INOSR HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES 12(1): 20-25, 2026. ISSN: 2705-1684

INOSRHSS121.0000

International Network Organization for Scientific Research
https://doi.org/10.59298/INOSRHSS/2026/121.2025

Ethics of Exhibiting Human Remains and Sensitive Materials: A Global Policy Review

Nyiramukama Diana Kashaka

Faculty of Education, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

The ethics of exhibiting human remains and sensitive materials has become one of the most contested issues in contemporary museum studies, archaeology, anthropology, heritage management, and cultural policy. This review examines the global ethical, legal, and institutional frameworks governing the acquisition, curation, interpretation, and display of human remains and culturally sensitive materials across museums, memorials, research institutions, and digital platforms. The study traces the historical evolution of exhibition practices from colonial collecting traditions to contemporary debates on decolonization, repatriation, informed consent, and cultural rights. Particular attention is paid to ethical principles concerning dignity, privacy, provenance verification, descendant community engagement, and institutional accountability. The review further analyses differences in legal and regulatory approaches across jurisdictions, highlighting the fragmented nature of international protections and the growing role of professional codes of ethics issued by organizations such as museums associations and cultural heritage bodies. Emerging challenges associated with digital reproductions, virtual exhibitions, 3D modeling, and online dissemination of human remains are also explored. Through comparative examination of policy frameworks and institutional case studies, the review identifies persistent tensions between scientific inquiry, public education, freedom of expression, and the cultural rights of affected communities. The study argues that ethical exhibition practices require transparent governance, shared curatorial authority, culturally informed consultation, and community-centered approaches that prioritize dignity and restorative justice. It concludes that future global policy harmonization must integrate decolonial ethics, digital accountability, and inclusive participation to establish internationally responsive standards for the responsible stewardship and display of human remains and sensitive cultural materials.

Keywords: Human remains, Museum ethics, Repatriation, Cultural sensitivity and Decolonization.

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition of human remains and sensitive materials has become an ethically fraught issue. Unlike other subjects, such remains raise uniquely challenging questions of dignity and propriety, temporal and regional distance of provenance, and potential harms to contemporary individuals and communities that are not easily addressed through conventional scholarly engagement [1]. The theme is currently the subject of intense scholarly debate, and various applied codes of ethics now articulate expectations for practice in many parts of the world. However, the topic remains insufficiently understood by wider sectors of the museum community. A comprehensive, up-to-date, and internationally inclusive analysis of the substantive policy issues is therefore timely [2]. While the ethical implications of exhibiting human remains and other sensitive materials are common to all areas of scholarship, including physical anthropology, archaeology, anthropology, and pathology, different communities emphasize different elements in approaching the question, and distinct applied codes of ethics are accordingly developed [1]. The issue also has the potential to affect any institution that exhibits human remains or sensitive materials in any form, not only "museums [2]." The present analysis therefore adopts a maximal frame: in scope, it covers all sensitive materials having the potential to affect human dignity, rights, or associated

forms of harm; in scholarly focus, it includes all disciplines for which such sensitive materials are natural objects of scholarly inquiry; and in institutional definition, it encompasses all bodies that display or otherwise engage with such materials in any way [3].

Historical overview of Exhibition Practices

Exhibition practices concerning human remains have a long history, with milestones and developments that have shaped contemporary norms. By examining past decisions, occurrences, and undercurrents, curators can better understand today's ethical expectations [1]. While displays of preserved bodies date back millennia and some artifacts have been publicly exhibited for centuries, policies and attitudes have evolved [2]. Increasingly, international guidance and professional codes encourage institutions to seek provenance information, verify acquisition conditions, exhibit items only with community support, and adopt measures that respect sensitivities [1]. Because of the colonial character of collecting and the submissive treatment of many original owners, tangible objects remain artifacts of the past, but human remains have become a matter of the present [2]. Whether or not the outreach potential, scientific benefit, historical value, or aesthetic quality of such exhibits outweighs deeply rooted ethical concerns is a key question for curators, institutions, and society [2].

