

Colonial Grave Robbery, 1884

Stories passed on through family oral histories have helped put researchers into contact with relatives of people whose remains were shipped off to Germany after their graves were robbed during the colonial rule over Namibia.

• **HANS AXASI #EICHAB, DAG HENRICHSEN, HOLGER STOECKER and LARISSA FÖRSTER**

IN May, 2016 we reported in this newspaper about a grave robbery in the Kuiseb in early December 1884 by the German scientist Waldemar Belck and the shipment of three skeletons from Walvis Bay to Berlin.

They belonged to three men – Jacobus Hendrick, Jacobus !Garisib and Oantab – with Swartbooi/Topnaar/Damara background. They had died on 30 March 1884 during a cattle raid by the Herero at a place called //Kharabes close to Rooibank. A few weeks later, the men had been buried by kaptein Jan Jonker Afrikaner.

We came across the names and details of the three deceased men in documents from various archives and in publications of the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (BGAEU). This Berlin institution still holds the remains of Jacobus Hendrick and Oantab, whilst the bones of Jacobus !Garisib are not preserved.

In 2016, we also asked readers of this newspaper to trace and alert us about possible descendants.

We can now report that by publishing key information from the colonial archive in *The Namibian* and also in *Republikein*, we were able to get in touch with the Khoekhoegowab-speaking oral historian Hans Axasi #Eichab, who contacted further family members.

It turned out that the stories passed on through family oral histories refer extensively to the conflict-prone history of the Kuiseb region at the end of the nineteenth century. This is partially because this was the reason for the flight and displacement of the family from the Kuiseb towards Utuseb and Walvis Bay and into other parts of the country, such as Rehoboth, Kalkrand, Gobabis, Aranos, Fransfontein, Sesfontein, Khorixas und Outjo.

The grave robberies on the lower Kuiseb are also remembered by the



Photo: Larissa Förster

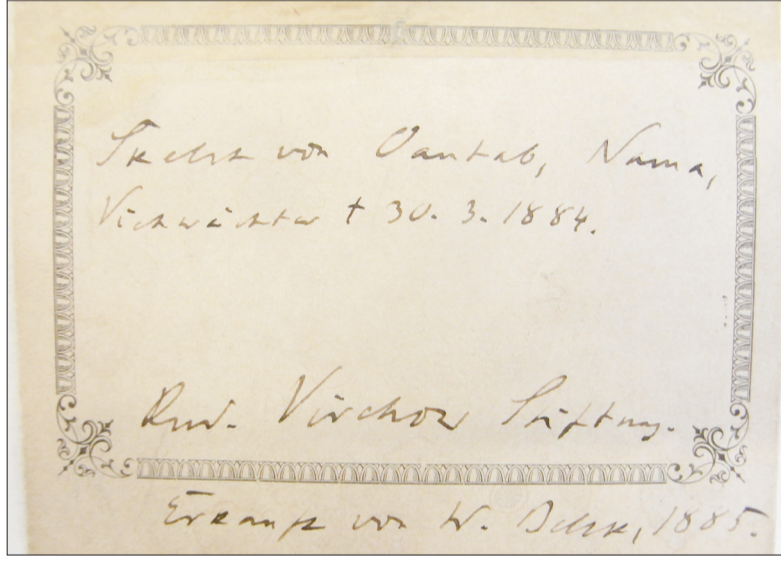
RETURNED ... People pay their respects at Parliament Gardens in Windhoek in 2014, following the return of human remains which had been taken to Germany around 1900.

family of #Eichab, as he recalls: “I can vividly recall how my grandmother told us horrific stories about a raid, massacres, rapes, abductions, desecration of the dead, burials and exhumation and exportation of human remains in the lower Kuiseb over the waters [i.e. sea] to somewhere. [...] We then as children took it up just as stories about the mythological Khoegaroen [i.e. maneaters] [...] but now I realised that it is my own flesh and blood.”

Furthermore, these memories suggest that the three deceased men also belonged to the kinship network of #Eichab’s great-grandmother.

Jacobus !Garisib is understood to be the brother of #Khoan Garises (1869-1969), and these historical memories were passed down through her daughter Kappi Garises, and granddaughter, Martha Dama Garises (1914-1995) – the latter being #Eichab’s mother. Furthermore, #Eichab identified some of the recitations passed down in the family as praise poems for the three historical individuals.

As such, our efforts to re-individualise the skeletons of Jacobus Hendrick, Jacobus !Garisib and Oantab and understand their biographies took a significant turn, with more biographical family histories yet to be unearthed.



STOLEN ... The label for the remains of the man Oantab, which were stolen from his grave and shipped to Germany, at the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory. Translation: “Skeleton of Oantab, Nama, stock guard/warden †30.3.1884. Rud. Virchow Foundation. Specimen from W Belck 1885.”

RESTITUTION DEMANDS

Recently, #Eichab reported to Dag Henrichsen that “all the members from the personally affected communities within the ranks of !Ainin, Swartboois and !Naranin descendants are [...] awaiting a positive solution towards restitution and return of the remains of their

loved ones”. He also noted that the affected families want a monument to be built at //Kharabes in the wake of the demanded restitution.

The prospect of the return to Namibia of the remains of Jacobus Hendrick and Oantab awaits serious consideration. So far, the BGAEU has not responded to our various published research interventions [for

more information, see our 2018 article in ‘Human Remains and Violence’, <https://doi.org/10.7227/HRV.4.2.4>].

We must also remember that there were forceful demands for the return of Jacobus Hendrick shortly after the grave robbery in late 1884.

Belck himself reported that the (unnamed) daughter of Hendrick demanded her father’s remains when hearing at Walvis Bay of the grave robbery. Instead of complying with her demands, Belck gave her the skull of Jacobus !Garisib instead.

According to family genealogies, a woman by the name of Anna Hendrick comes into question as the daughter who claimed her father’s remains already in 1884. Today, her restitution-seeking role has been assumed by #Eichab, together with the relatives of Jacobus Hendrick, Jacobus !Garisib und Oantab.

The BGAEU, in whose ‘possession’ the remains of two of the men are until today, needs thus also to deal with an existing, yet unresolved restitution claim by Jacobus Hendrick’s daughter.

Generally speaking, human remains from the colonial period remain nameless. If the grave robbery in the lower Kuiseb is not a unique case of colonial violence, the re-individualisation of the three men as reported here is very uncommon. It forces us to act and demand the final restitution from a scientific collection in Germany to the Namibian soil in which they already rested, as well as a full acknowledgement of what happened.

** If you have any relevant information on the three men named here, their descendants, the raiding incident in 1884, or on the local history of //Kharabes (or also #Arexa!nanis) more generally, please share it with us. Your communication will be treated confidentially. You can phone/write to Hans Axasi #Eichab at 081 882 0928 and Dag Henrichsen at dh@baslerafrika.ch*

#Eichab is an expert in the history of Khoekhoegowab-speaking people. Dag Henrichsen is a Namibian historian at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in Switzerland. Holger Stoecker is an historian at the Humboldt University in Berlin in Germany. Larissa Förster is a cultural anthropologist and associate researcher at Humboldt University of Berlin in Germany. All have previously engaged and worked on Namibian history, memory and cultural politics. Here they write in their personal capacity.

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