

Submission to Working Group on Human Remains by the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG)

MEG welcomes the setting up of the Working Group. The following comments should be seen as additional to the Guidelines on the Management of Human Remains which MEG ratified in 1991 and were most recently published in 2000 as Appendix 1 to the MGC publication on Restitution and Repatriation. MEG anticipates that a most welcome outcome of the deliberations of the Working Group will be the more general recognition and acceptance of the depth of feeling that exists, particularly but not solely on the part of actual or cultural descendants, that the specimens which are now “human remains” were once people, with relationships with others that are still meaningful within the communities in which they lived.

One of the principal aims in this debate should be the simplification of the procedures by which requests for the return of human remains should be heard, considered and responded to sympathetically. Where the statutes relating to the decision-making powers of museum governing bodies disbar them from agreeing to the removal of human remains from collections, MEG recommends that the working group should support legislative changes to make this possible. The broad approach should be to allow appropriate weight to be given to the rights and views of source communities relating to human remains formerly in their care. This may require changes in the powers of museum trustees to receive submissions and to provide for them to influence decision-making eg re the possibilities of de-accessioning. At the very least, the current situation which allows some museums to ignore the need to even discuss the issues surrounding return of human remains must be changed.

MEG is aware that in many museums no distinction exists in accessioning procedure let alone historical treatment between human remains and other biological specimens. MEG welcomes moves to correct this anomaly. It is crucial in the development of trust between holders of human remains, their source communities and other interested parties, sufficient to allow rational consideration of the issues.

MEG supports the necessity of putting together a Statement of Principles, relating to both care and safe keeping, and recommends consideration of the MEG Guidelines on the Management of Human Remains for inclusion. MEG also recommends the Working Group to endorse the provisions of MGC’s Report on Restitution and Repatriation which relate *inter alia* to human remains. One of the main purposes of the statement will be to give encouragement to museum governing bodies to initiate dialogues with interested parties relating to human remains in their care, within the overall remit of disseminating information about collections, but not glossing over the possibility of de-accessioning and return as an eventual outcome.

MEG wishes to counsel the working group to approach the inclusion within any legislative change of artefacts that are associated with human remains with caution. In particular, the definition of what is to be included within the heading “directly connected” must be carefully and unambiguously drawn up. MEG Guidelines, para 1.1 refers to ‘items made from human remains which have been altered by deliberate intent’ in addition to human remains, but the definition of what is to be included may also cover coffins, urns and other containers for human remains. MEG suggests that more detailed consultation will be needed to decide whether the proposals should also cover objects associated with funeral or burial activities or ceremonies.

MEG would like the Working Group's consultative report to include a recommendation that a central source of advice and forum for consideration of issues be set up to assist museum governing bodies and those charged with responsibility for advising them in arriving at a well-considered decision.

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