

The TREEMUS project :  
Towards a common catalog  
for non-european ethnographical collections  
of european museums

*Author:*  
*Emmanuel Désveaux,*

**CIDOC06**  
**GOTHENBURG**  
**S W E D E N**

## Ethnographic museums in Europe and their catalogs

Between the 15th and the middle of the 20th centuries, Europe constantly explored, traded with, colonized, sometimes looted, but also studied the other parts of the world. Collecting and bringing back “exotic” objects was even long the proof of this activity of domination and knowledge acquisition. Christian Europe, whose fondness for relics made the idea of conservation a familiar one, set in place procedures so that, once the objects had been imported, they could be preserved from the ravages of time. In spite of undeniable conceptual ruptures, this program was adopted and amplified by the Enlightenment and later by 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific rationality. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a new esthetic attitude finally recognized the value of the artistic productions of non-European countries, thus reinforcing the necessity for their conservation. This concern with conservation has always been accompanied by a logic of inventory-making. The latter finds its full expression in the catalog, a written counterpart of the collection.

This relationship with others, of which, down through time, the object has been a privileged mediator, gives the non-European part of today’s European material heritage a singular value and status. Not only is this heritage not negligible in terms of quantity, it also turns out to be extremely valuable from a qualitative standpoint. Most non-European civilizations were, in effect, without a “culture” of conservation. The collections in the museums of exotic ethnography thus contain unique objects that reflect a moment in the history of the non-European civilizations and attest to the traditional aspect of their cultures. Today these collections are more relevant than ever. We are witnessing the culmination of a globalization process that began exactly five centuries ago, when Europe set out to discover the world. The result is that our European continent must imperatively redefine its relationship with the rest of the world. On the one hand, these “exotic” societies are becoming aware of their traditions, and their demands for recognition are sometimes a political issue; on the other hand, Europe is in the process of reassessing its relations with the outside and the way it displays its museum material, in other words how it interprets and exhibits otherness. Such exceptional historical circumstances place on the ethnographic museums of Europe a particular responsibility with regard to the heritage they contain. It is indisputable that the present legitimacy of these institutions comes from having conserved objects that would otherwise have disappeared. In effect, we know that the vast majority of non-European cultures had no “culture” of conservation. The responsibility of the European museums resides chiefly in providing maximum access to this information, which implies the development of protocols ensuring transparency.

It is a reasonable estimation that the European museum collections of non-European ethnographic objects hold some 5 million objects. The number exceeds three million if we consider only the major national institutions like the British Museum (England), the National Ethnographic Museum in Leyden (Netherlands), the Quai Branly museum (France), the Dahlem Ethnographisches Museum (Germany), the Museo de Americas (Spain), the Museo Pigorini (Italy), the museum of world cultures Göteborg (Sweden), the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Belgium), etc.

Today these museums are going through or planning a process of renovation. Alongside modernization of their museography, in other words their alignment with certain moral values (in particular rejection of colonialism) and with the esthetics of our time, one of the major stakes involved is the production of digital catalogs. Leyden's National Ethnographic museum has been a precursor in this area. At present, most of Europe's ethnographic museums have undertaken or are about to undertake the digitization of their catalog. It is likely that, in the end, all European museums will follow suit. Spain took the bull by the horns, so to speak: legislative measures were set in place to incite museums to produce electronic versions of their catalog. Several museums in other countries have completed this task, such as the Leyden museum already mentioned, the Göteborg museum and the Quai Branly museum in Paris.<sup>1</sup> Most of the other establishments have been digitizing by stages. Each institution is following its own procedures, at its own pace and, of course, in accordance with its own financial means. Where the process has not actually begun, it is nevertheless being thought about and will be realized before long.

A clarification is in line here. Digitization should not be confused with catalogue revision. Over the history of ethnographic museums, there have been several plans to revise catalogues in accordance with new intellectual paradigms. The same object cannot be described in the same way in 1880 and 1950. That being said, these undertakings were rarely completed. The relevance of a paradigm is exhausted faster than the task of rewriting can be done. Therefore, at least in an ideal world, the digitized catalogs will take into account all earlier states of the paper catalog.

