

# Exploring Ethics and Interdisciplinarity in Provenance Research of Museums' Ancestral Remains: A Case Study of the A.L. Pinart Collections from Oceania

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**Abstract:** This article presents recent provenance research on the Indigenous ancestral human remains gathered by Alphonse Louis Pinart (1852-1911) during his journey in Oceania on board the French navy cruiser *Le Seignelay*. The collections he brought back from this trip, including both ancestral remains and artefacts, are currently scattered between different museums in Paris and Boulogne-sur-Mer (France). Based on the documentation available, it appears that the context of acquisition of the remains is vague and highly questionable in terms of ethics. Working on the provenance research of the ancestral remains, brought back by Pinart, does not come as an obvious task considering the numerous calls for repatriation, the decolonization of museums and the development of new ethical standards when dealing with human remains. Moreover, the recent introduction of a new set of legislation in the French cultural sector increases the complexity of the issue. In this article, we aim to explore the ethical and decolonial questions raised by working with the ancestral remains 'collected' by Pinart and to offer some points of consideration with regards to interdisciplinarity and the cultural and historical specificities of Oceania. We argue for the contribution of scientific data in provenance research, showing that physico-chemical and anthropological analysis, if consented to, are not necessarily antagonistic to ethical considerations.

**Keywords:** Alphonse Louis Pinart; provenance research; ancestral remains; ethics; bioanthropology

## Introduction

Our research project started as two separate projects that have found common ground in the figure of Alphonse Louis Pinart (1852-1911) and his journey in Oceania in 1877. Often dubbed as a traveler, a professor or a collector, Pinart traveled around the world, gathering a large amount of cultural belongings, artefacts and, more importantly here, ancestral human remains, now kept in different museums in France.<sup>1</sup> He produced several publications and numerous field diaries, in which he recorded his travels and sometimes documented how he

came to acquire artefacts and ancestral remains.<sup>2</sup> These diaries, now kept at the Bancroft Library, the primary special-collections library of the University of California, Berkeley, were transcribed by Guillaume Lescop, a Ph.D. candidate from the Côte d'Opale University, and Marie Hoffmann. The diaries were the starting point of the authors' research project on the provenance of these collections. Constraints regarding the reconstruction of the intrinsic information of the cultural and biological material brought back by Pinart led us to develop the idea of an interdisciplinary project contributing to the discipline of provenance research. Our aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the origins of the remains acquired by superimposing

1 Musée de l'Homme, Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Château-Musée of Boulogne-sur-Mer.

2 Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, California, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, Alphonse Louis Pinart papers.

scientific data on historical data while integrating the Indigenous communities' consent to the level of information produced. The specificities of Oceania, a vast region comprising several states, not all of which independent, where the legitimate custodians of the remains have yet to be identified, raise questions about the ethical handling of the ancestral remains collected by Pinart.

While working on the collections provenance and perusing Pinart's diaries, there is no doubt that the way in which he acquired the ancestral human remains is questionable – at the very least – and clearly an integral part of colonial frameworks. The ancestral remains gathered by Pinart have been handled on numerous occasions by an international scientific community to address various themes of bio-archaeological and forensic anthropology research. However, these scientific inquiries are increasingly constrained by recent developments in ethical considerations established by descendant communities, by editors of anthropological journals and through political activism.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with these remains, even for the purpose of documenting their provenance, raises important ethical questions due to the sensitivity surrounding the issue of ancestral human remains in Western museum collections.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the progressive acknowledgement of museums' participation in colonial agendas and systemic racism, in line

with the calls for a more ethical and postcolonial science,<sup>5</sup> and to decolonize museums,<sup>6</sup> working with ancestral remains can indeed be considered problematic. Then again, can provenance research on ancestral remains be forgone, when doing so could be tantamount to maintaining a status quo that would perpetuate the colonial paradigm? Recently, the role of these ancestral remains has been called into question, depending on the observer and his or her background. Some scholars view these remains as witnesses of a violent colonial history, an inescapable component for addressing historical injustices,<sup>7</sup> while others regard them as rare and invaluable evidence of human biological diversity, shedding light on aspects of humanity's past.<sup>8</sup> While we often perceive these two perspectives as conflicting, are they fundamentally irreconcilable? Can anthropological science be reinvented and decolonized through the leadership of Indigenous communities and the development of

- 3 Kirsty Squires / Rocío García-Mancuso: Ethical challenges associated with the study and treatment of human remains in anthropological sciences in the 21st century, in: *Revista Argentina de Antropología Biológica* 23 (2021), No. 2, 1-22; Watkins Rachel: Anatomical Collections as the Anthropological Other: Some Considerations, in: Pamela K. Stone (ed.): *Bioarchaeological Analyses and Bodies*, Cham 2018, 27-47, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-71114-0\\_3](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-71114-0_3); Mélissa S. Murphy / Klaus D. Haagen: Colonized Bodies, Worlds Transformed: Toward a Global Bioarchaeology of Contact and Colonialism, Gainesville 2021; Sian E. Smith / Cara S. Hirst: 3D Data in Human Remains Disciplines: The Ethical Challenges, in: Kirsty Squires / David Errickson / Nicholas Márquez-Grant (eds.): *Ethical Approaches to Human Remains: A Global Challenge in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology*, Cham 2019, 315-346, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-32926-6\\_14](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-32926-6_14).
- 4 Samuel J. Redman: *Bone rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums*, Cambridge, Mass. 2016; Chelsea H. Meloche / Laure Spake / Katherine L. Nichols: Working with and for Ancestors, Abingdon 2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809317>; Lucia Patrizio Gunning / Debbie Challis: The Plunder of Maqḍala: Ethical Concerns Around Belongings and Ancestral Remains in Museums, in: *Museum International* 74 (2022), No. 3-4, 60-71, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2022.2234192>; Susan Pollock: The violence of collecting, in: *American Anthropologist* 125 (2023), No. 2, 377-389, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13845>.

