SUGGESTED £2 DONATION

Pitt Rivers Museum
Anthropology and World Archaeology

The Pitt Rivers Museum is...

The Pitt Rivers Museum is...

... making critical changes to displays as part of the decolonisation process

When we reopened our doors to the public on 22 September 2020, we made changes to some of the Museum's more contentious displays. These changes are part of a comprehensive programme of work to deeply engage with the Museum's colonial legacy. Overall, this is one of the most pioneering approaches to decolonisation at a museum in the UK.

The Pitt Rivers is one of the best-known museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology in the world, and its collection of more than 500,000 items, acquired over more than 130 years, reflects an incredible breadth of culture. Objects range from musical instruments, weapons, masks, textiles, jewellery and tools, and cover all periods of human existence.

However, the history of the Museum is closely tied to British Imperial practices of collection and classification of objects from across the world.

During 2017–2020 a comprehensive internal review of displays was done from an ethical and conservation perspective. Displays with problematic case labels using derogatory language, or reinforcing negative stereotypes were identified as requiring urgent attention. Consequently, as a first 'intervention' additional information to displays were installed. A new introductory case offers insights into the way the Museum formed its collections and how it relates to its legacy today. The important role women played in the formation of the collection is also highlighted in nearby displays.

Throughout the Museum we have installed new interpretation graphics that offer more comprehensive readings and provide visitors with tools to analyse the displays. Corresponding films and podcasts, accessible through QR codes, bring the displays to life with more engaging, moving and multi-faceted stories.

Where the Shuar tsantsas were displayed, in a case called 'Treatment of Dead Enemies', we have installed graphics and text that explain in more detail how these human remains were brought into the Museum and the reasons why they were taken off display are outlined as well as the Museum's current engagement with the 2800 human remains it stewards.

This booklet accompanies the content of the new displays at the Museum, with further information available online:

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/critical-changes

The Pitt Rivers Museum is...

... a space of cultural representation

In a museum representation matters; as you explore the Pitt Rivers think about the power dynamics and ask yourself four simple questions:

Who is being seen?
Who has the power to see?
Who is being represented?
Who represents?

... not a neutral space

The history of the Pitt Rivers Museum is tied to British imperial expansion and the colonial mandate to collect and classify objects from all over the world. The processes of colonial 'collecting' were often inequitable and even violent towards those peoples being colonised.

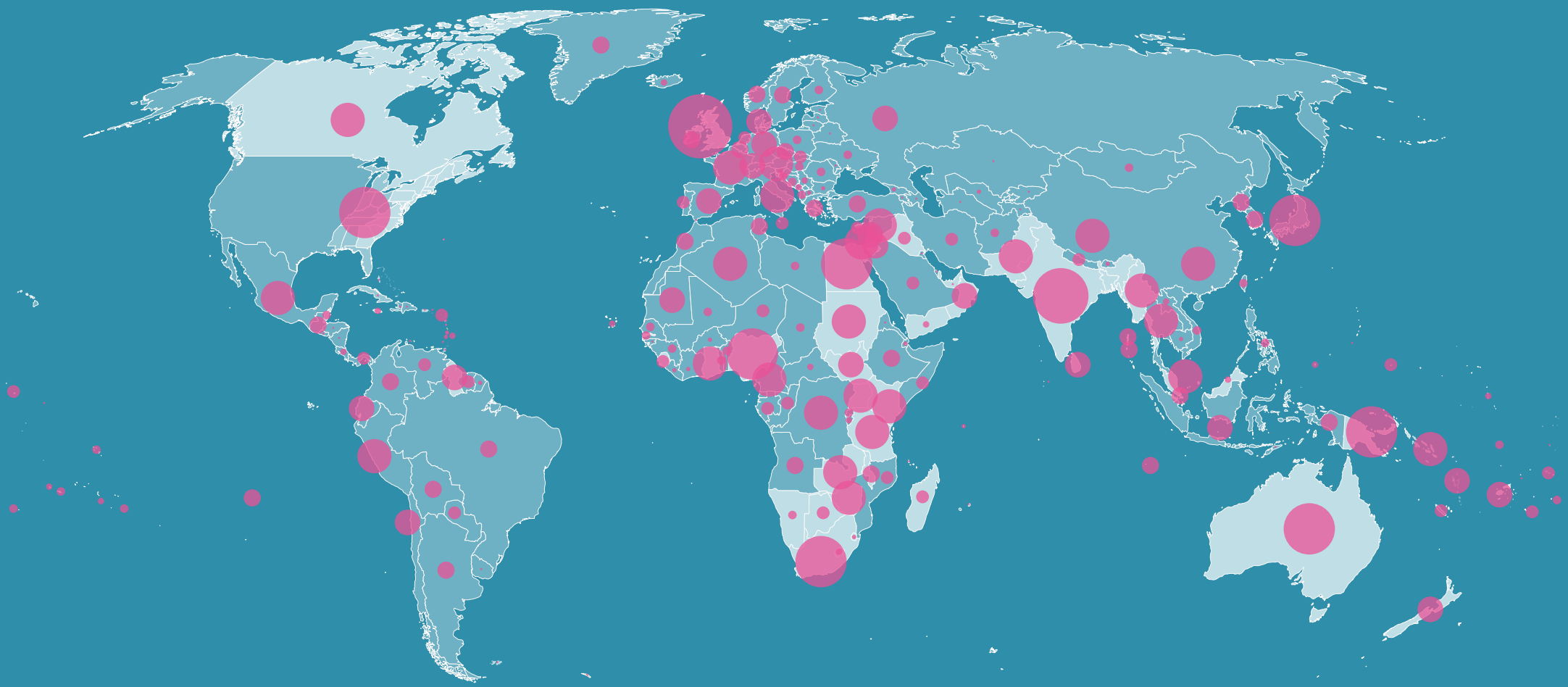
Many of the objects in the Museum were collected by colonial officers, soldiers, missionaries, researchers and curators who used the British colonial network to acquire objects. The Museum also played a role in educating and preparing colonial officers for their posts in the colonies. For example, in the early twentieth century the Museum acquired 994 Nigerian objects through British colonial officers stationed in Nigeria who had studied for the Diploma in Anthropology at Oxford.

