

WORKING GROUP ON HUMAN REMAINS

Comments by D C Devenish 31.10.2001

There are several aspects to the treatment of human remains; however the one on which I wish to comment is repatriation.

I note that you have sent me a separate news release on the subject; so Presumably you regard this as an important aspect. In this I note that you will be including objects associated with human remains.

I do not have direct experience of the repatriation of human remains; however I do have considerable experience of repatriation of exhibits. I should add that, in principle, I favour repatriation; but only if it is done for the right reasons and the objects will be of more use than, and at least as safe as, they were before – normally this should imply transfer to another museum.

In passing, I suggest that in any report the word “repatriation” or “return” be used -- not “restitution” nor “reparation”, since these expressions imply guilt in some form.

Unfortunately, I have to say, museums show signs of becoming victims of the “compensation culture” and other forms of obscurantism. Items were given to museums by donors who wished to protect them for posterity; they should not be subject to looting.

It is true that human remains require respect.

Does this mean that the remains of the old man of Neanderthal should be handed over for a municipal funeral in the local churchyard?

This may sound far-fetched; but similar events have been advocated in the USA or Australia, backed up by ill conceived legislation.

When I was in Rarotonga one American Curator whom I approached regarding return of cultural material, was unwilling to part with anything in case it would be destroyed. I pointed out that we had reasonable museum facilities and that I certainly had no intention of ritually reburying or burning any artefacts which might be returned. He in turn pointed out that it would not be up to me. Future legislation, he feared, could well put any indigenous

object in the museum at risk –as, in his view, has legislation in the US regarding Amerindian artefacts.

Bearing this in mind, how safe are the Maori heads recently returned to New Zealand?

On my last visit to the Pacific Islands Museums Association, I heard a story, which is hearsay, but has the ring of truth, that recently a self appointed committee of indigenous Hawaiians demanded and obtained a number of grave assemblages previously held in the main museum there, which they promptly reburied, i.e. destroyed,. Since then other indigenous Hawaiian groups have been complaining as they regard this act as the destruction of their culture.

The final point of what I have to say is, in my view, **human remains and associated artefacts are the one group of exhibits which should never be repatriated.**

In saying this I realise that I am going against received wisdom, and possibly also the “spirit of the age”; however I suspect that posterity may agree with my assessment (too late?).