

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 5, n° 1/2

Combined Issue

November 2006

SKULLS AS CURIOS, CRANIA AS SCIENCE:

Some Notes on the Collection of Skeletal Material during the German Colonial Period

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Burial plays a major cultural role in most Micronesian societies. Burial in the soil tied the deceased ancestors to the land they once owned and created and consolidated manifestations of land claims by the descendants. Apart from cultural practices, the burials were untouchable. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century European museums and anthropological societies were eager to acquire skeletal material from Micronesia to understand the peopling of the Pacific and the relationship of the various 'races.' To this end, German traders, officials and naval personnel obtained skeletal material both clandestinely and openly. In the latter case, acquiescence was assured through the power differential between the German officials and the local population. This paper compiles what is known of the German collection efforts in Micronesia.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Australian archaeology and heritage management was faced with the ethical issue of the profession's approaches to Aboriginal human remains, specifically their research and treatment.¹ A similar situation occurred in the USA, where it led to the passing of the Native American Graves Repatriation Act.² In modern archaeological and anthropological practice it is no longer acceptable to excavate, study and ultimately warehouse human skeletal remains without the consent provided by the relatives or, in the case of long deceased individuals, provided by their communities and current custodians of traditional and spiritual sites.

Much of the debate has focussed on the repatriation and subsequent reburial of human remains from Australia and the United States (including Hawai'i). The aim of this paper is to point out that this 'custom' of collecting crania for science was also practiced in German Micronesia and that in many cases German

government agents were involved—even though it had been made clear to them, that such activities violated the beliefs of the resident people under their tutelage.

SKULLS AS CURIOS

The burgeoning interest in cranial phrenology during the latter part of the nineteenth century coincided with an expansion of the European colonial Empires in Africa and Oceania. There was a great interest among the medical and anthropological profession in cranial material. This anthropological interest developed on the back of a general interest in ethnographic 'curiosa,' the acquisition of and trade in which had been a profitable sideline for many sailors and ship captains since late eighteenth century. They had always acquired skulls as part of that trade.

Nan Madol on Pohnpei may serve as an example. The vaults of Nan Douwas, and the perceived potential of them containing a 'treas-

This is a peer reviewed contribution. *Received:* 26 May 2006 *Revised:* 20 Dec 2006 *Accepted:* 21 Dec 2006

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Persistent identifier: <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla.arc-65664>

ure trove' attracted substantial attention by various whaling captains. John Thomas Gulick mentions that a Mr. Jules Dudoit, in the early 1850s a resident in Honolulu, had in 1834 recovered two silver crucifixes from the burial chamber on the south side of Nan Douwas.³ According to information provided by resident Europeans, the vaults of Nan Douwas had been looted for human bones in 1839 by Captains Charles W. Coffin of the Nantucket whaler *Ohio* and E.B. Sherman of the Fairhaven whaler *Marcus* in 1839.⁴

Likewise, the burial caves on Nauru had been frequently visited by outsiders, mainly whalers, who collected teeth and skulls for the ethnographic curio market.⁵

Such examples highlight the trade in human body parts as curios which the crews of traders and whalers could sell upon their return to 'civilisation.' However, it was recognised early on by the academics that the scientific value of such crania was limited. Krause asserts "everyone who works in the field of craniology will agree with me that it is very difficult to obtain authenticated crania from the [ethnographic] trade".⁶ This authenticity of provenance, however, was crucial if the crania were to add to the debate on human evolution and the nature of the perceived differential development status of human races. To resolve the issue, many museums sent out specific collection expeditions.

Collections were carried out both on behalf of governmental and university departments. In the Pacific area, however, none of them could compete with a private museum established by the Hamburg based merchant Johan Cesar Godeffroy. Godeffroy and Co. was uniquely placed to ensure a regular supply of ethnographica for the museum or, in case of duplicates or inferior items, for onwards sale: they maintained vast network of agents who traded on their behalf on many islands and atolls of the Pacific; the habit of advancing funds on the next copra harvest almost perpetually indebted the local community to Godeffroy and thus not only assured a steady supply of copra but also a first pick on whatever else was on offer; and they maintained a rigid company structure which saw all trading

the branch office in Apia⁷ and ultimately Hamburg. In addition to this vast collection network, Godeffroy also sent out collection expeditions, such as Amalie Dietrich to Australia, and funded others such as Johan Kubary to spend much of their time collecting.

