



Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called “Probebühnen” during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

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Sharing Knowledge / Teaser

For centuries, Western museums have collected, documented, and presented objects from other cultures. Yet paradoxically and even today, representatives of these cultures are seldom called on to participate in this process – from exhibition design to collection research. The Humboldt-Forum views multiperspectivity and the decentering of interpretive power as highly justified postcolonial demands that it will strive to honor. The project “Sharing Knowledge” initiated a unique cooperation with precisely these goals in mind. In 2014, students at the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca in the Venezuelan Amazon region and staff of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin began working together to establish a joint interactive web platform. It will provide the basis for the consolidation, exchange, and accumulation of knowledge about ethnographic objects from the region. On the platform, all object-related attributes are negotiable; edits are stored on a continual basis. Knowledge is therefore always in the making.

Sharing Knowledge / Project Description

Collaborative research en route to the Humboldt-Forum

by Andrea Scholz

For museums with non-European collections, collaboration with representatives of source communities is a key concern. In a post-colonial museum context, where an interpretive monopoly is a thing of the past, the current approach is to integrate different perspectives, in both exhibition work and collection research. The Humboldt-Forum also advocates multiperspectivity and sees itself less as a site of unilateral knowledge production and more as a “contact zone,” as described by James Clifford. Yet even a presumed contact zone is not void of power asymmetries or contradictions. And sustainability is paramount: for source communities and museum audiences alike, there is no long-term benefit in international cooperation projects that merely



involve isolated museum visits by indigenous representatives.

The project “Sharing Knowledge” was initiated with the aim of creating a vibrant and sustainable cooperation with an indigenous university in Venezuela. It originated in the Guyana collection stemming from Northeastern Amazonia and housed by the Ethnologisches Museum. The goal was to develop an interactive online platform which could be used by students from the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca (UNEIT) and staff of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin to consolidate, exchange, and build on knowledge about ethnographic objects. The platform serves both as a tool for collaborative collection research and as part of the Amazonia exhibition in the Humboldt-Forum.

First Approaches

In March 2014, I traveled with documentary filmmaker Natalia Pavía Camargo to the university in Tauca, Venezuela. The goal was to convince the university to participate in an exchange involving the Guayana collection. At UNEIT, an institution unique in its form, young students belonging to over ten different indigenous ethnicities (including Ye'kwana, Pemón, Eñepa, and Yukpa) study a special curriculum geared toward the specific challenges facing indigenous groups in the modern world. Graduates undergo training to become multipliers in their communities, which select their preferred student candidates in collaboration with UNEIT. Between semesters students return to their communities for fieldwork phases. Courses at UNEIT include topics such as food security alternatives as well as reflections of indigenous identity in conjunction with (non-indigenous) mainstream society, the exercise of indigenous rights, and the preservation of cultural practices. The latter include techniques such as basket weaving, wood carving, and the production of body adornment, represented in the Ethnologisches Museum.

UNEIT was therefore the ideal partner for the idea behind “Sharing Knowledge.” My first visit focused on establishing trust and collaborating to expand on the project concept. After the university's council of elders approved the project, starting with representatives of the Pemón and Ye'kwana, seven university members visited the Ethnologisches Museum in August and September of 2014. Many of the historical objects were familiar and mundane; others were new or had been forgotten and prompted subsequent research in the visitors' communities. Observations about the objects (for example, designations in the respective indigenous languages, information on their function or iconography) were recorded on copies of the historic index cards. For certain objects such as manioc graters that were formerly produced in the entire Guayana region by the Ye'kwana and passed along to the Pemón and other tribes through trade, the links to ethnic groups were revised.

Digital Cooperation

During the visitors' stay in Berlin, the idea for the online platform emerged while working with the collection. Members of the Pemón and Ye'kwana expressed a preference for symbols on the platform homepage that would represent their specific “object worlds.” Below these worlds, participants all agreed on a classification model for the objects that, apart from a few deviations, reflects the exhibition layout planned for the Humboldt-Forum: a structure based on different contexts of engagement with the world or, in other words, the areas in which objects are used. Participants agreed that visual communication elements would be preferred over text to avoid prioritizing the Spanish or German language over their indigenous counterparts. All relevant languages would be available in the user interface and the object descriptions.