## Online access and the mutualization of catalogs

In this context, it is legitimate to raise the question of the valorization of the intellectual and financial efforts devoted by the different European countries to the digitization of their non-European heritage. This obviously entails online access to the catalogs. Some museums, like the ethnographic museum in Neuchâtel (Switzerland) – which has a very small collection, the Pitt-

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be kept in mind that the Paris museum is an entirely new construction designed to house the collections to two distinct museums: the Musée de l'Homme, founded in the 1930s on a scientific program, and the Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniques, formerly the Musée des Colonies.

Rivers Museum in Oxford or the Leyden museum already provide such a service, but the results vary for reasons that we will see. The Quai Branly museum will be ready to put its catalog online at the end of 2005.

It appears, in this case, that it would be of great benefit to mutualize the digitized catalogs. This could be done at two levels. First of all consultation: for whoever is looking for information, the larger the base, the better the quality of information since it is, at least potentially, more detailed. But here the questioner, whoever they may be, must not get lost in a base that may contain several millions of entries, written up in several different languages and organized according to more or less homogeneous criteria. Independently of the paradigm changes already mentioned, the standardized descriptive notice is not necessarily made up using the same nomenclatures in Paris, Berlin, Madrid or London. Standardization of the catalogs, each of which has its own history, seems difficult to realize and even undesirable, for in this case standardization would inevitably mean loss of information.

The second level flows from the first. In these conditions, it becomes imperative to develop specific tools of investigation – *ad hoc* search engines – for exploiting databases on ethnographic objects. At first glance, this kind of database will be questioned in two main ways: either by origin (ethnographic, geographic), or by kinds of object, seen from the standpoint of use (tools, masks, weapons, scepters, etc.) or from that of the nature of their material make-up (stone, leather, wood, etc.). Without neglecting the difficulties inherent in the second viewpoint, particularly in the context of multiple languages, it seems that pooling efforts to develop *ad hoc* search engines would be singularly opportune. Ethnonyms and their relation with toponymy raise too many as yet unresolved questions, which would merely be exacerbated by digitization.

## The Ethnonyms' question

The question of the ethnonym – the designation of the tribe, people or ethnic group – is one of the thorniest problems there is. Associated with a toponym, a purely geographical reference, it is a determining factor in defining the object since it endows it with a provenance, an origin, and thereby links it to a given culture. Unfortunately, the nature of the information on ethnonyms turns out to be extremely untrustworthy. This is typically what information specialists call “uncertain knowledge”. The spelling of ethnonyms varies. First of all, from one language to another: for example, the name of a group in Cameroon, *Mundang* in English, is written *Moundang* in French. But the spelling can also vary within the same language. For instance, in French one can find *Esquimaux*, *Eskimaux*, *Eskimos*, and even, though less frequently, *Esquimeaux* or *Eskimeaux*. The variation stems from the failure of a standardized form to win out. To this

must be added simple spelling errors at the time of transcription, as those writing or copying the catalogs were confronted with masses of words not all of which were necessarily familiar to them. This dimension of the problem must absolutely not be underestimated. For of course these errors “migrate” into the new databases in the course of digitization. And then there is a second phenomenon, which we could call polynymy. In other words, either over time or simultaneously, the same group is known by two – or three or more – totally distinct names. Examples abound. The *Peul* of West Africa are also known as *Fulbe* in French, and as *Fulani* in English; *Eskimos* are now *Inuit*. Let us take a specific example so as to illustrate the nature of the problem. The *Hopi*, a well-known Pueblo group in the American Southwest, were known by the name of *Moqui* in the literature until around 1920. At that time, Fewkes, an anthropologist working for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington argued that the name *Moqui*, by which the Hopi had traditionally been known, should be replaced. *Moqui* means “those who are dead”, and he felt that to be insulting. Hopi indisputably gives a better image since it means “humans”, following an almost universal Amerindian ethnonymic principle. Informing his network of correspondents in the other museums, notably those in Europe, that had objects from this group of the substitution, he urged the replacement of *Moqui* by *Hopi* in all of their catalogs. This was done by the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, with the exception of one notice, probably overlooked in the correction process. In the meantime, the term *Hopi* prevailed, and no one, or almost no one, now knows that the word *Moqui* refers to. What is true today will be even truer in twenty years. One can imagine that the connection between *Moqui* and *Hopi* will be definitively forgotten and that the notice in question will have become totally silent, especially for an electronic system of questioning which is, as we know, much more rigid than the manual exploration of paper cards. The object will be virtually lost.