In its heyday the Museum Godeffroy was one of, if not *the* richest private museum of nineteenth century, stocked with ethnographica. The bulk of the Marshallese collection, for example, stems from Ebon, collected by Johan Kubary in 1871-72.⁸ The collection was eventually dispersed when the Godeffroy trading empire collapsed in the early 1880s.

CRANIA AS SCIENCE

In 1879 the Museum Godeffroy acquired ten slightly incomplete skeletons and eight isolated crania collected on Chuuk by the Polish ethnographer and trader Johan S Kubary.⁹ The crania came mainly from Toloas (12 individuals), but also from Eten (3), Fefan (2) and Uman (1).¹⁰ Otto Finsch bought another twenty crania, again from Johan Kubary who had excavated them himself. Fourteen of the crania stem from Toloas, four from Etan and one each from Fefan and Pis.¹¹ These were proudly described by Rudolf Virchow, the then pre-eminent German physical anthropologist.¹²

It is unclear to what extent the Chuukese were aware of Kubary's activities. It can be surmised that they were largely clandestine, because not only is the island provenance known, but in almost all instances the crania can be attributed to specific clans, suggesting that they were excavated from specified and well known burial grounds.

In addition, by 1886 the Museum Godeffroy had purchased 17 crania from the Mortlock Group, 8 from Pohnpei, three from Yap, one each from Nemma and Palau, and two from the Marshalls.¹³ Material from Kiribati was more frequent¹⁴ and apparently easier to obtain.

But clearly, the collection of skeletal material could not be separated from the overall political situation. In a comment on Krause's 1886 paper Virchow deplores the political events of 1885, ie. the partition of Micronesia between Spain and Germany and the resultant

withdrawal of German trading interests from the Marianas and the Western Carolines,¹⁵ meant that the supply of skulls would dry up and that the conduct of the racial debate would suffer from that.¹⁶

EXAMPLES OF COLLECTION ACTIVITIES IN MICRONESIA

Burial plays a major cultural role in most Micronesian societies. Burial in the soil tied the deceased ancestors to the land they once owned and created and consolidated manifestations of land claims by the descendants. Apart from cultural practices, such as the removal of bones to fashion tools and weapons imbued with spiritual/ancestral power as in the Marianas,¹⁷ or the removal of crania for ancestor worship as in the case of the Marianas¹⁸ and Nauru,¹⁹ the burials were untouchable. While burial patterns changed with the advent of Christianity,²⁰ the land claims derived from burials remain strong, with many being buried next to present-day houses.

Marianas

Krause commented on the lack of comparative material from the northern Mariana Islands.²¹ Crania from there were keenly sought after as these islands were assumed to be less affected by intermarriage with Filipinos²² and thus deemed to be more racially 'pure' than Guam.²³

Given that the Marianas were firmly in Spanish hand, and that German traders were no longer welcome to conduct shore-based trading after 1885,²⁴ any 'supply' of crania from that island group had to wait until the end of Spanish rule in 1898. On 17 November 1899 Germany took over the administration of the Northern Marianas from Spain.²⁵ The first administrator, Georg Fritz, was an avid collector for the zoological institutions and also interested in history and archaeology.²⁶ Soon after establishing his administration, Fritz commenced to collect archaeological material.

