

# The Namibian

## Namibia: Herero and Nama Skulls to Be Preserved, Not Buried

Brigitte Weidlich

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THE skulls of erstwhile Herero and Nama prisoners of war under German colonial rule, which have been kept in boxes at German universities, should not be buried once they return to Namibia but be preserved 'professionally', a committee has decided.

About ten chiefs of the Ovaherero Ovaherero/Ovambanderu Council for Dialogue on 1904 Genocide (OCD-1904) met at Okahandja last weekend to discuss the issue.

"It was decided that the skulls should become the property of the Namibian Government so that they can be kept in a professional way to keep the memory of this part of Namibian history alive for future generations," Festus Tjikuua, secretary to the technical committee of the OCD-1904, told The Namibian yesterday.

"The fifth OCD-1904 summit decided in principle that the skulls should not be buried."

The skulls were re-discovered in 2008, a century after the Herero-Nama uprising against German imperialism had ended.

The 47 skulls of Nama and Herero prisoners on Shark Island at Lüderitz, sent to Germany for 'scientific research', are in the cellars of the Charite University of Berlin. Another 12 skulls from indigenous Namibian prisoners of war were found at the University of Freiburg in Germany.

The German government has offered to repatriate the skulls. Several chiefs of the Herero and Nama communities indicated that they wanted to travel to Germany to perform traditional rites before the skulls are packed and transported back to Namibia.

According to well-placed sources, the Namibian Government mulled the idea to bury the skulls either at Heroes Acre or another place still to be identified. Some Nama leaders also suggested burying the skulls on Shark Island.

The OCD-1904 was formed in 2005 to seek dialogue with German authorities on reparations for atrocities committed against Namibians when the country was a German colony and to deal with this dark chapter of German-Namibian history.

In 2004, then Prime Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab called for dialogue between the two nations. Nothing much has come from his appeal in Parliament.

According to the resolutions taken at the end of the Okahandja meeting on Saturday, the OCD-1904 was given another five-year mandate "to continue lobbying for the dialogue on the 1904 Genocide with the view to seek alternative options if the demand for the dialogue is falling on deaf ears."

They recommended a meeting between OCD-1904, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture "to deliberate on strategic issues pertaining to the skulls and the dialogue".

According to a newspaper in Germany, Badische Zeitung, of November 14 2009, the Charite University in Berlin has in principle offered to return the Namibian skulls.

It is doing the same with skulls of Australian aborigines stored there. The Charite in 2008 signed an agreement with Australia to return "identified skulls" of Aborigines

The Badische Zeitung further revealed that Paul Barthels, a private lecturer in Berlin, also conducted anatomic studies on "Hottentots skulls" from [Namibian] prison camps.

Another German scientist, Eugen Fischer, who was the mastermind behind getting Herero and Nama skulls to Germany, visited Namibia in 1908.

"Fischer had graves of Topnaar Nama near Swakopmund opened and the corpses removed from these graves," the newspaper wrote.

Asked by The Namibian whether descendants of Nama and Herero families would consider DNA testing to establish which of the skulls belonged to their loved ones, Tjikua said "we are unaware of that method, but might consider it once we find out more about it."