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# ENTANGLED ENTITLEMENTS AND THE SHUAR SHRUNKEN HEADS

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## Introduction

Founded in 1884, within an atmospheric building, the Pitt Rivers Museum has more than 50,000 objects on display out of a total of well over half a million objects, photographs, sound recordings and manuscripts. Its unique Victorian lay-out makes the Museum widely loved and regarded as one of the best of its kind. The Museum is, however, also a contested space. Curating the integrity of that space, while ensuring its contemporary relevance, is a challenge that we embrace.



Following the post-pandemic reopening of the Pitt Rivers Museum in September 2020, visitors saw changes to some of its most well-known permanent displays, principally the so-labelled "Treatment of Dead Enemies" case. As part of the Museum's strategic commitment to following a three-year ethical review. Over the summer of 2020, a team at the Museum carefully removed 120 human remains from open display, including the well-known South American *tsantsa* (shrunken heads) that by some were considered the most important display in the Museum and arguably also its most significant public attraction. As was to be expected, those changes have been reviewed very positively by many, but negatively by some, and this chapter shares the reasons for the changes and offers an analysis of some of the diverging reactions nationally and internationally.

## *Tsantsa*

Shrunken heads, or *tsantsa*, were made by the *Shuar*, one of the so-called Jivaroan peoples who live on 7.5 million acres of land between the borders of eastern Ecuador and northern Peru in South America. *Tsantsa* can be made of human or animal heads.

While the largest collection of *tsantsa* is kept in Ecuador, most museums that hold significant ethnographic collections in Europe and the United States, also hold *tsantsas*. With a few exceptions (the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, the

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Kunstkammer in St Petersburg, the Náprstek Museum in Prague and the Slovenian Museum of Ethnology in Llubljana) most took the *tsantsa* off display in the 1990s or before as it was felt to be unethical or inappropriate to keep human remains (other than mummies) on display. Two museums, the Pitt Rivers Museum (in 2020) and the Wellcome collections (in 2022) only recently decided to no longer display *tsantsas*. In the case of the Pitt Rivers Museum, until July 2020, the *tsantsa* formed part of a case-display called "Treatment of Dead Enemies." This display was well-advertised especially in tourist guidebooks and most newspaper articles mentioned the shrunken heads as part of the "charm" of the Museum.

There were a number of reasons the human remains were removed from display. Most importantly, for decades, Indigenous peoples have protested against the display of their ancestral remains and given the Museum's guiding principles 2017–2022 Strategy,[1] taking the remains off display was ethically necessary; secondly, we were in breach of UK government and International Council of Museum (ICOM) ethical guidance which stipulates human remains should only be put on display where visitors do not stand the risk of unexpectedly being confronted with them. Thirdly, our audience research had shown visitors often saw the Museum's displays of human remains, and Shuar *tsantsa* and Naga trophy skulls in particular, as a testament to other cultures being "savage," "primitive," or "gruesome."

Rather than enabling our visitors to reach a deeper understanding of humanities' many ways of being and knowing, the displays reinforced racist and stereotypical thinking that go against the Museum's values today and our express wish to becoming a listening, anti-racist institution, that is committed to social justice and cultural care and repair. Clearly, our curation was failing to communicate those values, and therefore needed to change.



Apart from ethical considerations, there were also a number of conservation issues that required changes to the display; as a 2017 review showed, the majority of the mounts in the treatment of dead enemies' case were not supporting the objects and the *tsantsa* were hanging from their original strings.

## The *tsantsa* in the Pitt Rivers Museum

The Museum's Shuar collection comprises 173 objects, ten of which are *tsantsa*, six human, two sloth and two monkey. The *tsantsa* were acquired between 1884 and 1936 from five different collectors and were, as far as we know, added to the original display somewhere before 1944. Previously it was thought that there were 12 *tsantsa*, but that was due to a misidentification: a Munduruku skull seems to have been misinterpreted as a Shuar *tsantsa*; and one other *tsantsa* seems to have never been brought into the collection but at some point was erroneously entered into the databases as a *tsantsa* acquired by Major Thomas.

According to their accompanying documentation, the ten *tsantsa* are said to have been collected from either *Xebaroe* or *Jivaro* peoples along three different rivers where we know *Jivaroan* peoples were known to have lived. We suspect that these particular *tsantsa* come from three main *Jivaroan* peoples: the Untsuri Shuar who lived along the Zamora River; the Achuara from the Pastaza River and the *Aguaruna* along the

Marañon River. Around the time these *tsantsa* were collected, the *Achuara* were regularly raided for heads by the *Untsuri Shuar*, but further research is required into this and the data that accompanies the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) *tsantsa* does not provide us with either geographically or chronologically coherent provenance information.