In his first quarterly report, dated 9 March 1900, Fritz commented on the atrocities of the last days of the Spanish regime on Saipan and generalises on the excesses of Spanish colonial policy. He noted that he investigated a cave recovering a number of crania from what he sus-

pects to be mass grave of Chamorro killed by the Spanish or by an introduced disease.²⁷

By 1905, the German ethnologist and anthropologist Otto Schlaginhaufen could write a paper on the "physical anthropology of the inhabitants of the Mariana Islands," drawing on 45 crania and cranial fragments collected by Georg Fritz and sent to the Museum of Ethnography in Berlin. Most of the crania had been collected in 1903 and 1904 in karst caves near Tanapag on Saipan,²⁸ some of which had come from 'Calaberas Cave' where Fritz had noted twelve crania lined up near the entrance.²⁹

We do not know how the Chamorro population felt about the removal of the crania from the caves, unless Fritz collected them alone. The power differential between Fritz and the subjects he ruled was tremendous, exacerbated by the way the outgoing Spanish administration had (mal-)treated the people on Saipan.³⁰

Palau

The German anthropological society of Berlin deplored that there were so few crania from Palau. Apart from a cranium in the Museum Godeffroy, collected by Karl Semper in 1871,³¹ Virchow could only comment on only one other cranium furnished to him by a Dr. Schetelig.³² Intriguingly, modern research could trace a larger number of Palauan crania in German collections,³³ which could point to inter-institutional rivalry and resultant secrecy at the time.

Carolines

Comparatively little is known from the Carolines apart from Kubary's early collection efforts (see above).

On 29 March 1907 the German Vice-Gouverneur Victor Berg, a had gone to Nan Madol to search for the bones of the Sau Deleurs, the rulers on Nan Madol. His mistress, Kedinsairrn, from the ruling clan of Madolenemwh, and her family protested and argued that he would suffer spiritual retribution if he were to proceed and dig. People believe to have heard in the following night the sound of a trumpet shell from where Berg had dug. The

next day Berg died, officially from a heat stroke.³⁴

The German official records claim that he died of sunstroke and exhaustion while 'surveying' the ruins of Nan Madol.³⁵

When Georg Fritz was posted from Saipan to Pohnpei, he continued his collection activities for the Berlin Museums. In 1909 he sent two of the near-complete skeletons which he had 'saved' from destruction some time in late 1908.³⁶ It is not clear where the skeletons came from. Given that he sent them together with other material from the Central Carolines³⁷ it is probable that the skeletons were collected on one of the atolls devastated by the Good Friday Typhoon of 1907,³⁸ which he visited in May 1907.³⁹

Marshalls

In 1878 the German zoologist and ethnographer Otto Finsch travelled through Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Pohnpei and stayed for 30 days on Jaluit in August and September. One of his main aims was to collect ethnographic and biological specimens for the European scientific societies and museums. While he was able to make facial masks with plaster of Paris of two men from Jaluit, Finsch was unable to obtain Marshallese skeletal remains for museum collections. He comments that 'excavating them by himself was not possible because of the natives'.⁴⁰ Even though he offered the substantial sum of \$3 to \$4 per skull,⁴¹ he was unable to obtain any.

The naval physician Dr. Carl Benda acquired two crania from Jaluit, excavated at a chiefly burial site on a tip of an island (Jabor?). The burials were in scrub and surrounded by coral boulders. The "excavation had to occur at night, because the natives watch with great care over the sacredness of the burials." The bodies were encountered at a depth of 0.75m and did not follow a systematic orientation.⁴²

Virchow, in his analysis of the Jaluit cranium⁴³ and other material noted that Finsch had tried in vain to obtain crania from the Marshall Islands but that by happenstance and initiative the naval physician Dr. Benda obtained material in 1879, before Finsch arrived. Virchow praised Benda saying that "he man-

aged to conduct at night a successful expedition to the burial place; from the fact that Dr. Finsch had heard nothing about it, we can conclude that even the natives did not realise that their burials had been looted. At any rate, this case shows how the navy is advantaged in the collection of scientific material, and what valuable services she can render".⁴⁴

Virchow's chronology is misleading, however, as Dr. Benda was physician aboard the German warship SMS *Ariadne* which visited Jaluit between 26 November and 1 December 1878. That visit effected a Treaty with the *irooj* of the Ralik Chain to the effect that Germany had the rights to establish a coaling station on Jaluit.⁴⁵