Object in Focus

In 2003, the story of the sculpture of colonial officer B.J.A. Matthews by a Yoruba artist illustrates the link between empire and the collecting of objects. Hear the history of this object by scanning the QR code on the label.

Yoruba artist,
Sculpture of colonial officer,
Nigeria, 1930s
1981.12.1

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/changing-perspectives



Map illustrating how the largest parts of the PRM's collection (pink dots, key to right) overlap with British colonial territories at the height of the British imperialism (territories highlighted in paler colour).*

KEY: PINK DOTS SCALED TO INDICATE NUMBERS OF OBJECTS

over 50,000	20,000 – 49,999	10,000 – 19,999	5,000 – 9,999	2,000 – 4,999	1,000 – 1,999	500 – 999	250 – 499	100 – 249	50 – 99	25 – 49	1 – 24

*This map is for illustrative purposes only, these figures represent available data at time of production and are subject to change as the Museum continues research

The Pitt Rivers Museum ...

... can be a space of resistance

Our hope for the Pitt Rivers Museum is to make space for **self-determination** and to **bring silenced knowledge systems and voices** to the centre of museum practice, as a means of resistance against the existing dominant colonial structures. The Museum has been moving towards a more people-focused model of curatorial care by working with both local and international communities to promote self-representation and to question and counteract our historically stereotypical interpretations.

Contentious collections

The Museum still holds many contentious collections. Human remains, sacred and looted objects, represent a lot of pain and suffering and their presence in museums can cause ongoing damage to communities today.
We have started a collaborative programme of work that researches the composition of the collections with external partners in different countries. We have also started to work towards self-representation and self-determination with various communities to discuss future care and restitution.

Object in Focus

In 2003, Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso became the Pitt Rivers Museum's first artist in residence, and and he created an installation that challenged the Museum's entanglement with British Imperialism. His 'Plastic Buddha' demonstrates how he reinvents the traditional iconography of Tibetan Buddhism for contemporary purposes. Gyatso provides a commentary on the transformations that have occurred both in Tibetan society, as well as in the wider world, and by doing so breaks the prevailing stereotypes of Tibetan-Buddhism.

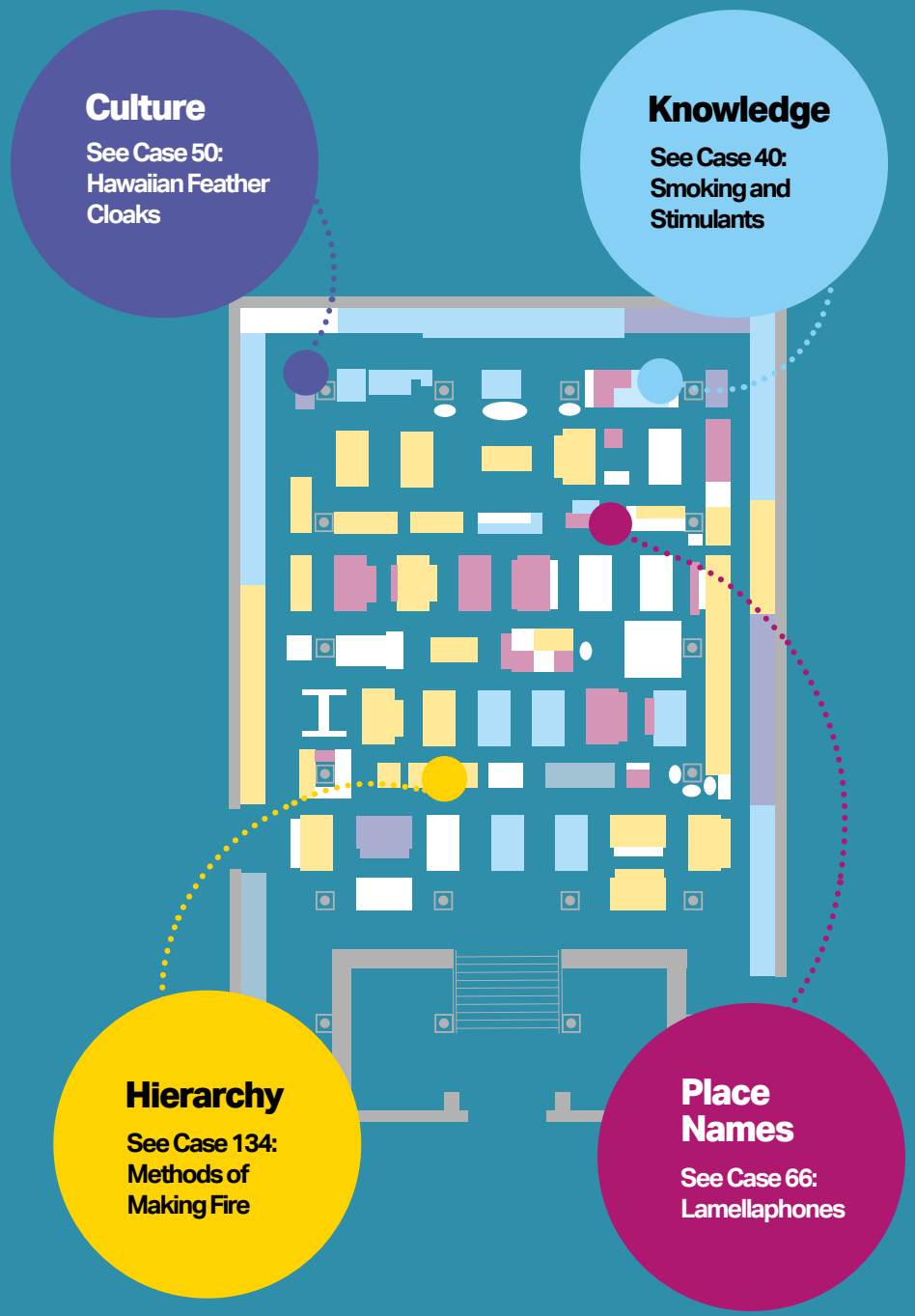
The Pitt Rivers Museum ...