According to Pitt Rivers Museum records, the *tsantsa* came into the collections as follows:

- Two of the *tsantsa* (one sloth and one human) are from the Museum's founding collection belonging to General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers: the first a sloth *tsantsa* (1874.115.1) the General indicates was collected by Clarence Buckley from the "Xebaroe." The second, a human *tsantsa* (1874.115.2), was probably sold to the General by a person identified as "Jamrach" and possibly collected by the same Buckley. They are amongst the oldest *tsantsa* recorded in any European museum collection.[2]
- One "Jivaro" human *tsantsa* (1911.77.1) bought in 1911 for £3 by a Mrs Sanders in the Peruvian Marañón River district.
- One sloth *tsantsa* (1923.88.364) purchased by Major R. H. Thomas in 1922 when visiting the "Jivaros" of the Upper Santiago River in Ecuador. He also collected a human *tsantsa* along the Zamora River, Guallaquisa in Ecuador (1923.88.363).
- One human *tsantsa* (1932.32.92) collected by William L. Stevenson Loat in Ecuador along the Upper Santiago River.
- In 1936, the aforementioned Major R.H. Thomas acquired two monkey *tsantsas* in Ecuador along the Pastaza River (1936.53.44 and 1936.53.45). He also collected two human *tsantsa* along the Pastaza River in Ecuador (1936.53.42 and 1936.53.43).



For a number of reasons that will be outlined further in this chapter, until recently it was assumed that several of the Pitt Rivers' *tsantsa* were not ceremonial, originally made as part of Shuar cultural practices. They were, instead, thought to be forgeries or fakes.

Recent consultations in March 2022, with Shuar delegate Jefferson Pullaguari Acacho and Ecuadorian human remains expert Dr Maria Patricia Ordoñez, showed how many of the assumptions regarding the supposed: "authenticity" and "counterfeit" of the *tsantsas* in the Pitt Rivers collections, need to be re-thought and that more research is required using more contemporary authentication methods such as CT scanning, ancient DNA and isotope and alkaloid sample analysis (see further). For example, while according to Laura Peers, the latter two *tsantsa* collected around 1936 were considered to be "commercial" or "forgeries" of Shuar *tsantsa* because pages of a 1936 Ecuadorean newspaper were found "wadded into the crown of the head, where in a real *tsantsa*, kapok, a cotton-like plant fibre, would have been used."[3] This, however, is not corroborated by more recent research that seems to suggest newspaper was often used as a filler by those that were packing objects for transport to foreign museums to preserve the heads and therefore cannot necessarily be taken on face value as a measure of "fakeness."[4]

## Taking Heads as Trophies

Different peoples distributed throughout the American continent were known to take and display human body parts as trophies.[5] Although the Shuar *tsantsa* are those that most prominently ended up on display in European museum collections, to become object of fascination and later popularised and stereotyped in popular culture[6]; many Amerindian communities, from very early on practised the taking of skulls or other parts of the human body as part of ceremonial practices and rituals. In the South America tropical lowlands especially peoples in the Amazon and Orinoco River area, such as the *Tupinambá*, and *Munduruku*[7]; and in Colombia, many peoples including in the Cauca valley, *Calima*, *Muisca* and *Quimbaya* were reported to hunt for skulls.[8] This echoes a continued practice from well-documented pre-colonial cultural practices illustrated in the archaeological record such as on ceramics, textiles and stonework iconography of *Chavín*, *Paracas*, *Nazca*, *Wari* and *Tiwanaku*.[9] The *tsantsa*, however, are quite unique both in their unusual materiality, their interwovenness with coloniality, exploitation and European trade (driven by the greed of museums and collectors) and the way they became portrayed in popular culture through a white gaze of western imagination as gruesome, ghoulish, or freakish: featuring in blockbuster movies such as "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of *Azkaban"* (here the *tsantsa* is portrayed as a racist caricature with a Jamaican accent, and long dreadlocks, as a rear-view mirror accessory of the "Knight Bus" that picks up Harry Potter) or as part of the souvenir industry: tequila bottles shaped in the form of a *tsantsa* or rubber rear-view mirror accessories shaped as a *tsantsa* but with huge bobbing eyes.



