

shrunk
HEADS

by Laura Peers

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating displays in the Pitt Rivers Museum is labelled 'Treatment of Dead Enemies'. The case includes a number of shrunken heads, or *tsantsas*, from South America. Each of these is about the size of a large orange. Some are suspended from cords, some have the iridescent wing-covers of beetles as hair decorations. Their mouths and eyes are sewn shut. To visitors today they may appear gruesome, but also compelling. As the curator responsible for the Museum's collections from the Americas, I want to explain why the shrunken heads were made and what they meant in the societies they come from. I also want to discuss the issues that are raised by their exhibition, and some of the questions that museum staff and visitors have asked about the display. The *tsantsas* have much to teach us, about how human beings understand themselves, and about why humans treat each other like this—both within the societies that the *tsantsas* come from and in the societies that display *tsantsas* in museums.



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Left: Close-up view of iridescent beetle wing-covers, used as decoration on hair on *tsantsas*.

PRODUCTION AND USE

The *tsantsas* were made by Shuar and Achuar people of Ecuador and Peru in South America. The motives of the Shuar and Achuar for taking head trophies are quite different from that found in other societies around the world, such as among the Naga of Assam in India and among the Ilongot in the Philippines, both of whom took heads as war trophies. Shuar and Achuar people did not display shrunken heads publicly, in the way that trophy heads in other societies around the world have been. Instead, Shuar and Achuar people wanted the power of the souls they believed were inside the heads.

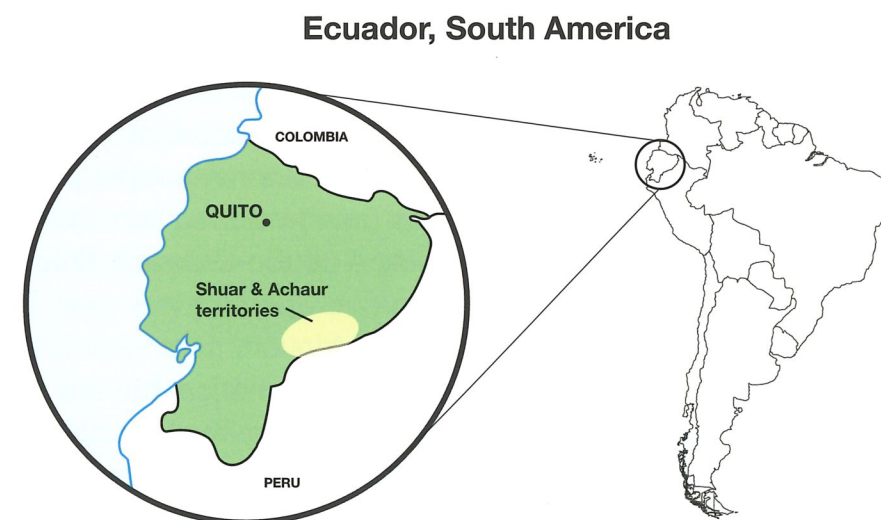
Historically, Shuar and Achuar people lived in small villages or extended families. They lived by hunting, gardening, and raising livestock, supplemented by fishing and gathering. Men often married more than one wife, and households usually included married daughters and their families. They had mestizo (mixed Native and European) and other tribal peoples as trade partners. Although their ways of life were identical, Shuar and Achuar maintained hostile relations with each other. They raided and took heads from each other frequently; they did not take heads from other groups, nor did they make *tsantsas* from women's heads. Heads were taken to get the powers located within them to aid the killer's group. It was not the physical head that people wanted; it was the power of a man's soul that was desired.