Ethical Frameworks and Principles

Ethical frameworks guide decision-making on exhibiting human remains and sensitive materials. The Nash equilibrium 1 offers insight into collective actions: changing due diligence on provenance alone does not yield societal benefit under a deontological frame [2]. Equilibria arising from safeguarding on sensitive portrayals, allowing commemorative responsibility, and sharing authority across cultures present principled paths towards net societal gain [3]. Complementary ethical views on concerns for dignity and sensitivity prevail. Balancing scholarship, community needs, and socially desirable outcomes emerges as the crux of the framework [3]. As museum public-service missions, funding structures, and global developments intensify discussions on the decolonisation of knowledge representations, careful dialogue on sensitivity, dignity, and perspective-sharing is crucial[1].

Legal and Regulatory Landscapes across Jurisdictions

Legal and regulatory landscapes regarding the treatment of human remains differ considerably across jurisdictions. While certain guidelines promote ethical standards for specimen acquisition and management, legal protections against their possession and exhibition remain fragmented [2]. For instance, many countries enshrine respect for human remains and control their excavation, sale, and display within national borders [1]. Other jurisdictions lack formal regulations, exposing museums to unrestricted internet sales of skulls and mummified remains, with legally sanctioned transactions varying widely and the safety of such specimens remaining uncertain. As a result, several international guides propose frameworks to address indigenous peoples' rights and other cultural and legal concerns surrounding the handling of archaeological human remains [4]. The situation regarding human remains in museum collections calls for increased scrutiny in light of widespread public acknowledgment of colonial misappropriation [5]. The legal and ethical dimensions of collecting, curating, and displaying such materials have attracted the attention of the American Association of Museums and the International Council of Museums, both of which have adopted evolving Codes of Ethics. Additionally, the United Kingdom's 2005 Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums established institutional responsibilities governing these materials, many of which were acquired when their original possessors were deemed incapable of protecting themselves [6]. While the document promotes best practices pertaining to the deaccessioning and repatriation of human remains, and emphasises the care, curation, and use of ethnographic specimens, a definitive framework for the management of human remains as a distinct category remains absent [7]. The preservation and exhibition of these materials continues to pose ethical challenges related to community endangerment, cultural sensitivity, and the prioritisation of study over the peace of surviving family members, yet specific policies and practices for addressing them remain underdeveloped across numerous jurisdictions [1].

Informed Consent, Provenance, and Repatriation

Informed consent, provenance verification, and repatriation processes constitute core ethical concerns when exhibiting human remains and sensitive materials [1]. To uphold ethical standards, institutions must ensure sufficient documentation and transparency, actively involve communities in decision-making, and establish mechanisms for returning items when warranted [2]. Adequate documentation and transparency regarding the history of an object and the conditions under which it may be displayed serve as a basis for responsible custodianship and ethical engagement. A publicly accessible chain of custody, including exhibition history, is essential [8]. Institutions should disclose institutional ethical review procedures for contested items and encourage donor-based ethical review. Full transparency is necessary for cases where community requests or advice cannot be accommodated, including pre-emptive groundwork to clarify institutional limits [2]. Elements of a provenance verification process generally include due diligence in acquisition, assessment of acquisition circumstances, and evaluation of potential links to unlawfully retained objects, consideration of legacy information

such as previous ownership, and a supporting rationale for the interpretation of the object's history. High-risk objects include those with less established information, potential unlawful retention, or unclarity regarding cultural significance [2]. Unpublished objects, documentation gaps, and unverified physical characteristics such as geographic origin further complicate provenance ascriptions [2]. Diligent provenance research not only benefits individual institutions but also strengthens collective knowledge. Global networks can exchange valuable insights into shared legacies and restoration promoting broader community-based approach to provenance challenges [1].

Cultural Sensitivity, Decolonization, and Descendant Communities

Cultural sensitivity, decolonization, and engagement with descendant communities are paramount in ethical deliberations pertaining to human remains and sensitive materials [3]. Pressure to reduce Western neocolonial power structures lends urgency and legitimacy to decolonization efforts. Critiques of directorial censorship that condemns colonsation and colonialism, but suppresses perspectives from colonized living or long-dead representatives, underscore the need for dialogue with involved living parties [2]. In this context, sensitivity stretches beyond labelled sensitivity and reputation of the exhibitor towards the agency of affected communities, whose remembrance, cultural prosthetisation, reproduction, and environmental connections have long been disrupted. Increasing call for full partnership in curatorial processes advocates a more radical approach that shares curatorial agency without the compromise of directorial censorship [9]. Sensitivity is seldom inclusive. Curatorial processes in Western exhibitions are commonly judged by external audiences with pre-existing expectations of sensitivity, interest, or shock value. Though some questions are asked in advance, they often concern legitimate evidence, an adequate grieving period, or the risk of an unconsented harmful end use rather than consent for portrayal [2]. Audience considerations again trump ownership rights. Community consultation is increasingly undertaken with the hope that viewers will determine the adequacy and acceptability of the representation, yet it occurs on curator-determined terms and schedules [1]. Full-cost benefit sharing arrangements are perhaps the most acute expression of adult-centred research ethics, forcing normally off-the-shelf reproduction licensing discussions into a "gift" or "offering" framework [1].