## Made for Trade?

Although Amazonian indigenous communities are often stereotypically portrayed as isolated or disconnected, they were in fact astute traders with extensive trading networks[10] and, as Taylor argues Shuar and Achuar were no exception with a constant flow of trade goods between Achuar, Quichua and Shuar neighbours taking place: "based either on a quasi-monopoly over certain natural products with restricted geographic distribution (e.g. specific palms, salt, latex, pigments for ceramics) or on the monopoly of access to certain manufactured goods (steel tools, rifles, shotguns, black powder, shot, and glass beads)."[11] *Tsantsa*, however, only became trade items when from the 1870s as part of the trade with white invaders, they are traded in exchange for guns as they became much sought-after collectors' items by European and North American collectors and museums. Ultimately, this resulted in the introduction of great quantities of guns among the Shuar. Researchers have argued that much warfare related to head-hunting was driven by this Euro-American Museum and private collectors' demand for *tsantsas*.[12]

Foreign presence in Shuar territories was a novelty, as apart from a very early intrusion in 1549 by a Spanish expedition led by Hernando de Benavente and sporadic contacts after that where the Shuar were described as "very warlike people"[13] and the infamous 1599 Shuar uprising reported by Velasco,[14] until the middle of the 19th century, there had been little contact between Shuar and whites.

This changed around the 18th century when Spaniards started to migrate in search of gold mining opportunities; however, there is little clear data on this and the contacts seem to have been sporadic. Trading steel machetes for pigs, salt and *tsantsa*[15] contacts were combative, or trade-related exchanges. Rubinstein argues that this trade of *tsantsas* for manufactured goods in the first half of the 19th century "incorporated Shuar into the world economy."[16]

According to Rubenstein, more and more mestizo and European settlers flooded into Shuar lands around the 1880s, in search for cinchona bark, a source of quinine used to treat malaria.[17] They "occasionally exchanged manufactured goods such as machetes and shotguns in return for Shuar labour or forest products: pigs, deer, salt – and *tsantsas*."[18] Not much later, with the introduction of cattle to the region by Jesuit missionaries, incentives for trade changed – pig or deer meat was no longer a scarce good. This is when what Larson calls the "heads-for-guns-trade" starts: "the only way to get a gun was to sell a head."[19]

The ensuing colonial reality of violence further shaped the conditions of trade: "Although the Shuar were able to obtain machetes, cloth, and other Western goods more easily from the missionaries than from traders, guns could only be acquired through the illicit head trade."[20] As such, as Ross argues, the advent of firearms "changed the relationship of raiding to the distance factor and to risk. It facilitated long-distance forays through hostile territory, altered the nature of regional commercial transactions, and stepped up the trade in guns and trophy heads."[21]



Opinions differ on the percentage of ceremonial versus commercial (also referred to as "trade," "fake" or "counterfeit") but it has been postulated that between 80 and 90% of *tsantsa* currently in Museum collections were mostly made for commercial or trade purposes. Given the historic realities described earlier, this isn't surprising.



Most were made for trade, in particular for the aforementioned Euro-American museum and private collectors' market. These trade-*tsantsa* were made from both human and non-human skin: "Non-human counterfeit *tsantsa* were often made out of goat or monkey skin."[22] Disturbingly, however, human counterfeit *tsantsa* were frequently sourced from the corpses of unclaimed hospital dead or bodies fraudulently obtained from morgues.[23]

Research using IRR, CT and microscopic hair analysis of 65 *tsantsa* from UK and US museums by Houlton and Wilkinson (2016) implied that only 9% could clearly be established to have been ceremonial, 56% were identified as made for trade (commercial); the remaining 35% were ambiguous and could not be classified. The authors outline that their research into SAAWC (Shuar, Achuar, Awajún/Aguaruna, Wampís/Huambisa and Candoshi-Shapra) *tsantsa* would help museums in their decision-making around returning *tsantsa* "to their cultural home. Ceremonial *tsantsa* were likely of SAAWC persons," they suggest "and thus should be returned to one of the SAAWC authorities. Commercial heads could have originated from anywhere across South and Middle America, potentially complicating their repatriation."[24]

More recent research into the genetic characterisation of a collection of *tsantsas* from Ecuadorian museums, by researchers from USFQ and the University of Oxford, showed that ceremonial *tsantsas* tend to show remarkable similarities. In this research, the *tsantsas* of three different museum collections, with very different provenance,

showed all were human with 13 males and one female represented. A total of seven mtDNA haplogroups were found using the mtDNA EMPOP database showing a predominance of the Amerindian mtDNA haplogroups B, C and D.[25]

