



The Mainly Nameless and Faceless Dead: An Exploratory Study of the  
Illicit Traffic in Archaeological and Ethnographic Human Remains

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# The mainly nameless and faceless dead: an exploratory study of the illicit traffic in archaeological and ethnographic human remains

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**Abstract** This paper represents an exploratory study of what is known about the current global trade in human remains, and in particular, specimens from archaeological or ethnographic contexts, regardless of which source countries they derive from and where they are destined. The paper is in four parts. In Part 1, we explain how the analysis of human remains forms an important component of archaeological research, and why looting activity at burial sites prejudice this research. In Part 2 we review the existing and relevant archaeological, ethnographic and criminological literature on the subject while in Part 3 we describe our own research into the online trade in human remains, both licit and illicit. To assess the current global prevalence and distribution of public and private dealers in human remains, keyword searches on common search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing), and online sites like eBay and Amazon were conducted. In Part 4 we draw some conclusions about our research and point in particular to various policy and law reform issues which require further consideration and study.

## The ‘Shesepamuntayesher’ case

In July 2011 United States (US) federal law enforcement authorities announced that they had uncovered a sophisticated and extensive international antiquities smuggling ring which had been caught bringing numbers of Egyptian artefacts into the country, including a sarcophagus containing a mummified individual [1]. Subsequently Mousa Khouli, 38, a New York antiquities dealer pleaded guilty to smuggling Egyptian cultural property into the US and making a false statement to law enforcement authorities. Investigators from the US

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HIS) indicated that Khouli and other conspirators had exported the antiquities to the US from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates using a variety of illegal methods to avoid detection. Hieroglyphics on the coffin indicated that the mummified female within it was named ‘Shesepamuntayesher’ and that she bore the title ‘Lady of the House’ [2].

The US mummy smuggling case was said by HIS not only to be the first occasion that a cultural property network of this scale and dimension had been dismantled within the country but that “in addition to smuggling cultural property this case also focuses on significant money laundering activity. This is notable because the illicit sale of cultural property is the third most profitable black market industry following narcotics and weapons trafficking...[Estimates] suggest it brings in \$2 billion to \$6 billion annually” [1]. Other experts on ancient antiquities noted at the time that the black market in mummies could be traced back to the mediaeval period and that there was no doubt that people were still keen to buy them, even though there was more interest in their coffins and surrounding contents than the human remains themselves [1].

Shesepamuntayesher’s case is a contemporary and dramatic example of how human remains which form a part of a nation’s cultural heritage still continue to be the subject of illicit trafficking. In this case we know the name of the human being whose remains have been excavated unlawfully from their burial place somewhere in Egypt and transhipped to alien climes. However, as we shall show and explain in more detail below, very little is known at present either about the origins or dimensions of this trade of principally nameless and faceless bodies or body parts, or the identity and background of those involved as suppliers or purchasers of such remains. Thus in this paper we present findings from an exploratory study, predominately online, of the international traffic in archaeological and ethnographic human remains which it is hoped uncovers some of its hidden features, as well as pointing to areas where further research is needed.

The paper is in four parts. In Part 1, we explain how the analysis of human remains forms an important component of archaeological research, and why looting activity at burial sites prejudice this research. In Part 2 we review the existing and relevant archaeological, ethnographic and criminological literature on the subject while in Part 3 we describe our own research into the trade in human remains, both licit and illicit. In Part 4 we draw some conclusions about our research and point in particular to various policy and law reform issues which require further consideration and study.

## **Part 1: The destruction of context**

Within the academic discipline of archaeology there exists a subfield generally referred to as human bioarchaeology, in which the ultimate goal is to reveal those aspects of ancient human life difficult to understand using the material cultural record alone [3, 4]. Although human remains are arguably the most “information-dense type of deposit in the archaeological record” [5], the successful interpretation of this information in a manner relevant to understanding the human condition in the past requires that it be “contextualized” by being “read” together with data on community and individual-level variation in mortuary treatment [4, 6]. Such systematic study of the biological, social, material and ritual components of ancient life is increasing globally, using ever more advanced scientific techniques

[7, 8]. In the broadest perspective, the combination of biological and mortuary data, when viewed as part of the larger archaeological record of a specific place or time, can provide the level of detail needed to metaphorically ‘bring the dead to life.’

The plundering of burial grounds in search of artefacts, and occasionally human remains, to fuel the global antiquities trade directly eliminates the possibility of such research by destroying the vital contextual clues needed to understand burial conditions, seasonality and sequence, as well as damaging and disarticulating the remains themselves. Such plunder is known to have occurred in many nations in the past, including Egypt where tomb robbers have operated since the time of the Pharaohs themselves [9, 10]. More recently widespread illegal excavations of grave sites in countries like Cambodia and Thailand have decimated archeological sites and caused irreparable harm [11, 12].

## **Part 2: A little-known phenomenon**

An extensive archeological and allied literature exists regarding many ethical issues associated with human remains [13–15] including such contentious and still current matters as the repatriation of the skeletal remains of indigenous people taken in the past by colonial powers for study and display. Recent legal and moral arguments for repatriation (primarily from European museums) of human remains collected during the colonial-era from African, Australian Aboriginal and Oceanic peoples have become quite prevalent [16–19]. Though this significant issue continues to attract attention, it exists outside the scope of this paper. Case studies and legal issues surrounding the licit or illicit trade in organs and tissue from cadavers and autopsies [20, 21] are also outside its scope. Important though all this literature is we are concerned here only with that which relates in specific terms to the trade in archaeological and ethnographic human remains, and this is a very small part of this larger picture.