Based on these parameters, a call for bids was elaborated describing the platform development. The Berlin Studio NAND was selected for the job and it implemented a pilot version with 246 objects in the months that followed.

During my stay in Tauca in May 2015, the web-based knowledge sharing project started with the first objects from the Pemón and Ye'kwana. Students also added objects from Tauca to the platform that had recently been created or were currently in production. Alongside the virtual platform, this would enable the gradual development of a concrete physical counterpart to the collection in Berlin. In Tauca the objects are used or preserved in the students' respective residential buildings.

On the platform, all object-related attributes are negotiable; changes are stored on a continual basis. Erroneous or incorrect museum documentation, as discovered in certain aspects during the Tauca delegation's visit, can therefore still be tracked and recorded. Knowledge is thus fundamentally instable and never written in stone.



Results and Outlook

The result of the cooperation and the exchange initiated through the platform were presented to the public together with the video documentation of the project and certain ethnographic objects of the Pemón and Ye'kwana as part of Probebühne 7. Objects that were presented included baskets for carrying and storing objects, a fish trap, a cassava grater, and a shaman's stool. Platform comments about the objects could be viewed on iPads in the museum space.

Establishing partnerships for joint projects is a central task for the Humboldt-Forum. "Sharing Knowledge" has made an important contribution in this respect. Experiences stemming from this cooperation are also valuable for future projects, since they reveal the instability of knowledge systems in museums as well as the necessity to define an alternative concept of knowledge for the exhibition and the sharing of ethnographic collections.

A first step has already been taken in this direction. The cooperation with UNEIT was exceedingly positive and fruitful and the platform prototype developed as part of the project proved to be suitable for the virtual exchange of knowledge. UNEIT has already started to use the platform as a virtual extension of current teaching material and as an impulse for research in the students' source communities. Nevertheless, the platform in Tauca faced greater technical difficulties than those initially anticipated. Potential solutions (for example an offline platform version for interruptions in online service) could no longer be identified as part of the Humboldt Lab project due to time constraints. These technical issues aside, as the Humboldt Lab draws to a close, virtual knowledge sharing is still in its early phases and will require intensive ongoing support in order to be operational in the long term. Whether the collaboration will continue until the inauguration of the Humboldt-Forum and even beyond, and perhaps even extend to other exhibition areas, will largely depend on additional funding.

The exhibition that emerged at the end of "Sharing Knowledge" is still not a model for involving audiences in collaborative projects. While the video documentation did prove to be a valuable means of communication, the Humboldt-Forum needs to develop other formats to convey information about the knowledge sharing process itself. This undertaking will require the allocation of corresponding funds.

While financial leeway is important, it is not the sole prerequisite in this case. "Sharing Knowledge" required complex processes of building trust and personal commitment that went far beyond the standard scope of curatorial work. This clearly indicated that cooperation projects with indigenous communities necessitate a structural framework that has not yet been accounted for in this form in the Humboldt-Forum.

Dr. Andrea Scholz, initiator of "Sharing Knowledge," is an ethnologist who specializes in the Amazon basin. She currently works as a research assistant for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. Her past curatorial projects include "Knight Moves: Surinam/Benin" as well as "Man – Object – Jaguar."

Sharing Knowledge / Positions

"You need to show that our culture is still alive and thanks to it, we are still alive today."

Kachipiu Díaz belongs to the Pemón people and is a student and coordinator. Kuyujani Lopez belongs to the Ye kwana people and has earned a degree from the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca. Both have played an active role in shaping the "Sharing Knowledge" Internet platform. They discussed their experiences and impressions of the cooperation, and expressed their strong belief in the need to continue cooperation between western institutions and the indigenous communities.

Interview: Michael Kraus

What do you think about the idea of the "Sharing Knowledge" project? Why did you become involved in the project?

Kachipiu: I believe that this project holds great significance to all indigenous peoples, as well as to the rest of



mankind. The approach of the project is very good and it should continue and become a lasting cooperation. It shows real progress. I think the Internet platform is a means for us as indigenous peoples to gradually become visible.

