

First forgotten Australians call for return of human remains

Indigenous representatives of communities affected by the theft of skeletal remains by the 1948 American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land have called on the Australian Government to redouble its effort to secure the return of their ancestors from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC.

Representatives of Groote Eylandt, Millingimbi, Yirrkala and Gunbalanya are in Canberra attending an international symposium at the National Museum of Australia on the legacy of the 1948 Expedition. A special Indigenous panel discussion of the symposium was dedicated to the repatriation of these remains. During the session community representatives described the recent repatriation of two-thirds of the remains removed in 1948 and their frustration at the fact that the Smithsonian declined to repatriate any of the crania in the collection.

Thomas Amagula of Groote Eylandt, who last year visited the Smithsonian and facilitated the return of part of his ancestors' remains, described the distress and anger felt by Indigenous people at the refusal of the Institution to release all the remains.

“When I hear about the efforts and money the American Government is spending trying to find and identify the remains of their soldiers who have been lost overseas, I wonder how the Smithsonian Institution can justify its refusal to return all the remains of our ancestors who were taken without our permission. We think this is very arrogant and would ask that this conference supports us in having all our ancestors returned to their country,” Mr Amagula said.

Along with other community representatives, Mr Amagula called for the Rudd Government to negotiate an agreement similar to the 2000 Australian-British repatriation agreement. This agreement provides for increased efforts to facilitate the eventual repatriation of all Indigenous remains stored in UK collections.

Senior ceremony man from Gunbalanya, Kalarriya Jimmy Namarnyilk, told the symposium that it was Aboriginal law that once bones have been properly placed through ceremony they should not be touched and stressed that the bones removed should be returned to country.

Senior Traditional Owners of Western Arnhem Land (where many of the remains were stolen), Jacob Nayinggul and Donald Gumurdul, sent a message to the symposium to help to bring the rest of ‘the old people’ home.

For further information and comment contact Thomas Amagula 0429 05 48 16

Mr Amagula's address to the National Museum of Australia is attached

**Statement by Thomas Amagula of Groote Eylandt to National Museum of Australia
Symposium on the 1948 American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land**

18 November 2009

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the country on which we meet.

Our Anindilyakwa story started when our ancestors' bones were stolen in 1948. Our story about the return of our ancestors' remains IS unfinished, but it started at meetings with FaHCSIA in Darwin and on Groote to talk about repatriation from 2005.

At these meetings we particularly talked about the human remains taken from Groote Eylandt and Gunbalanya and sent to the United States by members of the 1948 expedition. A delegation which included, Joaz Wurramara and I from Groote Eylandt, together with Donald Gumurdul and Alfred Nayinggul from Gunbalanya agreed to travel to Washington DC to bring our ancestors home. This task brought a big responsibility to us.

In July 2008 the Arnhem Land delegates travelled to Washington where we met very helpful staff from the Australian Embassy. They told us that *some* of the remains were waiting for us in the Embassy conference room which was a surprise for us. We were shown the crates which held the remains that had been released by the Smithsonian Institution.

We then had a minute's silence and talked to our ancestors in our *own* language, telling them we were bringing them home.

We asked the Australian Ambassador to support us in returning our ancestors and he was very helpful. He arranged for our delegation to meet with bosses from the Smithsonian Institution in an attempt to convince them to return all the remains, not just the parts of people which they have chose not to keep. I am very sad to report that we were not treated politely and the Smithsonian has refused to return all the remains which belong on the country where they came from.

The day before we left Washington our delegation went to see the remains that we were leaving behind. We talked in our Language telling them that we are coming back to bring them home as soon as we can. We were very sad to leave them behind.

The four of us sat together for the long flight home with the remains we had managed to get back on the same plane. The remains from both communities are very special to us and our ancestors brought us together as family.

It was a wonderful experience, making history bringing our ancestors home after 60 years and at the same time very sad to know that some remained in Washington. There is other material such as diaries and face casks which we believe we have a right to. Families of these ancestors are still alive wanting to rebury them back on the land where they belong.

Steve Webb, a physical anthropologist from Bond University, has had a look at the remains which came back with us. The remains have been mixed up and the records about where the bones have come from are very poor. The Smithsonian told us that there were 13 people, but Webb's report says there were could be a lot more than 13

individuals, perhaps up to 60, which our leaders are not happy about. Because the records are so poor and so many bones are missing, we have not been able to bury them.

When I hear about the efforts and money the American Government is spending trying to find and identify the remains of their soldiers who have been lost overseas, I wonder how the Smithsonian Institution can justify its refusal to return all the remains of our ancestors who were taken without our permission. We think this is very arrogant and would ask that this conference supports us in having all our ancestors returned to their country.

Finally I would like to thank our sister Lori Richardson who works for FaHCSIA and Mr Dennis Richardson, the Ambassador at that time, for supporting the Anindilyakwa and the Kunwinjku people to bring our Ancestors home.

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