One important example of this relevant literature is an analysis by Huxley and Finnegan [22] which surveyed the popular US and international private auction site eBay over a period of several years to determine the extent to which they engaged in the sale of human remains. The express purpose of this study was to inform the forensic anthropological community that “human remains, old and new, are for sale on the eBay internet auction site,” and that “eBay does not use a forensic anthropologist to assess photographs of these materials” [22:1]. Given that not only were prehistoric and historic remains recorded, but also cases of likely medico-legal import (but lacking professional preparation), the lack of a forensic anthropologist on hand (at least at the time) to monitor such sales is especially significant. Huxley and Finnegan found that prices sought for human remains advertised on eBay ranged from US \$500-2,000, and every specimen discussed (except for a scapula and an “arm bone” of unstated provenance or provenience, and two molars once belonging to the individual attempting to sell them) was a human skull.

Current eBay policy regarding the sale of human remains or tissue [23] states that only items containing “human scalp hair (such as lockets or wigs)” as well as “clean, articulated (jointed), non-Native American skulls and skeletons used for medical

research” are allowed to be sold lawfully. The policy more generally states that “humans, the human body, or any human body parts or products” are not allowed to be listed, with bone (and specifically Tibetan “prayer skulls”) specifically prohibited. The general ban on the sale of bone, however, appears in direct contradiction of the allowance of cleaned, non-Native American specimens allegedly sold as medical research specimens.

In a subsequent commentary on Huxley and Finnegan’s article, Kubiczek and Mellen [24] drew attention to at least three further “biological supply house” internet sites selling unidentified or identified human remains specimens “of Chinese origin with post-mortem intervals of 20 plus years, which had been donated, or “relocated”” [24]. This reference has been echoed in still more recent expose reports that document the continued, large-scale black market trade in skeletal material from India (for private use, or purchase by Medical Schools for student “bone boxes” despite a ban in place since 1985), as well as China (despite a general ban on human tissue sales there since 2008) [25].

Huxley and Finnegan [24] concluded their analysis with a call to regulate the sale of human remains online in the United States by drafting and enforcing a federal law on the subject. The fact that comprehensive laws banning the private trade have yet to be passed, whether in the United States or globally, has been emphasised in a recent commentary [26] in which several new examples of the attempted private sale of human remains online are described. These developments have occurred despite attempts by at least some online retail sites such as Etsy or Craigslist to update and restrict their sales policies to ban the sale of human remains or body parts. This includes skulls, bones, articulated skeletons, bodily fluids, preserved tissues and organs, although items containing hair and teeth are still legitimate on Etsy [27], and eBay still permits the sale of genuine human remains for “medical or educational use” [23]. No guarantee is required by eBay from either the buyer or private seller to prove that the purchase will in fact be used as part of a teaching collection.

In addition to this, the historic and contemporary collection of ethnographica from cultures throughout the Indo-Pacific (encompassing South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands), Africa, Latin America and elsewhere also likely contributes to current online markets. Much of this “tribal” art market consists of ritual paraphernalia or items bestowed with cultural memory and a history of use and/or maintenance (e.g. masks, items of clothing and jewellery, weapons, figurines, domestic items, instruments, and “trophy” or “over modelled” skulls). Such items were often collected during colonial-era expeditions, and therefore with motivations and practices for acquiring and displaying such items that today would be considered ethically or morally suspect [28, 29]. Downplaying the role of indigenous agency in the shaping of colonial era collections, however, is to have an incomplete understanding regarding the formation of these collections [30]. As will be suggested especially in the case of trophy skulls, the offering and selling of specimens to colonial-era collectors was not purely one made due to financial need in a newly imposed cash economy. Today, numerous dealers located around the world (all self-identified non-indigenous, with the exception of contemporary Europeans selling allegedly historic-period European specimens) continue to sell used and new ethnographic artefacts from the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere, but to what extent the current market contains human remains is poorly understood.

### Part 3: Quantifying today's market- an exploratory online study

From the sparse investigative research conducted to date, it would seem that an active, if relatively infrequent, private trade in human remains from archaeological, ethnographic, and medico-legal contexts continues to exist, as indicated by several very recent examples of private confiscation of human remains in the US and Australia [31–33]. In an attempt to quantify and describe more adequately the current dimensions of this trade, especially regarding archaeological and ethnographic specimens, the authors decided to conduct their own analysis of the market for human remains utilizing data drawn principally from internet based sources. In this section of the paper we outline the methods used to uncover and compile relevant information, the reasons behind collecting data in this manner, and how quantification occurred. It should be emphasised again that this preliminary market analysis only addresses the online market.

To assess the current global prevalence and distribution of online dealers in human remains (both those with a “public” face represented by galleries and auction houses, occasionally with street addresses and traceable contact details, and those “private,” often anonymous traders who operate through such means as eBay), keyword searches on common search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing) were performed. Common online auction sites eBay and Amazon.com were also included, especially as eBay had been surveyed before (Huxley and Finnegan, 2004) and maintains a policy statement on the sale of human remains. Keywords included “human remains,” “natural bone,” “skulls,” “bone,” “trophy skulls,” “oceanic art,” “curios,” “primitive art,” “kangling trumpets,” etc. Searching also occurred by means of key phrases, such as “Where can I buy oceanic art in Australia?,” “Can I legally buy bone?,” “Where can I buy Palo Mayombe supplies?,” etc. Palo Mayombe here refers to one of a closely related group of denominations (known as Palo, or La Regla de Kongo) developed in Cuba by slaves of primarily Central African descent, in which human remains can play a part in specific rituals. Palo has occasionally (arguably incorrectly) been suggested to associate with West African (Yoruba)/Cuban Santeria [34, 35].