Kuyujani: The project is really interesting because it gave us reason to hold discussions within our communities. As a result, this knowledge can then be shared with all of us. The objects that you have here, these handmade objects – they are very important to us as a people. We need to share this importance with others. From us as indigenous peoples. There is much that we can contribute. We also want to incorporate the indigenous communities more into this project. Until now, it's only been the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca, but we absolutely need the connection to the indigenous communities because that's where culture is, not just at the university.

Have both of you been actively working on the platform already?

Kuyujani: I have been working on the project through the university from the beginning. We work on identifying each and every object that is here at the Ethnologisches Museum. If we don't know what an object is, we consult with the community, with the wise people of our community. What is this object called and what is it used for? Then we upload the data to the platform. It is very important to us that the project continues and we keep working on it. And that we, together with the indigenous communities, help the Ethnologisches Museum. We need to incorporate other peoples who are represented at the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca and whose objects are located here at the Ethnologisches Museum. New ideas will emerge as the project moves forward.

Kachipiu: I worked on editing the translations from the Pemón language. That includes both the words that the researchers collected and the entries that the Pemón entered on the Internet platform.

What are your impressions about the documentation of the objects that you have seen here at the museum? Are there mistakes?

Kachipiu: Primarily, in the way it is written. The various groups of Pemón need to agree on how to translate our language. I'm referring to the fact that the *Taurepan*, *Arekuna*, and *Kamarakoto* need to agree on a single term for different words in all three groups of peoples. There's also a lot on the Internet platform that needs to be changed. Likewise, we need to continue gathering as much information as possible. When an institution like the Ethnologisches Museum publishes something, they should also inform us online or some other way, so we as a new Amazonian museum stay up-to-date, as well. We plan to set up a museum at the university in Tauca on the basis of the cooperation with the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. It needs to become mandatory that we receive such information.

Have you found objects from your cultural groups in the museum's collection in Dahlem that aren't used anymore, or that people don't know anymore, or that are well-known and still in use today?

Kuyujani: We've found objects here that we don't have anymore. Weapons that were used by the warriors when they fought against the Spaniards, according to our elder. Nowadays we don't see these items anymore in the community. There are also some objects still used: the *waja* [basketlike dishes], the baskets, the decorative feathers. These are all everyday items.

Kachipiu: The items we were able to identify are in use. The Pemón typically still use handmade items when preparing their foods and meals. These tools obviously have a limited lifespan. It depends on how they are used in preparing food. At some point they are set aside; you can hang them up, and they'll eventually deteriorate. They are biodegradable and environmentally friendly. The way I see it, it's a good way for people to support biodiversity directly where they live. It doesn't harm the environment. I believe it's important.

Do you approve of the fact that these collections of items from your cultural groups are housed in Germany?

Kuyujani: These items are here. You need to respect the fact that they are part of the cultural heritage of the museum. If you start to demand that they return items, you need to study the situation well. How did the object arrive here? If the object was sold or presented as a gift, it belongs to you. If you were to have sold something, you cannot just ask to have it back later. What I find interesting is the fact that the museum was the one to initiate this exchange and informed the communities that their objects are here. For me, it's good and fair. And now there will be an exhibition in the Humboldt-Forum starting in 2019, where the people in charge decided to consult with the communities beforehand. It is an indication of good intentions. It shows respect when you let us know before the objects are placed on exhibit. Up until now they had all been in storage.



Kachipiu: It's important to preserve as many items as possible here in the museum, but you cannot expose some objects to the public, as they are sacred. Only our wise people, our shamans, know how to use, those who have gained experience over time.

So there are objects that you wouldn't want placed on exhibit?

Kuyujani: For example, the shaman's bench. No one should be allowed to view this object because it is special in the world of the indigenous peoples. The shaman is the person in charge of the community's well-being and who takes care of it. Last year, together with one of our elders, we viewed everything in the museum's collection and said that this object could not be exhibited. Therefore, for the Ye kwana, there is this specific case where we found an object that cannot be exhibited. On the other hand, you can exhibit handicrafts. The wise people are in charge of handling this sacred knowledge. There are some things that are not passed along to younger people. You need to limit access to the information. For example, if I show things to a young man, and if he uses them the wrong way, he can cause harm to others when he uses this knowledge. For this reason, you cannot place objects on exhibit that are related to this knowledge. They hold great significance and they have a strong spiritual connection that is handled only by the elders. I'm sure there are younger people who would be interested in this sacred knowledge, but you need to choose who will be trained in using it. It's not for everyone.