... is a footprint of colonialism

Despite several hundred years of imperialism and colonialism, the mid-20th Century marked a period when many non-European countries freed themselves from formal colonial rule. However, **the past is still present**, and the invisible structures of colonialism still persist today. These invisible structures, known as coloniality, shape our ideas about race, class, culture, gender, and sexuality. Coloniality divides the world into 'the West and the rest' and assigns racial, intellectual and cultural superiority to the West. Coloniality creates and shapes these ideas through three overall processes, by establishing **Hierarchies**, controlling **Knowledge**, and imposing White **Culture** and **Place Names**.

... uses labels that oppress

Throughout the Museum's labels and displays you can still find the legacy of the colonial perspective. The labels use language and imagery that is derogatory, racist and Eurocentric. Often the interpretation in the cases evades the complex and devastating circumstances by which many of the objects were collected or erases the knowledge of the peoples who made them. The floorplan diagram to the right uses a colour key to highlight how widespread the use of problematic language is throughout the Museum's cases, including four displays marked with dots that you can visit to find out more.



Culture

Case 50: Hawaiian Feather Cloaks

Culture can be defined as the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviours, products, or way of life of a particular society, or people. Colonialism seeks to overwrite existing cultural systems in the belief that colonial cultures are superior. The cultural systems that often get imposed are capitalism, communism, religion, scientific logic, racism, patriarchy, and gender binary. Cultural imperialism leads to the destruction of other ways of living and the misinterpretation of many objects.

The imposition of gender binary was used as a tool of colonial cultural domination that designated two opposed, hierarchical and social categories, men and women. Within these Eurocentric ideas of gender, women are defined in relation to men; as those who do not have power; excluded from and ineligible for leadership roles.

In Hawaii, colonialism distorted the system of balance between women and men by dictating the subjugation of women in social, political, and economic realms, resulting in the restructuring of the status of Hawaiian women.

Read the object labels in Case 50 to unpick how Eurocentric frame of thought led to the misinterpretation of the Hawaiian feather cloaks in the Museum.

The term 'lady premier' is an inaccurate representation of Kekāuluohi's role. She occupied the position of Kuhina Nui, for which there was no comparable position in Western government.

The Kuhina Nui functioned as a co-ruler, and had equal authority over land distribution, negotiating treaties and the judicial system. The word 'lady' is also a highly gendered term which conveys notions of femininity equated with subordination.

EXISTING CASE LABEL

This example is probably one of the last to be made. It was given by Kekaluohi of Lahina, the **lady premier of King Kamehameha III**, to Sir George Simpson, Governor-in-Chief of the Hudson's Bay Company's Territories in North America, **as a present to his wife.** The gift was made on account of services he rendered in connexion with foreign claims against the Hawaiian Government.

'Ahu 'ula were not merely gifts, but were used to reinforce political and diplomatic transactions, solidify relationships, and engender obligations. Considering the significance of the cloaks, this exchange between two women disrupts the very male-centred narrative often ascribed to feather cloaks. By referring to the gift as 'a present to his wife', the statement underplays the significance of the presentation of the cloak.

Both women are being defined in relation to their male spouses and relatives. They are presented as having no identity separate from men.

This label imposes the notion of patriarchy upon both Indigenous Hawaiian and British women. Kekāuluohi served as the Kuhina Nui of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and its people, she was not solely beholden to the king as is suggested by the label.