Shuar and Achuar people believed that men have several different souls. One, the *arutam*, was acquired through dreaming, and acquiring this soul was the basis of men's power. Acquiring an *arutam* made a man want to kill, and they formed war parties to raid and take heads. A second kind of soul, the *muiskak*, comes into existence when a man who has an *arutam* soul is killed; it is his avenging soul. After the killing and taking of a head on a raid, therefore, rituals were held to prevent the *muiskak* from avenging the death, to contain the *muiskak* within the head trophy, and to harness its power. The head-shrinking process itself was thought to force the *muiskak* to enter the head, and the skin was rubbed with charcoal so that the *muiskak* could not see out and cause harm to the trophy-taker. The lips were also pinned together, and later sewn, to prevent the *muiskak* from escaping.

The process of creating the shrunken head involved peeling the skin and hair off the skull, which was thrown away. Only the skin and hair were kept. This was soaked in hot water briefly, and then hot sand was poured inside the skin cavity. The hot sand treatment was repeated several times, and the facial features were reshaped after each stage.

When a war party returned home with a *tsantsa*, three ritual feasts were held. These were intended to control the captured soul, and to transfer its power to female relatives of the head-taker. It was thought that this power helped women in gardening and raising animals, so that they could produce more food for the family. The third and final *tsantsa* feast might be held a year or more after the head was taken, so as to give the family enough time to raise pigs and crops for the occasion, which involved hundreds of people.

During the final ritual, the *tsantsa* was instructed about the way of life of its captor's group and about their territory. It was also addressed as if it was a child being born to the group. After this, the *muiskak* soul was ritually expelled from the head. From this point in the ritual process, the heads themselves had little value within Shuar or Achuar society. They were not believed to be powerful after the ritual process ended and were thus often sold to a trading partner.



Sketch map of South America showing the location of the Shuar and Achuar peoples.

COLLECTION AND ACQUISITION BY MUSEUMS

Headhunting increased greatly in the late nineteenth century. This was in response to changing trade in the region, which left the Shuar with very few items that were considered valuable by their trading partners. For instance, they had raised and traded pigs, but when their trading partners also began to raise pigs these became less valuable as trade items. *Tsantsas* were left as one of the few valuables to trade for spear heads and guns.

As shrunken heads became more valuable, they began to be produced just for trade and not for ritual at all. As early as 1895, heads of women and children were taken in a raid. Since women and children were not believed to have powerful souls, their heads could not be used in *tsantsa* rituals, which means that these heads were taken specifically for trade. Heads also began to be taken from settlers and mestizos living on the borders of Shuar/Achuar territory.

The manufacture of shrunken heads for the tourist trade was illegal in Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil, but continued because it was profitable. American, British, and European colonial officials and tourists often purchased shrunken heads, and many of these ended up in museums around the world. Many of these were in fact fakes, made from the heads of goats and dogs, but some were made from human heads acquired from morgues and poorhouses.

The Pitt Rivers Museum collection includes three heads that were probably made for sale. In one of these, pages of a newspaper printed in 1936 in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, was found wadded into the crown of the head, where in a real *tsantsa*, kapok, a cotton-like plant fibre, would have been used.

Fake *tsantsas* are still available for sale in South America, but the Shuar and Achuar stopped making ritual *tsantsas* by the late 1960s. Pressure from missionaries, the threat of army intervention by national governments, and the passing of generations has meant that people are no longer avenging deaths, and no longer take heads to acquire power.

THE TSANTSAS IN THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

The shrunken heads in the Pitt Rivers Museum were acquired from six different collectors between 1884 and 1936. General Pitt-Rivers, the donor of the Museum's founding collection, contributed one human head; he also donated a shrunken sloth head that he had purchased. Unfortunately, we know nothing further about the origins of either of these heads. William Bragge, an engineer who worked in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires in the 1850s (and who later gave several collections to museums and became a fellow of the Anthropological Society), donated one shrunken human head. An otherwise unknown 'Mrs Sanders' gave the Museum another, about whose origins we unfortunately know nothing.