If you were curators of an exhibition in Berlin, what objects would you like to place on exhibit and on which topics would you like to focus to enable the public to better understand the situation of the Ye kwana and Pemón peoples?

Kuyujani: We would like to show the indigenous art, the artesian objects, the decorative feathers, the baskets, how to weave a waja. It's artistic knowledge, it's something you can exhibit. They are in common use around the communities.

We strongly believe in our culture, in our spirituality, and this remains the case to this day. It would be good to show that it is not something dead. Rather that it is still alive and thanks to it, we are still alive today. We wouldn't exist without our culture. It would be great if the labels used in the museum would indicate whether the objects are historical pieces or are still in use today. By stating that the objects are still in use, it would be a way of communicating to the world that indigenous people still exist. There are many people who don't know that we indigenous people exist. They think that we are nothing but a legend, that we are extinct. It's good for people to see that our peoples are still active and our culture is different and deserving of respect.

Kachipiu: It's a living culture and capable of adapting to changes. It would be important for our peoples to learn about this living culture. It can act as a bridge that connects indigenous knowledge with the western culture. In my opinion, it can be enriching for both cultures.

There is much talk in the realm of museums about cultural heritage, as well as the concept of a "shared cultural heritage." Do you think that a European museum's collection can be considered a shared cultural heritage?

Kachipiu: Yes, it is a shared heritage because I as a young person and as part of this conversation can state that it enriches both cultures. If we don't share the knowledge of both cultures, we won't get anywhere. For this reason, it is important for us as indigenous peoples to cooperate with other countries. This can be seen as a cultural heritage of both cultures. We Pemón say that a shaman, a wise man, is our "living cultural heritage." He holds all this knowledge and knows how to explain the direction in which we humans are going, in particular the Pemón. The wise person is living cultural heritage. That is something we have heard our wise people say, as they store our memories. We are indigenous people who learn through oral tradition and we work with the organic world around us, with nature. We also need to write things down what can be written down. And the things that cannot be written down, spiritual ideas, is the knowledge that only a Pemón can use. There are stories about researchers who learned something from the Pemón, but they applied it improperly. That's why you should add the comments of the wise people in various places. That's how I see it.

Kuyujani: That's how I see it, too.

The conversation took place in Berlin in September 2015. Transcription by Sebastián Messina, translation from Spanish by David Fenske.

Dr. Michael Kraus is an ethnologist and exhibition curator and an academic officer at the Rheinische Friedrich-



Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. His research work centers on the history of academics, indigenous cultures of the Amazon, museum ethnology/practical museum work, visual anthropology, and material culture. He curated the "Touching Photography" project for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Expanding the Contact Zone

by Wolfgang Kapfhammer

Collaboration and mindfulness as urgent actions

Judging from recent debates, the task of providing cultures of the global South with a "decontaminated" forum, i.e. one that has been wiped clean of its colonial baggage, all in the heart of a European metropolis, appears to be developing into a Sisyphean trial. Attempts by the Humboldt Lab Dahlem to negotiate the related issues of representation, indisputably of critical import for museums, span the gamut from discourse to experimental design. The subproject "Sharing Knowledge" shows that expectations directed at the post-colonial museum include new forms of cooperation and action that extend to the *source communities* where collections originated. The post-colonial debate that surrounds ethnological museums must, however, avoid the trap of holding onto the same "mental infrastructures" (Harald Welzer) as those organizational forms which they rightly criticize. Because the debate ascribes such a totalizing role to colonialism that even subsequent attempts at "reparation" must necessarily be called into doubt, it ultimately denies subaltern groups any and all possibility of participating in the interpretive monopoly claimed by European museums, both then and now.

