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The ethno-wiki project.
Ethnographic Museums in Wikimedia Commons

This contribution is a report about an initiative by a couple of idealistic and ambitious young people, motivated to use *Wikimedia* as a tool to save a vulnerable academic heritage collection and revive the research on its ethnographic artefacts. Their initiative may be able to create a network of small ethnographic collections in different parts of the world, which despite having no money to spend on object databases, still want to become a part of the digital community in order to be less unknown; a network which might also include source communities of ethnographic artefacts in European collections.  Here my story starts.

Due to recent changes in university curriculum and cutbacks, the Department of Ethnic Art of the Ghent University was phased out. Consequently the collections lost their educational function. However, a group of former students is now trying to give a boost to scientific research in the field of ethnic art by means of the Ethnographic Collections. They made a start on presenting objects from Africa, Oceania and the Americas as digital objects in *Wikimedia.* The project offers the opportunity to create a new role for the collections, as it aims to reduce the irreversible loss of cultural diversity. As a virtual museum and knowledge centre, it may attract a great deal of popular interest, and perhaps even interest from indigenous peoples.

One of the former students, Karen Andree, who worked on the spears of Enggano in Indonesia, expressed her ideas clearly. She said that her motivation to work on the *wiki*-project is that it opens ways for indigenous people to recover their history, to reconstruct it, and to regain their identity. We in the western world have collected hundreds of reports, manuscripts, some even dating back hundreds of years. Naturally it is more or less our duty to share this information with the local communities. Karen does not attach immediate significance to the idea that this could lead to a dialogue. If it happens, it will be a bonus. The most important thing is that people may connect with their past, and that this may become a starting point for creating a new cultural identity. Therefore we should supply information which is useful to them - such as the given names of objects, which may change in time. This is why we should use sources from different  periods; old and new ones, etc. Of course this leads to lengthier articles, but details such as these may turn out to be crucial.

Another aspect, that we perhaps should be more aware of, is that we are used to looking at "others" from an anthropological viewpoint. Sometimes we tend to give information we ourselves find interesting, because it differs so much from our way of living. But it may be indelicate to put such a stress on this "otherness". Perhaps we should rethink our way of phrasing things.

Karen Andree regards herself as an information mediator, stating "If we want to start a dialogue, or if we want to show these people objects related to their past, to allow them to trace back the histories, it is also important that we communicate with them and make mention of where and how they can find information. What we do in our *wiki* entries is just giving a kind of summary. That's why it will be important to link to sources, and refer to collections of these items in other museums. In this way, people from Enggano, for example, will realize that important parts of their cultural heritage can be found in Jakarta, Leiden and Washington. We could also add links to other websites, which may also be rele-

vant. This implies that these links, once in while, will have to be checked, which means that we are starting a continuous project."

The *wiki*-files could also help the revitalization of art production. In 2009 Marcelin Abong, director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre of Port Vila, was my special guest in the Ethnographic Collections of the Ghent University. He and his friend, a journalist for the Vanuatu Post, had seen a photo of our fern sculpture from Vanuatu in the catalogue of the recent Oceania exhibition in Brussels. Both men were deeply impressed by the sculpture, took their time to look at it from all angles, and of course they also took a lot of photos for the newspaper. The idea arose to publish the material and ask readers if they knew more about fern sculptures. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre would then try to stimulate artists to pick up the fern carving tradition. The strength of the *Wikimedia*-project is due to the fact that it will enable the descendants of the makers of ethnographical objects to use the photos for inspiration, comment on the given information, make corrections and additions, and share local knowledge with us. On the other hand, this exchange of knowledge will give rise to new research.

From my contacts with people in Oceanic regions, I know how important it is for them that attention is paid to their art and culture. Contact with remote areas such as the Pacific has improved greatly, due to Internet availability. In 2001, I did research in the Asmat area in West Papua. There I realized that even in these regions, where there is only very limited availability of electricity, Internet access was still possible. The digital revolution undoubtedly has far-reaching effects, worldwide. The Asmat Papuans, for instance, are aware of the fact that ancestral figures, made by their predecessors, are kept in museums in Europe and in America, and that their ancestors can be found almost anywhere in the world. Asmat people can see these pieces on Internet and that is something for them to be proud of. They recognize the styles of the villages where these sculptures were made. In this way they can reconstruct their history and may even make contact with their ancestors from fifty up to hundred years ago. This is really amazing!

The initiative to digitalize ethnographic objects by means of *Wiki Commons* was launched at the 2009 ICOM/ICME conference in Seoul. The ultimate goal is to create together a virtual museum without borders which will "act as a museum".
Therefore objects will have to be put online via "*Wiki Commons*", which is a free – non-profit – system being used worldwide. Everyone can contribute information to *Wiki Commons;* it is quite easy and the explanation is given by the system itself.

The idea itself is quite simple, but of course to put this into practice will no doubt be much more complex. Digitalization of collections is time-consuming, especially when the project is still in its infancy. Therefore it is important for the museums which plan to take part to cooperate. They will have to consult with one another on the system to come to uniformity.

