



# What will happen to the stolen ancestral remains from colonial contexts? The University of Göttingen refuses to take responsibility

The University of Göttingen plans to **close its anthropological collection in February 2026**. This will create a dramatic gap, because to this day it is completely **unclear what will happen to the ancestral remains in the two Göttingen collections**. In addition to the **Anthropological collection**, there is also the even older **Blumenbach skull collection**. We have no information about what will happen to these ancestors. **Dividing the collection among other institutions and collections would make provenance research or searches by descendants considerably more difficult.**

In total, the university **holds over 1,300 ancestral remains** from colonial contexts, including **individuals who were looted, stolen, removed from graves, collected after massacres and wars, or dehumanized in the context of colonial violence during colonialism**. Many of these ancestral remains have been in Göttingen for **over 200 years** and were brought here for the purposes of **racial research**.

With the planned closure of the anthropological collection, **an institutional vacuum is now emerging that leaves the whereabouts of the ancestors unclear.**

There is **no concept for repatriation, no secure storage, no processes coordinated with all the societies of origin, and no transparency regarding the documents**, index cards, and archival materials that would be essential for restitution.

This approach contravenes international human rights standards.

The current approach of the University of Göttingen and the state government violate key international and national norms and obligations:

**(1) Right to repatriation (UNDRIP Art. 12)**

“Indigenous peoples have the right [...] to the repatriation of their human remains. States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned.”



**(2) Right to restitution of cultural and spiritual heritage (UNDRIP Art. 11)**

“States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.”

**(3) Right to control cultural heritage (UNDRIP Art. 31)**

“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources [...].

In conjunction with indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights.”

**(4) EMRIP report on the repatriation of human remains (2020)**

The UN expert mechanism makes it clear: „Repatriation is not a discretionary act but a legal obligation. It must be human-rights based, participatory, and led by Indigenous Peoples.“ (S.8)

**(5) German Guidelines on Colonial Collections (2019)**

Joint statement by the federal government, the states, and local authority associations: “Dealing with human remains from colonial contexts is a top priority. Returns will take place in dialogue with the societies of origin.” (p. 4)

**(6) Museum Association Guidelines on the Handling of Human Remains (2021)**

“The handling of human remains must be humane, transparent, and oriented toward repatriation.” (p. 10)

“Further dehumanization must be avoided at all costs.” (p. 7)

**(7) Coalition Agreement (2025)**

“We will intensify our efforts to come to terms with colonialism. This includes cross-border research on objects and the return of cultural property in dialogue with the countries of origin. Particular attention will be paid to creating a dignified place of remembrance and returning human remains.” (p. 121)



Göttingen is currently far from meeting any of these standards. The planned closure without a clear concept for the future of the ancestors means:

- Continued **disregard for the rights of indigenous and other affected communities**
- **Violation** of UN standards on repatriation
- **Ignoring** national guidelines
- **Ethical and scientific irresponsibility**
- continued **colonial injustice**

**Göttingen Postcolonial and the Global Ovaherero Genocide Foundation (Global OGF) therefore demands:**

- **There must be Immediate transparency regarding the planned future of the ancestors**, including a clear minimum care standard programme underwritten by a funding strategy to ensure sustainability until a real and sincere restitution programme is jointly developed, agreed upon, and executed by the relevant institutions in Germany and the source communities (Ovaherero being one of them).
- A moratorium on the closure until a viable repatriation concept exists. **Which must be done with the urgency of yesterday already.**
- **Ancestral Remains and all related artifacts must not be moved and or separated from related content.**
- Repatriation mechanisms must be urgently developed jointly with source communities.
- A permanent funding unit, **complemented by a team of researchers from both Germany and the source community (with support provided by Global OGF, which stands ready to participate in such a team)**, would conduct provenance research and manage sincere **repatriation and/or restitution processes**. This would be a temporary arrangement until a viable solution is quickly and urgently developed and put in place, together with the source communities.



**Göttingen  
Postkolonial**

## **As these are people, not research material!**

**The ancestors must be returned home, in accordance with the demands of the source communities, the dictates of international legal internments, and ethical and moral considerations.** Prior to such return, conditions in the receiving communities must be adequately prepared so as to ensure ample preparedness in terms of both physical and soft infrastructure necessary for their care and eventual burial whilst leaving semblances behind as preservation of memory and history for posterity. All responsibilities to facilitate and importantly finance such, rests with the institutions, states and individuals who today rest with the loots and who incidentally for over a century and counting benefited enormously from its proceeds.

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