Conducting internet searches in this manner allowed us to record the greatest diversity of online dealers, as well as access social networking sites and dealer forums (e.g. Facebook, Yahoo! Ancient Artefacts, etc.) on which the trade in human remains, and antiquities in general, could be openly discussed. Facebook especially hosted numerous ‘pages’ connected to online galleries or private individual collectors, on which “friends” of the gallery or collector in question could provide feedback regarding recent acquisitions and discuss desired or planned purchases. Entry of each dealer identified into a database occurred regardless of whether sale of any/all of their relevant stock was ongoing or recently completed but listed in archives. Data was collected for approximately 2 months from May to June, 2013, and from September to October 2013. Over each month-long period of searching, approximately 1–2 hours per day were devoted to online investigation. However, given the relatively small size of this facet of the accessible, online, antiquities market, repetition of dealer and gallery websites appearing in each search soon became frequent. Aside from the occasional change to eBay listings, no frequency differences between search periods were noted, but this could merely be an artefact of the sample size of supply and demand in the market itself. This database first recorded individual gallery or dealer websites, but in the case of, for example, auctioned trophy skulls, each was recorded separately due to distinct ownership histories, reference literature, price, etc.



Data entered for each gallery, auction house, or private dealer included name, URL, date the website was accessed, country the gallery or dealer purported to originate from, a postal address, email address, and contact name if listed. In almost all instances, human bone was being clearly advertised online, with only one dealer included that had human remains for sale, but with no corresponding advertisement on the associated gallery website. In this instance, trophy skulls from the Solomon Islands and PNG were observed in person by one of the authors [DH] via an impromptu visit to the gallery in question while on vacation in April 2013. To tabulate totals, individual specimen counts were calculated for each dealer listed, by category of artefact and/or skeletal element or body part on offer (i.e. skull, teeth, foot, hand, etc.). For more numerous categories of artefact, such as trophy skulls or alleged medical specimens, individual counts by region, ethnic group, or current country of residence were also conducted (see tables below). From there, data was recorded as to whether or not a price was offered, whether the sale was ongoing or already over, and what the estimated or realized price was.

The next category recorded was whether or not the artefact or specimen had a geographic or ethnographic ‘source’ clearly stated by the dealer. In cases where a dealer was offering more than one specimen at a time from different locations, source was recorded as “various.” All but two artefacts had clear geographic and/or cultural affiliations offered. The presence of any kind of legal “notice” was also recorded; specifically whether or not mention was made by the dealer to prospective buyers of the legality or illegality of the import or export of these objects, locally or internationally. The next category of data recorded was whether or not any provenance (ownership history) was listed, including stated date of collection. This data was recorded together with whether or not any published literature was cited to provide further documentation of authenticity to prospective buyers. Finally, additional miscellaneous information was recorded, such as whether the specific item listed was currently for sale or already sold, and any other pertinent notes, any associated identifying information such as former medical or museum labels, display stands, etc. Recording data in this manner allowed us to extract as much information as possible from each online gallery website or notice of sale, while the individual specimen count method of tabulation provides for a more realistic, and more readily quantifiable, sample size. We now turn to the findings of our exploratory research.

### **Who is trafficking and what is being trafficked?**

The sellers of human remains recorded in our study fall into three general categories: auction houses, online galleries and private dealers (see Table 1). While the recording of a dealer, gallery or auction house in the database constructed for the purposes of this research necessarily implies that the vendor has an online presence (whether or not all of their stock is displayed at any one time), the manner in which each category of dealer markets their wares was found to differ. Auction houses, as expected, target more high end individual, gallery or museum affiliated buyers, and thus are more likely to provide prices or estimates for forthcoming sales, as well as citations of reference literature and at least a generic statement of ownership history, even if only “from a private collection,” as was encountered frequently in this survey. In fact, the “old private collection”

label was used to explain ownership history at least 16 times by all categories of dealer, almost entirely in regards to trophy skulls, and the majority of specimens (greater than 70 %) had no proffered ownership history at all aside from perhaps a rough age estimate. Table 1 here records individual specimen counts for each specimen category by dealer category.

Online galleries are here defined as websites either run entirely online but devoted to selling around a theme (e.g. “oceanic art;” “antiquities,” “the macabre,” “oddities”) or produced and updated by the oft-named owners of a store front dealership with an address and email account. They often contain mission statements or seller biographies/collecting histories, frequently sell items from other dealers or private individuals on commission, stress the authenticity of what they sell, highlight dealer’s association memberships, and provide means for customers to keep updated on events and pay securely online. Private sellers, on the other hand, are more likely be anonymous or sell under an alias, purveying their wares through channels such as eBay, and be less likely to offer warranties, refunds, or take responsibility for arranging shipping, Customs clearance, etc.

In the human remains trade, as in the antiquities trade overall, the boundary between online gallery and private dealer can often blur. Given the history of relatively lax oversight of antiquities sales online and an expectation that small-scale dealers will voluntarily comply with relevant laws [36], it is perhaps to be expected that the majority of artefacts/specimens recorded were encountered as for sale or sold by online galleries or private dealers. Table 2 compares artefact category to the general location of all categories of dealers. It should be noted that not every specimen able to be categorized by artefact type or dealer category could be categorized by dealer location, given the ephemeral nature of e-commerce. The most immediate observation is that the majority of dealers serving the ‘demand’ side market in human remains, such as it is, exist in North America (primarily the United States), as well as Europe (France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium). Of the very few dealers located in the Indo-Pacific region, almost all had Australian addresses or email addresses although one Auckland, New Zealand auction house sold a trophy skull in March 2011. A dental supply company that provides full sets of real human teeth to medical schools from unstated

**Table 1** Comparison of artefact/specimen category and dealer category by individual count method

Artefact category	Dealer category			
	Auction house	Online gallery	Private dealer	Total
Trophy skulls	30	114	30	174
“Kangling” femur trumpets	2	16	8	26
“Kapala” skull cap cups	2	37	10	49
“Damaru” skull cap drums	2	7	5	14
Former medical specimens	4	40	104	148
Archaeological antiquities	1	2	1	4
Misc. ethnographic curios	0	5	0	5
Total	41	221	158	420



sources has active offices in India, Canada, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Only one dealer was found to be based in a source country itself; specifically, an online gallery in the Philippines that allegedly recently sold two mounted Ifugao/Igorot trophy skulls, and refused to ship to Belgium given a “bad experience with Customs”) [37].

