

# Authentication and repatriation of a ceremonial shrunken head from the US to Ecuador

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A ceremonial tsantsa—or shrunken head—was authenticated and repatriated to Ecuador in 2019, after it had been discovered amongst stored exhibits at Mercer University. The history of the artefact and the process of its authentication—which involved CT scans and assessment of 33 criteria such skin and hair features—are described in a study published in *Heritage Science*.

Tsantsas are unique and valuable artefacts that were produced by the Shuar, Achuar, Awajún/ Aguaruna, Wampís/Huambisa, and Candoshi-Shampra (SAAWC) peoples until the mid-20th century. They were made from the heads of enemies slain during combat in a labour-intensive, multi-step process. Tsantsas became valuable as keepsakes during the 19th century as a result of Western/European cultural encroachment, and unmet demand resulted in the production of convincing forgeries. As a result, repatriation of tsantsas to their places of origin requires prior authentication.

A team of researchers at Mercer University, USA report the authentication and repatriation of a ceremonial tsantsa discovered in the natural history collection of Mercer University and described in the personal memoirs of the original collector—a deceased faculty member of Mercer University—as having originated in the Ecuadorean Amazon. The authors examined the anatomy of the tsantsa using computed tomography (CT).

They found that the tsantsa had the structural hallmarks of a ceremonial [artefact](#), such as the size of the head, which was about as large as an adult human fist, and three holes in the upper and lower lips, joined together with a vegetal fibre, which are common in other ceremonial examples. The tsantsa also showed a distinctive, three-tiered hairstyle consistent with hair worn by SAAWC culture group members.

In total, the authors were able to affirm 30 of 33 authenticating indicators provided by Ecuador's National Cultural Heritage Institute and found in the academic literature, including evidence of traditional fabrication and modification. Although the authors caution that some of the authentic tsantsa characteristics might have been damaged as a result of it being used as a prop in the 1979 John Huston film *Wise Blood*, the findings allowed them to conclude that the artefact was a genuine, ceremonial tsantsa and not a forgery. The results of the authentication were accepted by the Ecuadorean government, and the tsantsa was repatriated in June 2019.

The authors also produced a to-scale 3-D replica of the tsantsa, suggesting that 3-D printed reproductions may be useful as enhancements, and in some cases even replacements for, authentic artefacts in cultural and historical education.

**More information:** Byron et al. The authentication and repatriation of a ceremonial tsantsa to its country of origin (Ecuador) *Heritage Science* 2021, [DOI: 10.1186/s40494-021-00518-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-021-00518-z)

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