*Three examples of “polynymic” ethnonyms*

	OJIBWA
<i>Variations on a reference term</i>	-OJIBWAY -ODJIBBEWÄS (Johann Kohl, in <i>Kitschi Gami, oder Erzählungen vom Oberrn See</i> , Bremen, Schünemann, 1859). -O-JIB-BE-WAS (Gérard de Nerval, “Spectacles d’été. L’Hippodrome. Les Indiens O-Jib-Be-Was “, <i>La Presse</i> , 25 Aug. 1845).
<i>Terms connected with the reference term</i>	-CHIPPEWA : name used for the Ojibwa in the US and Canada by US Americans.

	-SAULTEAUX / SAULTEUX: taken from the name of a river: name used by Canadians; 19 <sup>th</sup> century and even early 20 <sup>th</sup> . - ANISHINABE: autonyme (means “human” “true humans”).
	SUGPIAQ (means “true humans”)
<i>Variation on the reference term</i>	SUGCESTUN (old local language)
<i>Terms connected with the reference term</i>	-ALEOUTES (broader ethnonym) -ALUTIIQ (present-day recomposed autonym) -KONIAG (means “fishers”, as their Unangan neighbors called them) -KANIAGMIOUTES (term used by Pinart) -KAD’IAK ALEUTI (name used by Russian settlers: Kodiak Aliouts) -KAD’IAKTSY (idem) -QIKERTARMIUT (name used at end of 19 <sup>th</sup> century by Bureau of American Ethnology ethnologists)
<i>Inclusive ethnonym</i>	-Aléoutes / Aleuts -Eskaleuts (linguistic belonging; Aliout-Eskimo language) -Pacific Eskimos -Inuit ?= Eskimos: old term.
	JÖRAI (term used by the anthropologist Jacques Dournes)
<i>Variations on a reference term</i>	-JORAI -JARAI (England-US) -JORAĪ -JARAĪ -JARAY -DJARAI -GIARAI (Vietnam)
<i>Terms connected with the reference term</i>	-MOÏ: colonial term for all of the High-Plateau populations
<i>Inclusive ethnonym</i>	- > Northern Jorai

## Ethnonyms and et toponyms

The question of successive or parallel ethnic names becomes even more complex if we look at a trend that can be seen throughout history, namely specification. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance,

people talked about the Sioux tribe, whereas today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we talk about the Dakota, Lakota (or Kakhora), the Santee or about the Yankton Sioux, who are the western-most branch of the tribe, according to some authors. In other words, the synonymy is rarely perfect between several appellations; hence the importance of articulating ethnonyms with toponyms, which themselves come under the heading of uncertain knowledge, even though the uncertainty is less. Finally the articulation of ethnonymy and toponymy must be hedged about with temporal signposts. The Quai Branly museum recently asked a young trainee geographer from the French Institut National Géographique to carry out a survey of the overlap between ethnonyms and toponyms. The case of Alaska was examined. Out of nearly 600 objects in the museum collection classified as coming from Alaska, it was found that over 20% of the notices referred to a toponym that was no longer listed in modern atlases. At first sight, their localization is lost, unless each case is researched. Furthermore, nearly 15% of the objects were indicated as coming from somewhere outside the supposed territory of the ethnonym associated with them. Such inconsistencies are not necessarily aberrations. An explorer may well have bought an object from a trader in a port or at a trading post outside its zone of origin. But the elevated number of these consistencies also raises questions about the reliability of the information in the notices and, therefore, about the means it will take to rectify this. The last phenomenon to consider is homonymy. There are *Bororo* in central Brazil, made famous by C. Lévi-Strauss. But there is another group of *Bororo* in West Africa, these are a sub-group of the Fulani people. There are *Koro* in central Ivory Coast, living around the town of Mankono, but also *Koro* in the center of the South Pacific, this time in Vanuatu. At the intersection between ethnonyms and toponyms (for these terms often switch back and forth between the two categories), Cuba is both a large island in the Caribbean and an African kingdom located in the Congo. It should also be noted that the C/K variant does not always have a discriminating value in European languages: in German, for example, the K usually prevails in the spelling of geographical names (Kuba, Kalifornia, Kanada, etc.)