In regard to the question of what items are being trafficked in the global human remains trade, several categories are also provided, as detailed in Tables 1 and 2 above. Very occasionally, cases involving the ‘primary market’ surface, in which examples of archaeological artefacts with associated human remains freshly surfaced from new, illicit, excavations appear on line [38, 39]. However, one of us (DH) has observed numerous other examples of artefacts containing soil and human remains for sale in small antique/souvenir shops in both Vietnam and Cambodia as recently as 2011. We have also found at least one example of the attempted online sale of an antiquity with provenience to a specific (but unmentioned) archaeological site or museum collection; namely, the head of an Egyptian mummy offered through a Dallas, Texas, auction house [40]. As with the case of Shesepamuntayesher above, not only was important contextual information lost in the acquiring of these specimens for the illicit market, but it is likely that irreparable damage was caused to the mummies themselves. The vast majority of specimens discovered for sale online constitute a ‘secondary market,’ being primarily ethnographic or former medical specimens sold far from their country of origin, and at least occasionally derived from deaccessioned museum, university or private collections. The question remains as to how much of a given artefact or specimen’s stated provenance, as presented online, is genuine and the result of performing due diligence, or fabricated.

The ‘secondary market’ examples identified by our study primarily fell within two broad categories. The majority (174/420; 41.4 %) were ethnographic trophy skulls from a wide variety of cultural and geographic contexts. The next most prevalent category (148/420; 35.2 %) consisted of specimens sold as former medical teaching tools, or those sold for the purported purpose of current medical research. The next most prevalent category (89/420; 21.2 %) consisted of antique and ethnographic artefacts from South Asia (Tibet, Nepal, India, Bhutan) made from modified portions of specific

**Table 2** Comparison of artefact/specimen category and dealer location by individual count method

Category	Location				Total
	North America (USA/Canada)	Europe	Indo-Pacific Region (incl. Australia/NZ)	South America	
Trophy skulls	70	100	3	1	174
“Kangling” femur trumpets	12	3	1	0	16
“Kapala” skull cap cups	45	1	0	0	46
“Damaru” skull cap drums	8	1	1	0	10
Medical specimens	107	22	18	1	148
Archaeological antiquities	1	3	0	0	4
Misc. ethnographic curios	4	1	0	0	5
Total	246	131	23	2	403

skeletal elements, and with intended use in Buddhist ritual practice. Nine examples (9/420; 2.1 %) of what are here termed “ethnographic curios,” as well as specimens derived from (and sometimes advertised as deriving from) archaeological sites were also recorded. These objects comprised a necklace containing human and animal teeth sourced to the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea (sold by a prominent German auction house); various human long bones, crania and skulls purported to derive from Haiti and allegedly prepared outside the United States, but sold at a location within US jurisdiction; two “tantric” carved Nepalese skulls inlaid with silver and copper [41], a cranium advertised as recovered from a Neolithic cave site in Algeria, and even portions of Egyptian mummies.

Specimens offered by anonymous private dealers on eBay specifically consisted solely of alleged former medical or dental study specimens. Performing searches over the entire designated investigatory time period revealed a total of six examples of genuine human remains for sale, all listed with some variation of the disclaimers that either the specimen was suitable for medical or dental research, or as “articulated for medical use.” Specimen locations at time of auction included Germany, Belgium, Italy, Missouri and Utah in the United States, and Quebec in Canada. Specimen category was evenly divided between disarticulated skulls and complete articulated or repaired skeletons on display stands (or suitable for hanging display). Prices ranged from US \$900–4,599. With one exception, all specimens lacked any written mention or photographic evidence for a geographic source, so one cannot assume that the specimens originated in or near the listed location. Only one specimen (the most expensive one; a complete skeleton of a “pathological,” “hunchbacked” individual allegedly deceased and/or collected *c.* 1950) contained a clear statement by the seller that the sale complied with local law and eBay policy. In all other instances, caveat emptor was advocated, with the buyer being advised to check local laws before buying or being held responsible for paying Customs fees and assuming all risks for Customs clearance. Only three of the specimens contained any statement of provenance, but all no more specific than “from a doctor’s estate,” “from a medical studio,” or “from a Canadian University.”

Although all specimens are stated by the sellers to be legal to sell, none offered warranties or liability for uninsured shipping, returns, etc. Importantly in light of what Huxley and Finnegan [24] revealed regarding specimens of possible medico-legal import being sold online, one of the current specimens (sold via the eBay store “Genetics,” with the specimen allegedly located in St. Louis, Missouri) was an adult, male, Caucasian skull with purported healed blunt force trauma to the frontal bone. The fact that the specimen is listed as such suggests eBay continues to ignore the possibility that specimens with medico-legal import can still be sold under their current regulations. Significantly, using the same keywords and search parameters on Amazon.com turned up no examples of the active sale of genuine human remains, although animal specimens and resin replicas were present.

### Who is buying?

Three categories of potential purchaser of human remains online have been suggested by this market analysis. They are a) collectors of ethnographic (“tribal” or “primitive”)

art; b) seekers of medical specimens for either legitimate research purposes or as novelty items; and c) practitioners of specific religions or religious sects around the world, primarily in North America. Overall, our data suggests that the vast majority of dealers in such artefacts (with an online presence) are based in European or North American countries, primarily the US, UK, France and Germany. This includes private dealers operating through channels such as eBay. However, this does not necessarily imply that all individuals who might bid on or purchase from said dealers are located locally, or are walk-in traffic; on-line purchases can occur from anywhere, especially in illicit markets [36]. Similar to the antiquities trade in general, the growth and relatively minimal “self-policing” of e-commerce makes tracking and controlling the human bone trade exceptionally difficult. Research such as that presented here can only act as a representative sample to “update” what is known about purchasers and “merchandise.”