In the 1920s Major Ronald H. Thomas donated to the Museum a large collection that he had acquired in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. Included in his collection were a shrunken sloth head, two shrunken monkey heads, and three shrunken human heads; museum staff later came to believe that all three shrunken human heads in this collection were not ritual *tsantsas*, but produced for sale (see Turner 1944). William Loat, a naturalist who visited the Andes in 1927, also bequeathed a shrunken human head in 1932, but we do not know how he acquired it. This kind of frustratingly incomplete information is not uncommon for many objects in museums around the world.

Overall, therefore, there is no documentation about how exactly the shrunken heads in the Pitt Rivers Museum were acquired. Given the constant trade in such material to Europeans since at least the nineteenth century, however, they might well have been purchased or traded in places like Quito and other cities in Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. They were very probably acquired by Europeans as curios, as souvenirs of what were then thought to be 'primitive' or 'savage' peoples.

The *tsantsas* are displayed in the 'Treatment of Dead Enemies' case in the court of the Museum. This case is near another display on 'Treatment of the Dead', in other words the beloved dead, which includes a Catholic relic and a Scottish grave marker. The 'Treatment of Dead Enemies' case

examines what human societies around the world do with the bodies of dead enemies. The case includes head trophies from Nagaland, scalps from North American Indian tribal warfare, and carved boards from New Guinea on which skulls were hung.

According to the museum's front-of-house staff, 'Where are the shrunken heads?' is the most frequent question that visitors ask. The display inspired a set for a scene in a Harry Potter movie and served as the anchor for an episode of the *Lewis* television detective series. Leading artists regularly ask to photograph and draw them. They are iconic objects that are often associated by the public and the media with the essence of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Even in the Pitt Rivers Museum, however, displays do not remain the same forever. Museum staff have redisplayed the *tsantsas* several times over the years. We know that the heads have been on display in this case since before 1944, when G. E. S. Turner wrote that a 'fake' *tsantsa* 'has now been placed on exhibition alongside the genuine *tsantsas*, with a label drawing attention to the features which mark it as false' (see Turner 1944). *The tsantsas* were examined carefully around that time, as the discovery of the newspaper inside one of the heads shows.

By the time the case was partially redisplayed in 2003, the old typewritten labels had faded badly, so they were replaced with new texts emphasising the cultural meanings of the heads. To explain them within the theme of the 'Treatment of Dead Enemies', an illustration was added that shows the heads of Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators displayed on pikes in London following their execution in 1605.

Staff at the Museum are considering other ways of displaying the shrunken heads in the long term, and are also considering whether it is appropriate to continue to display them all. I want to explain why we are having these discussions, and what we are thinking of doing to the display.

ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION

Museums have faced criticism from indigenous communities for not representing them in a balanced way, and for not allowing community members to speak for themselves or be involved in the creation of museum displays. Tribal peoples have been especially concerned that they have been portrayed in museum displays as 'primitive' and their societies as inferior to Western societies. At the same time, British society has become more sensitive to displays of human remains, feeling that they now need to be displayed carefully. Museums are also concerned about ethical issues surrounding the acquisition of objects in their collections, and sometimes face repatriation claims from peoples (often known as source communities) who feel that objects were acquired unethically or who need the objects back in their communities.

The Pitt Rivers Museum knows of no ethical problems in the way that the *tsantsas* in its collection were acquired, nor has the museum ever had a repatriation request for them. Staff recognise that the heads require sensitive treatment, however, because these are human remains as well as artefacts. They are also the remains of tribal peoples from South America, displayed in a British museum. Both of these factors are important when we consider how, and even if, shrunken heads should be displayed.

In recent years, several groups have been appointed by the British government to consider human remains. These have included the Retained Organs Commission—which examined issues surrounding medical specimens in England, the Church Archaeology Human Remains Working Group—which focused on what happens to excavated Christian burials in England, and the Working Group on Human Remains—which focused on overseas indigenous remains dating from AD1500 to 1948. Human remains have also been returned to indigenous communities from many British institutions, including the University of Oxford, which has returned Australian Aboriginal remains from the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Treatment of Dead Enemies



Tsantsas - Shrunken Hea

These shrunken heads, or tsantsas, are from the area of the Himalayas. They were made by removing the skin and leaving the brain and other internal organs. The heads were then dried and preserved. They were used as trophies and were also used in religious ceremonies.