## Going beyond the thesaurus as an authoritative list

The difficulty raised by ethnonyms is nothing really new for anthropologists. They know from experience that defining a group can be a complex and risky exercise. For the last twenty or so years, much of their work has dealt precisely with this question, under the heading of “identity”. Today the world over this notion is surrounded by turbulence, which in itself often takes the form of the demand to be known by a new name. The phenomenon is particularly acute in North America, where the Eskimo have become Inuits, the Ojibwa have become Anishinabe, the Montagnais of Labrador have become Innu, the Kwakiutl have become Kwawaka’wakw, and so

on. It can reasonably be expected that this terminological substitution trend will spread to other parts of the world. The “classic” names are in effect often perceived as being the mark of a colonial past and are therefore rejected.

Museum curators have perhaps not always taken the measure of this problem. Having inherited the classificatory mentality from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they invested a great deal of effort, skill and time to compiling thesauruses of ethnonyms. The task, however, was considerable; it was therefore rarely completed and, overall, each attempt has had mixed results. In the museums’ defense, it should be said that there are some 6,000 recognized distinct ethnic groups in the world, which represents a potential repertory, given spelling variations and polynymy, of several tens of thousands of terms to deal with. Fundamentally, this raises the ticklish question of the authoritative list, since the logic of this kind of thesaurus is to rank the terms and draw up pathways from one to the other, leading to one reference term. In practice, each museum has objects from only a smaller number of groups, which thus reduced its ambitions to make a thesaurus, all of which lead to inventories that remained incomplete.

### Practical considerations : who such a system may concern?

Three types of public for these online consultations of ethnographic museum catalogs can be identified:

- 1) The traditional professional public (researchers, curators, dealers) for whom digitization should mean better tools to work with. This public is essentially interested in comparison. For example, researchers need to quickly identify the items equivalent to those on they are working so as to construct comparative series but also to enrich their documentary material.
- 2) The general public. Online electronic catalogs give this public access for the first time to this kind of information. From the standpoint of the “democratization of knowledge”, such catalogs therefore represent a considerable advance insofar as the information made available can also be understood by this broad public. It should be noted that the line between this public and the preceding category is not always easy to draw. If it is fairly simple to identify the 12-year-old school child looking for information on Dogon masks for a report, the dividing line becomes thinner when we come to young students working on a major or to knowledgeable non-professionals.
- 3) The public drawn from the peoples or the ethnic groups from which the objects come. The members of these groups thirst for knowledge about their culture and its earlier states, for which the objects kept in our museums provide the most reliable testimony. Without going into the delicate question of demands for restitution, which can feature a mixture of historical considerations, political interests and legal complexities, it is clear that Western museums have a duty to offer this public absolute transparency. This necessity for transparency is part of the

present-day, resolutely postcolonial context of intercultural dialogue. Online consultation makes it possible to respond to this demand, insofar as it can be done relatively easily. If such is not the case, these museums could be suspected of deliberately keeping people in the dark about their non-European collections. Such a suspicion would be extremely damaging to the image of Europeans throughout the world. This is therefore a most important political and moral issue.

## Proposals

The TREEMUS project aims to offer the three publics previously identified access to the European collections of non-European ethnographic objects through online catalogs.

