

Dead bodies on display: El Negro in cross-cultural perspective

Bruce Bennett

University of Botswana, History

El Negro of Banyoles was not unique: there are quite a lot of human bodies publicly displayed in various ways in museums and other places. In many cases, there are very similar issues involved, with calls for the bodies (or body parts) to be repatriated or buried. But this is not always true, and the significance of displaying the body can vary. Debates over such bodies can involve perceived conflicts between cultures, or between different types of values (e.g. "science" versus "human dignity"). This paper will attempt to offer an overview of the issue, in historical perspective, and offer some suggestions about possible general principles for dealing with it.

During the El Negro debate in Botswana, the question was frequently asked, "Isn't it just the same as the Egyptian mummies in museums?" It seemed to me that not all cases of the display of dead bodies were actually equivalent, and that various distinctions could usefully be made. This paper thus arose as an attempt to suggest some categories and distinctions which might assist in clarifying our discourse.

The first distinction is that between what we can term 'contemporary' and 'old' bodies. 'Contemporary' bodies are the bodies of the recently deceased, which are buried or otherwise disposed of according to their wishes, the wishes of next-of-kin, and the conventions of their culture and the place in which the death occurred. Although these may sometimes be in conflict—for example, in the West it is difficult for a Parsi legally to arrange for a body to be eaten by scavengers¹. There is relatively little dispute about what to do in such cases, and it is generally agreed that scientists, museums, or the public have no right to the body unless special permission has been given by the deceased or next of kin. A body may be left for the training of medical students, but unless it is thus donated, it cannot be used.

'Old' bodies, however, are those which are too old to be considered contemporary. For such bodies, the wishes of these obvious 'owners' (the deceased or next-of-kin) can no longer be consulted. When this point is reached is a question which may be answered differently in different cultures. (In extreme cases the category may not be admitted at all.) Perhaps, as a *minimum* age, we can suggest that for a body to qualify as 'old' there must be no-one living who remembers the deceased.

Who has the right to decide what happens to an 'old' body? Generally people answer this question with 'his or her people'. The next question is, who are 'his or her people'? In discussing 'descendants' and 'ancestors', we can distinguish two types of descent: *genetic descent* and *cultural descent*. 'Genetic descent' is self-explanatory. In talking of 'cultural descent' one is implying that there exists, now, a body of people who are in some sense 'the same' cultural group as the cultural group to whom the deceased person belonged.

In many cases, the two types of descent will identify the same 'descendants'. However, cultural descent does not necessarily imply genetic descent. Consider the case of a person of foreign origin who becomes assimilated into a new culture, and dies without children. His or her cultural descendants are the modern-day members of that culture, not the genetically related descendants of his or her people of origin. Similarly, genetic descent does not necessarily imply cultural descent: my remote European ancestors belonged to societies, such as the Roman Empire, or Ice-Age Europe, which I do not regard as 'my culture'.

The body of El Negro was removed from the grave apparently very soon after burial. Thus the body was, at the time it was taken, clearly a 'contemporary' body. The removal was carried out in secret and was fully realized to be contrary to the wishes of the 'owners'; in short, the body of El Negro was stolen. Here a distinction can be drawn between El Negro and the more common case of a body excavated by archaeologists; while there has been debate about the latter case, there is general agreement that contemporary bodies should not be stolen. Thus, the actions of the men who removed the body were clearly illegitimate. (A slightly different question arises as to how this affects the position of those in Spain who found themselves in possession of the body long afterwards: the issues involved are perhaps related to the debate about in what cases museums have a duty to repatriate items.)

El Negro might possibly still be considered 'contemporary', but if not, then fairly clear descent—both genetic and cultural—is apparent. Even if we had not been able to pin-point his ethnic origin, we would have known that it must be one of a limited number of Southern African cultures, all of which continue into the present.

However, there are other possible cases. Consider the case where genetic descent exists, but cultural descent does not. An example of this is the case of Ancient Egyptian bodies. Ancient Egypt preserved bodies for a specific reason, which (because they kept written records which we can read) we happen to know about. According to their religious beliefs, a dead person could have a happy afterlife, *provided* certain conditions were fulfilled. One of these was that the body must be preserved. Grave-goods enhanced the afterlife; for example models of workers stacking grain bags ensured the food supply. This concern is the main reason why Egyptian funerary art gives such a wonderful picture of Egyptian life, representing all the good things they hoped to take with them. But this religion no longer continues. Modern Egyptians are either Muslims or Coptic Christians, and in either case explicitly reject these beliefs about the significance of preserved bodies. Thus the modern Egyptians are genetic descendants but not (in the technical sense we are using) cultural descendants. (Obviously in a more general historical sense they are cultural descendants.)