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View of the 'Treatment of Dead Enemies' case in the Museum, 2011.

The government's *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* (DCMS 2005) recommends that: 'Human remains should be displayed only if the museum believes that it makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made equally effectively in another way. Displays should always be accompanied by sufficient explanatory material.' While some people feel that it is disrespectful to display any human remains in public contexts such as museums, others feel that museums have a duty to tell the stories of the dead.

Melanie Giles, an archaeologist who has worked with bog bodies found in Britain, states that 'the violence so often encountered in bog deaths, strengthens...an obligation to reveal what happened in the past...to tell the story of the one who was beaten, brutalised and hidden' (Giles 2006: 8–9). She also suggests that human remains offer an opportunity to explain very different societies, 'so that the decisions they made do not strike us as alien, exotic or barbaric, but rational, knowledgeable and meaningful, within a particular world-view' (ibid.: 9). This has also been true for such exhibitions as *London Bodies: Changing Shapes from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* at the Museum of London (1998–9), which helped the public to understand historic remains found in London, including plague victims, and what these peoples' lives and deaths had been like. There is a great deal we can learn from human remains, both socially and medically.

At the same time, people from many indigenous societies have objected to the display of human remains in Western museums. This has largely been on the grounds that human remains from their societies were often acquired by museums or third parties under conditions of unequal power during colonial times and against the will of community members. Human remains have also been used in the past as evidence for theories suggesting that Western societies are superior to indigenous societies. Such theories were used to support colonial rule, and thus contributed to the suppression of indigenous cultures. Many indigenous groups also argue that human remains are ancestors rather than specimens, and that from this perspective it is inappropriate and disrespectful to exhibit them for public viewing.

Displaying shrunken heads in the context of *tsantsa* rituals was not considered disrespectful by Shuar and Achuar people historically. Displaying them in museums today for audiences that are mostly British raises several issues that we need to consider. First, there is an ethical issue. Some shrunken heads were not produced for ritual purposes; they were made for sale, and it has been suggested that they were made from the unclaimed bodies of the poor found in morgues and hospitals in some South American countries. It could be argued that this raises the same ethical problems as are raised by the acquisition of organs for donation, or bodies for plastination, by affluent Western peoples from poor non-Western peoples: in the case of trade *tsantsas*, human remains have been purchased (or stolen) and processed to produce souvenirs made for sale.

With the human heads that have been shrunk to make *tsantsas*, either we are looking at the faces of murdered people who have had their souls stolen from them—in the case of 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. We need to consider whether it is appropriate to display such remains, and if so, how to do so respectfully.

Secondly, there is an issue with what shrunken heads mean to museum visitors. Interviews with visitors looking at the display of shrunken heads, carried out in 2003 by Peter Gordon, one of the Museum's graduate students, revealed that many people think of these objects as exotic and 'primitive'. Several visitors expressed morbid fascination, using words like 'bizarre', 'gruesome', and 'barbaric'. Several people thought the heads represented a stage in human development and in the development of ethics, which brings into play the idea that some societies are 'more advanced' than others. This is a completely false idea, and one that the Museum does not wish to support.

For one visitor, the 'Treatment of Dead Enemies' case had, as he said, 'a freak show element'. The freak show, in which physically different people were displayed to the public for entertainment, is a problematic association for a museum display. Historically, anthropology was

implicated with this kind of viewing through its association with the displays of indigenous people at World's Fairs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which physical and cultural differences from the visitors were emphasised. Headhunters from the Philippines, for instance, were displayed at the St Louis World's Fair in 1904 (Vaughan 1996). Headhunting has also become a metaphor for savage, 'primitive' behaviour. How much of this sort of thinking comes to the surface when people look at the shrunken heads? Is that how people see them? And if that is the case, how does the Museum create a respectful and educational display?