One idea for responding to the criticism aimed at ethnological museums was to establish them as "contact zones" (James Clifford) in which metropolitan institutions and peripheral source communities could meet "as equals." Due to the institutional inertia of ethnological museums, this idea of meeting was rapidly exposed to critique, i.e. the "preserves of colonialism" (Christian Kravagna). The project "Sharing Knowledge" offers a possible solution to this Catch-22 conundrum. With the online platform, a virtual middle ground between Berlin depots and indigenous partners in the Venezuelan savanna emerges, one that resembles the meeting spaces that Mary L. Pratt was referring to as she introduced the term "contact zone" into the ethnological debate on "imperial eyes." There is a distinction to be made between the contact zone in the metropolitan museum repository where encounters take place today with the producers of the objects (James Clifford's contact zone) and the contact zone at the periphery where the real activity of collecting occurred (Mary J. Pratt's contact zone). The latter middle ground was a place where colonial and imperial scholars did the actual work of investigation and collection, guided and shaped in large part by the authoritative knowledge of local indigenous experts. Colonialism and colonial self-image, however, denied this extreme dependence on indigenous expertise in the field and attempted to cleanse any traces of indigenous influence from the hybrid epistemologies emerging in the contact zone.

One might speculate that especially the older collections provide the clearest matrix of indigenous knowledge, since their contents still remained largely uninfluenced by Western pursuits of order. From this perspective, indigenous knowledge harbored in colonial collections offers the possibility of reviving the transcultural dialog through collaboration between museums and source communities. In "Sharing Knowledge" this dialog started, tellingly enough, with the development of classification categories and rules based on indigenous life worlds.

This kind of collaboration contains no traces of crypto-colonial hypocrisy. As "Sharing Knowledge" plainly shows, an "epistemic decolonialization" (Larissa Förster) of museums can be found precisely in the recognition of the efforts of local experts for "traditional ecological knowledge" (Fikret Berkes), who now meet their descendants in the new "contact zone."

This collaboration generates the desired polyphony in the metropolis, while the collections are able to extend back to their remote indigenous origins, where they can break the silence surrounding indigenous culture imposed by local discrimination. According to Pratt, the "autoethnographic discourse" initiated in this process is one of the characteristic genres of the "contact zone," where critique and resistance make their way into the intellectual domains of the hegemonic culture. The online platform of the project is open to objections and the possibility of voicing concerns.

Even more important than being heard in the metropolis, however, is the fact that "Sharing Knowledge" creates opportunities in Taucá for communities to engage in various ways with the products of their own



culture. The act of breaking with a “culture of silence” (Paulo Freire) can then become a “culture of mindfulness” toward the aesthetic of collection objects embedded in local environments. Finally, mindfulness forms the prerequisite for the resilience of these different ways of life. The current situation in many indigenous territories of the South American lowlands is extremely precarious. In light of these circumstances, a project like “Sharing Knowledge” becomes an urgent intervention, since sooner or later the window of opportunity for reconnecting with this local (material and other) culture will have closed. With this in mind, the representation debates in the metropolitan institutions, often plagued by narcissism and self-referential tendencies, may find reason to take a step back and reflect.

Dr. Wolfgang Kapfhammer is an anthropologist and lecturer at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich), with a focus on Amazonia. He has researched the Sateré-Mawé of the Lower Amazon in Brazil since 1998, as well as topics in the anthropology of religion and the environment, and collaborated with Sateré-Mawé representatives as part of the exhibition “Beyond Brazil” at Vienna’s Weltmuseum.

Sharing Knowledge / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 7, June 25 through October 18, 2015

Cooperational partners: Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca, Venezuela/ Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Arturo Asiza, Hernán Gonzalez, Richard Haas, Wendy Homsani, Katharina Kepplinger, Kuyujani Lopez, Adam Loyola, Kaware Martinez, Esteban Emilio Mosonyi, Edhawinedu Rodríguez, Andrea Scholz (Projektleitung / Project management), Marakada Sucre, Kamashiñedu Yarumare et al

Video documentation: Natalia Pavía Camargo

Website, exhibition design and exhibition visuals: Studio NAND & Markus Kerschewicz, Julia Lakritz, Abe Pazos