Privacy, Dignity, and Survivor Considerations

Privacy, dignity, and survivor considerations play a pivotal role when contemplating the exhibition or research use of human remains [1]. Compliance with ethical guidelines necessitates not only the non-diminishment of these considerations by the representation in publications, information, or agencies, but also the existence of protocols to mitigate potential harms [10]. Anonymisation of materially sensitive items in visual media is acknowledged as necessary to ensure dignity and civilian safety; however, these processes are sometimes erroneously equated with the omission of intellectually sensitive items when they represent individuals at risk of harm by their mention [3]. If harm can occur during exhibition, it may similarly arise from dissemination connected to the significantly reduced role of curatorial agency in research preparation and dissemination cycles. Ethical review may represent an effective screening and mediation mechanism in these contexts [3]. Effective screening and mediation are especially needed where review might not otherwise occur, and where the prospective exhibition represents a significant change in the circumstances surrounding the object; for instance, where an exhibition threatens to alter the conditions under which the object was displayed or was originally preserved such that non-diminution and non-commemoration are no longer achievable[3].

Museum Governance, Accreditation, and Accountability

Museum governance impacts every aspect of operational practice and public-facing behaviour. Judgements about how well or poorly an institution behaves can consequently be attributed to its governing structure and membership [2]. In many countries, museums are accredited by relevant professional associations, including, in some cases, membership of a museum board. These associations often maintain publicly-accessible codes of ethics, the content of which is driven by institutional interest and in some cases, by the nature of the museum collection within that region [3]. Where the museum does not have an established proactive sourcing strategy, the museum community operating such a code may request proof of provenance and security before consideration of application. The community may also advise the museum during an acquisition [3]. Although applied universally, potential conflict of interest has frequently been raised where museum boards undertake accreditation of their own institution. In such instances, it is not unusual for ethical offices to require a third party to assess the institution's application or compliance. Public funding for museum activities can further impact governance by placing the institution under scrutiny by government office-arms and citizens [2]. Aesthetic, scholarly and discriminatory policy decisions may then become part of public discussion, but outside a genuine consultation with the community most severely affected by the exhibition. External auditing designed to increase institutional transparency without establishing the formal governing process to accommodate this transparency has similar limitations [3]. Advisors from the affected community may be formally invited as permanent board members, and in so doing, achieve the necessary balance between the community wish to be consulted and the institution's responsibility to be approved.

Allowing for legislative, regulatory or other non-binding guidelines external to the museum itself does not alleviate this confusion [3].

Public Engagement, Education, and Transparency

Public communication about exhibitions of human remains and sensitive materials can facilitate genuine interest and support among stakeholders. However, museums often inadequately justify collective decisions or consult interested parties in ways that might enhance active participation [2]. The perceived legitimacy of a display affects its impact and public reception; legitimate displays engage, rather than alienate, audiences [3]. Legitimacy is influenced by communication, educative offerings, and transparency regarding the origins of exhibited collections. The gris proposed five principles for legitimate public displays: the display should be made for the benefit of the public, offer a connection to the subject matter, avoid uncritical exoticising of its content, be presented in a way that cultivates understanding and goodwill towards the subject matter, and include details about the origins of the display[3]. Arguably the most important consideration in this respect is who is telling the story of the display and, crucially, who is being consulted about decisions directing how the story is told. Consultation is important to confirming the story being told, but also for establishing trust with affected communities. Displays with strong cultural significance for living peoples should be able to draw upon forms of consultation enabling the appropriate people to contribute to the narratives in ways to which they are more intimately connected [1]. Primary sources for the narratives should derive from within the affected communities. Communicating any warnings expeditiously, and highlighting the resolutions of particularly sensitive or painful pasts, can help garner goodwill and ensure the presentation is received in the spirit intended [2]. Communications strategy is vital when decisions are fraught or the exhibition easily sensationalised. Associated programming can also improve reception of even controversial displays. All efforts should be made to render the exhibition as accessible as possible, with associated materials and public discussions offered in several languages where needed. Choosing and prioritising stories of hope, redemption or healing within the exhibition are powerful contributions to its reception [1]. Raising awareness of the collection and display should involve extensive use of social media and other channels to communicate the importance of the discussion. It is also important that curatorial staff enjoy access to training courses focusing upon ethical sensitivity in storytelling within sensitive collections and exhibitions [3].