EXISTING CASE LABEL

The cloak was purchased by the late H.G. Beasley for the Cranmore Museum from **Mrs. Ross Haddon, the great-grand-daughter of Sir George Simpson**, in 1930, and was presented to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1951 by **Mrs. H.G. Beasley.**

The development of various patterns was largely due to the fact that capes and cloaks became the monopoly of the higher chiefs to mark their social distinction and rank. They became regalia instead of wearing apparel and were **prohibited to commoners and women. To further mark the distinction against women, the garments came to be made entirely by men.**

'Ahu 'ula are mostly associated with male Hawaiian royalty and women are rarely discussed in scholarship relating to the cloaks. This is due to the Western ideas of gender used to exclude women from leadership roles.

However, there are instances in Hawaiian history of high-ranking women donning the cloaks, suggesting that in Indigenous Hawaiian culture, power was not determined by gender but by genealogical rank and ancestral lineage.

Knowledge

Case 40:
Smoking and Stimulants

Knowledge is both foundational and fundamental to how we see, imagine, understand and experience the world. Part of colonisation is the colonisation of knowledge, which assigns the production of knowledge to the colonisers, specifically the Western world, and in turn silences, erases and invalidates all other knowledges.

Knowledge is foundational and fundamental to how we see, imagine, understand and experience the world.

The scientific name is used for a presumed universal understanding.

This value-laden statement introduces opium in only negative terms, significantly narrowing the scope of its use.

Opium is an illegal narcotic made from the seeds of the opium poppy, ***Papaver somniferum.*** Native to Turkey, **the plant was introduced to China some 1300 years ago** and the extract used as pain relief for many years, being taken in pill or liquid form. After tobacco was introduced to China, the smoking of opium became popular and **by the 18th century a thriving trade had developed.**

The label situates opium as only a part of Chinese culture and history, ignoring the drug's historical and present global impact.

The term 'thriving' implies prosperity and positive development.

The trade was 'thriving' because opium is highly addictive and creates a cycle of physical and psychological dependency. As a commodity opium has been and is a great economic source for producers such as colonial powers and pharmaceutical companies. The 19th century opium trade was British colonial India's second largest revenue source and is currently part of the multibillion-dollar global opioid industry.

Inversely, for consumers, opium/opioids is a source of loss, impoverishment, physical and mental devastation. From the Opium Wars to now, this trade has depended on this cycle of devastation in order to 'thrive'.

Opium usage is only presented in the past tense, as history.

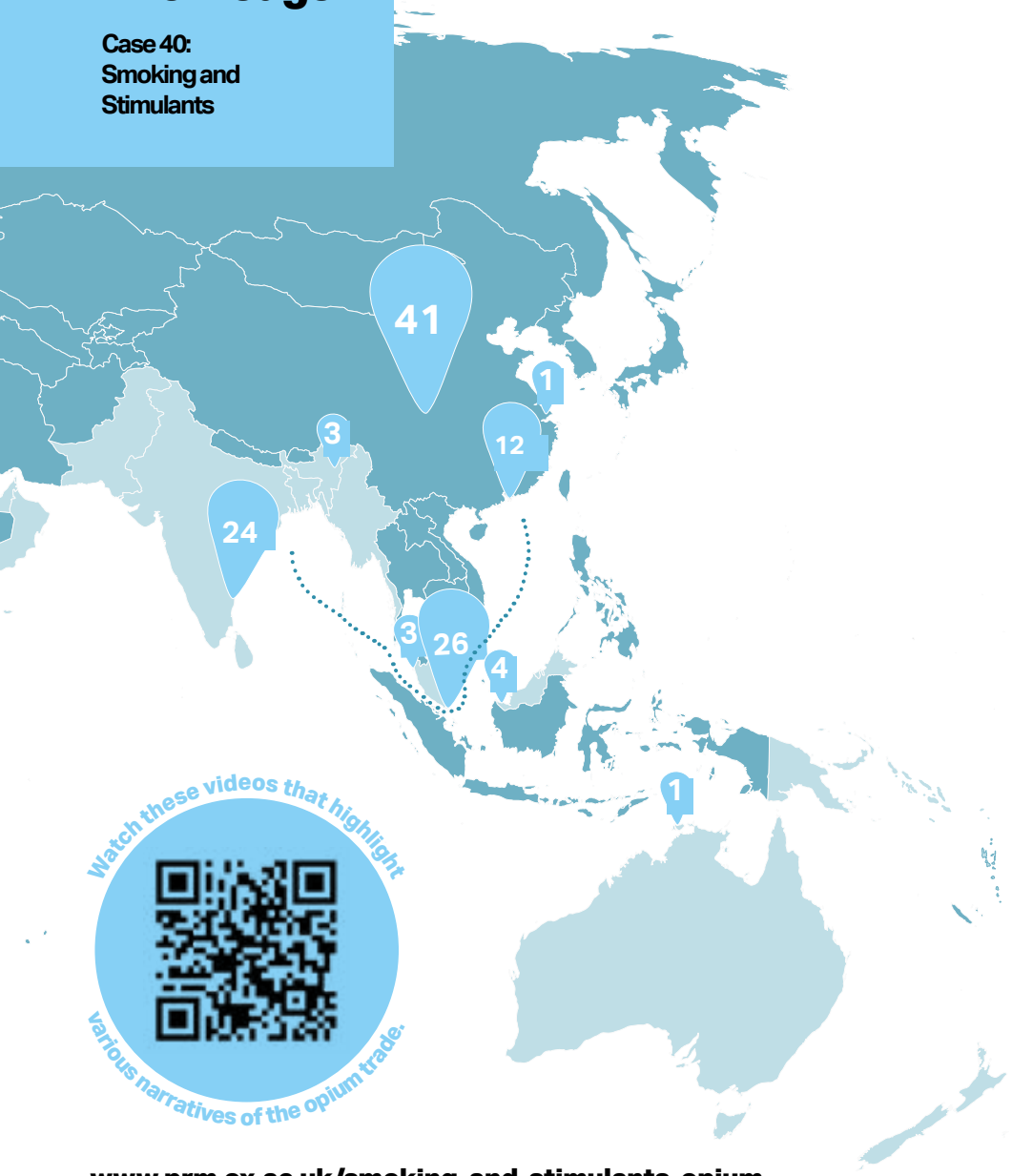
The label ignores the 19th century British legalised drug trade in Asia and the two Opium Wars fought to solidify this trade. Nor does it address the current opioid and drug crises that stem from the very same trade networks and systems of oppression established by colonialism.