In the first place, museums involved have to document their collections in an inventory – which means that they have to describe the objects using meta-data and link to pictures. For a lot of small museums and collections this first step is already a big one, as documentation of their collections in an analogue or digital inventory have not yet been done. Often their collections are only partially documented. Most small museums have to cope with a lack of staff and resources, and as physical visibility is often considered more important than virtual visibility, as a rule more attention is paid to exhibitions.  Digitalization however has many advantages, as it offers the museums the opportunity to become visible for a large and also international audience! The project will promote networking with other ethnographic museums worldwide and visibility is also a good strategy for the continuity of

collections. Besides, objects being photographed are better protected; in case they get damaged – it is possible to restore them accurately according to the photo, in case they are stolen; photos are helpful in the search. Also when they are lost, the photo still offers a 'virtual copy', although this cannot replace the original object.

The next step will be to systemize the objects – in a kind of catalogue – and link them to additional contextual information. This has to be done in a form which enables the user to use certain search options, so that required information can easily be found. The next step is the linking of information of individual collections to information of other participating museums.  For that purpose it is necessary that a basic "*Wikimedia*-museum system" will have to be developed, as the meta-data and additional information have to be put into the system in a standardised form that permits the linking of all the information in a comprehensive database. Participating museums will have to think along with the developers of such a *Wikimedia* system about ways this can be structured.

It might also be a good idea to let the participants check to what extent existing museum systems can be converted into this intended *Wikimedia*-system. Different registration software tools for museums exist, and a conversion between formats is a very complex matter. It certainly will not be easy to adapt these systems into the *wiki*-format. In fact, a new kind of structure will have to be developed, in which the different fields will fit, as well as a thesaurus or specific glossary to describe ethnographic objects. In the *wikimedia* system, specific jargon can be added to *wiktionary*. A lot of work still has to be done, before the system will work to everyone's satisfaction.

The philosophy of the project is that information about the objects in collections should be given in the languages of the country, in English, but also in the language of the people from which the objects originate. The latter aspect seems crucial to me. As mentioned earlier: ethnographical objects of non-western small scale societies are often seen as persons, as ancestors or spirits. And it is likely that people prefer to speak or write about them in their own language. Most of these objects are related to myths – which are always told in the mother tongue- and to rituals or customs.  The idea is that it allows locals to help define (and redefine) language and cultural boundaries, build biographies which include both text and images but also songs and stories in indigenous languages, etc.  Of course it is not possible to get access to all these languages. But to use a lingua franca is already a move in the right direction.

For example, the lingua franca of the mentioned above Asmat Papuans is *Bahasa Indonesia* and only a very few of them speak English. Even in cases where people may speak a western language, it seems better to choose one's native language. Most of these objects are related to myths – which are always told in the mother tongue- and to rituals or customs.

By making the information available in the native language, one aims to enable the offspring of the makers of ethnographical objects to comment on the information presented, and to supplement it with information which they themselves find of importance. The open character of the *Wiki Commons* system invites users to start a dialogue. As their way of looking at things is different than that of western researchers of ethnographic artefacts, a discussion is made possible between these two groups. Intercultural dialogue and exchange of knowledge certainly can be expected to contribute to the strength of this *Wikimedia* project and, as mentioned before, to inspire new scientific research.

Museums are places where other people's cultural heritage is preserved.
"Any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of position. It is a theory: a suggested way of seeing the world." Translated to the *ethno-wiki project*, this means that every object entered into *Wiki Commons* tells a story of its own, and information added to it implies critical reflections on the 'how' and 'why' of public instruction and transfer of knowledge. Attention has to be paid to the multi-layered character of the objects. After all, ethnographic objects represent the diversity of cultures of which they can be seen as ambassadors.

However, objects in museums are often represented by and for others; this is a result of colonial history. In this way non-western ethnographic objects have become part of western cultural heritage. Naturally, source communities are more concerned about the fact that these objects are their heritage; they will interpret their history differently than Western trained museum professionals. For them these objects, often seen as persons, are the embodiment of identity and the continuity of their culture. Perspectives introduced by the people they originate from offer new ways to look at objects.

This current period is an interesting one. At the moment Museums of Ethnography are in a kind of transition; the postcolonial discourse is no longer relevant. Museums invite representatives of cultural groups, related to the subject of exhibitions on opening ceremonies. They ask contemporary artists to display their works next to traditional ethnographical objects. The voices of communities in Diasporas are made heard louder in the museum space. Also doors are wide open in the virtual museum this *Wikimedia*-project wants to build, as the *wiki*-format allows everyone to speak!

The ambition is to become a global interactive *Wikimedia*-portal for indigenous heritage. In future we want to cooperate with other museums, cultural groups and individuals. Therefore I want to stress the challenges and opportunities which the *Wikimedia*-project offers, not only for the Ethnographic Collections of the Ghent University, but especially for indigenous people all over the world, whose ancestors made the objects that can be found in our collections. Building virtual museums and bridging the dispersion of ethnographic objects around the world *certainly is worth trying.* We hope to get support from different fields.