

## Questions from the chat – Network Conference of the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts

November 24, 2020

- ***How were the “Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts” adopted?***

The Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts were agreed on by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Foreign Office Minister of State for International Cultural Policy, the Ministers of Cultural Affairs of the Länder and the municipal umbrella organisations on 13 March, 2019.

In the Framework principles, the agreeing parties acknowledge the historical responsibility resulting from German colonialism and from actions marked by colonial attitudes and commit to dealing with collections from colonial contexts in a responsible manner and in close coordination with the respective countries and societies of origin. This includes, for example, achieving the greatest degree of transparency and documentation regarding collections from colonial contexts in Germany and facilitating the conditions for the return of human remains and of cultural objects from colonial contexts, which were appropriated in a way which is no longer legally and/or ethically justifiable.

In order to achieve this task, the Framework Principles commit to give people and institutions from the countries and societies of origin “the possibility to learn about the collections from colonial contexts held in Germany and to obtain concrete advice, also as regards possible return and cooperation”. This commitment was concretized through the establishment of a German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts.

See: Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>)

- ***When you speak of requests or perspectives from 'societies of origin', whom exactly do you have in mind?***

The “Framework principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts” define “International Cooperation and Cultural Exchange” as one of the “Areas of Activity and objectives” for dealing with collections of colonial contexts. In this regard, the document states that the responsible handling of collections from colonial contexts depends on dialogue, exchange and close cooperation with the countries and societies of origin as well as with their diaspora in Germany.

The Framework Principles furthermore mention the importance of seeking “direct exchange with the countries and societies of origin at an early stage when it comes to researching and presenting cultural objects in German museums, libraries, archives and scientific collections. Intensive dialogue and exchange in a spirit of partnership must be conducted here. One-sided, Eurocentric claims to the narrative are no longer in keeping with the times”.

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- ***Do 'burial goods' come under 'cultural goods' or are they considered under the same legal or ethical procedures/processes as 'human remains'?***

According to the “Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections” published by the German Museums Association in 2013, the term ‘human remains’ refers to “all physical remains belonging to the biological species Homo sapiens”.

They include:

- all non-processed, processed or preserved forms of human bodies and parts thereof. This covers particular bones, mummies, bog bodies, soft tissues, organs, tissue sections, embryos, foetuses, skin, hair, fingernails and toenails (the last four even if they originate from living people) and cremated remains<sup>2</sup> ;
- all (ritual) objects into which human remains as defined above have been knowingly incorporated.

They do not include:

- mouldings of human bodies or body parts, death masks, audio recordings of human voices, anthropological photographs;
- (ritual) objects previously associated with human remains, such as for example burial objects.

The German Museums Association is currently working on an updated version of the “Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections”.

See “Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections” by the German Museums Association (<https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/recommendations-for-the-care-of-human-remains/> )

- ***Will the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts assist with the return of human remains that are now held in museums in other parts of the world?***

The “Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts” state that dealing with collections from colonial contexts in a responsible manner also means creating the conditions for the return of human remains and of cultural objects from colonial contexts which were appropriated in a way which is no longer legally and/or ethically justifiable. Together with the agencies concerned, return request will be handled with urgency and sensitivity.

“Return” was established in the Framework Principles as one of the Areas of Activity and Objectives for dealing with collections from colonial contexts in Germany. With regards to human remains, the Framework Principles state the following:

“7.) The general willingness to return artefacts from colonial contexts, in particular human remains, to the countries and societies of origin is important for the dialogue in a spirit of partnership for which we strive, as well as for genuine understanding. Identifying cultural objects from colonial contexts which were appropriated in a way which is no longer legally and/or ethically justifiable and enabling their return is a moral and ethical obligation and an important political task for our age. Human remains from colonial contexts are to be returned”.

Taking the Framework Principles as a guidance, The German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Context will support individuals and institutions from the countries and societies of origin by providing information and advice on human remains held in German Institutions and will forward inquiries and requests to the institutions involved on a case-by-case basis.