- 5 George Nicholas / Julie Hollowell: Ethical Challenges to a Postcolonial Archaeology: The Legacy of Scientific Colonialism, in: Yannis Hamilakas / Phil Duke (eds.): *Archaeology and Capitalism, From Ethics to Politics*, Abingdon 2016, 59-82; Ann. M. Kaka-liouras: NAGPRA and Repatriation in the Twenty-First Century: Shifting the Discourse from Benefits to Responsibilities, in: *Bioarchaeology International* 1 (2017), No. 3-4, 183-190, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5744/bi.2017.1007>; Meloche / Spake / Nichols 2020 (see FN 4); Akhil Gupta / Jessie Stoolman: Decolonizing US anthropology, in: *American Anthropologist* 124 (2022), No. 4, 778-799.
- 6 Marion Bertin: Allier kastom et tabu au musée: gestion et exposition des objets du Vanuatu, in: *ICOFOM Study Series* 47 (2019), No. 1-2, 41-55; Marion Bertin: Décoloniser les musées du Pacifique. Quelques défis pour le futur, in: Kerstin Smeds (ed.): *The Future of Traditions in Museology. Materials for a Discussion*, Paris 2019, [https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/03/2019\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_tradition\\_in\\_museology.pdf](https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/03/2019_the_future_of_tradition_in_museology.pdf), <29.10.2024>; Arthur Tompkins (ed.): *Provenance Research Today. Principles, Practice, Problems*, London 2020; Katharine Anne Nelson: *Decolonize This Place: The Activist Potential of Anthropology Museums*. Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs), South Orange, NJ 2021, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4020&context=dissertations>, <29.10.2024>; Yves Bergeron / Michèle Rivet: Introduction. Décoloniser la muséologie ou « re-fonder la muséologie », in: *ICOFOM Study Series* 49 (2021), No. 2, 29-43; Alaka Wali / Robert Keith Collins: Decolonizing Museums: Toward a Paradigm Shift, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (2023), 329-345.
- 7 Kathleen S. Fine-Dare: *Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA*, Lincoln 2002; Naohiro Nakamura: Redressing injustice of the past: the repatriation of Ainu human remains, in: *Japan Forum* 31 (2019), No. 3, 358-377, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2018.1441168>; Jonatan Kurzwelly: Bones and injustices: provenance research, restitutions and identity politics, in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 47 (2023), 45-56, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-022-09670-9>.
- 8 Christopher M. Stojanowski / William N. Duncan: Engaging bodies in the public imagination: Bioarchaeology as social science, science, and humanities, in: *American Journal of Human Biology* 27 (2015), 51-60, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.22522>.

interdisciplinary methodologies allying historians, anthropologists and museums? The goal of this paper is not to offer solutions, but to formulate and interrogate questions raised by the authors' research on the ancestral remains taken from the Pacific by Pinart and to suggest some avenues for reflection.

### The Life of a Colonial Traveler

Louis Alphonse Pinart was born in Marquise, northern France, in 1852, as the youngest of five brothers in a wealthy bourgeois family. Not much is known about his early years, except the mention in his biography that he “followed the common course of French schools in Lille and Paris”.<sup>9</sup> In 1867, as Pinart was only 15 years old, he visited the International Exhibition in Paris. There, perhaps through the extensive northern France bourgeois network, he met Abbott Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg (1814-1874), a historian and ethnographer, and member of the former Scientific Commission of Mexico. This encounter is supposed to have had a tremendous impact on Pinart and triggered his interest for the American continent. In 1870, being 18 years old (or maybe as early as 1869), he left France and sailed for San Francisco in California.<sup>10</sup> From there, he set up his first expedition to Alaska, entirely self-funded. This marked the beginning of his life as a traveler, adventurer and linguist, which is documented, for the first decade, in his travel diaries and notes. Between 1871 and 1882, Pinart recorded his extensive travels on the American continent and in Oceania, taking notes for his publications, recording words, gathering artefacts and ancestral human remains in every country he visited. For the majority of the artefacts and ancestral remains he sent back to France, the provenance and the specific context of the acquisition are unclear. Nevertheless, his diaries provide a good overview of his ‘collecting’ practices and also of the way he interacted with the Indigenous peoples and communities he met. Whereas he produced a large volume of the documentation



Figure 1: [Alphonse Louis Pinart], Bradley and Rulofson (San Francisco, Calif.), 1885, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG PORTRAIT-1530, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8452992d/f1.item>, <28.10.2024>.

(1.2 linear meters, 20 volumes, around 50 publications),<sup>11</sup> there are very few mentions of artefacts acquired. However, his literary production provides an outline of his collecting practices and his motivations as a colonial traveler. Pinart continued his travels after 1882, even if his career experienced a progressive decline that was connected to his personal life. At the beginning of his life, Pinart was wealthy, though issues with the family enterprise and his own inability to manage his money drove him into bankruptcy.<sup>12</sup> As early as 1875, when he had just negotiated a mission with the Ministère

9 Hubert Howe Bancroft: *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft: Literary Industries. The History Company*, San Francisco, 1890, Vol. 39, 622.

10 His biography indicates that he traveled to California in 1869, which is possible but has yet to be proven. He may have traveled in 1869 and stayed there up until leaving in April 1871 for his first Alaska expedition.

11 Ross Parmenter: *Explorer, Linguist and Ethnologist: A Descriptive Bibliography of the Published Works of Alphonse Louis Pinart, with Notes on his Life*, Southwest Museum, 1966.

12 Georges Oustric: Chapitre IX. Un siècle de croissance économique (1815-1914), in Alain Lottin (ed.): *Histoire de Boulogne-sur-Mer*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2014, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.septentrion.7589>; Pascal Riviale: Eugène Boban ou les aventures d'un antiquaire au pays des américanistes, in: *Journal de la Société des américanistes* 87 (2001), 351-362, here: 354, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/jsa.1855>.

de l'Instruction Publique, which agreed to finance his trip as well as that of French archaeologist Léon de Cessac (1842-1891), Pinart was already having financial difficulties. These troubles reduced his ability to travel and he died bankrupt in 1911.

