

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

Introduction & Context

In this assignment we worked with the biography of Joseph Ekwe Bilé (1892-1959). He was a Cameroonian engineer, activist and performer that lived in Europe during the interwar and colonial time. The story about him on the Dekoloniale website gives an important perspective towards migration, colonial history 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.

The process was technical and interpretive. We had to pick and choose between what parts of a life story could be datafied and represented. We also had to decide in what way to do it, we wanted to respect the original project and the decolonial intentions.

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 contributed to the editing of the Wikidata entry by adding information about Bilé's occupations, education, political affiliations and relationships. This included his studies in Thüringen and abroad in Moscow, his work as a performer and as an activist. I covered his collaborations with figures like Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker as well. By contributing with these details, the entry became more complete and connected to other relevant Wikidata items, like 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 choose how to present information like "political activism" and "performance work" in a way that would fit the Wikidata ontology while the meaning was kept intact

We worked with Linked Open Data principles, reusing already existing Wikidata identifiers for people, organizations and places to make sure that Bilé's data connected to a broader network of existing knowledge. Sources and references were added to maintain credibility and transparency.

Challenges & Considerations

One of the big complications that we ran into, was to preserve context when transforming a rich text into data statements. The Dekoloniale biography emphasizes Bilé's experiences with colonialism, racism and transnational solidarity, but subjects like these do not fit in easily in 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. Therefore open data projects like Wikidata risk reproducing western knowledge structures unless contributors work to challenge them. These reflections reminded me that curating decolonial data is an ethical and political task not only a technical one.

Critical Reflection

Through this process, I understood that curation and categorization are never neutral acts. Every single decision about structuring, categorizing and which relations to include are all part of, in our case, shaping a life story in a certain way. 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 recognized the potential of Wikidata. A way for people to collaborate on contributing different missing pieces and perspectives to connect data across borders, cultures and languages.

This openness gives decolonial projects a space to make marginalized histories more visible. Although that's a good thing, it requires critical awareness to prevent simplification and misrepresentation.

This assignment gave me a more nuanced view on both the strengths and limitations of linked open data, that can persevere and connect knowledge, but cannot fully capture the complexity or the emotions of historical experience.

Conclusion

Working with the Joseph Ekwe Bilé biography showed me how curating data is a technical, interpretive, ethical and political practice. As a data editor and researcher, I learned how to transform a text based story into structured data, while reflecting on the ethical and the political dimensions related to the practice.

The project showed me how making marginalized histories visible through linked open data consists of negotiation between precision and context. Platforms like Wikidata can be a part for expanding accessibility and recognition, but at the same time risk underplaying complex lives into simple categories.

For the final conclusion, this assignment made it clear that curating data is a form of producing knowledge, a practice that requires technical skill and critical reflection on how digital infrastructures shape what, and who become part of shared history.

Literature review:

Crawford, Kate, and Trevor Paglen. 2021. "Excavating AI: the politics of images in machine learning sets." *AI&Society*, 1105-1116 <https://www.lsba.org/documents/CLE/Diversity/excavatingai.pdf>

Das, Subhadra, and Miranda Lowe. 2018. "Nature Read in Black and White: Decolonial Approaches to Interpreting Natural History Collections." *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 4-14. <https://www.natsca.org/article/2509>.