The desire of the Marshallese not to disturb the dead was very strong. M. Prager describes an incident where he had been ordered to erect a flagpole for the German trading station on Jaluit. As the station complex had been erected on a former chiefly cemetery, the Marshallese were not prepared to assist in the excavation. They left and avoided the area for fear of being forced to do so by the German employers. The excavation was eventually executed by station workers from the New Hebrides who indeed encountered a burial. Unfortunately, so Prager, the bones were in such a bad condition that he could not salvage the skull as he had intended.⁴⁶

By 1886 the sample of crania collected in the Marshall Islands had increased to 15 male and one female individual.⁴⁷ It is unclear where they had come from.

Pater Josef Filbry, in his discussion of the burial customs of the Marshalls,⁴⁸ mentions that *irooj laplap* Ujelañ, a close friend of the Catholic padres, went to the burial location of a chief, then only known to a few, and excavated the burial to extract the Spondylus head ornaments and the chest ornament made from *Tri-daena* or whale tooth.

Filbry comments that it would be interesting to open the old chiefly graves, but that in the eyes of the Marshallese this would be outrageous and an unforgivable transgression.⁴⁹

Museum collections contain other rather odd items indicative of the power of the collectors. The collection put together by Dr. Wil-

helm Knappe, German Commissar of the Marshall Islands from early 1886 to October 1887, contains two funeral mats, which had been used to wrap the body of the daughter of *irooj* Kabua, who had died on 20 March 1887 as a result of the explosion of a petroleum lamp.⁵⁰ Traditionally these mats would have been buried with the body.

By 1886 the power differential in the Marshall Islands had firmly shifted in favour of the Germans. The Marshall Islands were a German protectorate⁵¹ propped up, if need be, with naval power. The political manoeuvring of the various chiefs to carry favours with the German administration to consolidate their own position must also not be underestimated.⁵²

Nauru

The German government physician for the Marshall Islands, Dr. Erwin Steinbach, on a visit to Nauru in August 1894, visited a number of karst burial caves along the shore.⁵³ Friedrich ('Fritz') Jung, German government station chief on Nauru from 1892-1897, had previously visited a number of caves in the centre of the island and recovered three crania from the bottom of one of these caves. He let Steinbach have these crania, who upon his return to Germany published a description in an ethnographic journal.⁵⁴

Aloys Kayser, Catholic priest on Nauru with a keen ethnographic eye, commented that these burial caves had been raided in the past for the ethnographic curio market.⁵⁵ On Nauru skulls were regarded as the most valuable component of a human body. Once separated from the decayed corpse, the skull was taken to the beach, washed of all flesh, skin and hair and bleached in the sun. It was repeatedly oiled, bleached and washed until it had attained a glossy 'chocolate-brown' colour. The skull was then buried at the centre post of the house and the place marked with a stone (also wholly covered with soil) to allow the skull to be relocated. The location of the skull was a family secret passed on from one caretaker generation to the other, but unbeknown to most family members. The skulls were occasionally extracted, cleansed, oiled and reburied. The theft of such ancestor skulls was one way of exacting

revenge in family feuds. In 1914 a skull exhumed when a hut was shifted served as a moneybox placed into the rafters. Ancestor skulls also formed part in the burial ceremony of children, here the skull(s) were placed onto the body. A large number of ancestor skulls were acquired by whalers to service the ethnographic curio market.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey of historic sources has shown that German anthropological museums and institutions satisfied their need for skeletal material by enlisting the help of German traders and especially administrators. On occasion, as evidenced by Benda's actions on Jaluit, the officials were fully cognisant of the fact that their actions were both immoral in the eyes of the local population and that they were, in fact, violating local rules. Arrogance and feelings of racial superiority ensured that they did not consider this behaviour outrageous.

