit' (Roberts, 1994: 8) and 'to be fully understood and appreciated (an object) has to be *interpreted* or explained' (Ambrose and Paine, 1993: 67, with original emphasis) and has clear links to the interpretation of religious texts. The unwillingness of museums to offer monetary valuations of objects brought in for identification further emphasises that they act outwith the commercial world of everyday life, while the archaeological excavation of urban cemeteries can be seen as ritual cleansing of sites before commercial development as much as an opportunity for scientific research. Seen this way, curators and archaeologists are like priests or elders, with arcane knowledge and the power to control access to material and ideas.

This does not mean that we have to see sanctity or meaning as intrinsic to objects. As I have shown above, they emerge from the interplay between people and material in specific circumstances. Drawing on this understanding and an appreciation of the ideas of *taonga*, we should recognise that how we display objects affects their sanctity, just as the power of material can vary across time and place and between people. We need to accept that the same material can be regarded as sacred in different ways by different people. Likewise, we do not need to accept a priestly role for archaeologists and museum curators that excludes other people from knowledge and understanding; there are many religious examples where all believers are expected to play an active role.

Encountering mortality in museums

Considering the 200,000 people who waited many hours to walk past the Queen Mother's coffin in April 2002, as well as the practice of burying removed organs next to the bodies of children buried many years previously, there is clearly a need for rituals surrounding death despite (or because of) our increasing detachment from the experience of death in daily life. A century ago, when most people died at home and infant mortality was high, death was a

frequent part of normal life. Taking a longer perspective, Giddens noted that 'the ubiquity and visibility of death is one of the phenomena that most strikingly distinguishes the pre-modern family, and day-to-day social life in general, from the contemporary era' (Giddens, 1986: 126). Nowadays, death usually takes place in hospitals and hospices, places removed from normal daily life, while the death of people before old age is seen as particularly shocking. Contemporary burial traditions are also less likely to include the corpse being visible. Writing about traditions in north-east Scotland in the 19th century, Walter Gregor recorded that 'the company ... one by one went into the apartment of death, uncovered his head and frequently making a remark on the appearance of the body' (quoted in Bennett, 1992: 197). Today, very few people have seen the body of someone who has died recently.

Images of death are now dominated by the traumatic, whether shown in news coverage of fatal accidents, bundles of flowers at crash sites or fictional portrayals in film and television. Combined with the decline of visual statements of mourning in public between the 19th century and the later 20th century, such as the wearing of black clothes, the experience of the death of other people is now portrayed as disrupting daily life rather than being a normal aspect of it, such that 'once required as part of religious and moral instruction, the call to remember death and the proximity of objects that resonate with physical decay ... can be perceived as threatening to modern sensibilities' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 213). Nonetheless, the material culture associated with death and memory is vast and varied, even if rarely publicly highlighted. While the places that particular people associate with the death of loved ones are everywhere, there are very few places in which non-traumatic death is made visible to everyone else. Among the exceptions are cemeteries, churches and museums.

The collections of museums largely consist of objects used by people who are now dead. Along with the display of human remains and the association that many people make between the dead and museums (Merriman, 1989), I have argued that this is an important part of their social role. It should be noted, however, that unlike churches, memorials and cemeteries, museums rarely make explicit links between the display of material associated with death and named individuals,

instead portraying death in the abstract. While not usually acceptable in modern society, the display of human remains and the materiality of death is therefore something that is perhaps only possible for museums. I suggest that such exhibitions have the potential to become very valuable, offering people an opportunity to encounter and consider life and death. Perhaps this offers one answer to the charge that museums can offer little in the face of virtual technology (McLeod, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Forging relationships with the living

If we continue to follow the conventional practice that erects a barrier between scientific/educational attitudes on the one hand and those of indigenous groups on the other, we will not be able to develop a true respect for alternative viewpoints. Indigenous groups are now recognised as not existing within a timeless 'ethnographic present'. The rights that are often bestowed on particular groups of people can still derive, however, from the Western view of them as 'noble savages' or from a sense of guilt. This is perhaps seen in the statement by the Australian and UK governments (quoted above) that they 'recognise the special connection that indigenous people have with ancestral remains' (Butler, 2001: 24).

Instead of trying to resurrect the relationships of the time of collection and offering some form of restitution for past colonial wrongs by returning human remains, we should try to forge new relationships with people that recognise current concerns and that acknowledge how the practices of archaeology and museums have changed radically over the past century. As Swain puts it, 'archaeologists would do well to make sure they are in tune with the society in which they operate, the society they are there to serve' (Swain, 2002: 100). We must recognise that, wherever material is housed, it has a history that is shared among many people who now all have a stake in it. It also means that we have to engage in separate dialogues in each case, trying to weigh up the claims of ancestral rights and scientific research. Likewise we need to base discussions about repatriation or special storage on a respect for alternative ritual practices in the present, rather than on

legalistic understandings of ownership or the pious hopes of preserving material for posterity. Respect will emerge from these dialogues much more successfully than it would through the imposition of a standard code.

Challenging preconceptions

Perhaps we should make explicit the sacred quality of museums and archaeological sites, pointing out the challenging nature of all that they contain, instead of picking on particular items for special labelling or removal from display. Rather than merely tolerating the removal of particular material from display or from museums altogether, respect includes within it the obligation to explain the action openly. That this process can benefit the visitor was seen in the display in Glasgow about the return of the Lakota Ghost Dance shirt or the explanation of the removal from display of a Maori tattooed head in the Marischal Museum, Aberdeen. Both resulted in much more engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions than did the previous display of the objects themselves. That way, people would be offered both a clearer view of other cultures and a clearer reflection of their own as they consider the appropriateness of displaying the remains of human bodies, and other material, in museums.

There is nothing 'natural' about any way of behaving. Indeed, recognising the variability of humanity should help us to challenge our own preconceptions and emphasise our links with other people. Questioning the display of human remains and other material should therefore not be seen as a problem that needs a solution. Instead it is a sign of the importance of the material for which we care and a challenge to involve the whole public to participate in, rather than observe, the rituals that create meaning.

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Neil G.W. Curtis is a graduate of Glasgow (Archaeology 1986), Leicester (Museum Studies 1988) and Aberdeen (Education 1996). Since 1988 Neil Curtis has worked in Marischal Museum of the University of Aberdeen, where he is now Senior Curator and Honorary Lecturer in Anthropology. Contact address: Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, Marischal College, Aberdeen A10 1YS, Scotland. Tel: +44 (0)1224 274301; email: neil.curtis@abdn.ac.uk

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