



Press Release

## Repatriation of Skulls from Namibia

University of Freiburg hands over human remains in ceremony

The University of Freiburg completed its investigation of skulls from its historical collection in 2011. The extensive research project identified 14 skulls as being from the territory of present-day Namibia and prepared them for repatriation in close coordination with the Namibian Embassy.

Rector of the University of Freiburg Prof. Dr. **Hans-Jochen Schiewer** handed over the skulls to a Namibian delegation led by the Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport, & Culture Hon. **Jerry Ekandjo**, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Traditional Leaders Chief **Immanuel /Gaseb** (the slash represents a clicking sound), and Head of the National Museum of Namibia and Chairperson of the National Heritage Council **Esther Mwoombola-/Goagoses**. The delegation, which was accompanied by Ambassador of the Republic of Namibia to the Federal Republic of Germany **S.E. Neville Gertze**, will transport the human remains back to Namibia along with further remains from the Charité in Berlin.

“The unlawful acquisition of human remains is one of the dark chapters in the history of European science and also of our university. I am glad that the research project completed in 2011 has made a contribution to the critical reappraisal of this history and that we have fulfilled the conditions for the repatriation of the skulls and their honorable memory. As rector of this university I deeply regret what was done here in the guise of science”, emphasized Schiewer in his opening speech to the Namibian delegation.

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The university already presented the findings of the research project to the public in 2011. The Rectorate had entrusted the renowned Freiburg anthropologist Prof. Dr. **Ursula Wittwer-Backofen** with the task of identifying the skulls and resolved to repatriate the identified and classified skulls in close coordination with the Namibian Embassy.

The Alexander Ecker Collection, housed in the Freiburg University Archive, was originally assembled by the anatomist and anthropologist Alexander Ecker (1816–1887) and consists primarily of human skeletal remains, predominately skulls from archaeological excavations around the world. Today the Ecker Collection numbers roughly 1370 skulls.

Eugen Fischer, an anatomist who specialized in anthropology, became the curator of this collection in 1900. He never kept a catalog, nor did he leave a description of his acquisition practices. Of the approximately 200 skulls brought from Africa to Germany at that time, eight are labeled as “Herero” and five as “Hottentots.” They were most likely added to the collection during Fischer’s time as a professor in Freiburg (1918–1927). Fischer had traveled to German South-West Africa, the present-day Republic of Namibia, to conduct research in 1908 and brought them back with him to Freiburg. Other historical sources suggest that human remains were shipped to Germany for so-called research purposes within the context of the German-Herero War and added to anthropological collections there.

During the two world wars, parts of the collection were damaged and most of the original documentation was lost. Several relocations made identifying the provenance of the remains even more difficult. During the last relocation of the Alexander Ecker Collection to the University Archive, it became evident that the collection might contain skulls of problematic origin from an ethical standpoint.

19 skulls were identified as relevant for the research of Namibian ancestry. They were chosen for bearing a reference to the Herero, the Nama, or to Southwest or South Africa in general. The points of reference were the skulls themselves and the labels accompanying them.

The University of Freiburg achieves top positions in all university rankings. Its research, teaching, and continuing education have received prestigious awards in nationwide competitions. Over 24,000 students from 100 nations are enrolled in 188 degree programs. Around 5,000 teachers and administrative employees put in their effort every day – and experience that family friendliness, equal opportunity, and environmental protection are more than just empty phrases here.

A variety of methods were applied, including UV light, documentation of anomalies, pathologies or traumata, morphometric analysis, and stable isotope analysis. Invasive methods were only applied when absolutely necessary.

The purpose of the analyses was to pinpoint the geographical provenance of the analyzed skulls. Taking all available results into account, the researchers found a significant probability that 14 skulls are from the region of present-day Namibia. The researchers recommended these skulls for restitution.