How does the labelling in case 40A shape our understanding of the objects and cultures represented in the case?

Do you agree with the knowledge reproduced in the label?
Do you think it tells the entire story of the objects in the case?

Knowledge

Case 40: Smoking and Stimulants



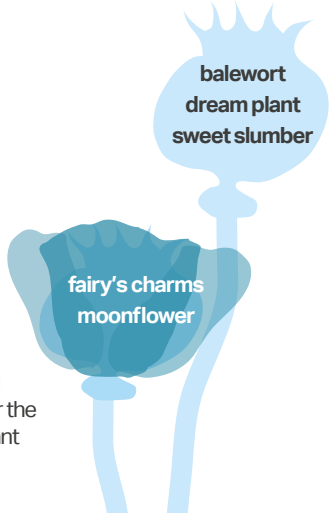
Watch these videos that highlight various narratives of the opium trade.

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/smoking-and-stimulants-opium

One plant. Multiple stories.

The history of opium as presented by the objects in Case 40A is much more varied than what the label suggests. In fact, the objects map the long and complex history of the opium trade between Britain, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and China. The case represents the events of the Opium Wars (1839-1860), through which Britain gained commercial and territorial privileges in China, including legally and freely selling addictive opium to the Chinese population. It also tells the story of the impoverishment of much of the Indian population through the forced submission of their land and labour for the cultivation of opium by colonial powers, and the 'payment' of Aboriginal Australian labourers with opium by European landowners.

While often considered a 'blip' in British history, the 19th century opium trade has an enduring legacy. It marked the beginning of what is referred to as the 'Century of Humiliation' in Chinese History, still affects the health of indigenous communities, shaped current foreign relations and paved the way for modern legal and illegal drug networks.



Colloquial names for the poppy plant

Detail from Royce Ng's *Empire of Opium*

Detail from Fiona Foley's *Out of the Sea like a Cloud*

Place names

See Case 66: Lamellaphones

What's in a name?

There is power in naming.

Place-names are a great repository of knowledge. By colonizing Indigenous toponyms places were stripped of their original meanings, values and significance.

The diagram to the right shows words often associated with 'place' and 'names/naming'.

What does the overlap tell you about the importance of place-names?

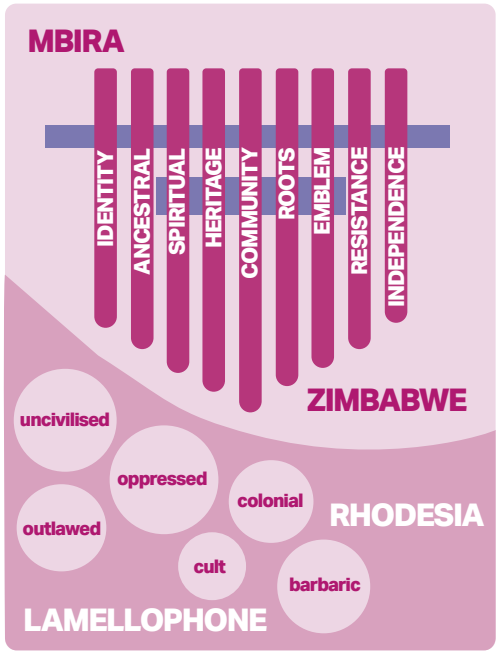
Names bestowed by colonisers on places and objects often tell us more about the colonial agenda than the real meaning and significance of a place.

The mbiras in Case 66A have been given the generalised term lamellaphones in an attempt to categorise and classify them within a Eurocentric understanding of musical instruments. Similarly, they are still labelled with colonial toponyms such as Rhodesia, Belgian Congo, Nyasaland and Dutch Guinea, which serve to brand and classify these places in relation to colonial powers.

How does the meaning of the mbira change within the colonial context of Rhodesia versus independent Zimbabwe? Would a similar change in meaning happen if you use Indigenous instead of colonial toponyms?

In conversation:
Listen to explore the connections between place and naming through the history and cultural significance of mbira in Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia.

www.prm.ox.ac.uk/mbira



These word associations were compiled through interviews with staff, visitors and persons from Zimbabwe living in diaspora.