Case Studies: Exemplary Policies and Contentious Controversies

Contemporary museum policies regarding the display of human bodies and human remains are often characterized by a commitment to the promotion of ethical underpinnings, perspectives, and processes [3]. Examples of exhibition policies from eight museums, four with restrictive human-remains display policies and four without such policies illustrate a range of policies and practices reflecting a commitment to ethical engagement with cultural material [1]. The British Museum and the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge disclose a rationale for repatriation policies that emphasizes obligations of care arising from the manner of acquisition. The University of Cambridge's policy also articulates a commitment to making collections available for study and encourages international collaborative research on collection materials [2]. The Impact of Human Remains in Museum Collections at the University of Glasgow reflects ongoing concerns about the acquisition, retention, research, and exhibition of human remains acquired in a colonial context while the document Restitution Statement reiterates the museum's commitment to these principles [2]. The partial-review iterations of the 1984 american association of museums code of ethics for museums convey the aspiration to remain ethical and reflect commitment to ethical standards and public education [2].

Policy Gaps, Challenges, and Emerging Issues in Digital and Virtual Displays

The field of museum studies has identified a range of policy gaps regarding ethical permits, access rights, and the sharing of human remains and other sensitive material in virtual environments [2]. A 2019 symposium on the digital sharing of archaeological human remains, for example, emphasized the importance of applying ethical considerations to both physical and digital remains and constructing frameworks for the responsible display of digitally modeled remains [3]. Online provenance records and ethical permissions are also lacking for many datasets of skeletal remains. Even remains possessing adequate digital provenance, are sometimes subject to concerns about being inappropriately exploited, presented, or misrepresented in non-academic contexts [3]. Guidance from virtual decedents' communities regarding the ethics of displaying their remains can be particularly valuable amid the current proliferation of 3D scanning, modeling, and virtual reality technologies. Even while developing 3D digital models that are rigorously documented, establishments face difficult decisions about whether to share virtual reproductions [3]. Community permission to broadly disseminate 3D digital models of skeletal information can raise ethical questions parallel to those surrounding wider access to physical specimens. Implementing restrictions on both physical and 3D digital sharing may thus be imperative; virtual access does not obviate the need for consent and may even add new complexities [2]. Institutions promoting the rigorous documentation of provenance and ethical permissions for 3D models also highlight the absence of universally

recognized metadata standards for documenting consents, permissions, and rights management, and are not alone in perceiving a risk of digital exploitation or misrepresentation that exceeds that of physical materials [3]. Digital curation of virtual remains also figures prominently in decolonization movements, whose broad aims encompass correcting historical injustices, returning owned materials, and creating equitable partnerships. Virtual repatriation through additive-subtractive annotation to authorize the posting of select materials, without ceding control over the originating medium, connects directly to museums' involvement in national and international repatriation discussions, and through 3D reproduction, raises issues parallel to those surrounding traditional visits to physically borrowed items [3].

Recommendations for Global Policy Harmonization and Best Practices

Policy harmonization and best-practice development can ultimately be achieved only through the collaboration of multiple countries, institutions of different functions and scope, and a variety of experts [3]. A normative framework would provide guidance to museums worldwide, be they large or small, national or public-private; preventive preservation institutions; memory organizations and archives; research or non-profit institutions; Tourism Development Authorities; or, above all, the diplomatic authorities responsible for shaping policies in a multicultural, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious world[3]. Such guidance would consider the primary role of ethicality, inclusiveness, accuracy, openness, accessibility and sensitivity in the creation and management of collections, as well as the relationships that institutions establish with the communities to whom the materials on display or part of their collections belong[2]. The historic dialogue and exchange of ideas between the International Council of Museums and cultural rights activists, which continues to enrich discussion within and outside the museum community, could guide the definition of a Normative Framework. It should take into consideration a balance between the most important values of Freedom of Expression, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Rights and the Preservation of the Common Heritage of Humanity. The concept of Freedom also needs to be critically revisited: the interaction between the Freedom of Expression of an institution is it cultural, scientific or other, and the Cultural Rights of the Community must be this institution's first goal [3].

