

Between images, objects, and memories: Indigenous dialogues with ethnographic collections in Europe

Dialogue between Indigenous communities and European museums creates new ways of remembering, interpreting, and engaging with heritage. These encounters are often tense and emotionally charged, and can evoke joy, nostalgia, dreams, and, at times, criticism of the presence of certain objects in museum collections. These interactions reveal that Amazonian material heritage is a contentious field of fragmented memories and divergent perspectives. With the aim of revitalizing historical relationships between museums and Indigenous communities—by fostering a dialogue between contemporary Indigenous practices and the collections preserved in Europe—we understand Amazonian heritage as a dynamic and relational process in which materiality, ecology, history, and territoriality intertwine beyond their geographical boundaries.



ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS IN EUROPE

A central component of the project "Heritage and Territoriality: Past, Present, and Future Perceptions Among the Tacana, Tsimane', Moseetén, and Waiwai" was the rediscovery of ethnographic collections held in European museums. Through collaborative and interdisciplinary methodologies, these four peoples gained access to objects crafted by previous generations of their own communities and preserved at the Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg (Sweden), the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt am Main, the Museum für Völkerkunde in

Dresden, and the BASA Museum at the University of Bonn (Germany). Established as public institutions during the formation of nation-states and the expansion of European colonialism, museums contributed for a long time to legitimising power relations and dominant narratives that marginalised other histories and forms of knowledge. In recent decades, however, many museums have begun to critically question these legacies and become spaces for dialogue with source communities.



Project "Heritage and Territoriality"

INDIGENOUS RESEARCHERS AT EUROPEAN MUSEUMS

The researchers who participated in the project first encountered the objects of their peoples through photographs and catalogs, and later through visits to European museums in June 2024. This encounter demonstrated that the objects are not mere testimonies of the past, but material entities endowed with vitality, capable of reawakening memories, emotions, and knowledge among members of the peoples who produced them. Direct contact proved indispensable for bringing forth profound

narratives and evoking cultural practices linked to the territory. The ethnographic collections preserved in European museums now offer an opportunity to create spaces for encounter between Indigenous communities and museums, where it is possible to revive knowledge, memories, and practices that had remained dormant. More than simply providing insight into the past, these experiences foster new relationships between Indigenous communities, museums, and objects in the present.



From left to right: Milton Marupa, Ariel Pache, Lucia Canare, José Caimani y Kantuta Lara.
Photo: Felipe Gómez

How the Tacana, Tsimane', Mosetén, and Waiwai peoples reengaged with their collections in European museums

Why are our objects in these institutions and so far from our territories?



Many of these objects were brought to Europe by explorers, travelers, and anthropologists more than a century ago.

Some are no longer made, but many remain alive in our communities.

We are here to explore the knowledge of our grandparents.

We must record and document this knowledge, especially so that the next generation can put it into good practice.

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graph TD
    MUSEUM --> COLLECTION
    COLLECTION --> INDIGENOUS_COMMUNITY[INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY]
    INDIGENOUS_COMMUNITY --> DIALOGUE
    DIALOGUE --> MUSEUM
    DIALOGUE -- Transforms --> MUSEUM
  
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To reconnect communities with the collections preserved in Europe, we developed a collaborative approach consisting of four stages: catalogs, interactive cards, museum visits, and live streams.

BEFORE — MUSEUMS — AFTER

BEFORE

- Instruments of power
- One narrative
- The stories and knowledge of Indigenous peoples are marginalized.

AFTER

- Spaces of dialogue
- Multiple voices
- Space for representing "us"

Museums house thousands of indigenous artifacts collected more than a century ago. Today, these places can become spaces for dialogue, collaborative research, and cultural revitalization.

