

Assignment 2: Categorization – Referencing Knowledge Resources in Linked Open Data

Introduction & Context

For this assignment, our group worked with the biography of Joseph Ekwe Bilé (1892–1959), a Cameroonian born engineer, performer, and activist who lived in Europe during the colonial and interwar periods. His story, published on the Dekoloniale website, offers an important perspective on colonial history, migration, and Black self organization in early twentieth century Germany.

The aim of the assignment was to translate this biographical narrative into structured, linked open data on Wikidata. By doing so, we contributed to making Bilé's story part of a shared and accessible digital knowledge base. The project also aimed to reflect on how categorization and data modeling affect the representation of marginalized histories.

This process was not only technical but also interpretive. We needed to decide what parts of a life story could be represented as data, and how to do this in a way that respected the decolonial intentions of the original project.

Personal Role & Responsibilities

My role in the group was mainly as a researcher and data editor. I worked with gathering and verifying information about Joseph Ekwe Bilé, checking facts from the Dekoloniale biography with additional sources, including academic works by Robbie Aitken, Eve Rosenhaft, and Hakim Adi.

I also contributed to editing the Wikidata entry by adding new information about Bilé's education, occupations, political affiliations, and relationships. This included his studies in Thüringen and Moscow, his work as a performer and anticolonial activist, and his collaborations with figures such as Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker. By adding these details, the entry became more complete and connected to other relevant Wikidata items, such as the “Comintern” and the “Afrikanischer Hilfsverein”.

Methodological Approach

We began by developing a simple data model to guide how we would categorize the information. The model included basic categories such as birth and death data, education, occupations, organizations, relations, and places of residence. This helped us think systematically about how to turn a complex narrative into structured data.

The process required careful interpretation. For example, while the Dekoloniale biography describes Bilé's life in political and cultural context, Wikidata requires factual precision and predefined categories. We had to decide how to represent information such as "political activism" or "performance work" in ways that fit the Wikidata ontology without losing meaning.

We also worked with Linked Open Data principles, reusing existing Wikidata identifiers for people, places, and organizations to ensure that Bilé's data connected to a broader network of knowledge. References and sources were added wherever possible to maintain transparency and credibility.

Challenges & Considerations

One of the main challenges was to preserve context when transforming a rich, narrative text into discrete data statements. The Dekoloniale biography emphasizes Bilé's experiences with racism, colonialism, and transnational solidarity, but these themes do not fit easily into Wikidata's structure. Fields like "occupation" or "citizenship" risk simplifying complex realities especially for someone like Bilé, who lived as a colonial subject, migrant, and political exile.

This issue relates to what Crawford and Paglen (2021) describe as the "politics of classification", the idea that all taxonomies are political because they decide what counts as knowledge and what is left out. Even when Wikidata appears neutral, it still reflects certain assumptions about what is important and how history should be represented.

A similar critique is made by Das and Lowe (2018), who argue that natural history museums reproduce colonial hierarchies through their taxonomies. In the same way, open data projects like Wikidata risk reproducing Western structures of knowledge unless contributors work consciously to challenge them. These reflections reminded me that curating decolonial data is not just a technical task, but it is also an ethical and political one.

Critical Reflection

Through this process, I came to understand that curation and categorization are never neutral acts. Every decision about how to structure data and what categories to use, what relationships to include, shapes how a life story is understood. By adding Bilé's biography to Wikidata, we were not only entering information but actively shaping how his story became part of digital memory.

At the same time, I also saw the potential of Wikidata as a collaborative and open system. It allows multiple contributors to add missing perspectives and connect data across borders and languages. This openness gives decolonial projects a space to make marginalized histories more visible. However, it requires ongoing critical awareness to prevent simplification or misrepresentation.

In this sense, the assignment illustrated both the strength and the limitation of linked open data that can connect and preserve knowledge, but it cannot fully capture the complexity or emotions of historical experience.

Conclusion

Working on the biography of Joseph Ekwe Bilé showed how curating data is both a technical and interpretive practice. As a researcher and data editor, I learned how to transform narrative information into structured data while reflecting on the ethical and political dimensions of this process.

The project demonstrated that making marginalized histories visible through linked open data involves constant negotiation between precision and context. While platforms like Wikidata can expand accessibility and recognition, they also risk flattening complex lives into simplified categories.

Finally, this assignment made clear that curating data is a form of knowledge production, one that requires both technical skill and critical reflection on how digital infrastructures shape what, and who becomes part of shared history.