See: Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>)

- ***Will the contact point proactively inform communities about their objects and ancestors in German institutions?***

The German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts aims in particular at individuals and institutions from the countries and societies of origin. It is intended to serve as the first, central point of contact for all questions concerning collections from colonial contexts in Germany. In particular, the German Contact Point will carry out the following service tasks:

- Providing information and advice on collections from colonial context in Germany and related topics
- Forwarding of inquiries and requests on a case-by-case basis
- Connecting individuals and institutions and establishing networks
- Collecting, organising, documenting, publishing and evaluating statistically pertinent data and information
- Supporting the Federal Government-Länder Working Group on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts in Germany in the elaboration and further development of the areas of activities and overall objectives defined in the "Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts"

See "Establishing a German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts" (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2262748/5450242f5fdd6b343b32919aab9c11a6/191016-kol-kulturgueter-pdf-en-data.pdf>)

- ***How can the Contact Point guarantee "unconditional restitution"?***

As stated in the "Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts", German institutions commit to dealing with collections from colonial contexts in a responsible manner and in close coordination with the respective countries and societies of origin.

"Return" was established in the Framework Principles as one of the "Areas of activity and Objectives" for dealing with collections from colonial contexts in Germany. On this regard, the Framework Principles state the following:

- 7.) The general willingness to return artefacts from colonial contexts, in particular human remains, to the countries and societies of origin is important for the dialogue in a spirit of partnership for which we strive, as well as for genuine understanding. Identifying cultural objects from colonial contexts which were appropriated in a way which is no longer legally and/or ethically justifiable and enabling their return is a moral and ethical obligation and an important political task for our age. Human remains from colonial contexts are to be returned.
- 8.) Requests for the return of artefacts from colonial contexts are to be processed promptly. At the same time, cultural heritage institutions are called upon to take an independent and

proactive approach to identify artefacts in their collections which might be returned, even if there has been no request for return.

- 9.) In principle, returns should only be made in agreement with the countries and societies of origin.
- 10.) In Germany, the vast majority of institutions whose collections include artefacts from colonial contexts are funded by and under the responsibility of the Länder and municipalities.

The legal preconditions for the possible return of artefacts from colonial contexts depend on the Federal, Land and organisational law applicable to these institutions, in particular the financial regulations of the Federation, Länder and municipalities. These provide for return in principle. Where there is a need for legal action to facilitate the return of artefacts from colonial contexts, such action is taken.”

See: Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>)

- ***To what extent does the contact point plan to cooperate with civil society organization?***

As mentioned in article 11 of the “Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts” the “responsible handling of collections from colonial contexts depends on dialogue, exchange and cooperation with the countries and societies of origin as well as with their diaspora in Germany. The exchange of experience and knowledge is especially important in this connection.” This exchange also involves working in close cooperation with the civil society and diaspora organisations in Germany who act as representatives of the countries and societies of origin.

Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>)

- ***When dealing with collections from colonial contexts it is important to broaden the field and look at libraries, archives, not only at museums and their collections. How is the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts going to address this issue?***

According to the “Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts”, dealing with collections from colonial contexts in a responsible manner does exclusively involve cultural heritage institutions like museums and their collections. The preamble of the Framework Principles states the following:

“An appropriate handling of collections from colonial contexts is a core task for cultural policy and an important contribution to our shared post-colonial culture of remembrance. Such collections, held in cultural heritage institutions and scientific or academic institutions, include ethnological, natural historical, historical, art historical and cultural historical objects and documents. They also include human remains.”

It is therefore also a task of the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts to work closely with cultural heritage institutions like libraries, archives and scientific or academic institutions who hold assets from colonial contexts.

## GERMAN CONTACT POINT FOR COLLECTIONS FROM COLONIAL CONTEXTS

See: Framework Principles for Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf>)