But although no-one now belongs to this belief system, we know about it. In such cases, how far are we bound to follow the wishes of the deceased? As it happens, there is a good case that in fact modern museums are doing exactly what the Ancient Egyptians wanted—preserving the bodies, names and grave-goods. It is unclear how the Ancient Egyptians would have felt about *display*, but it is not obviously a problem. They often hid their graves, but not exactly to keep them out of view: the aim was to protect them from grave-robbers, who operated even in the days the graves were built, and who would remove the vital grave-goods from the body, and even compromise the safety of the body itself. In other cases, however, the wishes of the dead may not be quite as convenient for modern museums.

In the case of medieval European bodies, there is at least a partial cultural continuity. In recent times, when medieval Christian graves are uncovered in Europe, after archaeological investigations it is often felt appropriate to rebury the bodies with a Catholic mass—this being the ceremony they would almost certainly have wanted.

Pre-Christian European bodies, however, are generally considered as fair game for the museum. An interesting recent case is that of 'Lindow Man', a male body discovered in England in 1984, remarkably preserved by having been embedded in a peat bog. (On account of this, the British press dubbed him 'Pete Marsh'.) Carbon-14 dating indicates he died about 300 BC.² As far as genetic descent is concerned, Lindow Man's descendants are presumed to be the British population in general (plus, of course, their American, Antipodean and other offshoots). He could be one of my own ancestors. More specific genetic descent cannot normally be ascertained in such cases, and in any case is of limited importance. In one other recent case, DNA analysis of a 9000-year old skeleton in England

('Cheddar Man') showed that Adrian Targett, a history teacher living less than a kilometre from where Cheddar Man was found, was a direct descendant.³ This remarkable discovery, however, is not apparently considered as giving Targett any special rights over the remains.

The British public, the genetic descendants, wanted Lindow Man to be put on display. In contrast to the medieval bodies, Lindow Man's culture no longer exists; there is no priest of his religion to rebury him. Actually one may doubt that Lindow Man would have welcomed the attentions of representatives of his own culture, had they been available; since he had not simply died but been ritually killed—by strangling, cutting his throat, and breaking his skull. He may also have been stabbed in the chest. He may have been a sacrifice to the gods. Alternatively, he may possibly have been executed for some offence: the body was pegged down in the bog, which is reminiscent of Tacitus' description of the way the barbarians put to death homosexuals.⁴

In North America, Native Americans ('American Indians') generally disapprove of the display of the remains of their ancestors (or indeed any interference with them), and have engaged in debate with museums and archaeologists over the matter. In many cases, both genetic and cultural descent are clear. In others, however, the remains may be as old as Lindow Man. Europeans used to believe that 'primitive' societies were somehow unchanging, but in fact all societies have histories, and it is not self-evident that a 2000 year-old Native American body is culturally closer to a twentieth-century Native American than I am to Lindow Man. In the absence of written records, the question is usually unprovable. Modern Native Americans do in fact claim these bodies as 'theirs', and in the absence of historical evidence their view is I think entitled to prevail. It is interesting to note that the existence of a written record, which creates continuity, also creates discontinuity. If Europe had not had writing for so long, I would not have known for certain, in the way that I do, that Lindow Man is separated from me by a great cultural divide.

Apart from cultural descent, genetic descent also raises different questions in North America from those we noted in Europe and Egypt. In both Egypt and Britain, the group of genetic descendants may be taken to be approximately the same as the modern nation-state. (Actually the group of genetic descendants is larger, but, for example, the British state can be taken as an acceptable representative of the genetic descendants of Lindow man.) But in the case of a Native American body in North America, the group of genetic descendants is the Native American people (or some group of them), a small and distinct minority within the state. This raises the potential for conflict over who has the right to remains: in the British or Egyptian case no such conflict arises since the political authority is the same thing as the representative of the genetic descendants. This tension is an acute one in the case of North America, since the reason the genetic descendants do not form the state is that they were dispossessed by settlers, whose descendants do dominate the modern state. The Native Americans' minority status is not an accident, and the issue of who has the right to decide cannot be separated from the political context of dispossession.