### The “Violence of the Collecting” (Pollock 2023)

As Susan Pollock mentions, “the history of anthropological collecting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes clear that although the degree of coercion exercised varied, the practices of collecting inevitably took place in contexts of starkly unequal power relations and involved various forms of violence”.<sup>13</sup> In rare instances, the acquisition of some remains appears to have been achieved through consensual exchanges, as Pinart describes in Vaihu, Rapa Nui.<sup>14</sup> However, there are numerous clues in Pinart’s documentation as well as other sources that reveal the violence of his ‘collecting’ practices. In his field diaries, Pinart shows a real fixation on acquiring ancestral remains from Indigenous communities, often rushing to dig up and even loot graves, while appearing completely conscious of the fact that Indigenous communities might not agree or even take offense with such practices:

*“I brought back 40 skulls from this excursion; at 2 o’clock we set off again and returned to Matavéri at 4 ½ o’clock; fearing that the Kanakes would take offense at the sight of the skulls, I had them taken to the small cove which serves as a landing stage.”*<sup>15</sup>

Pinart also displays a sense of precipitation regarding Indigenous graves which offers a stark contrast to the respect he might show to Western and colonial cemeteries:

*“In the afternoon I visited the cemetery located opposite the agency, 200 meters away; it is surrounded by an adobe wall and contains a number of tombs on whose plank we read ‘captured and tortured to death by Apaches’ or ‘killed by Apaches’ it’s a sad story these dead would tell us if they could get out of their graves, and the blood doesn’t run cold in the veins at the reading of such inscriptions”.*<sup>16</sup>

Aside from ancestral remains, Pinart often provides an ‘anthropological’ description of the Indigenous peoples he encountered. According to the theories of the time, he commented on their hair, skin color, facial features and general shape of the skull and body. His adherence to racial theories indicates an added scientific violence to the violence of the collecting act in itself. In particular, the influence of ‘scientific polygenism’ can be perceived in his descriptions and comments on Black people found in multiple occurrences in his notes.<sup>17</sup> Several other sources also confirm Pinart’s violence regarding the acquisition of ancestral remains. For instance, Paul-Emile Lafontaine (1829-1887), a navy officer who traveled on the *Seignelay* with Pinart in Oceania in 1877, writes about an instance when Pinart had to face the wrath of Tuamotuans – Paumotus – after having “stolen” one or two bags of skulls on Makataea Island – Tuamotus.<sup>18</sup> Constance Gordon-Cumming (1837-1924), a Scottish painter, also traveling on the same vessel, provided an adverse impression of Pinart’s collecting habits regarding ancestral remains and burial materials:

13 Pollock 2023 (see FN 4), 381.

14 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877-01-18-1877-04-26, Vaihu, 1877: “[...] fearing that the Kanakes would take offense at the sight of the skulls, I had them taken to the small cove that serves as a landing stage; as the boat on board had left, I had to have them put in a hole and covered with rocks; here we met a few Kanakes, but to my great astonishment they went to fetch me other skulls and brought them to me for a little tobacco”.

15 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877 01 18 1877 04 26, 1877.

16 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Camp Bowie, March 2nd, 1876: “Dans l’après-midi je fis visite au cimetière situé en face de l’agence a 200 mètres; il est entouré d’un mur en adobe et contient nombre de tombes sur la planche de laquelle nous lisons «captured and tortured to death by Apaches» ou «killed by Apaches» c’est une triste histoire que nous raconterait ces morts s’ils pouvaient sortir de leur tombe, et le sang ne se refroidit dans les veines à la lecture de pareilles inscriptions”.

17 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877 01 18 1877 04 26.

18 Paul-Emile Lafontaine: Campagne des mers du sud faite par le *Seignelay* de 1875 à 1879, Paris 2006, 267.



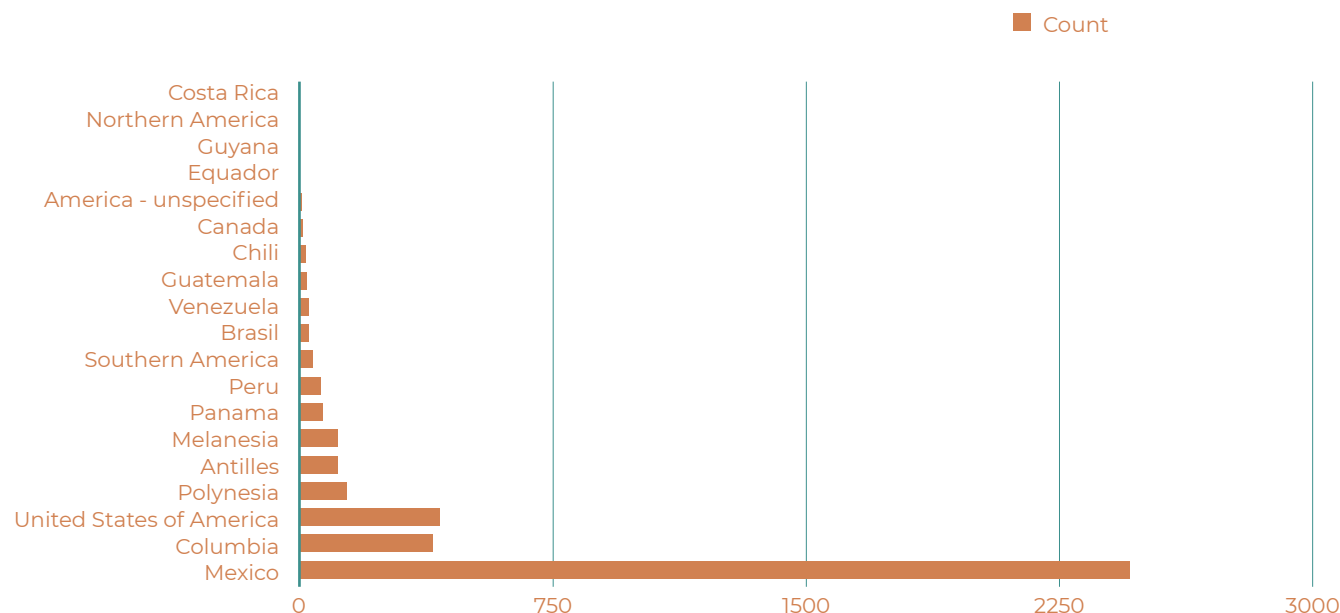


Figure 2: Geographical origins of A.L. Pinart's collections

*"I do not think the sailors like it very much, and they are always afraid that some trouble will arise with the natives of various isles on the vexed subject of the cranes, which our savant scents out from old hiding-places in caves and clefts of the mountains, with all the instinct of a schoolboy hunting for bird's nests".<sup>19</sup>*

The ancestral remains Pinart gathered were mainly sent to museums in Paris. Therefore, not only did contemporary racial theories largely contribute to the development of Pinart's collecting practices, but the latter on their part went on fueling racial theories.