Pueblo: <i>Futurlewa</i>						Imagen (lira p. 552)				
Taraco										
Museo	N° inventario	Nombre original	Dimensiones p x l x a	Materiales (s)	Categoría en el Museo	Clase de Artefacto (FTE)	Colectores y año	Lugar de procedencia	Informaciones etnográficas	Fuente de las informaciones etnográficas
Maximum de representación a Futurlewa en Mito	2743	Botas	28 x 38 cm	Algodón, cienzo y caca		Carbones y leños	Abel Hahn, Dr. Emil Hahn, Hans Hahn, GEO. Hahn, Futurlewa Futurlewa	Mitani, Mitani, Dobos		Hahn H., & Hahn E., Hahn G., (1961) Los Tarus. Caba reña la historia de la Futurlewa Dobos

We collect and organize photographs, records, and historical information about the collections held in European museums. This work has helped us understand the quantity and diversity of objects associated with each indigenous people and has made it easier to access this heritage before visiting the museums.

I recognize this! My wife used to make these pots and cook in them for the whole family.

We're familiar with this fan—we all have one at home.

It's good for fanning a fire and also for chasing away insects.

I've tried to teach my grandson how to use it, but he doesn't want to learn. Now that he knows even museums have one, I'm sure he'll want to learn.

My mom and my grandma did, too. Now we're using only aluminum, but the food doesn't taste the same.

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The cards allowed each person to freely choose which objects they wanted to comment on. The images sparked memories of materials, techniques, rituals, people, and places.

I don't do it as much anymore, but we have wise people who can help us remember so we can keep making them.

We have to pave the way so that other people can come, too.

The designs of the objects are like a notebook written by our ancestors.

Images trigger memories. But touching, observing, and handling objects helps reawaken knowledge that had lain dormant.

Additionally, in some cases it was possible to broadcast live from the museums, allowing community members—particularly elders—to participate in and witness this experience first-hand.

are not objects. communicate, in dialogue, connect.



Catalogues, cards, visits, and livestreams made it possible to bring together communities and collections separated by more than a century.

The broadcasts sparked memories, revived names in Indigenous languages, and broadened participation. Digitalisation provides an additional bridge, not a substitute for the physical experience.

What the encounter with the objects awakened:

Memories: "We remembered our ancestors and felt their presence" (Gladys Ybaguari)

Knowledge: "I saw that they were the same materials our parents and grandparents taught us to work with." (Carlos Yapoxi)

Indigenous languages: Participants rediscovered names, techniques, and meanings that were not recorded in museum databases.

Intergenerational relationships: The objects sparked conversations among elders, researchers, and young people about knowledge that is at risk of disappearing.

Catalogues, cards, visits, and livestreams made it possible to bring together communities and collections separated by more than a century.

The aim was not simply to study objects, but to strengthen memories, knowledge, and their transmission to future generations.

Heritage and Territoriality: Past, present, and future perceptions among the Tacana, Tsimane', Mosaic and Waiwai

Project website

Bibliography

Researchers

The project Heritage and Territoriality: Past, present, and future perceptions among the Tacana, Tsimane', Mosaic, and Waiwai seeks to comprehensively understand the meaning that these Amazonian indigenous peoples attribute to cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. The project analyzes the relationship between heritage, territory, local knowledge, and perceptions of time and space, while also considering the pressures and threats these communities face. Through a comparative, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approach, the project highlights both the differences and similarities among the participating peoples, promoting the revaluation of heritage as a key element for cultural strengthening and territorial defense.

More information about the project, its activities, and results on the official website:



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CIPTA - Consejo Indígena del Pueblo Tacana

Gladys Ybaguari Quenevo (Tumupasa)
Juan Gabriel Supa Uncubich (San Miguel del Bala)
Max Ecueibary Mamio (Macahua)

CRTM - Consejo Regional Tsimane'-Mosaic

Ariel Pache Canchi (Alto Colorado)
José Caimani Josesito (Asunción del Quiquibey)
Lucía Canare Nate (Asunción del Quiquibey)

OCITB - Organización de Comunidades Indígenas Tacana de Ballivián

Milton Marupa Rimba (San Marcos)

APIW - Associação do Povo Indígena Wai-Wai

Alexandre A. de Souza
Carlos Yapoxi Martínez
Jaime Xamen Wai Wai

Graphic Anthropology

Álvaro Martínez

www.alvaro-martinez.com

anthropo
GRAPHICS

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