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

1. Introduction & Context

For this assignment, our group worked on the biography of Joseph Ekwe Bilé (1892–1959), whose life story is featured on the *Dekoloniale* website. Bilé was a prominent activist, intellectual, and co-founder of the anti-colonial group *Liga zur Verteidigung der N###rrasse* (League for the Defense of the N*gro Race) in Germany. His biography offers important insights into anti-colonial resistance, diasporic organization, and the lived experience of Black political life in early twentieth-century Europe.

The aim of the task was to transform this narrative biography into structured, linked open data on Wikidata, thereby contributing to the visibility of marginalized figures in digital knowledge systems. By doing so, we sought to fill in missing details about his life, occupations, and social connections, and to connect them with other entities across the Wikidata ecosystem. The broader goal of the assignment was to engage critically with how digital infrastructures organize, classify, and circulate knowledge (Bowker & Star, 2000).

2. Personal Role & Responsibilities

Our group consisted of three members who collaboratively worked on identifying and categorizing data from the *Dekoloniale* biography. My main role in the project was as one of the categorizers. I focused on extracting details about Bilé's life, such as his political affiliations, occupations, and relationships, and converting this information into data points that could be appropriately represented in Wikidata. This process involved translating narrative sentences into structured categories such as *"member of," "occupation," "educated at,"* or *"place of residence."* I also helped discuss how certain data points should be interpreted or grouped, for instance, whether Bilé's political activities should be categorized under *occupation* or *affiliation.* Together, our group cross-checked each data point to ensure consistency and accuracy before contributing it to Wikidata.

3. Methodological Approach

We began by reading the biography aloud as a group, pausing to note any factual statements that could be expressed as structured data. This collaborative reading helped us collectively interpret the text and ensure that no relevant detail was overlooked.

Next, we compared Bilé's existing Wikidata profile with the information provided on *Dekoloniale*. We found that his entry contained only minimal information, birth and death dates, nationality, and a few identifiers, so our aim was to supplement it with missing data, such as organizational affiliations, locations, and family connections.

We then created thematic categories to organize the data we extracted. These categories included:

- **Biographical data:** birth and death information, nationality, education

- **Professional life:** occupations, roles, affiliations, and organizational memberships

- **Social and political context:** activism, political engagement, and participation in decolonial movements

- **Personal relations:** family members and social networks

By working through these categories, we realized that categorization itself produced new insights, for example, identifying Bilé's connection to other activists revealed the extent of his transnational political involvement. As Bowker and Star (2000) note, every act of classification both reveals and conceals aspects of the world; it makes certain narratives legible while obscuring others.

Finally, we structured the data using Wikidata properties, ensuring each point was linked to an existing Wikidata item wherever possible. For example, rather than merely writing "fought at World War 1," we linked him to the corresponding military unit, ensuring interoperability across the linked open data network.

4. Challenges & Considerations

One of the main technical challenges was understanding Wikidata's ontology and selecting the most accurate properties for each relationship. For instance, linking Bilé to family members required creating or identifying those individuals in the database, which involved additional data entry. Similarly, choosing between properties such as *"affiliation"* and *"member of"* required careful interpretation of the biography's wording.

We also faced ethical challenges in curating information about a historical figure we did not personally know. Some details, especially regarding his family, were not explicitly stated in the biography. We therefore discussed how to avoid speculation or the risk of misrepresenting Bilé's life. Our group agreed to include only verifiable data directly supported by the *Dekoloniale* text.

These considerations raised important ethical reflections on representation: transforming someone's life into structured data is not a neutral act. It involves decisions about what counts as relevant information and what remains invisible in the data model.

5. Critical Reflection

Working on this project revealed that data modeling is not only a technical process but also a form of knowledge production, echoing Ford and Iliadis' (2023) description of Wikidata as a *"more-than-technical project"* that depends on social negotiation, collective labor, and interpretive judgment. The act of categorizing Joseph Bilé's biography forced us to confront how digital infrastructures shape historical visibility. While the *Dekoloniale* project emphasizes narrative and contextual richness, Wikidata's structure requires standardization and simplification.

This tension aligns with the course readings on categorization and curating as knowledge production, particularly Bowker and Star's argument that classification systems shape what we come to know about the world. In our case, deciding which categories to use for Bilé's life, such as how to represent his activism, demonstrated how data categories influence how history is remembered.

The process also revealed the limitations of Linked Open Data: while it increases accessibility and connectivity, it can flatten complex human experiences into fixed properties. Nevertheless, it provides an important framework for ensuring that marginalized histories, like that of Joseph Ekwe Bilé, are represented and discoverable within global knowledge networks.

6. Conclusion

Through this assignment, I learned that working with Linked Open Data involves both technical precision and ethical responsibility. Making marginalized histories visible requires careful attention to how data is categorized, verified, and contextualized.

By contributing Bilé's story to Wikidata, we not only made his life more accessible but also participated in a larger process of decolonizing digital archives. This project deepened my understanding of how knowledge infrastructures can both empower and constrain representation, and how critical reflection is essential in curating data responsibly.

Ultimately, I came to see that data is never neutral, it reflects the choices, perspectives, and values of those who produce it (Bowker & Star, 2000; Ford & Iliadis, 2023). The process of categorizing Joseph Bilé's biography thus became not only an act of digital documentation but also one of historical care and ethical engagement.

References:

Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences.* MIT Press.

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