Hierarchy

See Case 134: Methods of Making Fire

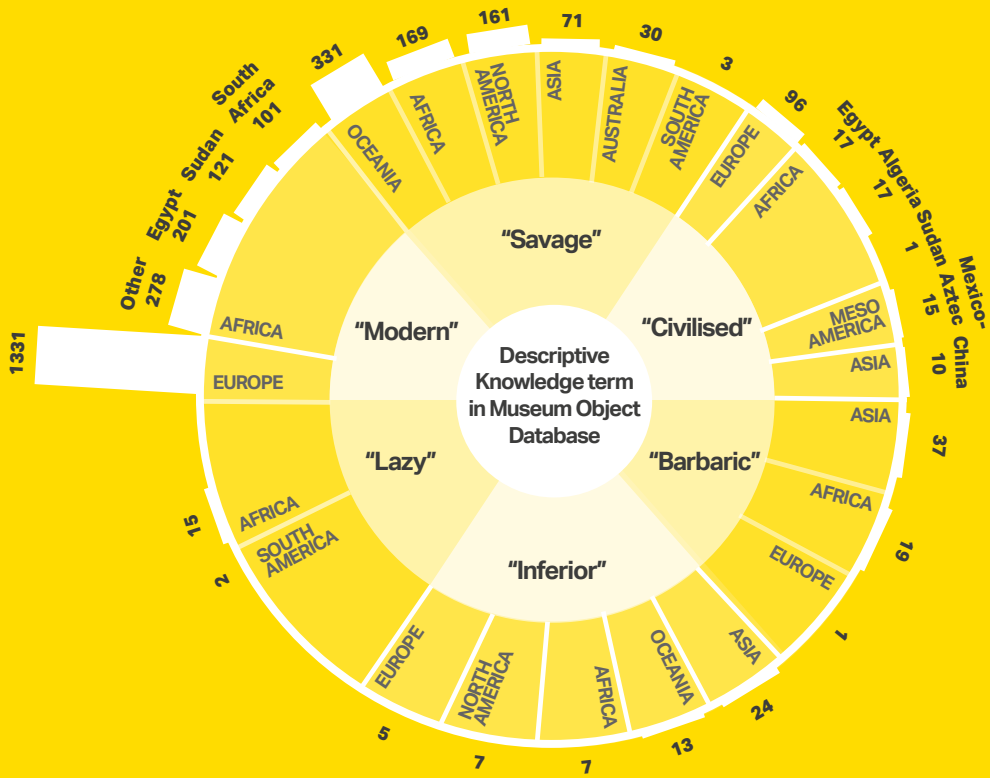
Colonialism is supported by racial classification and difference. Using racialised language creates a false hierarchy of human beings based on observable traits, such as skin colour and physical measurements ranking them from inferior to superior. This ranking system was used to justify the economic and political exploitation of People of Colour and women.

Racialised hierarchies linked to intelligence, labour and gender have been a core part of the Pitt Rivers Museum from its founding. General Pitt-Rivers himself believed in social evolutionism, which identified universal evolutionary stages to classify different societies as in a state of savagery, barbarism, or civilization. European societies positioned themselves at the highest rank of civilization.

Historically, false hierarchies were based on assumed characteristics such as intelligence and behaviour were used to label societies as civilized/uncivilized, modern/savage, superior/ inferior etc.

The diagram opposite shows the use of such hierarchical language in the Museum's labelling and frequency of use by continent.

Challenge this stereotype: Listen to Maasai representative Amos Karino Leuka discuss the cultural importance of wooden fire-drills and fire-making as part of the inauguration ceremony of a new political leadership cohort.



www.prm.ox.ac.uk/methods-of-making-fire

Hierarchy

See Case 134: Methods of Making Fire

The grammar of hierarchy has been used in this case to create a false narrative of cultural and technological 'progress' of fire-making.

In an effort to showcase 'comparative technologies', the display reduces fire-making to a purely technological process. However, terminology here is creating a false narrative. While considering the deep social and cultural importance of fire-making important for cultures recognised as 'civilised' such as European countries, Japan, South Korea, and Ancient Egypt, 'simple' handle fire-drills are referred to as used ceremonially.

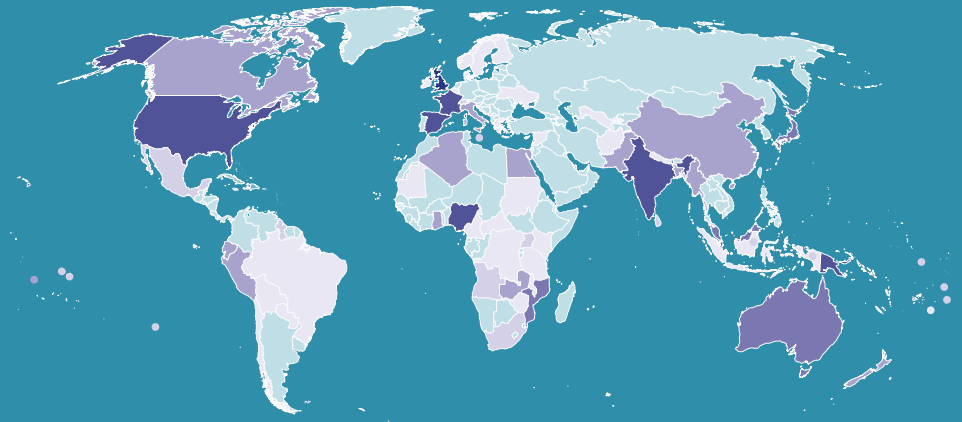
However, when talking about drills used by the peoples of Africa, South-East Asia, and Australia hand fire-drills are referenced in terms of daily living and practicality.

