

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

In this project, contributions to Wikidata were made by expanding the biography of Mpondo Akwa, a largely overlooked figure in the early anti-colonial movement in Cameroon. Little is documented about Mpondo Akwa, and like many other important historical figures, his voice has been marginalized in colonial archives. The aim of this project was therefore to make such marginalized biographies wider accessible and usable by transforming biographical information from narrative textual sources into structured linked open data on Wikidata.

We began by closely reading the biography of Mpondo Akwa published on the Dekoloniale platform as a group. The text was then divided into sections so that each member could contribute to transforming the biographical information into structured data. This approach allowed the group to systematically cover a larger portion of Akwa's life while maintaining consistency across contributions.

The sections I was responsible for were organized in an Excel spreadsheet with specific columns designed to capture recurring biographical elements. These columns included; name, age of M. Akwa, places, occupation of relation, social relation, M. Akwa activity at time, year and important event (see Figure 1). These categories were deliberately chosen because they correspond closely to existing Wikidata properties. They particularly allowed biographical events to be anchored in time, space, and social relations which are central to Wikidata's relational data model. The categories chosen also aligned well with the information available on Dekoloniale. This made the whole process of retrieving information from Dekoloniale and mapping it onto Wikidata's data model effective and less error prone, because more information could be preserved.

Each row in the spreadsheet represented a specific event or period in Akwa's life. Standardizing the information in this way made it easier to identify connections between events, roles, and relationships, which reduced ambiguity and we could easily locate, compare and reuse information during the Wikidata contribution process. Rather than repeatedly returning to narrative textual information, the spreadsheet enabled a clearer overview of Akwa's life trajectory.

Figure 1. Combined spreadsheet of structured information:

Mpondo Akwa								
Names	Age of M. Akwa	Places	Occupation of relation	Social relation	M. Akwa activity at that time	Year	Important event	
King Dika Akwa	0-9 years	Douala, Cameroon	King	Father	Born and raised	1879	Violent German exploitation of inhabitants	
Franz Anton Schran	9-14 years	Paderborn, Germany	Colonial officer	Companion to Germany	Student	1888	Racist behavior and insults	
Ludwig	9-14 years	Rheindahlen, Germany	Name change	Himself	Student	?	Name change and Catholic baptism	
Jesko von Puttkamer	14-21 years	Buea, Cameroon	Governor	Boss	Interpreter	1893	Colonial troops had killed, expelled or subjugated	
Daughter of the Baptist	22 years	Douala, Cameroon	Daughter of Baptist min	Wife	Critic of German colonial rule	1900	M. Akwa criticised Puttkammer, resulting in a	
Kaiser Wilhelm II	24 years	Berlin, Germany	Emperor	Political	Activist	1902	Travelled to Berlin to lodge an objection to	
M. Akwa	24 years	Germany	Himself	Himself	Cigarette salesman	1902	Settlement in Germany	
The Akwa's	27 years	Cameroon	Leaders	Family	Cigarette salesman	1905	The Akwa in Cameroon made another attempt	
The Akwa's and the Douala	27 years	Cameroon	Leaders	Family and leaders	Cigarette salesman	1905	Wrongful imprisonment of peacefully resisting	
M. Akwa	27 years	Germany	Himself	Himself	Cigarette salesman	1905	Mpondo was publicly attacked from various sides	
Dr Moses Levi	27 years	Germany	Lawyer	Lawyer	Cigarette salesman	1905	Trial of Mpondo Akwa. Dr Moses Levi defends	
Heinrich Liersemann	28 years	Hamburg, Germany	Lieutenant	Critic of Mpondo	Defending himself	1906	Liersemann publicly insulted Akwa in the new	
Heinrich Liersemann	28-30 years	Hamburg, Germany	Lieutenant	Critic of Mpondo	Defending himself	1906-1908	Akwa sued Liersemann for insult and Akwa won	
Eloombe Ya Kamerun	29 years	Hamburg, Germany	Magazine	His magazine	Writer	1907	Mpondo published a magazine in the Douala	
Otto Gleim	33 years	Douala, Cameroon	Governor	Governor	Return to home	1911	German colonial authorities arrested him on	
M. Akwa	36 years	Douala, Cameroon	Himself	Himself	Death	1914	Convicted in their racist two-tier system and	

When transforming the spreadsheet data into Wikidata entries, we first combined our individual spreadsheets into one shared document, since we had used the same column structure. We then analyzed the existing Wikidata entries for Akwa to identify what information already existed and to identify gaps that required further contribution. While some basic statements had been added by previous contributors, many lacked credible references or sufficient contextual detail and key aspects of Akwa’s life were also missing entirely. My contributions focused on both improving existing statements and adding new ones. First, I attached credible reference URLs from the Dekoloniale website to existing statements such as work location, using the “stated in” qualifier. This step was necessary to increase the reliability and reusability of the data, linking statements to the Wikidata item for Dekoloniale. After properly referencing existing information, I added new statements based on data from the spreadsheet, such as occupation and significant events. For example, I added a “significant event” statement describing a legal case involving Akwa, supplemented with a “point in time” qualifier indicating the year of 1905, as well as appropriate references and source qualifiers (see *Figure 2*). Additionally, I provided a refinement of the concise descriptive summary displayed at the top of the Wikidata page (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 2. Significant event statement of legal case:



Figure 3. Concise description made for Mpondu/ Mpundo Akwa:



A central challenge in this process involved deciding how to categorize complex textual information into simplified information to fit both within the spreadsheet and Wikidata. Some details had to be left out as well as slightly adjusted to fit within defined columns in the spreadsheet. This raised questions about how adjusted data could still accurately describe significant events as well as an ethical consideration about if the data would become too subjectively constructed or be represented as inaccurate. Additionally, Wikidata’s data model and property constraints limited the information about certain aspects that would represent the biography of Mpondo Akwa. For instance, detailed descriptions of Akwa’s involvement in legal and political conflicts had to be reduced to single statements categorized as only significant events. While this allowed the information to be formally represented within Wikidata, it also meant that information would be lost, such as motivations, consequences

and much more that represents the full story. Although additional information was added, extensive parts of Akwa's story remain uncaptured, demonstrating that data modelling is not a neutral act but one shaped by platform design and contributor decisions.

Working on this project revealed how curating and modelling data are indeed not acts of objectivity, but processes that shape knowledge. As Bowker and Star (2000) discuss, classifications reveal and obscure realities. Transforming complex biographical information into structured categories within a spreadsheet required choosing and adjusting what to include and how it would be represented. Consistent with Ford and Illiadis (2023), working with Wikidata showed how data infrastructures carry social and political implications. What is presented is dependent on who contributed it and how they did. On point with Clausen et al. (2023), structuring data within this project functioned as a curatorial practice by transforming this complex textual information into new structured information.

This project made me realize how open linked data can serve as a tool for representation, allowing overlooked life stories to be accessed, connected and shared.

Bibliography

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