Interestingly many *tsantsas* were not made from humans but from sloths and monkeys, and this was increasingly so as European demand for *tsantsa* grew. Although it is sometimes claimed all animal *tsantsas* are "counterfeit," Houlton[26] indicates that accounts of shrinking heads – other than human – include animals such as sloth, jaguars, condors and monkeys and that "these were often revenge killings because the animal had harmed a tribal member (Karsten 1935; Stirling 1938)."[27] In that sense, it is pertinent to note that given these particular *tsantsa* would have been made with similar thought processes in mind of protecting against avenging souls, we should reconsider narratives that qualify animal *tsantsa* as non-ceremonial. "Uyush" or sloths are considered sacred by Shuar communities. The Shuar Documentation Project documents a Shuar story told by Uwijint, where "Unup," an elder who performs *tsantsa* ceremonies, is transformed into an "uyush" or sloth after he became intoxicated with tobacco. The story also explains the origin of the ceremony of *tsantsa*, head-shrinking and why the shuar kill "uyush" to perform "*tsantsa*."[28] As sloths aren't likely to kill animals, it is unlikely these would be considered revenge killings, and might suggest the more commemorative functions as described by Taylor[29] and by present-day Shuar.[30]



## Proyecto *Tsantsa*



In 2017, we started working on a partnership project called "Proyecto *Tsantsa*," led by Maria Patricia Ordoñez and Consuelo Fernandez Salvador, at the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador (USFQ). The project brings together four institutions: The USFQ, the Museo Pumapungo (Tamara Landivar), the Pitt Rivers Museum (Laura Van Broekhoven) and the Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC) sede Quito (Maria Patricia Ordoñez) by means of their Laboratorio de Quimica. USFQ and INPC approached the Federación Interprovincial de Centros Shuar (FICSH) and the Federación Shuar de Zamora (FESHZ) and has organised multiple conversations with Shuar and Achuar delegates. The USFQ acts as coordinator for the project and provides the project with capacity for CT scanning and ancient DNA analysis; the INPC allowed for DNA, isotope and alkaloid testing of samples to be analysed; both museums provide access to the collections and discussions regarding their display and/or preservation methodologies and PRM have reached out to other museums in Europe and elsewhere to identify where Shuar collections are kept so that we can make a mapping for Shuar federations of which Museums they might want to engage with in the future.

The first meetings took place in Quito in April and August 2017, followed by a two-day workshop in Cuenca on 22 and 23 March 2018, bringing together all partners, with video conferencing participation from the Pitt Rivers Museum. Our aim was to discuss political aspects of Shuar heritage, sensitivities around presence and absence of *tsantsa* and other cultural objects from Shuar-led museums currently being established on Shuar land and the sensitivities, limitations and possibilities of cultural

care and representation versus current museum displays. Visits to the United Kingdom were planned for the academic year of 2019–2020 but fell through due to the global pandemic. USFQ and INPC held multiple workshops and individual consultations with members of the FICSH and of the FESHZ throughout 2021 and 2022. In September 2020 and March 2022, the Pitt Rivers Museum held consultations with Jefferson Acacho and Maria Patricia Ordoñez.

With partners in Quito, we decided to ensure we were bringing together a multidisciplinary team of archaeologists, anthropologists, museum professionals and biologists with delegates of the Ecuadorian Shuar community to answer a number of key questions of relevance to the different partners in the project. On the one hand, we wanted to better understand the *tsantsas*' provenance, individual histories, and assigned significance and representation in museum collections.

> Using a mix of CT scanning, DNA analysis and further isotope and alkaloid testing, the project has tried to answer questions with regards to the *tsantsas* 'authenticity' or 'counterfeit, fake or replica-making' and whether we might identify possible links to specific living Shuar or Achuar peoples. DNA can identify if remains are of human or animal origin; and give an indication of gender, and microsatellite demographic testing can help give an indication whether the remains are of Shuar origin. CT scans help identify constructive elements in more detail, including techniques used to insert ropes, leather-making processes, cutting of the neck and treatment of the eyes. Isotope and alkaloid analysis of hair samples can provide information on migration and diet, in order to demographically locate within a specific geographical location.[31]



Several questions are key to the project participants: on the one hand, questions that relate to what future care would look like with regards to the *tsantsa*; whether they might need to be returned to the community or, if they were to be on display, who should be involved in the curatorial process. And, given the fact that – as far as we know – over half of the *tsantsa* in Museum collections, are said to be "counterfeit" and/or were made for commercial profit-making, and not originally by Shuar and/or from Shuar or Achuar ancestors, the project wanted to find ways to better identify which *tsantsa* were Shuar-made, and which not.