And thirdly, we need to consider what Shuar and Achuar people think about *tsantsas* today. Now that Shuar and Achuar people are becoming active players on the national and international political stage in order to safeguard their lands and rights, *tsantsas* have become powerful in a new sense as they are such powerful visual anchors for stereotyping. To most Western people, however, Shuar and Achuar people are known only as the people who shrank heads; this is not empowering.

In 2003, anthropologist Steven Rubenstein took some Shuar friends living in New York to see the *tsantsas* at the American Museum of Natural History and asked them what they thought about the display (Rubenstein 2004). Some felt that shrunken heads should never be exhibited and that they should be stored away from other objects. The *tsantsas*, they explained, are sacred objects requiring special handling and prayer. Others were content for the heads to remain on display, but were concerned that exhibitions of shrunken heads without other information about Shuar culture perpetuated a stereotype about them that is affecting the way they are perceived today. They said that they would like displays to include material showing how colonisation and missionisation have affected their culture, to show how Western colonisation succeeded in devaluing what was theirs and imposing foreign cultural values.

FUTURE PLANS

In thinking about how to display the *tsantsas*, then, we need to bear in mind their historic cultural meanings, the fact that some were produced just for trade, the increasing desire by the government and museums to treat human remains with respect, the many meanings of shrunken heads to the public, and how Shuar and Achuar people today feel about them.

The 'Treatment of Dead Enemies' case highlights many of the areas that have emerged recently as sensitive and requiring careful attention within museums. We want the materials in this case, like all the objects on display, to teach, to provoke thought, and to promote public engagement. We hope that they inspire wonder, as well as thought about the nature of human societies.

We also have a duty to respect professional and legal obligations, as well as to respect members of indigenous communities. Over the next few years, museum staff will continue to think about how to display the shrunken heads and how to provide more information about them and about Shuar and Achuar culture more broadly. This booklet is part of that process.

We plan to produce a leaflet for visitors with a map of all the Shuar/Achuar material culture on display in the Museum, together with more information about Shuar/Achuar culture more generally. And as well as showing the *tsantsas* as part of Shuar and Achuar culture more broadly, we need to find ways of presenting them as products of Europeans' desire for exotic souvenirs, and of a global trade system that valued shrunken human heads as trade items.

One other issue we are thinking about is whether we should allow photographs of the shrunken heads to appear in the media. The Museum often receives requests for photographs, but we find that people only want to use the images because of the stereotypes associated with shrunken heads: they want to use these stereotypes of exoticism

and gruesomeness to 'hook' readers into reading a story or buying a newspaper. This is disrespectful to Shuar and Achuar people. We have never received a request for an image of the shrunken heads for the purpose of challenging stereotypes. As a result, we are currently refusing requests from the media for images of the heads, though we consider each one carefully.

In addition, we need to change the way in which the *tsantsas* are displayed to support them physically in a better way. At present, several are suspended by a cord, which places great stress on certain parts of the head; we need to make new mounts for them. As we do this redisplay work, we will remove the 'fake' *tsantsas* that were produced from the bodies of the poor, such as the one with the Quito newspaper inside it, because it is not appropriate to display these. The ritual *tsantsas*, however, and the shrunken animal heads, will remain on display to teach the Museum's visitors about aspects of Shuar and Achuar culture.

We will also be placing on the side of the case where the shrunken heads are exhibited another copy of the illustration of the displayed heads of Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators. We hope that by doing this, we will challenge visitors to think about how their own societies deal with the bodies of enemies. We also hope to find other ways of engaging with visitors about these objects and encourage you to make suggestions as to how this might be done.

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