Cases of retribution to such behaviour are rare. The German trader Reimers, formerly working for the Jaluit Gesellschaft in Jaluit, was murdered in the Bismarck archipelago in 1904. The *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* reported that he was murdered when he was caught opening graves to extract ethnographically valuable burial goods.⁵⁶ It is significant to observe in this context, that the paper noted that the trader himself was to blame for his death.

The German administrators of Micronesia then continued the collection of skeletal material in an official and semi-official capacity, making ample use (conscious or not) of the power differential between them and the subjects they ruled.

Such behaviour, however, did not go unnoticed in the wider community. People were talking about it. A good example is the fictionalisation of Kubary's activities by the Australian writer Louis Becke. In his story "Dr. Ludwig Schwalbe, South Seas Savant" Becke describes a German skull and ethnographic curio collector, engaged in profiting from inter-tribal warfare in Melanesia.⁵⁷

Today, Becke's story remains the only amusing take on an otherwise quite depressing episode.

ENDNOTE

1. Eg. McBryde 1995; Webb 1987; Pardoe 1992.
2. Cantwell 2000; Meighan 1992, Ousley *et al.* 2005; Pensley 2005; Zimmermann 1998.
3. Gulick, L. 1857; Gulick, A. 1914, p. 87
4. Gulick 1859; Hezel 1979, p. 43
5. Kayser 1916a
6. Krause 1886, p. 122.
7. Sterndale 1874.
8. Kubary 1873.
9. Traveling the Pacific as an ethnographer, collector and trading agent in the employ of J.C. Godeffroy, Kubary lived in Samoa (1869), the Marshalls (1870), Yap (1870), and Palau (1871-73), traveled through the atolls of the Carolines (1873), and lived on Pohnpei (1873-74), Jaluit (1874), and in New Zealand (1874). After a trip to Europe (1875) he established a plantation on Pohnpei in 1875, but continued collection travel in Micronesia as well as New Guinea. In October 1896 he committed suicide in Pohnpei (Spoehr 1963; Paszkowski 1971; Ballendorf 1996).
10. Krause 1881, Schmeltz und Krause 1881: 660.
11. Virchow 1881
12. Virchow 1881
13. Virchow 1881, p. 1130; 1133
14. Finsch had collected a full skeleton and five other crania in Kiribati (Virchow 1881, p. 1134).—When Krause presented his study in 1886 he had 35 individuals to examine.
15. See Spennemann (1999) for the Marianas and Hezel (1983) for the Western Carolines.
16. Virchow 1886.
17. C. Cabrera & Tudela 2006.
18. Russell 1998.
19. Kayser 1916a.
20. Spennemann 1999b.
21. Krause 1886.
22. See de Viana 2004; 2005 for Filipino influence.
23. Virchow 1881; Krause 1886.
24. Spennemann 1999.
25. Spennemann 1999.
26. see Spennemann 2006.
27. Fritz 1900a; 1900b.
28. Schlaginfaufen 1905; Anon. 1906.
29. Fritz 1904, p. 41.
30. Spennemann 1999.
31. Semper 1873, p. 365; Krause 1886.
32. Virchow 1881.
33. Pietrusewsky 1990.
34. Ehrlich 1978, p. 118.
35. Anon. 1907.
36. Letter A. von Luschan, Director Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin to Georg Fritz, Bezirksamtmann Ponape, dated Berlin 6 November 1909. Letter courtesy of Georg Fritz' Grand niece, Gudrun Möller, Frankfurt.—The skeletons were moved in 1927 to the Department of Pathology of the University of Berlin: Letter Preuss Director Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin to Georg Fritz, Berlin, dated Berlin 21 June 1927. Letter courtesy of Georg Fritz' Grand niece, Gudrun Möller, Frankfurt
37. Letter A. von Luschan, Director Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin to Georg Fritz, Bezirksamtmann Ponape, dated Berlin 6 November 1909. Letter courtesy of Georg Fritz' Grand niece, Gudrun Möller, Frankfurt [note: a second letter dated the same date, not one cited above].
38. Spennemann 2004
39. Fritz on board *Germania* 13 April 1907, AKA Allgemeine Angelegenheiten der Karolinen pp. Inseln Bd. 7. May 1906 to July 1907. Verwaltungssachen 12f. file 3004. NLA Mfm G 18,242.—Fritz 1907.
40. Finsch 1879.
41. About US\$620 to US\$760 in 2006 terms (CPI corrected).—To put this into context we have to appreciate that \$3-4 in 1879 were equivalent to about 300 to 400 pounds of copra at the early 1870 base rate or about 600 to 800 pounds at the mid 1870s rate.—As an alternate measure of price we can use rifles, one of the most sought after and pricey commodities, which sold between \$5 and 20 apiece in 1880 (Hezel 1983).
42. Benda 1880.
43. Only one had been sent/sold to him, the other had gone to the Museum Godeffroy (Virchow 1881, p. 113).
44. Virchow 1880b, p. 116.
45. von Werner 1889: 360-78; Krämer & Nevermann 1938: 9-12.
46. Prager 1886, p. 74-75.
47. Krause 1886.
48. Filbry 1913.
49. Filbry 1913.
50. Anon. 1890, p. 26 nos. 63 & 64.
51. Official hoisting of the German flag occurred on Jaluit by S.M.S. *Nautilus*, on October 15, 1885. The *Nautilus* then proceeded through the archipelago, hoisting the flag on the main islands: on October 18th on Mili, October 21st on Arno and October 22nd on Majuro. Ebon was the final, and main stop. After 19 signatures