## How and Why Were *Tsantsa* Made?

Most accounts that refer to *tsantsa* making, were written by foreigners who did not speak Shuar while the Shuar cosmovision is complex and intricate and can be easily misinterpreted. It has been widely reported by researchers that the heads were taken by and from male members of the Shuar and Achuar and made into *tsantsas* as part of ceremonial processing of heads taken from enemies slain in combat.[32] They reportedly were done away with once the ceremonies had been performed.

Thus, the predominant narrative in scholarly literature describes that *tsantas* were made to acquire the power of a man's soul, not the physical head. There have, however, recently been some discussion among contemporary Shuar groups, who

remember *tsantsas* were also made from clan leaders that died from natural causes as part of a process to commemorate and celebrate important individuals, both men and women. In an interview with the Guardian's journalist David Batty, Jefferson Acacho, a leader of the Shuar federation in Zamora, Ecuador who is working with USFQ and Pitt Rivers Museum, said the authentic *tsantsas*

> were not made from the heads of random enemies but clan leaders, some of whom died from natural causes. The objects were believed to contain the soul of the dead man, whose power could be positively harnessed for the community. When a leader died it was a way to show respect for them. The lips and eyes were sewn together because it was thought that a head could still see and eat after death, which would give it more power. This would prevent them from gaining more power and causing harm.[33]

Current day Shuar, in fact, consider ceremonial *tsantsas* as objects imbued with power and hold them in great respect but the practice of making *tsantsas* is no longer practiced today (and hasn't been for over half a century).

Although there remains a lack of clarity regarding the belief systems associated with the *tsantsa* making, some elements of Shuar cosmovision are key to understanding what the deeper epistemological and ontological concepts are that are associated with *tsantsa*-making. Harner[34] describes how according to the Shuar the "true determinants of life and death are normally invisible forces which can be seen […] only with the aid of hallucinogenic drugs." Shuar conceptualisations of reality therefore stand diametrically opposite as our waking life is explicitly viewed as "false" or "a lie" and reality only reveals itself in dreams or drug-induced visions and the use of hallucinogens is introduced very early on in life to ensure essential contact with the supernatural.



## Contextualising *Tsantsa*?

In other Museums, Shuar and Ashuar representatives on different occasions have argued either for the return, the contextualisation, or the removal from display of the *tsantsa*.[35] PRM lecturer curator, Professor Laura Peers had addressed the discussion in a brief, insightful publication on sale in the Museum Store. "With the human heads that have been shrunk to make *tsantsas*," she argued:

> either we are looking at the faces of murdered people who have had their souls stolen from them – in case of the ritual *tsantsas*, or we are looking at the faces of people who were too poor to prevent their bodies being used like this after their death – in the case of those produced solely for trade.[36]

Having described more of the ontological and epistemological context of Shuar *tsantsa* making socio-political functioning and understanding of their value in Shuar society, one wonders what merit the exhibiting of *tsantsas* in a university museum of

anthropology and world archaeology like the Pitt Rivers Museum, could have and what narratives we might want to present and how?

Interviews with visitors looking at the display carried out in 2003, revealed that many people thought of the display as gruesome, referring to the *tsantsa* (and or their Shuar makers) as "primitive," referring to them with words like "bizarre," "gruesome," "barbaric" and "freak show."[37] Our curation of the *tsantsas* as part of a practice of headhunting and treating dead enemies (the case title), instead of achieving a deeper understanding of Shuar society or the practices of *tsantsa* making, were being interpreted as a metaphor for "savage" and/or "primitive" behaviour.

In 2011, then-curator Professor Laura Peers, argued Shuar and Ashuar had on several occasions indicated that they did not want to be continued to be represented through these "powerful visual anchors for stereotyping"[38] nonetheless the *tsantsa* continued on display and under review (nominally) for nearly another decade.

In the March 2018 Cuenca workshops Shuar delegates indicated how they would want to be included in the way their cultural practices were represented in museums, and in the decision making around any returns of *tsantsa*.