The global and Indo-Pacific ethnographic (“tribal” or “primitive”) art market posits that an artefact’s age, whether it was manufactured (skilfully or poorly) for the art market itself, whether it has been repaired, and the overall purpose of manufacture are crucial questions to answer when gauging inherent “worth” to both dealer and buyer [42, 43]. Although the mythos surrounding so-called ‘headhunting’ trophies does not necessarily reflect ethnographic reality, at least in the case of the Dayak [44], it is arguably a selling point. Regardless of whether or not a given trophy skull was purchased out of perhaps misunderstood fear or reverence for a “savage” tradition, or to commemorate its perceived passing, human dignity must be denied the ethnographic “other” before a skull can become an objectified “curio.”

For those seeking *memento mori*, the skull of a 14th century saint, for example, represents a different category of “ethnographica” [45] that includes artefacts such as prosthetic limbs, old medicine bottles, deformed animals, etc. Although the legal donation of human bones derived from autopsies could supply hospitals and medical schools with teaching specimens (upon donation of one’s body to science), the use of grandiose descriptors such as “extraordinary,” “rare,” “valuable,” and “spooky” by, for example, eBay dealers in alleged medical specimens seem to emphasize the novelty factor of owning human remains above other concerns. Finally, practitioners of specific religions/religious sects such as Vajrayana Buddhism (see below) or Palo Mayombe seek human remains, or artefacts made from them, to invoke the dead to heal, harm, or bring ancestral power or guidance into one’s daily life. Whether practitioners are Western converts seeking to demonstrate their devotion to their new faith, or members of diasporas seeking to maintain practices crucial to their identity, the necessity of and “authenticity” lent by use of real human remains makes acquisition by even illicit means worth it for some.

## Regional case studies

### South Asia

For the purposes of this research, South Asia encompasses Tibet, Nepal, India and Bhutan. Almost the entire subsample of human remains specimens or artefacts currently or recently sold on the global market which can be sourced to these countries consist of items intended for use by practitioners of “Chöd” healing rituals of the Vajrayana/

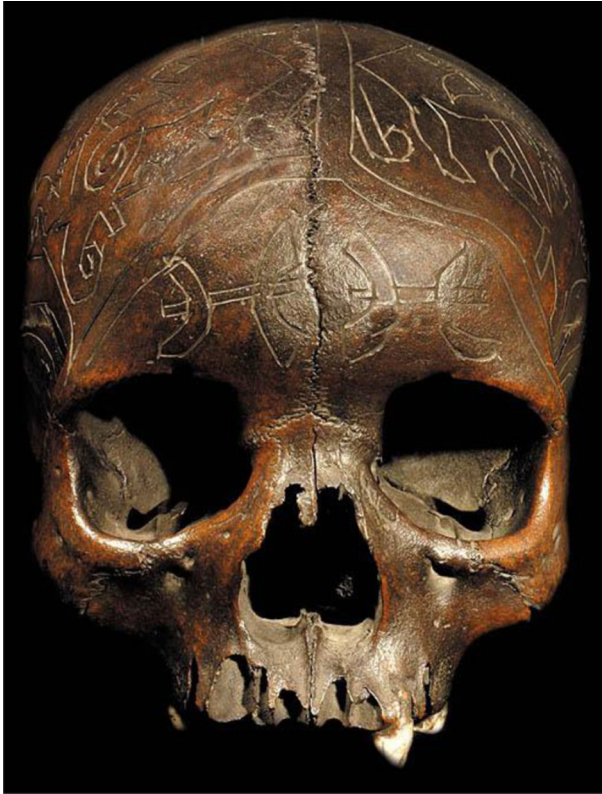
Mantrayana lineages of Tibetan Buddhism [46–48]. As the tables above indicate, several examples of “kangling” (human bone trumpet, usually made from femora or tibiae) and “kapala” (cups or bowls made from human calvaria, known as Thöpa in Tibetan) continue to be sold or offered online. Many kapala are ornately decorated with inlaid copper, silver, or real or fake precious gems and kangling routinely have animal (preferably goat) skin covering the distal end of the femur (see Fig. 1 below). Examples of skull-cap “damaru” (small, two headed skin drums) were also recorded. Finally, two examples of antique artefacts made from carved segments of human bone reused as bracelets or as part of an ‘apron’ were also documented. Prices of items recorded here range from US \$250 to AUD \$4,599 (ritual bone ‘apron’), with most specimens towards the low end of that range. Most have stated age estimates of early-late 1900s, but at least one dealer states that all newly created kapala and kangling sold are sourced to the “tribal remote Bhutanese community of Sakten, located in far Eastern Bhutan,” given that Bhutan is the only nation in the region from which human bone can be legally exported [47]. A few examples of recently sold or available Naga trophy skulls (northeast Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam; tribe unspecified) were also recorded.

### Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian specimens currently offered for sale consist primarily of ethnographic “trophy” skulls sourced to former head-hunting cultures of Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo (e.g. Kendayan, Dayak, Melawi) (see Fig. 2 below), as well as the Ifugao and Bontoc tribes of the Philippines. Trophy skulls from these cultures represent a significant proportion of those recorded (66/174; 37.9 %), and many are intricately carved and decorated, sometimes stained or coated in a brown patina, and sometimes mounted on display boards in pairs or triplets, or accompanied by faunal remains such as boar skulls [37]. Most are offered for sale as stand-alone items, but one or two specimens consist of half-skulls (Dayak) or a mandible attached to a gong/mallet instrument in the case of the Bontoc specimen. Many of these specimens were listed as already sold or as for sale by private arrangement, but those with listed price are no more than \$3,000 (or AUD



**Fig. 1** Antique decorated kangling. Image courtesy of a US gallery



**Fig. 2** Dayak carved trophy skull. Image courtesy of a US gallery

\$4,600, in the case of the Ifugao mounted specimen for sale at the time of writing). Some specimens allegedly derive from named collections dating to the late 1800s or 1900s (e.g. Ex Elizabeth Grunwald, Grenoble, France; Ex Francois Coppens, Brussels, Belgium). The remainder allegedly derive from private European collections or have no stated provenance (the dealers simply providing a rough age estimate of production and/or collection). Only a few examples of published literature exist that document Dayak trophy skulls within old collections [49], while other research analysed “trophy skulls” taken from Japanese and Vietnamese soldiers by returning servicemen during WWII and the Vietnam War respectively, or from a private eBay sale [50–52].

