

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

Aboriginal bones



NB: This is not a word for word transcript

Rob: Hello, I'm Rob.

Cath: And I'm Cath.

Rob: And welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. Today we're talking about bones.

Cath: Yes but not any bones, these are very old bones from past generations of Aborigines – the **native** people of Australia.

Rob: And these bones have become **artefacts** on display in museums around the world – but not for much longer. More about that soon. But first, I've got a question for you Cath. Are you ready?

Cath: Yes!

Rob: Where in your body would you find the humerus bone? In your:

a) leg

b) arm

c) head

Cath: I'm very confident about this. I think it's in your arm and sometimes we call it your funny bone.

Rob: OK, well, we'll see if you're right at the end of the programme. Bones are the subject of today's programme and particularly ones belonging to the **ancestors** of one of the oldest and smallest ethnic groups in the world.

Cath: Yes the Aborigines of Australia.

Rob: They now only account for approximately 2% of the Australian population and they've maintained many of their traditions and beliefs.

Cath: Yes, they attach a lot of importance to the bones of their dead.

Rob: That's why The University of Sydney's Museum of Anatomy is returning the bones it has in its collection to the Aboriginal people following a long campaign. Let's hear from the BBC's Phil Mercer about why the bones were collected in the first place. Listen to how he describes what people thought of Aborigines.

Phil Mercer, BBC

For more than 150 years the bones of indigenous Australians were collected around the world as part of studies into an ancient and enduring culture. Aborigines were often considered to be anthropological oddities. Their bone structure and skull size attracted great scientific interest. Other remains were found during construction work or by farmers and given to institutions for safekeeping.

Rob: So Phil Mercer was talking about how, for 150 years, people collected the bones of **indigenous** Australians.

Cath: Indigenous – that means people who belong to a place. In this case the Aboriginal people. And scientists considered these people to be anthropological oddities.

Rob: Anthropology is to do with studying the origins of the human race.

Cath: And oddities here means something unusual. So the Aborigines are called anthropological oddities because their bone size and skull structure were different from most other humans. So scientists were fascinated by this and when bones were found they were given to institutions – museums – for **safekeeping**.

Rob: Yes, they were looked after and put on display. But there's a sad side to this because Aborigines attach great importance to them. They believe that unless the dead are totally buried they will remain as souls in **torment**.

Cath: Torment means extreme suffering. So obviously they were very very keen to get the bones back.

Rob: And now the remains of six people have been returned and this was marked by a special event, or **ceremony**. Community elders from remote towns across Australia travelled to attend and carry out some of their **rituals**.

Cath: A ritual is something carried out in the same way every time. We can hear more about it from the deputy vice-chancellor of Sydney University, Professor Shane Houston. Hear how he describes the event...

Shane Houston, deputy vice-chancellor of Sydney University

It is a point in culture that says that spirits cannot rest far from country and we engage in a smoking ceremony to prepare ourselves and to prepare our ancestors for the trip back home. And it is an incredibly moving event where people embrace remains and embrace each other as if you would embrace a family member who has been apart for many years.

Rob: That was a very happy Shane Houston describing the ceremony as very **moving** – or emotional. He says their ancestors were prepared for the trip back home.

Cath: I'm sure it was a very emotional time so it's not surprising that people were **embracing** – or hugging - each other and embracing the remains like a family member who they haven't seen for a very long time. A very touching moment. So Rob, what happens to the bones now, do they pass to the community elders?

Rob: Well there's an amazing amount of information about these people and the Aboriginal community have a lot of knowledge about their background so the museum has returned the bones to the descendants – or relatives – of the dead.

Cath: That's good to hear but there must be a lot more bones still being exhibited around the world?

Rob: There are, so campaigners are continuing to **lobby** museums and colleges overseas to return their collections. But some have been repatriated – or brought home – in recent years.

Cath: Still a lot of work to do, it sounds like.

Rob: And I set you some work earlier, to work out the answer to this question. Where in your body would you find the humerus bone? In your:

- a) leg
- b) arm
- c) head

Cath: And I was very confident and I said arm.

Rob: And you're right. We do sometimes call it our funny bone when you knock it, it doesn't make you laugh though, it hurts!

Cath: No it just hurts actually, it's horrible!

Rob: OK Cath, could you please remind us of some of the vocabulary we've heard today?

Cath: Sure. We had:

native

artefacts

ancestors

indigenous

safekeeping

torment

ceremony

rituals

moving

embracing

lobby

Rob: Thanks Cath. We hope you've enjoyed today's programme, and don't forget you can download it as a podcast. Please join us again for another 6 Minute English very soon.

Both: Bye!

Vocabulary and definitions

native	A native of a country or region is somebody who was born there.
artefacts	An object which is of interest to archaeologists, usually something made by humans.
ancestors	The people we are descended from: our parents, grandparents, etc.
indigenous	People who originally belonged to a place.
safekeeping	To look after something for someone.
torment	Extreme unhappiness, pain or upset.
ceremony	A formal or religious event, such as a wedding or a burial.
rituals	Actions which are traditionally carried out in a particular situation or ceremony.
moving	Something that makes you feel very emotional.
embracing	To put your arms around somebody or something.
lobby	A group of people who work together to persuade an organisation to do something.

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