Later conversations with Jefferson Acacho in 2020 and 2022 confirmed this:

> As Shuar, we don't have anything against the world knowing our world, and for museums to have our souvenirs and talk about our cosmovision, our ways of living here. What we ask is that museums involve us Shuar so that it can be us who tell the stories and we can show the world all our instruments and aspects of our attire, the *tsantsas*. What would be better for a museum than a Shuar to comment on all this, right? How we made *tsantsa*, how we worked them and how we live, what our way of seeing the world is. Who better than a Shuar who has lived experience, who has felt our world and knows our history from living it, telling the stories of our ancestors and sharing it with the world?[39]



He continues:

> Museums like to accumulate all this knowledge, and that is wonderful, but at times the information that was gathered was distorted through history. We are like living books, our grandparents who tell us how they have lived and live, they have passed all this knowledge to us, we now have to share that knowledge at a global level, through Museums. So, this work is what we would want to articulate with Museums how we will do this so we can tell our histories, our ways of living, our way of belonging.[40]

As Larson puts it:

> The Shuar have become known to the outside world as those South American head-hunters, as if the identity of the Pitt Rivers Museum has merged with its collections of shrunken heads, that is nothing compared to the way in which an entire people have been typecast by museums displays like these.[41]

As Jefferson explained in our WhatsApp conversations in September 2020:

> We would like to have our own museum where we can represent ourselves who we are showcasing all aspects of our way of being, including music and dance, food and also the history of the *tsantsas*, but one that tells a fuller story. Now we have tourist who come here and we do not have our own museum, they come with ideas that we are murderers; that we are violent. The Shuar aren't bad people. We want people to come here and learn through our stories that we tell about ourselves. A place where our grandparents can teach our children, and tourists can understand our world in a respectful way, not how it is being told now, as if we were murderers. Making *tsantsas* was a sacred practice. Now, foreigners will come here and they say: we've been told you guys chopped of peoples' heads, didn't matter who they were, you were those murderers.[42]

Shuar delegates also indicate they would like to be more involved in aspects of representation and preservation:

> We understand that in your Museums you display the *tsantsas* behind glass in cases, we would never do that. We would need to undertake a spiritual ritual so that its soul, *tsantsas* are spirits, gives us the permission for people to get to know it. Those are details that will enrich museums. We ask permission of the spirits, with our own tools, in our own way of opening up and conversing with them.[43]



## Critical Changes in the Museum

Late August 2020, I contacted Martin to report we had taken all human remains off display Beginning of July 2020, the decision was taken to remove the *tsantsa* from public display and I indicated that now, I would like to work with him on a story to report back on this ahead of the reopening of the Museum in September. Martin indicated he continued interested only in writing exclusively about the *tsantsa*; eventually, I worked with David Batty, at the Guardian, to ensure the wider story got into the world.

As in 2019, after an initial flurry of interviews with the press, subsequent opinion pieces started coming in: following opinion pieces in the *Daily Mail,* the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and a few particularly outraged pieces in the *Oxford Mail*, hundreds of people felt compelled to send in their comments. This time, I also received dozens of letters, and our social media saw hundreds of comments, and thousands of reactions. Some were very angry; a couple I had to report as Hate Crimes to Thames Valley Police, those expressed that I should be lynched, others were the archetypical cuttings from papers, and capital-letter threats, or angry tweets or Facebook posts with racist or misogynistic language or images. Forty per cent of the letters concluded we were "erasing history"; 10% disputed that racism played any part in the removed displays; 15% felt we were "pandering to political correctness"; 10% were echoing the *Times*

article saying we were patronising our audience who should be left to make up their own minds. A few lamented we had "stolen my youth" or that we had "removed the magic or highlights" of the collections. Others felt that removing 120 human remains meant we should take all other 55,000 objects off display too. Several letters made demands to "reinstate," and it was suggested that we should "learn from history" and not hide the "ugly truths." Over half threatened they would never come back; some saying they had been generous donors (none of their names were in fact known in our systems and no donations had been received under their names).

To better understand these reactions, we commenced a programme of audience research to on the one hand understand how the changes were received by audiences online, and on the other to understand how the new installations were understood by our on-site audiences. Online research by Goldsmith's graduate student Angela Billings and by Leiden University graduate student Sterre Houtzager showed how a small minority (8%) of our online audience had loudly voiced their anger, while the overwhelming majority of people (92%) showed support. Social network analysis, showed that in 2019 the reactions posted in response to the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* articles were overwhelmingly negative; while in 2020, the picture was more nuanced: with Facebook comments being the most aggressively negative but reactions overwhelmingly positive[44]; Instagram representing a more nuanced picture[45] and Twitter mostly supportive and positively engaging.[46]



The reactions in the press and the letters I received, almost exclusively written by UK- or US-based males, also showed it was not appreciated by many commenters that we were listening to Indigenous voices, over more local and national-felt entitlements, confirming impressions of white supremacy being at play here; there was also some misogyny at play: it was not appreciated that a woman, and one considered a foreigner, was leading these changes.