A new problem arose recently with the discovery in 1996 of a 9000 year old skeleton in Washington State ('Kennewick Man'). Under American law, the remains of Native Americans found on government land (as Kennewick Man was) must be offered to the appropriate groups. In this case the remains were offered to, and accepted by, the Umatilla people. However, some anthropologists have challenged this, arguing that the body does not resemble modern Native Americans, but rather resembles modern Ainu or Polynesians.⁵ Whether or not there is any substance to this claim is not my concern here. The more interesting point is, what significance should we assign to such a finding? According to the Umatilla's beliefs, they have *always* lived on that land, and therefore Kennewick Man logically must be their ancestor. Even if DNA evidence were produced otherwise, they

would not accept it. The question arises, therefore, whose system of knowledge would prevail in such a conflict, the scientists' or the Umatilla's?

The act of displaying a body can have differing significance, not only between cultures but within a particular culture. Here I would like to consider the case of European culture, since this is the culture within which the modern museum, and the 'scientific' preservation, use and display of bodies emerged.

In European Christian tradition, bodies or parts of bodies can be displayed in a religious context: especially, but not only, in the form of the relics of saints.⁶ Relics were very important in medieval Christianity, and remain a feature of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. In the middle ages, there was an extensive and often somewhat disreputable trade in them. The religious display of bodies remains particularly common in southern Europe, including Spain—which may perhaps partly explain why so many Spanish people found the objections to the display of El Negro surprising at first. The tradition is still a living one: for example, in New York the body of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, who died in 1917, is displayed in the chapel of Mother Cabrini High School. (The body is complete except for the head, which for some reason was taken to Italy.)⁷ Recently the body of Pope John XXIII (d. 1963) was displayed in Rome. It was noted that the body was very well-preserved, which is sometimes seen as an indication of sanctity, but Church officials pointed out that in this case no special significance could be attached to the fact since the body had been embalmed⁸ Here display is a form of exaltation.

On the other hand, display of a body could also be a form of degradation. The bodies of executed criminals were sometimes left hanging on gibbets as a warning to others. As is well-known, when Mary Tudor became Queen of England and restored Roman Catholicism in 1553, the Anglican Archbishop Cranmer and others were burnt at the stake in Oxford. A less well-known fact is that the body of Martin Bucer, an important Reformation theologian who had (perhaps luckily) died before the accession of Mary, was exhumed and burnt in Cambridge. Similarly, since Oliver Cromwell died before the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, in 1661 his body was exhumed, and then hanged, and displayed as if he had been executed. His head was stuck on a pole at Westminster; it was later taken as a souvenir and remained in private ownership until 1960, when it was buried in the ante-chapel of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge (Cromwell's old college).

Although the Russian Revolution rejected Christianity, Stalin, interestingly, appropriated one of its symbols by putting the preserved body of Lenin on display. This later gave rise to a curious fashion for subsequent Marxist-Leninist leaders in other countries. After Stalin's death, his body was initially added to Lenin's, but after Khrushchev's denunciation it was removed and buried. Since the fall of Communism the proposal of burying Lenin has been raised repeatedly in Russia, generally supported by reformers and opposed by Communists. In 1998, a Vice-Premier of Russia said 'I feel something mystical about it... Unless we bury Lenin, Russia will remain under an evil spell.' On the other hand, the Young Communists' League has called for Lenin to be cloned.⁹

An even more striking case is that of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the great Utilitarian philosopher. In his will he directed that his body should be preserved as an 'Auto-Icon'. The Auto-Icon consists of his preserved body, dressed in his clothes, mounted in a glass case. It is kept at University College London. Various suggestions have been made as to how exactly Bentham meant his Auto-Icon to be regarded. This case is particularly unusual since Bentham's display is a personal act which is not a recognized custom in his culture, either now or when he made it.

There is currently a proposal in Malawi to put on display the embalmed body of the late Life President Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The proposal, which includes what is described as a 'high-tech viewing gallery', is supported by Dr Banda's political heirs and may perhaps

be seen as having something in common with the case of Lenin: the body as political icon. It seems however less connected to previous African tradition.

