

Enslaved, exported, then made into an artefact, one young girl is finally coming home

By Nick Miller
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Berlin: In the late 19th century a young indigenous girl was enslaved by Broome pearlers. They tied heavy stones to the child's feet that dragged her to painful depths, then hauled her back up to their lugger with armfuls of mother-of-pearl for the buttons of the European elite.

Her untimely, young death was not the end of her exploitation.



A Yawuru man performs at the repatriation ceremony at the Australian embassy in Berlin.

The remains of the girl and more from the Yawuru and other indigenous communities were sold again: as scientific curiosities and specimens for institutions and collections on the other side of the world.

Some ended up in a museum in Dresden in east Germany, and there insult was heaped upon indignity.

They were robbed literally of their humanity, inserted into a skeletal display and labelled the “missing link” between ape and man.

In Germany, after the horrors of the early 20th century, this crime has extra resonance. And so Dr Eva-Maria Stange, minister for education and research for Saxony, choked

back tears on Monday, asking for forgiveness. She took part in a ceremony in Berlin where the remains of more than 40 indigenous Australians, including seven Yawuru, were at last handed back to their community.



Saxony state minister for education and research, Dr Eva-Maria Stange, at the ceremony.

“They became scientific objects,” Stange said during the ceremony, “but we don’t see them as objects any more. We give dignity back to the deceased, and their families.

“These are the victims of unethical research and colonialism. It took a long time, in my opinion far too long, for this restitution to take place. This I deeply regret. I can only offer my sincerest apology.”

Afterwards, Stange explained her tears: the particular meaning of this ceremony for modern Germans, a painful echo of the unethical, racist medical experiments and theories of the Nazis.

“It is a very moving moment to have the chance to right the wrongs of the past,” she said.

“Certainly it has to do with Germany’s past. We have a special sensitivity for when injustice is perpetrated against peoples ... You can’t undo it, but you can take responsibility for it.”

Yawuru law boss Neil McKenzie led the gathering in two smoking ceremonies.

In Berlin, at the Australian embassy, a glass atrium was transformed with a solemn ceremony. Leaf smoke, traditional stories and songs from Yawuru elders worked to cleanse sorrow and bind people together.

Now the ancestral remains will make the long journey home.

David Puertollano, a representative of Broome's Yawuru community, told the gathering his people would "forever remember the humanity you have shown". He thanked the German institutions – Dresden's State Art Collections and Wittenburg's Martin Luther University - for the rigorous forensic and coronial investigation they conducted to provide "evidence of the physical trauma our people have suffered and which matches our horrible history".

"Their spirit is trying to find their way home... [we must] see that they are safely and peacefully returned to their resting place on our country, and set their spirits free.



Yawuru law boss Neil McKenzie leads a remains repatriation ceremony at the Australian embassy in Berlin on Monday.

"We can never undo the hurtful and heinous acts of the past, but what we can and should do is acknowledge this part of our shared history. We take comfort in this gift of return today."

Afterwards Puertollano said they had wanted to bring their culture to Berlin and share it with the Germans who had helped make the returns possible.

"It's all part of the healing process," he said.

"We're not only healing ourselves but we're healing people in Germany. We're moving together. They really do get it. They understand what it means to us, they understand

that past injustices are the reason they must be responsible now [and] do what they're doing.”

Yawuru elder Neil McKenzie led the gathering in two ceremonies: they “washed” themselves in smoke, and then laid their hands on each of the boxes and coffins containing the remains.

Lynette Wood, Australia’s ambassador for Germany, said there was a “legitimate anger” about the treatment of these indigenous remains.

She praised the “incredible generosity” of the indigenous community members who had come to Berlin to bring their people home and involve the Germans in such a ceremony.

“It’s part of Australia’s reconciliation process, too,” she said.



Invited guests participate in a ceremony to return the mortal remains of Indigenous Australians from the State Ethnographic collections at Martin Luther University in Germany.

The repatriation of indigenous ancestral remains from around the world has been going on for more than 30 years and so far more than 1500 have been returned from institutions and private collections. But many, many more are yet to be found or repatriated.

Talks with German institutions began around 10 years ago. Until 2017, 52 remains had been returned, and after three ceremonies in the last week another 53 will make the journey home. Some have had their origins identified, others will stay in government hands while more research is done to find their community of origin.

The Germans undertook intensive research to try to identify the origin of the Australian ancestral remains in their collections, using forensic science to seek clues, and comparing the marks of torture and trauma with local oral history and police records.

For eight years the remains in Martin Luther University were covered, and the old display cases will now remain empty, Professor Heike Kielstein said.

“These empty places will remind us and our students ... of the horrifying and appalling fate of your ancestors. From now on the fate, the history and legacy of your ancestors will be part of our collective memory and teach generations to come about respect and responsibility.

"It's the least we can do."