Today, instead of human remains, visitors find text panels that engage with the fact that the way human remains ended up in our collections is deeply problematic, how our disciplines enabled racist practices rooted in socio-evolutionism, and how the measuring of skulls and bones provided a scientific aura to theories that upheld racist and sexist views in the entitlement of white people to objectify, own and abuse black, brown and female bodies for labour, learning, research or entertainment. We also speak about how in 1994, Shuar delegates working with the National Museum of American Indian had already indicated they did not want their ancestors to be put on display, and how we are now working with communities to find ways forward and carve out pathways that are steered by and co-curated with Indigenous peoples.

The outcome of the different analyses was fascinating, troubling and strangely hopeful at the same time. Angela's analysis showed that the letters we received and the comments on Facebook were nearly all negative. Often formulated as sharp accusations, they presented a grim and often racist reading of what we had decided. Letters and comments expressed severe disappointment, mixed with threats, accusations and intimidations, often misogynistic; the letters were almost exclusively written by males with 85% from England (mostly South-East and Oxfordshire) and about 10% from the United States. It also was clear that for the social media part of the work, the overwhelming majority (92%) expressed strong agreement, of being pleased, relieved

but those reactions came mostly in likes and hearts and emojis. Because the 8% had, however, posted comments, and the way social media is mostly "read" is very much scrolling through comments Angela concluded that, in this particular case, it seemed important we would ensure we would also hear the quieter voices as those were the voices I wasn't seeing, or hearing.[47]

Laia Anquix' on-site audience research, showed it was the particular wording that we chose to argue the changes that offended the 25% that was not pleased with their visit: the fact that we owed up to our curation being an enabler of racisms and stereotypes and the open acknowledgment of the fact of our Museum and Universities coloniality.[48]

Many of the angry reactions we received underlined that that is very much a sentiment that still persists among a part of the UK audience in particular and people calling the *tsantsa* "disgusting" "ugly" and saying that we should not hide the worse of humanity only underlined again that UK audiences were completely missing the ceremonial significance of the *tsantsa* and lacked ontological and epistemological frameworks and the basic empathy to really understand and one of the questions we need to investigate is if any curation, however careful, can compensate for that?

Apart from this critical (sometimes hurtful) feedback, there was also much feedback reflecting admiration for the steps that we have taken. The explicit support from the public in general, and also the scholarly community and Indigenous communities in particular, has been heartening and overwhelming at times bringing us important partnerships with affected descendant communities in different parts of the world.



## Next Steps

As outlined above the Proyecto tsantsa continues and after a COVID-forced break, activities both in Oxford and Ecuador have intensified. Thanks to the support of PRM curatorial assistant Nicholas Crowe, and Leiden University intern Sterre Houtzager (2022), we were able to locate over 172 *tsantsas* (over 120 of which in the United Kingdom) in museum collections worldwide and have established contact with collection managers of the largest who seem keen to work with Shuar delegates towards finding the best ways forward for care and potentially the return of tsantsa, if requested, in future years.

At the March 2022 Zoom workshop, two of the necessary next steps identified were that we needed to do detailed CT scanning of the PRM *tsantsa*; and ideally do ancient DNA research on the *tsantsa* to find more clarity regarding which *tsantsa* were counterfeit and which were ceremonial. In August 2022, ancient DNA samples were taken of the PRM *tsantsa* and are now awaiting analysis at the USFQ in Ecuador. In September 2022, working with Dr Fiona Brock at the Cranfield University Forensic Institute and PRM Head of Conservation, Jeremy Uden, we were able to do CT scanning of three of the human *tsantsa* currently kept in the PRM collections (1874.115.2; 1936.53.42 and 1936.53.43). The XT H 225 scanner allowed for detailed capture and measurement of internal components and identification of making features and exceptional high X-ray and CT imaging resolutions. The analysis of the CT scans and ancient DNA analysis will take place in the next year in Oxford and Ecuador.

