

### **Racism, Archaeology and Museums: The Strange Case of the Stuffed African Male in the Darder Museum, Banyoles (Catalonia), Spain.**

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#### **Introduction**

The exhibition and storage of human remains in anthropological and natural history museums has been an issue strongly debated during the last decade (see, for example, Zimmerman 1988; Hubert 1991a, 1991b; Podgorny and Politis 1992). Discussion has taken place between the various interest groups and in some cases has led to the repatriation of human remains. The case of the stuffed African man of Banyoles, however, has largely bypassed the usual museum and academic circles and instead has entered the public domain (Anton 1992) as a clear issue of racial conflict.

The stuffed body of an African man has been the central exhibit of a small Catalanian museum since the beginning of this century. Events in 1991 brought its existence and the issue of its display to the attention of the Spanish media, as well as acquiring some international press coverage (for example, ***El Pais***, 10.11.91, 12.11.91, 13.11.91, 30.11.91, 2.1.92, 20.1.92, 6.2.92, 8.2.92, 6.5.92, 7.5.92, 9.5.92, 10.5.92, 18.5.92, 19.5.92, 20.5.92, 21.5.92, 7.7.92, 27.7.92, 3.8.92, 19.1.92, 20.11.92, 22.11.92, 30.11.92; ***Diario de Mallorca***, 16.12.92; ***El Dia de Baleares***, 5.7.92; ***The New York Times***, 5.2.92). However, despite such extensive media attention and the ensuing public debate, the issue has yet to raise any comment from the Spanish or international museum community or be addressed in an academic forum. The issue, which concerns museum and academic ethics and affects ethnic relations both within Catalonia and abroad, was not even raised at the First World Congress on the Preservation and Conservation of Natural History Collections held in Madrid in 1992. It is in order to bring this important issue to academic attention that this paper has been submitted to the ***World Archaeological Bulletin***.

## The Stuffed African of Banyoles

The Darder Museum is a small museum in Banyoles (Girona, Catalonia) which contains various archaeological and natural history specimens. **including** stuffed animals, preserved human foetuses and a South American mummy. Its central exhibit is the stuffed, upright body of an almost naked African man holding a spear. The body was obtained between 1829-30 (Anton 1992) and prepared by the French taxidermist Edouard Verraux and was first displayed in Paris in **1831, as part of an exhibition of stuffed animals**. The Catalan naturalist Frances Darder purchased the body from the Verraux collection in 1888 and, in 1916, he bequeathed it and his whole collection to the town of Banyoles. Since this time the whole collection has become the Darder Museum, which is managed by a Board of Directors, many of whose members also sit on the Banyoles Town Council.

According to Darder's 1888 catalogue (Anton 1992), Verraux had recorded that the body had been taken from its grave on the night of its burial, after the family had departed. It was then taken to Cape Town where it was stuffed. Verraux stated that the body was that of a "chief" of the "Betjuanas" (Anton 1992) -presumably, therefore, deriving from modern Botswana/South Africa.

The exhibition of the body first became a public issue in 1991. At this time, Dr. Alfons Arcelin, a black Haitian doctor practicing in Catalonia, asked the Darder Museum to remove the body from exhibition because of its racist nature. When the Directors refused, Arcelin campaigned for a boycott of the Olympic rowing competitions (due to be held in Banyoles in 1992) unless the body was withdrawn. Arcelin's activity elicited various reactions. The museum Directors immediately issued a document justifying the continued exhibition of the body on the grounds that it was their central exhibit and, according to one Director, the Museum would have to be closed if it was withdrawn. At the same time, some sectors of Banyoles, a region of high African immigration, began to adopt a clearly racist standpoint. This is best illustrated by comments made to the press: "there are too many black immigrants here, they should go back to their own country"; "now that black immigrants are arriving, must we withdraw the black man from the Museum Darder? No!"; "before, when there were no immigrants, we did not have any problems."

In order to avoid racial controversy during the Olympic Games, the Town Council of Banyoles considered the possibility of removing the stuffed body for the duration of the Games, using the need to restore it as an excuse. However, this proposal was rejected by the Mayor, who compared it with the policy of some separatist local governments who refused to fly the Spanish and Catalan flags together during the local fiesta on the grounds that it might

cause **public disorder**. From the beginning, both the museum Directors and the **Banyoles town officials** have been strongly opposed to any solution other than keeping **the** body on display.

**Events continued** to accelerated during 1992, with much publicised debate between the various Olympic organising committees and the town officials in Banyoles and the towns people themselves. The following account gives some idea of the various opinions involved and the actions taken,

In January of 1992 an African association, the Inter-African Center for the Promotion of Cultural Activities (Barcelona), proposed that the stuffed body be handed over to a commission of representatives from African countries and reburied, with dignity, in Africa.<sup>1</sup> This was refused. At the end of January and the beginning of February the controversy became international when the Olympic committees of some African countries, as well as the Foreign Office of Botswana, were informed of the events in Banyoles.

On the 5th of February the New **York Times** published an extensive article about the matter and, later in February, the International Olympic Committee ordered the Spanish Olympic Committee to investigate the case. Also in February, the President of the International Olympic Committee, a Catalanian, Joan Antoni Samaranch, told the press that the matter was unimportant, but later said, on the 6th of May, that he thought it “would be advisable for the stuffed African of Banyoles to take a holiday.”