### The Pinart Collection in the Musée de l'Homme

Throughout his travels, Pinart collected over 3.719 ethnological objects (including 102 fakes or archaeological duplicates), according to the catalogs of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, to which can be added the 223 objects (including a Tapuanu Mask from the Nomoi Islands, Figure 4) currently at the Château-Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer. These artefacts were gathered from Northern America, Southern America and Oceania (see Figure 2), and were either collected personally by Pinart, or acquired through antiquarians such as

Eugène Boban (1834-1908),<sup>20</sup> and donated mainly between 1878 and 1881. From Oceania, specifically, 277 objects and 160 ancestral remains were collected by, or given to, Pinart himself in Polynesia and Melanesia. A small number of these objects, 28, were acquired by Pinart through an intermediary under unknown circumstances during his journey in Oceania or on his return to France. For instance, the Tapuanu Mask origin is not linked to the trajectories of the ship *Le Seignelay*, as Pinart never visited the island. In any case, these Oceanic materials come from 18 regions of the Pacific, for which the locality of origin is more or less identified (Figure 3). Pinart's Oceanic collection is notable for its sheer size and the speed with which it was assembled. In fact, 437 elements from 18 regions, spread over a vast territory, were acquired in a particularly short space of time, from 21st March to 7th October 1877. This 'rapid' acquisition reflects unique collecting methods, influenced both by the collector's personality and the conducive political context.

Between 1878 and 1888, ancestral remains collected by Pinart in Oceania arrived at the National Museum of Natural History, in Paris, where they joined numerous other human remains from various regions of the world, whether colonized or not. Together, they shape a national

<sup>19</sup> Constance Frederica Gordon Cumming: *A Lady's Cruise in a French Man-of-War*, Edinburgh 1882, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Jane MacLaren Walsh / Brett Topping: *The Man Who Invented Aztec Crystal Skulls: The Adventures of Eugène Boban*, Oxford 2022, 99-103.

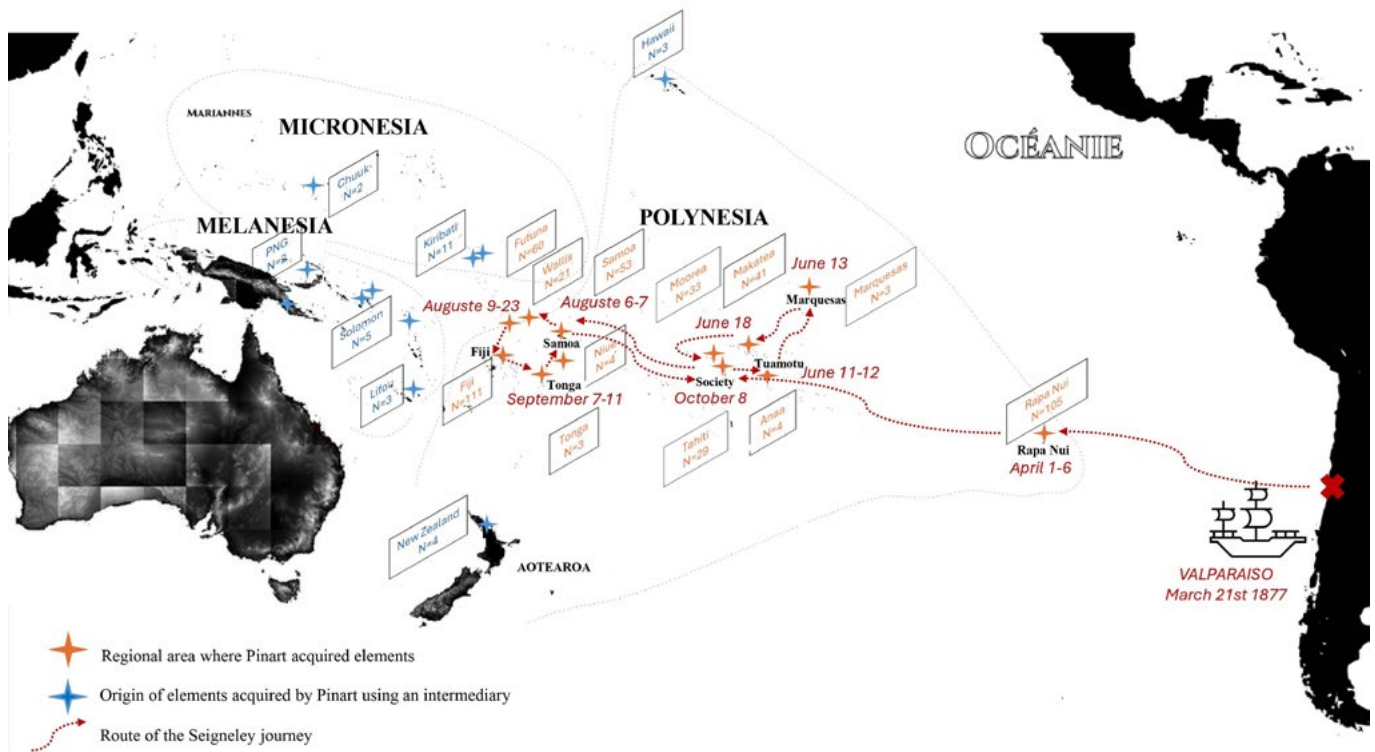


Figure 3: A.L. Pinart's journey on the ship *Le Seignelay*, commanded by the later Vice-Admiral and Naval Minister Théophile Aube (1826-1890), from March 21st, 1877. Number of items (cultural material and human remains) collected by A.L. Pinart in each region from MNHN's and MQB's digitized inventories. A.L. Pinart ended his voyage on October 8th, 1877 in Tahiti and joined a US schooner bound to San Francisco.

anthropological collection, composed of approximately 860 skulls, intended for scientific study, commissioned by Armand de Quatrefages (1810-1892) and Ernest Théodore Hamy (1842-1908), who held the anthropology chair at the MNHN.<sup>21</sup> Following the naturalistic perspective of de Quatrefages, anthropological collections were aimed to explore the relationships between the peoples of the earth through the comprehensive description of human diversity, affirming the common origin of the human species.<sup>22</sup> This perspective was revived with the establishment of the Musée de l'Homme by Paul Rivet (1876-1958) in 1938, whose ethnology is grounded in a "humanism" advocating "racial equality", understood as variations within the species.<sup>23</sup> The Musée de l'Homme thus became a monument where "non-Western" arts and artefacts play a significant role, promoting an idea of "universalism" and confirming a humanist colonial policy in France.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of

ancestral remains collected by Pinart in the French national collections marks, to date, the final stage of their journey and signifies a shift in their status from ancestors/individuals to "collectible objects", and later to a "scientific subject", as well as "political artefacts".