The most demonstrative and important case study to involve the illicit traffic of archaeological human remains from the Indo-Pacific region into Australia has been described in detail elsewhere [39]. It involved the attempted online sale of Iron Age (*c.* 2,500–1,500 BP) bronze bangles, finger rings, earrings, and forearm and wrist guards fashioned from single sheets of decorated bronze, still frequently found for sale in public markets in rural and urban Cambodia, as well as regional transit point cities such as Bangkok and Singapore [53]. What makes this case unique in an Australian and global context is that many of the objects in question still contained soil and human bone. Although no additional archaeological specimens of this type from Southeast Asia or elsewhere were documented during the period of this study, this does not mean that off-line commerce, especially within source countries, does not occur.

## The Pacific

The vast majority of individual artefacts and ethnographic specimens documented in this survey originally derive from cultures indigenous to Island Southeast Asian or Pacific Island nations, particularly Papua New Guinea, Indonesia (Irian Jaya), Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands, with the vast majority being ethnographic trophy skulls. Using the individual count method, of the 174 “trophy” skulls recorded from the online records of all dealers combined, 28 (16.09 %) are sourced to the Asmat, eight (4.5 %) to the Iatmul, six (3.4 %) to Vanuatu tribes, four (2.2 %) to various Sepik river tribes and one each from unspecified “Soloman Islands,” “Irian Jaya,” “West Papua,” “Gulf Province,” or “May River” tribes (see Table 3 and Fig. 3 below). A further 11 specimens (6.3 %) were documented as having a general Papua New Guinea provenience, but with region and ethnic group unspecified. While there is some evidence that certain New Guinea cultures such as the Iatmul continue to produce so-called “over modelled skulls” as an aspect of tangible heritage [54], scholarly analysis of colonial-era collections of, for example, Asmat material culture suggests that the inclusion of trophy skulls in collections served the competing needs of missionaries and early anthropologists at a time when headhunting traditions were ending [55], but that museum, collector, and indigenous demand continue to drive the market [56].

Many of the Indo-Pacific region ethnographic specimens with any stated ownership history derive from colonial-era collections by European, American or Australian officials stationed in Island Southeast Asia or the Pacific [49, 57], so their dispersal and eventual sale by European or American dealers is not surprising. Satisfying the “tribal” art collecting community’s self-imposed criteria of “authenticity,” age, adhering to local aesthetics, and use by “tribal” people in “tribal contexts” [42, 43], it is likely that trophy skulls from the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere might be more actively collected if more existed on the market, given the near complete lack of legislation related to cultural property exportation from the region, or cultural property related MoU agreements between source and demand countries [58]. As it stands, successful confiscation and repatriation appears few and far between for human remains sourced to this region [59, 60].

## Africa and the near East

Very few specimens genuinely or allegedly sourced to African or Middle-Eastern nations were observed over the course of this research, but those that were recorded seem to derive from the same two online galleries; one in France (or possibly Belgium; no exact contact address was listed on the website), and the other by the same German auction house discussed above. As Table 3 shows, in regards to specimens categorized as trophy skulls, the French (or Franco-Belgian) dealer had, at the time of our study, recently sold 16 specimens sourced to Benin, 15 to Togo, and three to Nigeria (19.5 % of the total). The German gallery, on the other hand, sold one specimen from a Cameroonian ethnic group (Bangwa), one from Nigeria (Tiv) and one from Togo (ethnic group unnamed) (1.7 %). Aside from the Egyptian mummies or mummy fragments discussed above, the Near East



Table 3 Geographic distribution of trophy skulls by source culture and market destination

Source culture/country	Market destination											Total
	USA	Canada	Germany	France	UK	Belgium	Switzerland	Australia	NZ	Philippines		
Asmat	14	1	8	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	28
Benin	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Cameroon	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Dayak	18	3	6	8	6	9	0	0	0	0	0	50
Iatmul	3	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	8
Ifugao	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	14
Indonesia-Sunda/Timor	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Irian Jaya	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Korwar	2	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	6
Naga	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Nigeria	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Palawan	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
PNG-Gulf region	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
PNG-Sepik region	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
PNG-Misc.	4	0	0	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	11
Peru	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Soloman Islands	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Togo	0	0	1	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Vanuatu	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	6
Total	59	6	31	47	7	20	1	0	1	2	0	174



**Fig. 3** Asmat trophy skull “ndambirkus.” Image courtesy of a French gallery

is also represented in our assemblage by at least one skull (previously sold by the abovementioned French or Franco-Belgian dealer) said to derive from an Algerian Neolithic site (exact provenience unspecified). The fact that trophy skulls and other ethnographic “curiosities” from West and Central Africa were able to find markets and buyers within their former colonial ruling states is not surprising, but does suggest that the proffering and purchase of such items is motivated by more than just “aesthetics.” Indeed, the inclusion of such items as softly-lit black and white photographs of nude African women in the same on-line catalogue suggests that capitalizing on the “exoticism” (perhaps, perversely, the “eroticism”) and “otherness” of both the people and their ritual items might still influence the purchasing decisions of well-to-do individuals in the market, long after the era of colonial subjugation ended.