As part of the Proyecto Tsantsa, Dr Maria Patricia Ordoñez (USFQ), myself and my ornithologist PhD student Rosa Dyer travelled to Quito, Cuenca, Sucúa, Paquixa and Zamora to meet with Shuar delegates of the Federación Interprovincial de Comunidades Shuar and delegates of the Zamora Chinchipe Shuar Federation and with Jefferson Acacho at the end of August 2022 to discuss next phases for the project. Many issues are at play that merit a separate article, including the lack of institutional representation; lack of financing for Shuar-run local museums; the involvement and co-optation by multinational destructive extractive mining companies; are just some of the concerns that were flagged. But, most importantly all stakeholders are committed to continuing work towards finding ways forward. The federations agreed they would like to continue and intensify the work with USFQ, PRM and other partners of the Proyecto Tsantsa. We aim to have a next in person workshop in Ecuador in Spring of 2023 to jointly define the outcomes of the next phase of Proyecto *Tsantsa*, from initial conversations it seems likely repatriation requests will be part of the requested outcomes, which is why the research to identify whether the *tsantsa* currently kept in museums are ceremonial and Shuar made or counterfeit was agreed as a crucial next step; alongside further mapping of collections in Europe, the United States and other possible parts of the world (including Australia, New Zealand and Canada).



## Conclusion



In the case of the *tsantsa*, although critiques in letters, social media and press highlighted the sense of "loss" to publics and academia, in fact more research will be done on this topic now than we have ever done while they were on display. It seems remarkable that, even collections that supposedly are "iconic" or considered very important to the Museum, such as the *tsantsa*, in fact have laid in the Museum's collections for decades with hardly any (internally or externally led) research done on them and close to no important publications. The same has been the case for several other collections, we have recently commenced working on because a request for collaboration or return was received from originating communities (for example, in the past six years this concerns objects of Benin city, Nigeria; Maasai collections, Kenya and Tanzania; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island, Australia; Evenki collections, Russia; objects from Hawaii, United States). Although by some the process of return has been portrayed as one that involves loss, in reality, more often than not, it is either requests for return, or co-curatorial endeavours, that have signified the start of any serious research, including provenance research. Moreover, because the research starts from a request by an originating community and, therefore, the research is set-up collaboratively and jointly, better research questions and more relevant outcomes can be expected leading to deeper insights and understanding, and arguably, research with higher scientific value and certainly more societal impact. One would expect universities and museums to be chomping at the bit to dedicate more resources to this kind of research than to other components of work that have been considered "core" or "business as usual." This is not always the case, and at the Pitt Rivers Museum, we are trying to change that.

With regards to the *tsantsa* and other human remains that were on display, or are still kept at the museum, we are reaching out to communities. The programme of work with regards to the *tsantsa* will continue and we are expanding the network of museums that are to become involved. We are continuing our work with Shuar delegates, and we have reached out to other institutions in the United Kingdom, European Union, United States and Canada, as part of a request by Shuar delegates to map where *tsantsa* are currently being kept. Hopefully this will help create opportunities for other museums to join in a collaborative research project to find ways forwards with Shuar stakeholders towards redress, be it return or different ways of representation and care. Dozens of questions still need answering, some led by questions of the Shuar, others by those in the United Kingdom, Europe or other parts of the world telling stories with the Shuar. This story is particularly complex, as the different entitlements are entangled ad multiple including entitlements to do with possession and display: who is authoring the stories, where are the stories told and to whom; questions need to be answered regarding who made the objects, and whether they were made by Shuar makers, and in that case, what Achuar involvement will be also in case of return; or whether they were made from bodies stolen from morgues, or from different animals, and how and whether that affects the representational aspects of displaying *tsantsa* and/or the need for their return. And those *tsantsas* made from bodies stolen from morgues, what forms of redress are necessary and possible? In the cases where objects were made from animal skin, do other forms of display in Museums become possible or are the stereotypical images implanted in our general audiences' brains, so powerful that any reading of a *tsantsa* will be marred by cognitive dissonance or stereotypical portrayals of "others." Also, what does it say about those commenting in the press, on how they voice their opinions about museums and what their roles are in the future, how do we draw learnings from that with regards to how we communicate in our museums, in our press releases and on our websites?



Some entitlements that were voiced in press, and also in interviews with on-site audience members, were deeply troubling. They show how deeply ingrained coloniality sits in our expectations and experiences and make us ponder whether, given the strangely racialised representations of *tsantsa* in popular culture, it may have become close to impossible to put them on display. Nonetheless, we would like to see whether, working together, we can work towards a mutually agreed co-curated representation of Shuar heritage that helps convey worldviews in their full complexity, nuance and diversity, so that, as Jefferson Acacho argues, Shuar can tell their own stories, from a point of self-determination and as a part of redress.

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