Therefore, 'simplicity' of fire-making as a purely technological and survival process is assigned to countries that are lowly situated on the constructed hierarchy, while countries deemed more 'civilised' or closer to European norm only use this 'simple' technology as a part of their social and cultural landscape while in fact the making of fire has deep social and cultural importance in all cultures and often certain techniques are purposefully used as a very conscious choice.

The diagram opposite shows the relative frequency of use of hierarchical language in the Museum's labelling by continent.

Human remains at the Museum

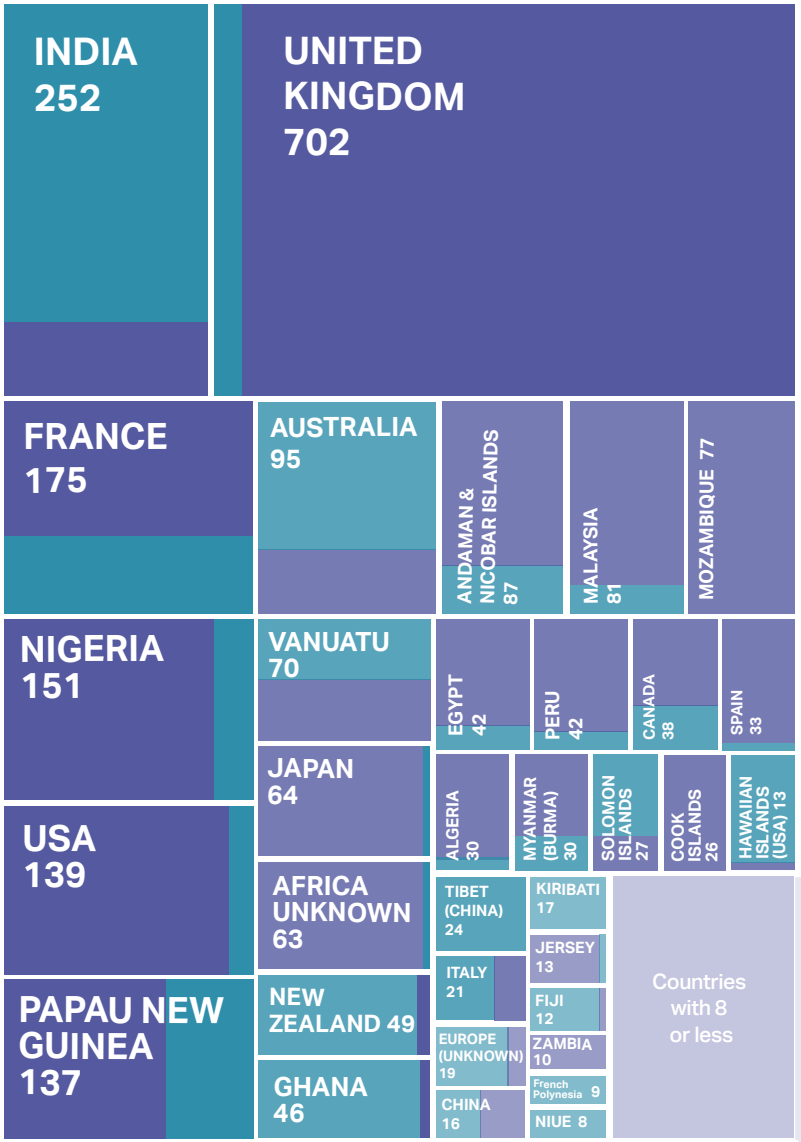
Human remains in the Pitt Rivers Museum originate from different continents and were collected at different points in time. Some of the remains, such as human tissue including skin, bone, hair, teeth or nails, have been incorporated into cultural artefacts. Other skeletal remains are from burial contexts. This map shows where in the world the human remains held by the Museum come from.



over 700 (UK) | 100-250 | 50-99 | 10-49 | 5-9 | 1-5

Colour Key

Colours indicating number of recorded objects (ranging from fragments, e.g. hair, to whole bodies e.g. mummified remains)



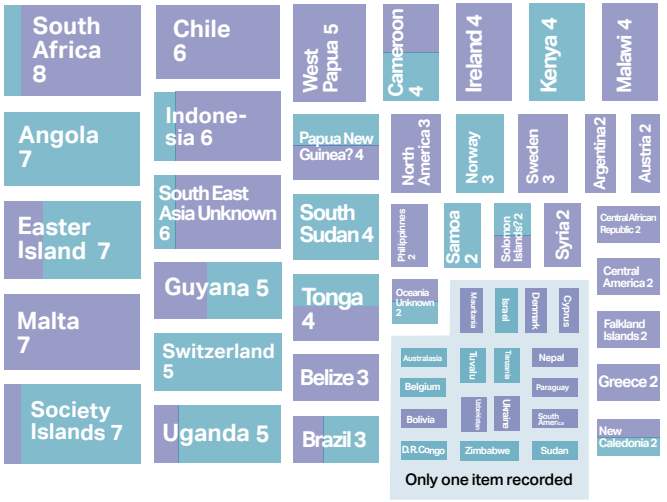
The tree map above shows the numbers of objects at the Museum listed as human remains, by country, and distinguishes between artefacts made with human remains (teal) and 'non-artefactual' remains, including those taken from burials (purple).