The on-line sales records of the auction catalogues, unsurprisingly, do not mention who the buyers were, or whether or not they were genetically indigenous to West Africa or culturally affiliated with the ethnic groups in question. If they were, then perhaps the purchase of such esoteric items was done with the intent to repatriate them. A potentially contrasting example can be seen in the case of several Hopi “katsinam” masks (considered sacred objects by historic-period and contemporary Hopi Native Americans) sold at auction in Paris despite evidence that at least one had been recently stolen, and that the sale violated US law, Hopi law, and the UNESCO Convention [61]. In this case, the auction house (Neret-Minet Tessier & Sarrou) asserted that all of the masks had been acquired legally, despite protest, and that the nameless bidder had “peerless taste.” In a twist, the losing attorney paid for one of the masks at auction out of his own funds so as to repatriate it to Hopi representatives [62]. However, at least four additional katsinam masks purchased were also repatriated, including items purchased by Pierre Servan-Schreiber [63], Richelle Dassin [64], and Monroe Washburn [65]. In addition, several other culturally significant artifacts were purchased in December, 2013, by the Annenburg Foundation, also in Paris, but have since been repatriated [66]. Although human remains were not involved in the Hopi auctions, if the West

African specimens discussed above were bought for purposes of repatriation, it would be an unusual act for a private collector to carry out, as opposed to museums that might eventually repatriate if pressured [19].

### Latin America

Only one specimen, an allegedly Huari skull from Peru, was recorded during our investigation. Being already sold by the German auction house discussed above, this specimen is unique amongst the trophy skulls recorded in this study in that it appears to be mummified, still containing skin, lips, and possibly hair (although the forehead is wrapped with a woven cloth band). The eyes have been replaced by seeds (see Fig. 4). Unlike trophy skulls from the Indo-Pacific region previously sold by this auction house, this specimen is labelled as merely a “curiosity,” with provenance given only as “Siguas, sur de Arequipa, Peru.” If accurate, this would give a rough provenience of the Santa Rita de Siguas district, Arequipa Province, in southeastern Peru [67]. The date range offered for the specimen is (“presumably”) 800–1000 AD, which does overlap the currently accepted chronology of the Huari (“Wari” in English) state that controlled much of the south-central Andean and coastal regions of Peru during the Middle Horizon period *c.* 500–1000 AD [68].

Wari sites, especially intact mortuary sites, are incredibly rare discoveries, with most having been looted well before archaeologists can reach them [69]. When Wari burials and trophy skulls have been recovered from secure archaeological contexts, they have provided a wealth of information about not only the expansion and eventual “collapse” of the Wari Empire, but also the daily lives of both rulers and subjects [70, 71]. Due to the only very general provenience and the complete lack of ownership history proffered to the bidder at least in the catalogue itself, one might reasonably conclude that this specimen has its origins in the rampant burial looting that has afflicted archaeological sites of many prehistoric cultures throughout Peru for decades, if not centuries [72]. Despite Peru being signatory to all major international Conventions on cultural property, having MoU agreements with numerous South and Central American Countries, South Africa (pending), Turkey, and the US (notable European exceptions being France and Germany), the traffic apparently continues, and might even be increasing [73]. The generic category of “human remains” is included in the ICOM Red List of Peruvian Antiquities at Risk [74], but this category does not make specific mention to Wari period remains. However, notice is given to Customs agents that “any antiquity that may have originated in Peru should be subjected to detailed scrutiny and precautionary measures.” The situation in other Latin American countries is much less well known, but there is at least tentative evidence for a trade (desired or actual) in other categories of human remains, such as “tsantsa” (so-called shrunken heads) from the Jivaro region, Ecuador [75].

European source countries?

The question of historic-period specimens from European market countries such as England, Italy, Germany and France also being a part of the global human remains



**Fig. 4** Alleged Huari trophy skull. Image courtesy of a German auction house

trade is worth examining in more detail. Our preliminary investigation revealed three dealers that represent case studies warranting further discussion; one the abovementioned German auction house, the second the abovementioned French (or Franco-Belgian) online gallery, and the third a private dealer in natural history/taxidermy specimens out of northern England. Numerous other dealers (11 dealers with stand-alone websites, and 32 private eBay dealers currently or recently active) were also recorded as current or recent buyers and sellers of human remains allegedly sourced to old European ex-medical collections or Victorian-era curio collections. In fact, the majority of medical specimens recorded for sale or recently sold by on-line galleries or private dealers have either no stated source, or derive from European or North American collections, some with ‘back stories’ purporting to tie the specimen in question to famous murder cases. For example, the German auction house mentioned above having recently sold the nearly-complete skeleton of the “last man hanged in Hessen, Germany,” allegedly executed in the 1500s.

## Part 4: Conclusion

The exploratory research presented above has revealed an active global trade in human remains, including archaeological and ethnographic artefacts and former or current medical specimens. It is a trade which in the main appears to be carried out by currently licit means although as the Shesepamuntayesher case referred to above indicates there is also an illicit component of this market whose true dimensions still eludes description and analysis. While our research does suggest that the attempted open sale of human remains derived from archaeological sites is a very rare occurrence, it is impossible to know the true extent of the trade from online data alone. As the in-store or street-level observations of human remains for sale made by one of us (DH) in Southeast Asia in 2011 (Vietnam) and 2007 (Cambodia), and 2013 (United States), “public” art, antiques or antiquities dealers at least partially dependent on walk-in traffic could easily arrange for the sale of illicit goods via an in-person appointment at another location. This being said, the evidence at this stage suggests that the most prominent demand countries are located in North America and Europe, while the specimens and artefacts themselves can be sourced or stored anywhere, including from collections that derive from market countries themselves, such as Germany or Italy. Auction houses, smaller online galleries (occasionally associated with off-line dealers operating out of store fronts), and individual sellers using platforms such as eBay are all participants.