This system of questioning ought to be able to respond to queries formulated in terms of provenance and type of object. The system should be efficient, in other words be not only fast but also capable of providing all of the information on a given question (which means tracking down the shadowy zones in the catalogs, e.g. the example mentioned above of the *Moqui* notice in the Musée de l'Homme); it should also be able to adapt its response to the user, in other words it should accept filters. Above all, the system should be capable of learning from experience, which means that each consultation will enrich the content.

Lastly, the system should be open ended at two levels. It should first of all easily adapt to exploring new files when new museums join the project. And secondly, it should be capable of integrating new names, in particular at the request of ethnic groups (see above, the question of renaming groups in the present-day context).

The questions that follow have been developed on the basis of an initial study of the different existing semantic engineering techniques. They will need to be validated or invalidated in the first phase of the project.

*To respond to a request formulated in terms of provenance*, we imagine constituting a specific research tool that would be an adaptation of mathematical graph theory, which would make it possible to take a huge lexical corpus and inventory all of the existing links between two terms, then, following certain rules yet to be formulated, to create semantic bundles or semantic aggregates that are equivalent, up to a certain point, to a class. The thesaurus problem seems to provide an ideal opportunity to follow this direction insofar as the thesaurus partially completed by each museum would help fuel this corpus. In view of enriching the corpus so that it reaches a critical size and thus makes the construction of graphs as pertinent as possible, we could add a number of language lists present on the Internet, since linguistic and ethnographic designations more or less overlap (the name of the language is often the same as the name of the group and vice versa). The big advantage of using this kind of procedure lies in a veritable mutualization of the information contained in the different catalogs, thus immediately increasing the overall

“coverage” of the groups indexed. The other advantage, which is important from a practical standpoint but also from a political point of view, is that this process avoids entering into interminable discussions about the standardization of terms or their ranking.

This first approach should be paired with a system of geographic information, which will make it possible to anchor the correspondences between ethnonyms and toponyms; this second approach should include the temporal dimension. Such a system will also ensure that the efforts invested by the curators in the development of thesaurus yield the best results. Last of all we should note that this new system of indexed ethnonyms is likely to have a knock-on effect outside the framework in which it was conceived, especially in bibliography.

*To respond to a request formulated in terms of object type*, the system will need to be multilingual. To respond to all users, we imagine compiling multilingual thesauruses of descriptive terms normally used by those who compose files of ethnographic objects. This task, which will use already existing thesauruses, should be carried out in permanent dialogue between engineers, semanticists and curators. The latter will be responsible for ensuring the semantic consistency of the questioning system developed. For professional users – anthropologists, curators, but also members of the groups from which the objects come – an automatic translation, even a rough translation, is of great help. We are thinking here of the notices written in languages other than English, and in particular in less widely spoken languages such as Dutch, Swedish and, up to a certain point, German. The catalogs of European museums contain a considerable mass of information on such objects, but this information is partially unknown because it is not accessible to the majority of potential readers. It therefore remains largely under-exploited. Enhancing this information by using the system we envisage would be of indisputable benefit to everyone. It would pave the way for a multiplication of exchanges between anthropologists and curators in the different European countries as well as in the countries from which the objects come and would make it possible to identify new areas of research. Automatic translation will be of use at a superficial level. It will therefore be necessary to retrieve the relevant notice and to translate it using an automatic translator available on the Web. Alternatively, the translation needs of the other publics will have to be examined. It is likely that automatic translation will not be sufficient owing to the many errors that still occur. It will be one of the first tasks of the consortium to find a solution to this problem.

The TREEMUS system must operate independently of the software on which local museum catalogs run while at the same time being capable of retrieving the information necessary for its operation.

The TREEMUS project that we initiated was submitted last fall (November 2005° to the European Commission for funding. The answer that came in the following spring was in-between : eligible, but not retained for immediate funding. Our intention is to improve technically our proposal and to extend our network of participating institutions and, then, to try again next year in 2007. Everyone is welcome to join.