European popular belief has long held that if a body is not properly buried, the spirit may be restless and haunt the living. This belief, which has persisted into modern times, is interesting since it is not part of orthodox Christianity and may possibly derive from pre-Christian religion. Recently there was a scandal in Britain when it was discovered that some hospitals had kept body parts of dead children without permission. Members of the intellectual elite were startled at the strength of feeling over this issue, labelling it 'emotional' and 'irrational', and in some cases explicitly comparing it to 'primitive' belief. This is a useful reminder that cultural difference can exist within what outsiders might consider a single society. The patronizing attitudes of colonizers were sometimes as much a matter of class as of race—or to put it another way, they were often just as contemptuous of their own common people as they were of 'natives'. Even in present-day Britain, a division appears between the 'rational' attitude of scientific detachment and the 'emotional' response of cultural significance.

Another case of conflict within a culture has recently arisen in Cambodia. Many memorials to the genocide have been created in various places by, for example, stacking up huge piles of skulls from the killing fields. However, traditionally bodies are cremated according to Buddhist custom, and many Cambodians believe that leaving the bones uncremated hinders the passage of the soul. Hence there are calls to cremate the remains. But this is contested by other Cambodians who want the memorials to be permanent.¹⁰

The general pattern of the debate, so far, has been the effort to show why bodies should not be disturbed or displayed: that is, it has been about the case against display. I would like briefly to look at the other side of the argument. In an area where feelings are likely to run high, it is helpful to try to understand each other's motives.

Firstly, the case for studying, though not necessarily displaying, dead bodies. Several years ago we had a very useful discussion of the issues in a University of Botswana archaeology seminar. Marshall Owens, who had been conducting research on graves, raised uncertainties which he felt about the ethics. Andrew Reid put the case in favour thus. Pots and spears and houses, he said, tells us about how people lived, what they ate, and so on, but graves can give us insight into what they thought about life and death. In our quest to understand our predecessors, it is surely important to try to understand these things. It is a sign of respect for them that we wish to understand their view of ultimate questions as well as their economics.

That case applies to studying graves, but not directly to displaying them. The case for display is less clear, but is related. In medieval European art, the figure of the skeleton at the feast is a common motif: a reminder that life is short. What the skeleton is, we will be. But for the members of the British public who go to see Lindow Man, the significance is perhaps the converse: what we are, he once was. Seeing the body helps them to relate to the *reality* of his life and death; a man, like ourselves, who lived and breathed. He and the modern visitor do not share a culture, but they do share common humanity.

This justification for display does not, of course, fit the case of El Negro, on several grounds. Firstly, in the case of El Negro the display had the strange distorting effect of making an almost contemporary figure seem remote and prehistoric. Where Lindow Man helps to connect, El Negro produced a spurious alienation, making the African seem 'Other'. Secondly, unlike Lindow Man, El Negro simply did not belong to the people who displayed him. Lindow Man was found; El Negro was stolen. I would like to think that it was some such realization, on the part of many Spanish people, that their reasons for wanting to keep El Negro—not necessarily discreditable in motive—were in fact invalid, that led to their acceptance of his return.

Notes & References

1. Zoroastrians hold earth, water and fire to be sacred; thus they do not wish to dispose of a body in a way that would defile any of these elements.
2. Don Brothwell, *The Bog Man and the Archaeology of People* (London: British Museum Publications, 1986) p. 16.
3. 'Cheddar Man is my long-lost relative', *Electronic Telegraph* [on-line edition of *Daily Telegraph*] Issue 652 Saturday 8 March 1997, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>>
4. Brothwell, *The Bog Man*, pp. 24-44; Tacitus, *Germania*, XII (*Tacitus on Britain and Germany*, trans. H. Mattingly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951) p. 110.
5. Dorothy C. Wertz, 'Kennewick Man: Native American ancestor or 'proto-Caucasian'?', *GeneLetter* 1(9), October 2000, accessed May 2001, <<http://www.geneletter.org/10-02-00/features/kennewick.html>>
6. The veneration of relics is a feature of some other religious systems as well, notably Buddhism.
7. Jennifer McCabe, 'Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Founder of the Institute of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart', n.d., accessed May 2001, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/medny/mccabe.htm>>
8. BBC World Service news, Sunday 3 June 2001.
9. 'Controversy still rages over Lenin's resting place', CNN on-line, 21 January 1998, <<http://europe.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/21/russia.lenin/>>
10. In April 2001 the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen proposed a referendum on the issue: 'Referendum on Killing Fields monuments', BBC site, 25 April 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_1296000/1296022.stm>. See also Moira Roth, 'Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds, Part 4, Oan Hon (Lost Souls), Lament for Cambodia, Hiroshima, Kosovo, and East Timor', May-September, 1999 <<http://www.collegeart.org/caa/publications/AJ/roth4.htm>>