### Ethics and Decolonial Practices in Museums

Considering the colonial context and the violence of Pinart's practices, working on the cultural belongings and artefacts he acquired raises ethical concerns. These considerations are even more compelling when taking into consideration ancestral remains. Ignoring ancestral remains would contribute to maintaining a form of colonial status quo by leaving their existence undisclosed to the descendants communities and keeping them in the stasis of museum storages. However, studying them is not an evident option either. Researching the provenance of these ancestral remains does indeed raise the question of how to approach the issue in a manner that is both ethical and decolonial. Indeed, when working with topics as sensitive as ancestral remains, the issue of ethics and postcolonialism cannot be overlooked. The ethical question is mainly associated with the delicate nature

21 Bernard Dupaigne: *Histoire du musée de l'Homme: De la naissance à la maturité (1880-1972)*, Paris 2017, 1-300.

22 Armand de Quatrefages: *L'espèce humaine*, 2nd edition, Paris 1877.

23 Christine Laurière: *Paul Rivet: Le Savant et Le Politique*, Paris 2019, 159-282.

24 Fabrice Grognet: *La réinvention du Musée de l'Homme au regard des métamorphoses passées du Trocadéro*, in: Frédéric Poulard / Camille Mazé / Christelle Ventura (dir.): *Les musées d'ethnologie, culture, politique et changement institutionnel*, Paris 2013, 37-70, 47-52.

of human remains in general,<sup>25</sup> particularly in the archaeological and anthropological contexts. As mentioned by Marie Cornu and Vincent Négri, ethics are defined as a “set of principles and values that guide social and professional behavior”.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Indigenous ancestral remains, the ethical question cannot really be dissociated from the postcolonial critique.<sup>27</sup> The nature of these human remains, as stated by Cornu and Négri, raises the question of “ownership” that comes with these types of collections and their existence as “objects of studies”.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, they were taken away from Indigenous communities that have been exploited and abused by colonial powers and institutions, museums and science included. Moreover, as has been shown in recent studies, and as is confirmed by Pinart’s example, Indigenous ancestral remains were more often collected and looted than Western remains.<sup>29</sup> Compared to the United States, where NAGPRA offers a framework, as imperfect as it can be, European countries, where numerous ancestral remains are now kept, have yet to develop such a legal structure. Though there are some guides and tools on how to deal with human remains, such as the *ICOM Guidance for Restitution and Return of Items from University Museums and Collections*, identifying human remains as a priority area (ICOM 2021), or the *Deutscher Museumsbund’s Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections*,<sup>30</sup> as highlighted by Nilsson Stutz, there is still a general lack of

legal infrastructure and code of ethics surrounding human remains collections in Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Some research projects are progressively trying to fill this gap, such as *Ethical Entanglements*. The care for human remains in museums and research seeks to elucidate how ethical decisions are made and what values inform these decisions.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the implementation of a legal framework conceived by a Western and former – or rather, current – colonial state can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a useful tool. Indeed, this type of legislation that promotes standardized approaches often negates the diversity of Indigenous positions and realities. While the repatriation and reburial of ancestral remains is a priority or necessity for some descendants communities, others are not interested in these processes or would privilege different approaches.

For example, with respect to the *Rambaramps*, ancestral effigies from La Map, Malekula, Vanuatu, for which some members of the communities might request repatriation, whereas others might instead require specific traditional care.<sup>33</sup> As for today, one can refer to the protocols created in Aotearoa, New Zealand, by Te Papa Tongarewa, accessible online, as it constitutes a methodological guide on provenance research, with research reports accessible: not only are the concerned ancestral remains described, but it also includes a study of the territory and archaeological funerary sites (Provenance Research Te Papa).<sup>34</sup> One can also mention the *Repatriation Handbook* by Michael Pickering regarding ancestral remains from First Nations Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).<sup>35</sup> These guides could be used as an adaptable template for different territories and communities in Oceania. The main challenge is related to the

25 Patricia M. Lambert / Phillip L. Walker: Bioarchaeological Ethics: Perspectives on the Use and Value of Human Remains in Scientific Research, in: M. Anne Katzenberg / Anne L. Grauer (eds.): *Biological Anthropology of the Human Skeleton*, Hoboken, NJ 2018, 1-42.

26 Marie Cornu / Vincent Négri: L'éthique en archéologie, quels enjeux normatifs? Approches françaises, in: *Canadian Journal of Bioethics/Revue canadienne de bioéthique* 2 (2019), No. 3, 9-16, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066458ar>, 9.

27 Liv Nilsson Stutz: Between objects of science and lived lives. The legal liminality of old human remains in museums and research, in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 29 (2023), 1061-1074, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2234350>; Gunning / Challis 2022 (see FN 4).

28 Cornu / Négri 2019 (see FN 26), 12.

29 Pollock 2023 (see FN 4); Diane Martin-Moya et al.: And Still, Ancestors Remain Out of Their Graves: Reflections on Past, Present, and Future Bioarchaeological Practices while Building an Indigenous Cultural Heritage Database in Quebec, in: *American Antiquity* 88 (2023), No. 3, 386-401.

30 Wiebke Ahrndt et al.: *Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections*, Berlin 2013, [http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content\\_files/file/TO/296.pdf](http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/TO/296.pdf), <24.04.2024>.

31 Stutz 2023 (see FN 27), 1062.

32 <https://ethicalentanglements.online/>, <29.10.2024>.

33 Jennifer Shannon: Collections Care Informed by Native American Perspectives, in: *Collections* 13 (2018), No. 3-4, 205; Hugo DeBlock: *Artifak: Cultural Revival, Tourism, and the Recrafting of History in Vanuatu*, Oxford 2018; Bertin 2019 (see FN 6); Lydia Degn-Sutton: *Stories of Return: A Collection of Repatriation Narratives*. Diss. University of Denver 2021.

34 <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/learn/for-museums-and-galleries/how-guides/collection-management-repatriation-guide/provenance>, <29.10.2024>.

35 Michael Pickering: And the Walls Came Tumbling Down, in: Cressida Pforde / C. Timothy McKeown / Honor Keeler (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation*, Abingdon 2020, 918-926.

cultural and political diversity of Oceanian societies. The lack of consultation with Indigenous communities, who are the rightful custodians of these remains, makes it difficult to assess their potential perspectives on them.