Meanwhile, the Banyoles Town Council decided that it would not accept a direct request from the International Olympic Committee, because it did not consider it a valid spokesman, and would only consider a request if it came from the Barcelona Olympic Organising Committee.

In May the International Olympic Committee announced that the stuffed African of the Darder Museum had no scientific, historic, ethnic, or any other kind of value, and that it would ask the Barcelona Olympic Organising Committee to request the Council of Banyoles to withdraw it from exhibition.

At the same time, the Council of Banyoles continued to consider the possibility of closing the Darder Museum during the celebration of the Olympic Games. They made it clear, however, that this action would be purely temporary in order to silence criticisms during the Games. The Council also announced that it was being pressured by the people of Banyoles to keep the body on exhibition. Some sections of the local population had distributed T-shirts with the inscription: **O tots o cap**” (“All of them or none of them”) meaning that if the stuffed African had to leave, then so would the large number of African immigrants living in Banyoles. Other local people saw the stuffed body as a “sign of local identity” (Anton 1992), an inherent part of the community: “If the Negro can’t be Olympic, then we don’t want to be Olympic.”; “For the town of Banyoles the Negro is more important than the Olympic Games.”; “To hide

the Negro would be an act of cowardice.“; “If the Negro goes, the mothers of Banyoles will educate their children to be racists.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Arcelin and the Inter-African Center for the Promotion of Cultural Activities continued to demand a definitive solution, not just a temporary closing of the museum hall. They also accused the International Olympic Committee of being hypocritical and insensitive. Today, the controversy continues – the stuffed man remains on display whilst the number of visitors to the museum has tripled and the entrance fee has been raised.

### **What Should be Done with the African of Banyoles?**

The case that we have just described is a clear example of a museum policy that has created social and racial conflict. Despite this, the Catalonian and Spanish museum community remains silent, and no comment has been forthcoming from any Catalonian or Spanish archaeologist or anthropologist. Obviously, this problem needs to be resolved but this can only be done with the necessary academic discussion within Catalonia and Spain, as well as consultation with those countries in which similar problems regarding the ownership and museum treatment of human remains are currently being addressed. During the World Congress on the Conservation and Preservation of Natural History Collections, Dr. M.A. Mares talked about the need for a world-wide ethical standard for museums, a standard that would require museum pieces to be returned to their places of origin. Dr. R.S. Hoffman, from the Smithsonian Institution, has insisted on the importance of this subject for the harmonious coexistence of different nations and cultures. The Darder Museum must join the international museum community and follow general ethical guidelines which would necessitate the removal of the stuffed African.

One of the many problems with the exhibition of the body is the context in which it is displayed. Some have argued that the nearby exhibition of two stretched human skins negates the racist argument, and that the body should be seen as illustrating human variation (or even possibly variation within the animal world as the museum also contains many other stuffed animal specimens). The identity of these skins is, however, in some doubt, and recent research has indicated that they too are possibly of African, or maybe Asian, origin. Moreover, there are now agreed ways of displaying human variability (for example, with the use of photographs and casts), which illustrate all human types equally, so as to exclude any racist interpretation.

The stuffed African of Banyoles is the product of European colonialism and today represents an ethnocentric scientific attitude left over from the last century. Therefore, the only possible justification for exhibiting the body might be to show future generations the cruelty and disrespect of colonialism.

With clear agreement from its legitimate owners, the body might then serve as an educational tool to illustrate past atrocities (as in the Hiroshima Museum or that at Auschwitz). However, this possible change in rationale for display does not seem to have been considered by the Banyoles officials.

The authors believe that the racist exhibition of the stuffed African is unjustifiable both scientifically and ethically. The body was stolen from its legitimate owners, and neither the museum of Banyoles nor any other institution has any right to hold it. The present policy of some museums is to return material only to legitimate descendants. However, even if this policy was adopted by the Darder Museum, the lack of detailed information regarding the origins of the African would make such a procedure very difficult to implement. Whatever policy is adopted, the offense caused by the exhibit is such that it must be withdrawn from display whilst any relevant research is carried out. The proposal made by the Inter-African Center for the Promotion of Cultural Activities, that the body should be buried in Africa (presumably in Botswana), would seem to provide the most ethically correct solution. This action might also go some way towards encouraging reconciliation between the various ethnic groups living in Banyoles. Similarly, further education regarding the ethical issues involved might also help to stimulate such reconciliation.

It is clear that the body of this African has fulfilled many different functions since his death, as has been the case with other collected human remains throughout the world. Initially the centre of funerary ritual, it then became a scientific curiosity framed in a colonial context. Once in Europe it became a commercial object, being traded between various collectors, and on the death of Darder, it became a token of benefaction towards the town of Banyoles. Today it has become a symbol of racism and is used by some sectors of the Banyoles community to express their dissatisfaction with recent black immigration. The Banyoles case therefore exemplifies the current rise in racial tension within Europe which has been targeted upon African and Asian immigrants, and should be seen from this context. Recent violent events in Germany and France can be seen as extreme representations of this trend. The important political implications of the continued exhibition of the stuffed African man in the Darder Museum seems to have been overlooked by the Banyoles Town Council, Whether deliberate or not, this damaging oversight leaves the Council giving its tacit support to the anti-immigration faction, and so promoting racial tension within the region.

### Note

1. Although the exact provenance of this Darder Museum "exhibit" is not known, it seems highly likely that the "person" is a "San" "Bushman."

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