Understanding Human Remains

Many objects in the collections contain human bone, skin, teeth, and hair. The majority come from the UK, India, Southern Europe, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, USA and Australia. While the remains from Europe are mostly archaeological bone fragments, those from other parts of the world were largely collected as part of problematic socio-evolutionary anthropological projects.

Museum staff are working on reaching out to communities because we hope to return many of the human remains. Provenance research is important to determine where an ancestral remain might come from. The Museum does not perform invasive tests, but we are working with an osteologist to provide us with additional information which might help us to find living descendants.

The Museum no longer acquires human remains but instead works with communities to find the most appropriate way to care for these complex items. We recognise that attitudes and appropriate treatment vary considerably in different national, cultural, community and individual cases. In the future, we aim to only display human remains after consultation and with the permission of community delegates.



Human Remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum

> *We, too, have the human right to get buried and stay buried.*
>
> Suzan Shown Hario,
> Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee
> Indigenous rights activist from USA

Have you come to see the 'shrunken heads'?

The human remains that used to be on display in the Museum have been removed. Indigenous peoples have long argued against the public display of their ancestors' remains.

Our audience research has shown that visitors often saw the Museum's displays of human remains as a testament to other cultures being "savage", "primitive" or "gruesome". Rather than enabling our visitors to reach a deeper understanding of each other's ways of being, the displays reinforced racist and stereotypical thinking that goes against the Museum's values today.

Problematic past research practices

Collecting human remains was an integral part of disciplinary practices of social evolutionism that ranked some societies as savage and barbarous and others as civilised.

Research on human remains, such as the measuring of skulls and bones, provided a scientific aura to theories that upheld racist and sexist beliefs in the entitlement of white people to objectify black, brown and female bodies for labour, learning, research or entertainment. Such ideas can still be seen in the racism and practices of exclusion that persist today, since they continue to influence our conceptions of each other.

> *You're a race of scientific criminals. I know I'll never get my father's bones out of the … Museum... I am glad enough to get away before they grab my brains and stuff them into a jar.*
>
> Minik Wallace,
> Inughuaq from Greenland

Ways Forward

Before the Museum agrees to return any remains, we want to be sure that the requesting body speaks for the community of origin and that the wishes of the community are being consulted, accounted for and followed. For many communities, repatriation remains prohibitively expensive, subject to impassable barriers and is hard to achieve in practice. It may also seem low priority when set against a complex backdrop of other political, social and cultural challenges.

The Museum seeks to address this and meet some of these challenges by publicising and prioritising activity relating to our returns policy and procedures. We also intend to take a more proactive approach to engagement and consultation, be open to exploring models for both virtual and physical repatriation and co-curatorship.

Human Remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Healing Wounds

As part of our stewardship of human remains, the Pitt Rivers Museum is reaching out to and working with communities to find ways to heal past wounds. Given the international origins of the collections, this is a long-term process that will involve collaborative engagement over a long period. This process may lead to remains being returned, cared for differently, or redisplayed.

In the past, the Museum has returned human remains and associated objects and will continue to work with international partners on this important work.

> *“There is a growing awareness among overseas institutions about the importance of repatriating ancestral remains. Their genuine commitment to the repatriation of indigenous remains allows our country to resolve a very dark period in our history.”*

Dr Arapata Hakiwai, Maori and
Moriori Karanga Aotearoa programme,
Te Papa Museum, New Zealand

Ethical Code

By removing human remains from open display we are honouring our respect for the communities around the world with whom we work. It also brings our practice into line with international ethical codes and UK guidelines on the public display of human remains.

> *“Human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated. They must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.”*

International Council of Museums
Ethical Code,
article 4.3

Human Remains at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Case study: Shuar

Most museums have taken tsantsa ('shrunken heads') off display because of their exoticising nature that often lead to misinterpretation by visitors. At the Pitt Rivers Museum visitors referred to the tsantsa as 'a freakshow', 'gory', or 'gruesome'. Shuar delegates have expressed dismay at being represented in such stereotypical ways. Since 2017, we have been working with the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador, which is leading conversations with Shuar community delegates about how they would like to see their heritage cared for in Museums in Ecuador and internationally.

> *"We don't want to be thought of as dead people to be exhibited in a museum, described in a book, or recorded on film… Our ancestors handed over these sacred objects without fully realizing the implications."*

Miguel Puwáinchir and
Felipe Tsenkush,
Shuar Indigenous leaders, Ecuador

Case study: Return of Australian Aboriginal Human Remains

For the last few years, the Museum has been working with the Australian Government towards the repatriation of 18 human remains and 1 associated item. The return was approved by Council on 11 May 2020. There are 114 human remains of which 18 are non-artefactual and which we can be certain came from Australia.

> *"They must have regarded us as savages or animals for them to do such things. We feel sad and unbalanced… and it is really disappointing for us that we still can't bring all of our old people home."*

Neil McKenzie,
Yawuru cultural leader,
Australia

Your Thoughts

Different people have different attitudes to the display of human remains in museums. We would love to know your thoughts.

Please leave us a note or feel free to email at **humanremains@prm.ox.ac.uk**

Some questions to think about:

How would you feel walking into the Museum and seeing, without warning, the skull of a grandparent looking back at you from the displays?

How would you feel if the remains of your family member were taken and put on public display?

How would you feel if your child's umbilical cord was displayed as a curio for all to see?

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