Moreover, the expanding scope of sciences involved in analyzing past populations is fostering higher standards of conduct in the study and handling of human remains. In essence, the growing emphasis on ethical considerations regarding human remains is advancing a more comprehensive understanding of how these remains, both ancient and recent, should be respectfully treated.<sup>36</sup> How can we effectively approach human remains within the context of provenance research without fully comprehending the historical period and geographical context from which they originate? Taking the example of the ancestral remains collected by Pinart, the application of meticulously conducted scientific analysis would significantly contribute to reconstructing the identities and histories of individuals, thus playing a vital role in restoring their history and dignity, which were denied by the collecting processes themselves. Consequently, such efforts would also enrich provenance research, a field that originated in the Oceanic region with emblematic case studies associated with particularly turbulent and poignant colonial legacies: for instance, the story of Ataï's head,<sup>37</sup> the macabre trade in Maori heads,<sup>38</sup> and the repatriation of Aboriginal ancestral remains from Australia.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 4: 88.3.57 Tapuanu Mask, Nomoi (Mortlock) Islands, Pinart collection – Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer.

## An Argument in Favor of Interdisciplinarity

The quest to trace the origins of the ancestral remains collected by Pinart encounters several challenges due to the lack of information regarding: the collection location, the circumstances of collection, the age of the bones, the cultural artefacts gathered alongside the bones, and the specific link connecting all the collected items (both ancestral remains and associated burial artefacts), which may represent a familial, communal or cultural cohesion of objects that are now stripped of their contexts and sometimes scattered across various institutions. While archives occasionally offer insights into the location and circumstances of the acquisition, as well as its subsequent journey, they often fall short in providing the historical and anthropological context for the material itself.<sup>40</sup> This

36 Squires / Errickson / Márquez-Grant 2020 (see FN 3).

37 Christelle Patin: La tête d'Ataï, une récolte en dehors des collectes ordinaires ? Étude comparative du prélèvement de quatre médecins de la marine en Nouvelle-Calédonie, in: Christelle Patin (dir.): Ataï, un chef kanak au musée: Histoires d'un héritage colonial, Paris 2019, 43-149, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.mnhn.6077>.

38 Simon Jean: New Eyes on Curios: The Acquisition and Repatriation of Toi moko between France and New Zealand as a Postcolonial Approach to Museum Practice, Wellington 2022, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.19316468>.

39 Pickering 2020 (see FN 35).

40 Marie Hoffmann: Provenance Research Before Repatriation: The Limits of Museums' Archives, in: Carl Deußen / Yagmur Karakis (eds.): Thinking About the Archive and Provenance Research (= Boasblogs Papers 4 [2022]), 28-33, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18716/KUPS/64500>.



challenge extends beyond Pinart's collections and applies to all collections undergoing provenance research. From an interdisciplinary perspective, scientific data, produced in collaboration with relevant communities and endorsed by social and political institutions, can supplement historical records to deepen our understanding of those collections. Such data encompasses contributions from the fields of archaeology, geochronology and bio-anthropology.

The documentation of Pinart's journey in Oceania is heterogeneous, with varying levels of detail regarding the locations of object and human remains collections.<sup>41</sup> His one-week stay on Rapa Nui, from April 1st to April 6th in 1877, is particularly well-documented, including descriptions of three sites where ancestral remains were collected: Vaihu, Hanga Roa, and Hanga Ho'onu. Pinart also mentions the circumstances in which skulls were acquired, exchanged for tobacco by certain individuals within the communities. However, the documentation of the rest of his journey is notably less comprehensive. Pinart provides scarce information regarding his collections (locations and contexts) during his visits to Tahiti, Wallis, Anaa, Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, and the Carolines. Nonetheless, some locations can be identified through his writings, such as Makatea, where he describes encountering the *Seignelay* on April 16th, 1877, along the western coast. Pinart provides indications and geographical markers based on relatively permanent monuments or geological formations, allowing the locations of his acquisitions to be pinpointed today through land surveys. According to his writings, it would be possible to reconstruct his one-day journey on the island of Makatea, during which he collected 41 skulls. However, due to the sensitive nature of this information, we cannot provide further details on the geographical markers identified by Pinart.<sup>42</sup>

Land surveys would not only provide precise geolocation but also contextualize the collection sites. For example, Pinart describes collecting

surface-deposited bones in caves, ossuaries or in close proximity to monuments. In Hanga Roa Bay on Rapa Nui, Pinart recounts:

*"[...] the first interesting thing encountered was at the site and behind the old village, a long stone wall [...] where I saw bones and skulls mixed with stones; I later informed Dr. Thoulon, and he excavated this point, from which he extracted about 20 skulls from two complete skeletons."*<sup>43</sup>

Relocating these sites would not only document funerary practices, but also investigate the relationships between the ancestral remains collected in the same location (familial and/or communal) and assess their antiquity. It is not always clear whether Pinart conducted archaeological excavations at certain locations; a brief topographic survey of the site would clarify this aspect. The issue of the ancestral remains' antiquity is often neglected in provenance research. However, it is a crucial matter tied to the relationship of the living with the dead. This theme delves into the distinction between the 'forgotten death' and the 'present death', referring to the long-deceased and the recently deceased, respectively. The difference lies in whether the deceased passed away within living memory, or beyond it.<sup>44</sup> The phrenologist P.M.A. Dumoutier (1797-1871) collected over a hundred bone specimens from various regions of the world during his expedition aboard the corvettes *Astrolabe* and *Zélée* led by Jules Dumont d'Urville (1790-1842).<sup>45</sup> He frequently mentions in his notes collections made from "abandoned burials".<sup>46</sup>

Here, the term "abandoned" holds significance and could imply ancestral remains that were 'forgotten' or 'disconnected' from the living, who may not recognize any particular affiliation with these

41 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877 01 18 1877 04 26.

42 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877 01 18 1877 04 26.

43 Alphonse Pinart: Voyage à l'île de Pâques, in: Le Tour du monde, Nouveau Journal des Voyages 36 (1878), 225-240, here: 227.

44 Lydia de Tienda Palop / Brais X. Currás: The Dignity of the Dead: Ethical Reflections on the Archaeology of Human Remains, in: Squires / Errickson / Márquez-Grant 2019 (see FN 3), 19-37, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32926-6\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32926-6_2).