Restoration supervision: Diana Gabler, Helene Tello

Exhibition set-up: Bernd-Michael Weisheit

Technical coordination: Nadine Ney

Copy-editing: Elke Kupschinsky

Translations: Galina Green, Sebastián Messina

In memoriam: José María Korta, Ricardo Grenat

Sharing Knowledge / Imprint Documentation

Publisher: Humboldt Lab Dahlem, a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (2012-2015). Directors: Martin Heller, Viola König, Klaas Ruitenbeek, Agnes Wegner

Editor: Christiane Kühl

Assistance: Carolin Nüser

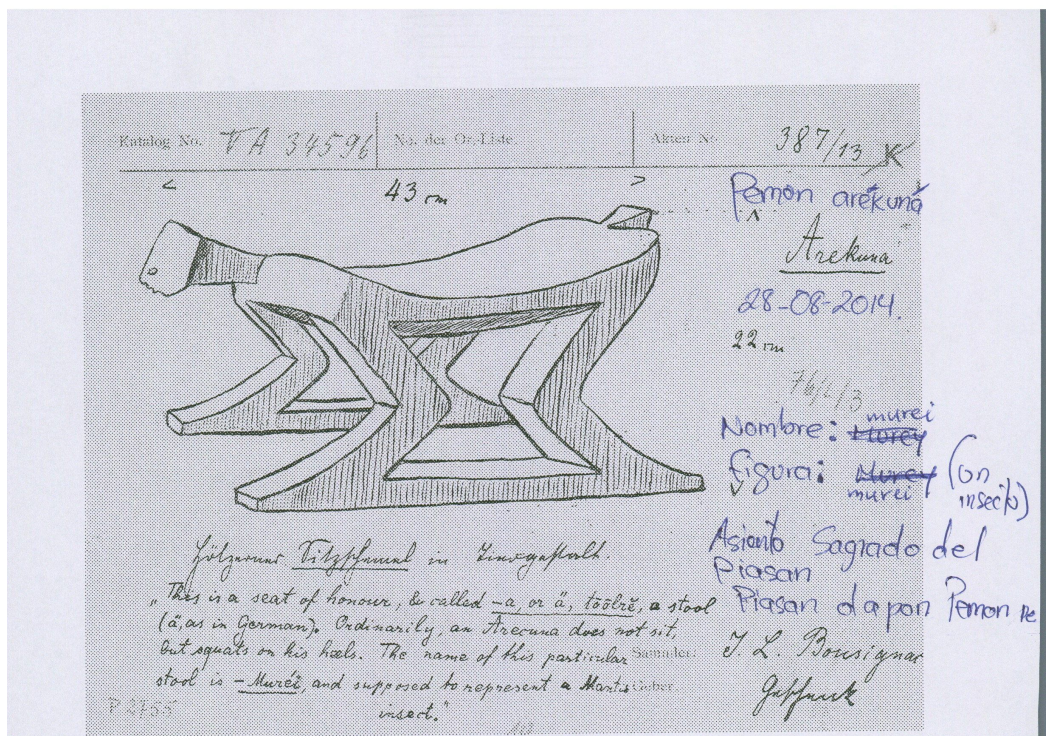
Translation: David Fenske, Sarah Matthews