under the annexation document had been collected the *Nautilus* returned to Jaluit on November 1, and the annexation of the 'Protectorate of the Marshall-, Brown- and Providence Islands' was complete (Treaty of friendship between the Marshallese chiefs and the German Empire, dated 1 November 1885 and witnessed by Korvetten Kapitain Rötger contained in Auswärtiges Amt, Kolonial-Abteilung, Streitigkeiten mit den einheimischen Missionaren auf Ebon und Saipan. 20 December 1885 – August 1887. Series. Kirchen – und Schulsachen 2h n°3. file n° RKA 2606. National Library of Australia, Canberra. Mfm n° . G8557).

52. In 1886 the German Colonial administration levied an annual copra tax of 360,000 pounds on the whole of the Marshall Islands. The German administration used, where possible, traditional boundaries for the delineation of their tax districts. The *irooj* were ordered to collect the copra, and were given one third of the collected tax. Making the *irooj* responsible for the collection of copra tax in their districts certainly enshrined the power of the named *irooj*, but also tied the chiefs to the German administration (Sorces: *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 3, 1890, p.208.— Franz Sonnenschein, 'Bekanntmachung zur Ausführung der Verordnung vom 28ten Juni des Jahres betreffend die Erhebung persönlicher Steuern.' dated Jaluit 6 October 1888. Contained in Auswärtiges Amt, Kolonial-Abteilung, Einführung von Steuern. Marschall-Inseln. 19 March 1888-March 98. Series. Steuerwesen 15h. file n° RKA 2770. National Library of Australia, Canberra. Mfm n°. G18180).
53. Traditionally a corpse was oiled and wrapped in mats and after a three-day ceremony dropped into one of the karst caves, occasionally (out of respect) also lowered down on a rope which was also dropped into the cave, or handed down to one or more people standing below. Cave burial occurred to prevent them from being vandalised by rival clans. In several of the caves the bodies lay cross-crossing each other, depending on how they fell when they were dropped. Few Nauruans ever ventured into the caves (Steinbach 1896; Kasyer 1916a).
54. Steinbach 1896.
55. Kayser 1916a.
56. Anon. 1904.
57. Like the fictional Schwalbe, Kubary too suffered a loss of all of his collections. In 1873 and 1874 he accumulated a large collection of ethnographica in the Carolines and Pohnpei, which he

took with him when he left. The sailing vessel *Alfred* went aground in a pass in Jaluit Atoll, Marshalls in 1874, with the loss of all cargo (Young 1876).

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