45 Jules Dumont d'Urville: Voyage au Pôle sud et dans l'Océanie sur les corvettes l'Astrolabe et la Zélée, Paris 1842.

46 Emile Blanchard / Pierre-Marie Alexandre Dumoutier / Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville / Charles Hector Jacquinot: Voyage au Pole Sud et dans l'Océanie sur les corvettes l'Astrolabe et la Zélée: exécuté par ordre du Roi pendant les années 1837-1838-1839-1840, sous le commandement de MJ Dumont-d'Urville, Paris 1854, 85.

bones. One has to keep in mind that what Dumoutier may have perceived or described as ‘abandoned’ might just have been a misinterpretation of the situation due to cultural bias, but it may also have served as a term to absolve Dumoutier, allowing him to justify his collections. The memories linked to these remains may have been lost, greatly impacting the claims of the descendants communities regarding the status of these remains. To address this issue, radiocarbon dating of the remains could help assess the generational gap between descendants communities and the ancestral remains, determining whether these remains can be biologically linked to them. Alternatively, some ancestral remains brought back by Pinart could be very ancient, dating back to the pre-contact era. Such evidence would identify a site with significant archaeological and historical potential. On Makatea, for instance, Pinart mentions: “I can collect some skulls and bones in caves that appear to have been used since ancient times”.<sup>47</sup>

Analyzing these remains along with associated material could potentially contribute to research on the biological and cultural history of Oceanic societies. Radiocarbon dating would also ensure compliance with recent French law concerning “human remains belonging to public collections” (Section 3 of the Heritage Code), which stipulates that “the human remains concerned [by requests for restitution and removal from the public domain] are those of individuals who died after the year 1500”.<sup>48</sup> In summary, radiocarbon dating can allow for the assessment of the level of relationship between the living and Ancestral remains, the evaluation of a site’s archaeological potential, and the legal determination of whether a remains can be subject to a repatriation request.<sup>49</sup> At present, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether the ancestral remains gathered by Pinart are

dating from before or after 1500 A.D., impeding eventual repatriation requests from descendant communities.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the issue of the ancestors’ identities remains largely unexplored in provenance research, which tends to focus solely on the collecting context. However, the ancestral skulls collected by Pinart belonged to ancestors with extraordinary social histories. They once played vital roles as members of past societies at specific points in history, only to be later transported as mere ‘specimens’ to the other side of the world, erasing both their identity and their humanity. It was not until the early decades of the twenty-first century that the question of the rights of the deceased began to emerge.<sup>51</sup> This emergence can be attributed to the development and application of methods aimed at establishing the personal identity of the deceased, even when only skeletal remains or DNA survive. In essence, bio-archaeology and forensic anthropology may grant the deceased a stronger ‘voice’ through a compelling tool: osteo-biography.<sup>52</sup> The theory that the body biologically records the environmental and social influences experienced throughout an individual’s life enables a more direct exploration of the experiences of individuals, thanks to the plasticity of the skeleton and its ability to respond and adapt to its surroundings.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, osteo-biographies shed light on individual lives through the comprehensive study of the entire skeleton and its burial context.<sup>54</sup> Through various methods of macroscopic and/or molecular analysis (including observations of body modification, ancient DNA analyses, biodistances, and

47 The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Alphonse Louis Pinart Papers, BANC MSS Z-Z 17, box 2, vol. 7, Diary 1877 01 18 1877 04 26.

48 Loi n° 2023-1251 du 26 décembre 2023 relative à la restitution de restes humains appartenant aux collections publiques, Art. L. 115-6.

49 On the question of the terminology regarding the topic ‘repatriation/restitution’, see Ciraj Rassool / Victoria E. Gibbon: Restitution versus repatriation: Terminology and concepts matter, in: *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 184 (2024), No. 1, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.24889>.

50 Another law regarding ancestral remnants from DROM-COM (départements et régions d’outre-mer et collectivités d’outre-mer) is also in development and should be modelled on the Law No. 2023-1251.

51 Kirsten Rabe Smolensky: Rights of the Dead, in: *Arizona Legal Studies Discussion Paper* 6 (2009), No. 27, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.924499>.

52 Lauren Hosek / John Robb: Osteobiography: A Platform for Bioarchaeological Research, in: *Bioarchaeology International* 3 (2019), 1-15.

53 Rosemary A. Joyce: Archaeology of the Body, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005), 139-158; Clark Spencer Larsen: Bioarchaeology in perspective: From classifications of the dead to conditions of the living, in: *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 165 (2018), 865-878, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23322>; Joanna Sofaer: Towards a social bioarchaeology of age, in: Sabrina C. Agarwal / Bonnie A. Glenncross (eds.): *Social Bioarchaeology*, Oxford 2011, 285-311.

54 Ann L. W. Stodder / Ann M. Palkovich: *The Bioarchaeology of Individuals*, Gainesville 2012.

radiogenic and stable isotope analyses), osteo-biographies try to reconstruct social and ethnic identities, kinship, post-marital residence, interactions and admixture, as well as climate change and health conditions.<sup>55</sup> These ancestral remains are fundamental for comprehending the world of the living through the ancestors' experiences, thereby challenging and reshaping our understanding of Western collections. Ancestral remains originating from the islands of Wallis, Anaa, Makatea, and Kiribati are exceptionally rare in European collections. Hence, those collected by Pinart serve as remarkable testimonies to the histories of these island communities, offering a fascinating glimpse into their past through the analysis of these remains. Concrete examples, such as forensic anthropology techniques to identify human skeletal remains obtained from the Tanganyika/Rwandan-Germany East Africa colony and Australian Indigenous groups, highlight ethical interdisciplinary projects facilitating the search for descendant communities via DNA analysis and the contextual reconstruction of death through osteological analysis.<sup>56</sup>

The authentication process preceding repatriation initiates further scientific inquiries, including the deepening of historical documentation, bio-anthropological analysis, and digitization. This approach is exemplified in the recent repatriation policy report by the Inuit Government of Nunatsiavut. During consultations, 76% of respondents expressed support for conducting studies on human remains prior to burial, contingent upon family consent, to verify or refute affiliation with the Inuit and cultural heritage.<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that the scientific dataset we propose to interrogate

raises ethical considerations regarding the dissemination of information linked to the location of sites and Indigenous knowledge, as well as the eventual physico-chemical analysis requiring the destruction of a minute portion of the bone, thereby destroying its physical integrity. The level and type of analysis should always be decided according to the interest and consent of the descendants communities, after discussion and explanation of the contribution of these methods to further the knowledge of their history.