Prospective buyers were able to be categorized into three broad, and potentially overlapping categories; namely collectors of ethnographic (“tribal”) art/curios, collectors of medical specimens for either legitimate educational purposes or as “macabre” novelty items, and practitioners of specific religious sects or practices, such as the Chöd healing rituals in Vajrayana Buddhism or Palo Mayombe. Marketing rhetoric and the degree of transparency provided by dealers regarding ownership history and the legality of import or export varied greatly, with most dealers providing no more than the suggestion that buyers “check local laws.” Such a caution is certainly warranted since it is apparent that national and even local laws differ widely in regard to most if not all aspects of dealing in any way with human remains including not only their export and import but also their burial or cremation; transportation and storage; dissection and preservation; sale or display [14]. Take, for example, the case of Australia from where our research has been conducted. No uniform national legislation exists in Australia regarding the treatment of human remains and it is left to each of the states and territories of the Australian Federation to regulate this subject area. In regard to the specific import or export of human remains into or from the country the Australian Customs and Border Protection Agency (ACBPA) official website states that there is no need to make either an import or export declaration but:

“If you intend to import human remains or ashes into Australia you should contact the Australian Embassy in the country from where the remains are to be exported prior to importation into Australia. The source country may have specific requirements or conditions associated with the movement or export of human remains or ashes” [76].

Having made this statement the ACBPA asserts elsewhere, under the headings of ‘moveable cultural heritage’ and ‘foreign cultural property, that there are restrictions

which apply to certain categories of human remains. Thus the remains of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, including bark and log coffins used in ceremonial burial, cannot be exported while other human remains that have been removed from their place of discovery for 50 years or more may require a permit to be exported [77]. Further, Australian's traveling abroad who wish to import remains are reminded of their obligation to comply with local laws relating to the export of cultural property, and that if a permit is required they may be requested to produce it to ACBPA at the border. Australian citizens are also reminded that substantial penalties apply, including seizure and forfeiture of illegally obtained foreign protected objects, to those who fail to meet these requirements [77].

Earlier research discussed elsewhere [38, 39] suggests that the seizure and forfeiture penalties referred to by ACBPA are in practice largely unenforceable and that Australian border protections against the import of all types of illegally obtained and protected cultural heritage objects of foreign origin are woefully inadequate. Not only are the legal protections defective but so too are the abilities of border officials to identify suspect imports and question dubious importers. ACBPA currently lacks the specialist investigative and prosecutorial skills displayed by ICE and the HIS in the US. Efforts to increase the overall awareness of Australian customs agents to art and antiquities crime continue, but progress is slow and incremental [78]. Given the history of active, reactive, and sometimes contradictory public and private collecting by Europeans throughout the Indo-Pacific region discussed above [30, 79], the fact that very few ethnographic items containing human remains were being sold by Australia-based dealers is somewhat surprising, especially considering the relatively weak cultural property legislation currently in place [38].

The extent to which the situation described briefly here in Australia applies to other countries remains unclear but the research data as a whole suggests that the human remains trade continues to be a relatively minor but overlooked (and potentially growing) aspect of the global illicit antiquities trade, functioning under the principle of caveat emptor. Given that replica bones would likely not suffice in any of the collecting communities discussed, Customs seizures and prosecutions for illicit exportation or importation cannot be expected to increase in future without better training for border control officials and unless laws are updated to close the existing loopholes that allow the sale and transport of human remains, especially in source countries. Genuine human remains are arguably more readily identifiable by international customs authorities, but statements of "for educational use" might mask trade in specimens actually sourced to illicit excavations of new archaeological sites, as opposed to actual medical teaching specimens. Fundamentally, what is needed is greater dealer transparency coupled with online retail networks such as eBay requiring sellers and buyers to comply demonstrably with pre-existing policy.

Several examples of the means by which the licit and illicit sale of human remains continues to occur, especially without sufficient and verifiable due diligence, have recently received media attention. In January, 2010, the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) called upon Christie's auction house to withdraw from sale one human skull and two femora once affiliated with Yale University's Skull and Bones Society [80]. Emphasizing that not enough information was at hand at the time of the sale to be certain that the remains were not Native American, nor that no federal laws or international accords would not be violated,



Christie's eventually bowed to pressure, but only because "another party claimed rights to the remains" [81]. WAC ethics protocol includes redress to the Vermillion Accord on Human Remains and the Tamaki Makau-rau Accord on the Display of Human Remains and Sacred Objects [82], bolstering their official objection to the sale. Although these Accords are valuable in efforts to prevent illicit or questionable sale or acquisition of human remains, Christie's own explanation for withdrawing the lot suggests little heed was paid. In addition, other cases, such as the ransacking of the graves of WWI war dead for saleable relics and memorabilia (doing irreparable damage to context and the skeletons themselves in the process), suggests much more educational effort is needed [83].

The issue of the violation of the basic human dignity of the dead that is required for this trade to continue is reinforced by, for example, a UK based private dealer offering an item consisting of a human skull (allegedly Dayak) and an animal skull (primate) tied together with cordage and decorated. A warning is given to potential buyers that importation of this piece might be prohibited in their country without a CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) permit. CITES permits are required in order to import or export endangered faunal specimens, especially if quarantine for possible biological hazard prevention will be needed. The lack of any kind of advice or warning against the importation of human remains given by this seller, then, suggests that less importance and legal 'risk' was assigned to their international shipment. Very occasionally, ethical collectors of such material will intervene and notify authorities when very suspect, or especially macabre, cases (potentially damaging to their reputation) arise [84], however the research presented above strongly suggests that expecting the online human remains trade to become fully self-regulatory is relatively futile. Unless more direct regulatory provisions are put in place and enforced in both source and demand countries, trade in the 'mainly nameless and faceless dead' will continue, with only the occasional arrest or sensational news story to attest to its existence, and bioarchaeologists in the field left to pick up the pieces.

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