



## **Torres Strait remains**

*Torres Strait remains - Audio*

### **Nigel Warburton**

In 2011, after long negotiations, the Natural History Museum in London agreed to repatriate 138 ancestral remains to the Torres Straits Islands. The remains had been in the possession of the museum since the late nineteenth century, and this was the largest single return to Australia to date. I met up with Ned David and Seriako Stephen, representatives of the indigenous Torres Straits Islanders, when they were in London to discuss with the museum whether and how the remains could be accessed for future study on their return. Ned David began by explaining how this came about.

### **Ned David**

Back in 2000, the government of the United Kingdom, led by Tony Blair, and John Howard, the Prime Minister of Australia, basically signed an in-principal agreement that, I think, allowed for the repatriation of human remains from the United Kingdom back to Australia. On hearing that this particular arrangement has basically created an opportunity for our communities or our people to seek to have the remains of our forebears returned, that allowed for a few things to happen. One, of course, is that we spoke to all seventeen communities in the Torres Straits to get their opinions, which, in more ways than one, simply was, I guess, an opportunity for the people to say that we would like the remains of our ancestors that were taken some time ago, under a number of ways and a number of circumstances, to be returned home. We came over to England in September/October of 2010, to speak to representatives from a number of institutions that included the National History Museum.

### **Nigel Warburton**

Seri, I wonder if you could tell us why this is such an important issue for you.

### **Seriako Stephen**

Thank you. This issue is of cultural significance to our community in the Torres Straits, and us natives say that we have a mandate and the consent of the community elders and the entire community to bring back our ancestral remains to our community, and the significance of that is that we have that affinity with those ancestors that were taken over 100 years ago. We have a spiritual connection to them; we have cultural connection to them.

**Nigel Warburton**

So, what would you say to the people who have argued that these remains have scientific value in terms of the study of the evolution of humanity, of the study of different cultures, and so on, that they have been looked at within a museum, and we are talking about quite a large distance of time between the deaths of the individuals and the present day, so that some people have argued that they are of more value to humanity as biological remains that can be studied scientifically than as symbolic objects or as objects of spiritual significance?

**Ned David**

This is about values. This is about the principles of our community and our people, our connections to our ancestors. It's extremely important that our ancestors are laid to rest in the appropriate manner that befits their position in our society or in our community. And as has been stated, in every single group that we have consulted, that whilst the remains of our forebears, kept under lock and key, are so far away from home, their spirits will continue to wander lost in another land. Now let's not in any way suggest that we as a race of people ourselves don't close the door on what the benefits that can be derived from what science can do, and in this regard we are quite keen to hold discussions, have discussions, with the scientific community. But at the end of the day, whatever decision is reached, we will need first and foremost to respect the values of what I think makes us a distinct race of people.

**Nigel Warburton**

And, presumably, you know a lot about the likely intentions of the people whose body parts we are talking about, so that it's inconceivable that they would have wanted their bones to have ended up in a box in a museum.

**Ned David**

Well, I think that's probably something that, or a question that would apply to any community, that you wouldn't want a relative of yours being held elsewhere against the wishes of the family or the people.

**Nigel Warburton**

Actually, my father and grandfather both left their bodies to medical science, so there are different traditions, I mean their bodies have presumably been dissected and used by medical students or in some other way. So there are different cultural views and different individuals chose differently. But, presumably, it would be a complete lack of respect in your tradition to treat bones as merely material objects and not attached to the person that they were once part of.

**Ned David**

Ah, look, that's exactly right.

**Nigel Warburton**

And the process, presumably, involves negotiation, probably compromise as well. Are there aspects in which you feel you have had to compromise?