## Conclusion

Pinart's collection, composed of over 4.000 artefacts and ancestral remains, notable due to its large scope and the short span of acquisition, has so far remained poorly documented; just as Pinart's diaries, kept at UC Berkeley, have never been published or thoroughly studied. If the movement towards provenance research is progressively filling the documentation gap, the study of ancestral remains within larger collections brings up sensitive outputs. As raised herein, excluding ancestral remains of provenance research appears to be a detrimental approach, perpetuating the colonial circumstances in which the remains have been held for decades and sometimes centuries. However, considering the ethical and decolonial issues associated with the nature of these remains, researchers should adapt and question their practices. If further research into Pinart collection, both material and archival, is needed, it should also incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies alongside strong ethical considerations. It would be crucial to make it a priority, once the descendant community is identified, to establish contact and notify them of the ancestral remains' existence and presence in the museum collections. Moving forward, it would be paramount to privilege consent and consultation with the descendant communities, as they should be the ones to validate, lead and orient the research. This approach is captured in the self-determination slogan "nothing about us,

55 Lesley Gregoricka: Moving Forward: A Bioarchaeology of Mobility and Migration, in: *Journal of Archaeological Research* 29 (2021), No. 4, 581-635, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-020-09155-9>.

56 Nicky Phillips: Indigenous groups look to ancient DNA to bring their ancestors home, in: *Nature* 568 (2019), 294-297, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01167-w>; Wilson Jilala / Noel Lwoga: Identifying the peopling of Tanganyika-Germany East Africa through Skeletal Remains: A case study of the Restitution process in Tanzania, in: *Academia Letters* 2 (2022), 1-6; Maurice Mugabow-agahunde / Charles Mulinda Kabwete / Jérôme Karangwa: Reconstructing the Provenance of Rwandan Human Remains at a Local Level, in: Bernhard Heeb / Charles Mulinda Kabwete (eds.): *Human Remains from the Former German Colony of East Africa: Recontextualization and Approaches for Restitution* Berlin 2022, 95-136.

57 Jamie Brake: What we heard: A Report on Consultations Relating to Repatriation in Nunatsiavut, Unpublished report on file at the Nunatsiavut Archaeology/Heritage Office, Nunatsiavut Government, Department of Language, Culture & Tourism, Nain 2016, 25.

without us”.<sup>58</sup> Further research should also address the question of neocolonial and Western concepts of copyright and ownership:<sup>59</sup> data access and ownership, such as to an ancestral remains database, should be decisions left to descendants communities, drawing, for instance, from the OCAP® (ownership, control, access, possession) principles. Indigenous Data Sovereignty is a reality that cannot be ignored and can be highlighted with tools such as labels developed by *Local Context*.<sup>60</sup> We also must keep in mind and acknowledge our position as white and Western trained scholars, questioning how the colonial background of our training and our institutions might be shaping our methodologies and epistemologies.


Finally, the transdisciplinary approach could be a key avenue to ensure ethical and decolonial processes when working with ancestral remains. Indeed, understanding how biological and social identities, along with historical contingencies, interact to shape specific human lives is an inherently significant topic. This approach is defined as ‘humanistic bio-archaeology’.<sup>61</sup> The contribution of interdisciplinary scientific data that illustrates these two dimensions, historical and scientific, would undoubtedly facilitate more nuanced discussions surrounding collections that bear witness to

transitional periods. As Christelle Patin notes, “these new data enrich the narrative and, simultaneously, the attachment to the remains; they give them substance”.<sup>62</sup> The integration of interdisciplinary data within provenance research would facilitate the restoration of the history of Oceanic societies and, consequently, their recognition. This integration of interdisciplinary data necessitates establishing a close link with the communities affected by Pinart’s trajectories, as the work depends on their interests and consent. In so doing, an additional narrative could be crafted for the ancestral remains gathered by Pinart – one that would tell the story of restoring the connection between communities and their ancestors, as well as shaping their future.

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Figure 2: Graphic created by Marie Hoffmann.

Figure 3: Map created by Wanda Zinger.

Figure 4: 88.3.57 Tapuanu Mask, Nomoi (Mortlock) Islands, Pinart collection – Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer © Franck Boucourt-ACMHDF

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58 Egil Olli: Opening Speech presented at the Global Indigenous Preparatory Conference for the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (8-13 June 2013), Alta, Norway; Sadie Heckenberg: Nothing about us without us: Protecting Indigenous knowledges through oral histories and culturally safe research practices, Diss. PhD Thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2018, [https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/1ffb3004-a81b-4605-8452-d95c563a6d46/1/sadie\\_heckenberg\\_thesis.pdf](https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/1ffb3004-a81b-4605-8452-d95c563a6d46/1/sadie_heckenberg_thesis.pdf), St. John, Hawthorn VIC 2018; Henrike Narr: Nothing About Us Without Us. Access for Indigenous Peoples to the United Nations and Perceptions of Legitimacy, PhD Diss., University of Tübingen 2020; Sarah Funnell et al.: Nothing About Us, without Us. How Community-Based Participatory Research Methods Were Adapted in an Indigenous End-of-Life Study Using Previously Collected Data, in: *Canadian Journal on Aging / La Revue canadienne du vieillissement* 39 (2020), No. 2, 145-155, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980819000291>.

59 Andreas Rahmatian: Neo-Colonial Aspects of Global Intellectual Property Protection, in: *The Journal of World Intellectual Property* 12 (2009), No. 1, 40-74, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1629228](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1629228), <29.10.2024>; Neha Gupta / Susan Blair / Ramona Nicholas: What We See, What We Don’t See: Data Governance, Archaeological Spatial Databases and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in an Age of Big Data, in: *Journal of Field Archaeology* 45 (2020), No. Sup. 1, S39-S50, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2020.1713969>; Andrea Wallace: Decolonization and Indigenization, in: *Critical Open GLAM: Towards [Appropriate] Open Access for Cultural Heritage*, 2021, <https://openglam.pubpub.org/pub/decolonization/release/1>, <29.10.2024>.

60 <https://localcontexts.org/about/>, <29.10.2024>.

61 Hosek / Robb 2019 (see FN 52), 2.

62 Christelle Patin: Petite rhétorique narrative des restes humains muséaux, in: *Technè. La science au service de l’histoire de l’art et de la préservation des biens culturels* 44 (2016), 14-17, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/technè.925>, 15.