CONCLUSION

The exhibition of human remains and sensitive materials remains a deeply complex ethical issue situated at the intersection of scholarship, public education, cultural rights, and historical accountability. Contemporary debates demonstrate that the display of such materials cannot be approached solely through scientific, aesthetic, or educational frameworks without equally addressing dignity, consent, provenance, and the perspectives of descendant communities. Historical practices rooted in colonial acquisition, unequal power relations, and extractive collecting continues to shape present-day institutional responsibilities and public expectations. This review shows that ethical approaches increasingly prioritize transparency, collaborative governance, provenance research, repatriation mechanisms, and meaningful consultation with affected communities. Museums and related institutions are progressively shifting from custodial authority toward shared curatorial models that recognize the agency and cultural rights of communities historically excluded from decision-making processes. Nevertheless, substantial inconsistencies persist across legal systems, institutional policies, and professional standards, particularly regarding the regulation of digital reproductions, virtual displays, and international ownership claims. The emergence of digital technologies and online dissemination has further complicated ethical governance by expanding access while simultaneously increasing the risks of exploitation, misrepresentation, and unauthorized circulation of sensitive materials. These developments reinforce the need for globally coordinated ethical standards capable of addressing both physical and virtual forms of exhibition. Equally important is the recognition that ethical stewardship extends beyond compliance with formal regulations and requires sustained commitment to empathy, accountability, inclusiveness, and restorative justice. Ultimately, responsible exhibition practices must balance scholarly inquiry and public engagement with the protection of human dignity and cultural memory. Institutions that embrace transparency, intercultural dialogue, ethical sensitivity, and equitable collaboration are better positioned to foster trust, promote historical understanding, and contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions surrounding heritage, identity, and human rights. Future global policy frameworks should therefore prioritize harmonized ethical principles that support culturally respectful, community-centered, and socially responsible approaches to the stewardship and display of human remains and sensitive materials.

REFERENCES

1. Licata M, Bonsignore A, Boano R, Monza F, Fulcheri E, Ciliberti R. Study, conservation and exhibition of human remains: the need of a bioethical perspective. *Acta Biomed.* 2020;91(4):e2020110. doi:10.23750/abm.v91i4.9674.
2. Page KM. *The significance of human remains in museum collections: implications for collections management* [master's thesis]. Buffalo (NY): State University of New York, Buffalo State College; 2011.
3. Ulguim P. Digital remains made public: sharing the dead online and our future digital mortuary landscape. *AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology.* 2018;8(2):153-76. doi:10.23914/ap.v8i2.162.

4. Squires K, Errickson D, Márquez-Grant N, editors. *Ethical approaches to human remains: a global challenge in bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology*. Cham: Springer; 2020. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-32926-6.
5. Cassman V, Odegaard N, Powell J, editors. *Human remains: guide for museums and academic institutions*. Lanham (MD): AltaMira Press; 2007.
6. Jenkins T. *Contesting human remains in museum collections: the crisis of cultural authority*. New York: Routledge; 2011.
7. Fforde C, Hubert J, Turnbull P, editors. *The dead and their possessions: repatriation in principle, policy and practice*. London: Routledge; 2002.
8. Redman SJ. *Bone rooms: from scientific racism to human prehistory in museums*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 2016.
9. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. *Guidance for the care of human remains in museums*. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport; 2005.
10. German Museums Association. *Care of human remains in museums and collections*. Berlin: German Museums Association; 2021.

CITE AS: Nyiramukama Diana Kashaka. (2026). Ethics of Exhibiting Human Remains and Sensitive Materials: A Global Policy Review. INOSR HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES 12(1): 20-25. https://doi.org/10.59298/INOSRHSS/2026/121.2025