**Ned David**

I think, at this point in time, we are trying to reconcile amongst ourselves about our own obligations as leaders, at this point in time in our community, and it's walking a very fine line, our cultural obligations both as Torres Straits Islanders, and as leaders of our time. And it is ... the Torres Straits is an extremely multi society, I think. I mean there is no middle ground. We laugh the loudest at jokes; when we mourn, everybody knows we are in mourning; and you get on the wrong side, and we will do you harm. I think, that's how I try to describe us at times. There is no middle ground. This is I guess the cross roads for us, because we know the expectations on us from our own people is exactly as you say. There is no other argument. There is no other cause. We are here to take our people back home and lay them to rest. It is as clear as that – but it isn't. How we traverse that next stage is probably one of the most difficult things that we are going to have to do. So sometimes I think we are really fortunate to travel here and wander around and look at the sites and other times I think we're burdened with this massive responsibility of going back and explaining to our own people that there is another way, we don't know exactly what that is, just yet, but I think we should consider it. It's tough.

**Nigel Warburton**

Do you see this as Europeans making amends for wrongdoing in the past? Or is it more practical than that, that there is something which they've now, by whatever means, got possession of and they could return them so they ought to? Or is it some sort of symbolic act they are performing by returning these bones, that they are saying we were culpable, we are guilty of something?

**Ned David**

I think it is an absolute paradox, myself. I mean, there are a number of remains were part of ... I guess where the clergy has played a role some hundred odd years ago, when Christianity, I guess, arrived in the Torres Straits. And a hundred years later we see a submission that is based on values that are one hundred per cent driven by Christianity to basically state a case to bring back the very same remains that were taken a hundred years ago. Now the islander race, the Torres Straits society, are one hundred per cent Christians.

**Nigel Warburton**

I notice that in the reporting there are no illustrations, no photographs of the remains in question. I was intrigued by that, because that's almost the opposite of what you would expect with a museum, which is all about displaying, or making available to researchers the objects

which are in their collection. So was that something that you particularly argued for that these objects shouldn't be represented?

**Ned David**

There are a couple of reasons for that. There are a number of the remains that are of special significance as part of some of our practices and traditions, whilst in some regard there are people in the museum community or the scientific community, whatever, that feel that it's a great artistic value to have them on public exhibition and display. It would be totally inappropriate in our context, in our culture, and that's one of the big reasons as to why we requested that they be kept out of publications. In this regard, the Natural History Museum has been very respectful of our wishes and have carried every one out without question.

**Nigel Warburton**

How important is it for you that these remains are coming back to the Torres Straits Islands?

**Seriako Stephen**

These museums demonstrate a reconciliation of past actions, and practical reconciliation is important. Doing the things that they talk about in practical reconciliation is what the NHM is doing, and that actually sets a foundation for all the other institutions, museums, medical institutions that holds all indigenous remains throughout the world, and we know that in other countries it will be a challenge for us in communities and also for the government, the Australian government that, you know, have been great assistance to us to assist communities to return indigenous human remains in particular to Australia, and I think that the reconciliation there now is flying, and it's flying high, and for all past injustices, past actions, as I said, were actually doing a practical reconciliation, and the NHM have demonstrated that and laid that foundation.

**Ned David**

When we first went out to speak to people about, you know, what were, I guess, some of the possibilities, as part of going down the repatriation process. The elders, a number of them, said, look, we first heard of the remains of Torres Straits Islanders that were taken sometime ago in the 70s. For that long, it's been a subject of discussion. We always said that this is a business that we will one day need to resolve. You're obliged that when someone passes on to put them to rest in a manner befitting a Torres Straits Islander. Basically that's the work that people like Seri and myself find ourselves in. And so, yeah, that's basically it. Extremely significant, very important. We have these very opulent type, I guess, gravesites. Most are in people's yards because we maintain a strong connection with our dead, and there's certain processes that happen within a member of the family or community's life, and one very special one is when they pass on. We do certain things and, as a number of the elders said, the spirits of our forebears and ancestors are basically wandering lost in a foreign land and

need to be brought home, and there is a place in the Torres Straits that we collectively believe when someone is rightfully laid to rest that's where their spirit goes. Basically, we are just trying to finish the work that we can do in our time and hopefully it will happen in our lifetime.