As of November 2015

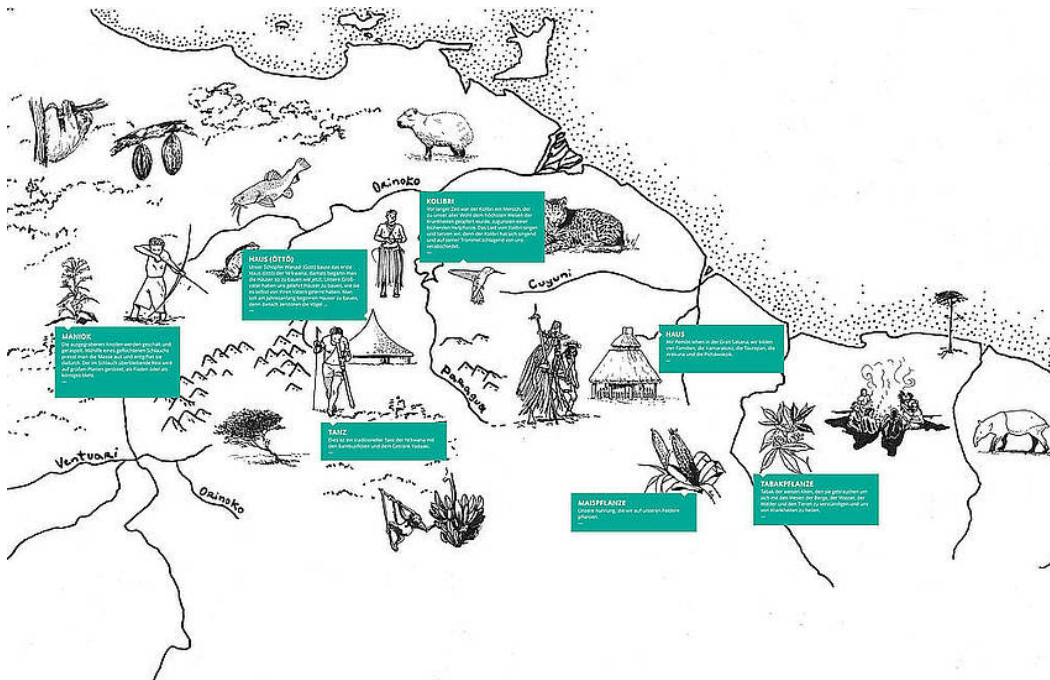
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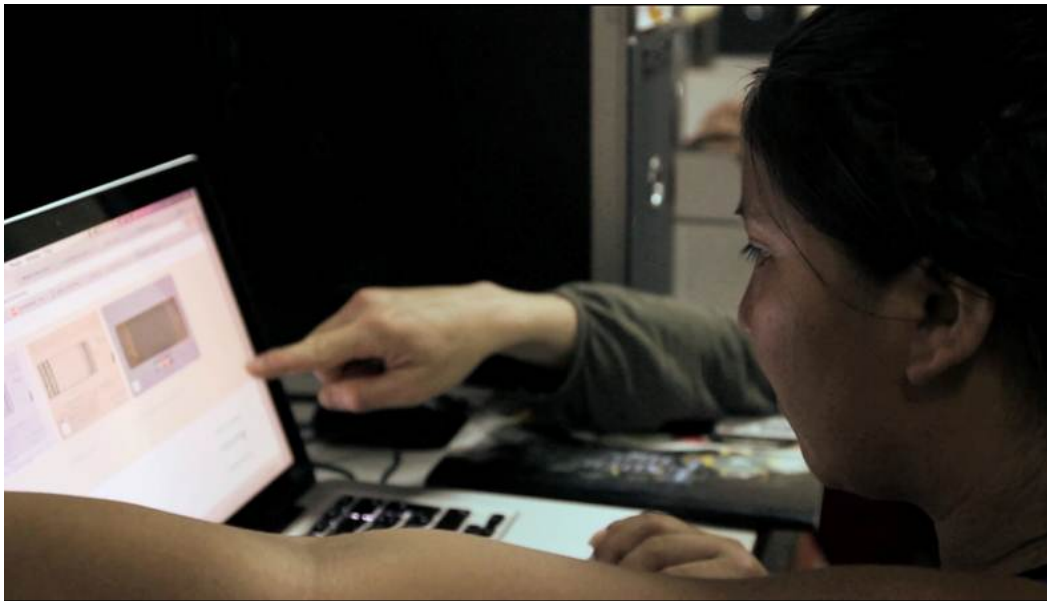
Representatives from the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca at work in the museum depot, August 2014, photo: Natalia Pavía Camargo



Copy of a historical file card from the collection American ethnology with comments by students of the indigenous university, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum



Homepage of the exchange platform "Sharing Knowledge," © Humboldt Lab Dahlem/UNEIT/Studio NAND



Students at the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca working on the interactive website, May 2015, photo: Natalia Pavía Camargo



Installation view "Sharing Knowledge," photo: Uwe Walter



Installation view "Sharing Knowledge," photo: Uwe Walter