

Save the Date

Indigenous Futures: Towards Policy on Ancestral Remains in the Netherlands, 12-13 May, Leiden

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Together with members of the [Colonial Collections Consortium](#), Wereldmuseum Leiden and RCMC are organizing an international workshop to contribute to policy frameworks on the repatriation/rematriation and handling of ancestral remains in the Netherlands. How might a policy look when we foreground the lived realities and voices of those past and present whose lives were most affected by colonial and post-colonial practices of collecting, researching displaying human and ancestral remains in museums and other heritage institutions? Should ancestral remains “acquired” under colonial situations be researched or exhibited within museums today? And how might policies embed Indigenous struggles for self-determination and sovereignty in their framework?

The workshop consists of plenary and break-out sessions. The first confirmed speakers are: Marie-Josée Artist (Suriname), Elizabeth DiGangi (USA), Anne May Olli (Sámi, Norway), Bambang Purwanto (Indonesia), Motsane Seabela (South Africa) and Rachel Watkins (USA). More speakers and the full program will follow soon.

Ancestral remains in the Netherlands

Ancestral remains collected within the colonial context can be found across numerous, very different institutions and collections in the Netherlands. These span cultural, historical and academic collections. Like the museum group Wereldmuseum, and especially the Tropenmuseum, some of these institutions have a history in physical anthropology, and include objects acquired in the service of racial science. Indeed, large collections of human and ancestral remains, for example in medical or anatomical, or broader natural history collections, such as those in the Museum Vrolik, Groningen University Museum or the Anatomical Museum in Leiden, also include ancestral remains collected within a colonial context. These collections were brought together as part of a study in human variation, including variations in what was considered as the normal body, or to prove racialized difference.

Within the Wereldmuseum, ancestral remains were also acquired as part of a tradition of cultural anthropology – in, for example the study of rituals related to death or healing. In some instances, questions of aesthetics played a role in how ancestral remains collections were developed, such as remains acquired privately by artists or art collectors or within, for example, the study of the anthropology of art (Wereldmuseum), or the aesthetics of science (Groningen University Museum or Utrecht University Museum). While predominantly comprised of skeletal material, these collections also include skin, hair, teeth and nail samples.

Key questions

Within the shifting global context of restitutionary practices, ancestral remains have come to occupy a special space of concern across the museum profession, among academics, and importantly, among representatives of different communities who share relations with these ancestors. Within the framework of restitution of objects collected within a colonial context, ancestral remains present similar complications to other objects, for example in terms of their precise provenance, or the complexity of the historical conditions through which they entered museums. Like other objects, ancestral remains were gifted, traded through established dealers, acquired during conditions of war, but also stolen. And yet, they also present more complex challenges.

On the one hand, questions may arise as to whether ancestral remains can/should be regarded as museological objects and therefore can be owned by museums in the first place. Are human and ancestral remains “objects”? It could also be asked, how do we deal with the differing ways of assigning value to this category of object that would make them either scientific, cultural, or ancestral, whether these are mutually exclusive categories, and how might these different categories impact decisions about return? Indeed, as a category of “object”, does it matter how they were collected, for example, through scientific expeditions or in hospitals after the patient died? Were they collected as part of medical explorations or to prove specific, now discredited, racial ideas? Does it make a difference? Can we conceive of ethico-legal frameworks beyond return that could allow ancestral remains to be cared for, researched, or displayed, for example, when done together with descendant communities, as part of a scientific or educative agenda, that still honor ancestral rights and dignity? Said differently, is return the only option for repair?

Arguably, a more mundane question to ask is how to define human and ancestral remains, and what are the limits of what fits in or outside of this category? Are all human remains ancestral? Should all categories of ancestral remains be treated in the same way – is the category hair or nail similar to skin or even skeletal remains? How might the different intellectual histories, or the historical function for which remains were used impact on how we treat with them in the present? Or do we also include photographs, or facial mask taking in the process of physical anthropology?

Aim of the workshop

Since 2021 there is an [active policy on the restitution of colonial objects](#) in place in the Netherlands. When this policy framework was developed, it was recommended there needed to be a separate policy on ancestral remains. The main goal of this workshop is therefore to shape this future policy. Because of the way in which ancestral remains entered museum collections, developing a national policy framework necessitates centering the perspectives of Indigenous and formerly colonized people. With this workshop, we aim to bring some of the most cutting-edge theory and policy input on this theme together, to understand current policy frameworks in other localities and contemporary (institutional) restitution practices to develop a more comprehensive national policy shaped by Indigenous people from across the world.

Practical information & registration:

- Location: Grote Zaal and adjacent rooms in Wereldmuseum Leiden
- Schedule: approximately from 10:00-17:00 on both days, including a lunch break (vegetarian and vegan). Optional dinner on Tuesday 12 May is included as well.
- Accessibility: There are barrier-free provisions for people with reduced mobility in the museum building, gender neutral bathrooms and quiet spaces available. For specific needs, contact us at rcmc@wereldmuseum.nl
- Registration is mandatory via the following form: <https://forms.office.com/e/E9cimTRvqU>
- Questions? Contact us at rcmc@wereldmuseum.nl