

Objects That Evoke Memories: Tsimane' Memory at the Dresden Museum

Visit by Tsimane', Tacana, and Mositén Researchers

In June 2024, Tacana, Tsimane', and Mositén researchers visited museums in Germany and Sweden to reconnect with artifacts produced by their peoples and preserved for decades outside their territories. One of these encounters took place at the Dresden Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden).

The visit allowed them to observe, touch, and interpret artifacts that are part of the collection assembled by Richard Wegner between 1927 and 1929. Nearly a century after leaving their territories, these artifacts were reunited with members of the peoples who created them, helping to revive knowledge, memories, and practices that had remained dormant. This knowledge is linked to materials, techniques, and ways of life passed down through generations. During the visit, the researchers described and interpreted the artifacts and recalled their uses. Many were items of clothing, textiles, baskets, and other elements of daily life. There were also protective items for adults and children, as well as toys and objects associated with childhood. Although some of these objects are no longer made in the communities, they remain present in the collective memory of the communities.

THE TSIMANE' AND MOSETÉN PEOPLES

The Tsimane' and Mosestén are indigenous peoples of the Bolivian Amazon belonging to the Mosestén language family. Their communities primarily inhabit the basins of the Beni, Quikibey, Manikui, and Apere rivers in northern Bolivia. Throughout their history, they have maintained significant levels of autonomy and preserved their own practices, knowledge, and forms of organization.

The region's forests, rivers, and animals are integral to their ways of life and knowledge systems. Many of the artifacts found in European museums were used for generations in daily life, for personal protection, child care, hunting, fishing, and ritual practices. Although some of these objects are no longer made today, they remain part of the communities' collective memory.



José Nate teaching his grandchildren how to make arrows.
Puente Yucumo, September 2022 – Photo: Lesly García Soto

THE TSIMANE' COLLECTION AT THE DRESDEN MUSEUM

The Tsimane' collection at the Dresden Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden) consists of 76 objects that the German physician and anthropologist Richard Wegner collected during an expedition to Bolivia between 1927 and 1929. During his two-year journey through South America, Wegner collected more than one hundred boxes of materials and nearly two thousand photographs.

The Tsimane' objects were collected primarily in the Beni River basin and include clothing, child protection items, bark textiles, musical instruments, tools, and other items of daily life. Wegner's photographs and descriptions allow for a comparison of these artifacts with the communities' current knowledge and practices. Nearly one hundred years after they were collected, the collection remains a source of memory, knowledge, and intercultural dialogue.

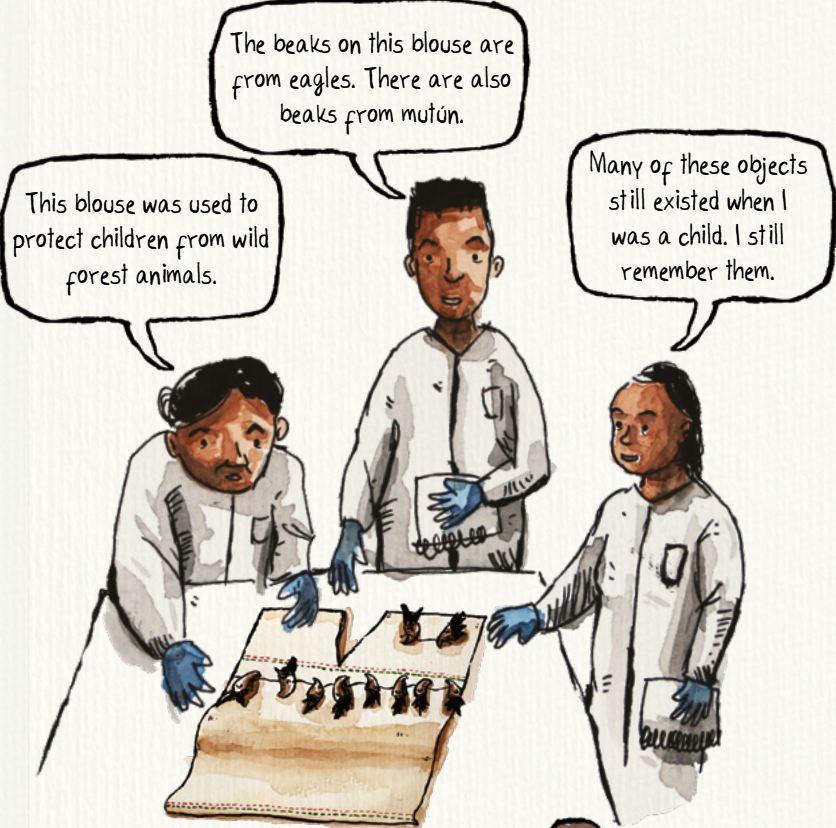
List of Objects

Museum	Indigenous People	Nº.	Name	Dimensions	Material (s)	Collector and year of collection	Place of provenance
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	59517	Hammock for children	75 x 35 cm	Fibra natural (ambaibillo)	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Cochiro River
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	58412	Rattle/ Shesheagye	9,6 x 3,1 x D 3,1 cm	Madera y calabaza (puru)	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Cochiro River
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	59463	Amulet	16,5 cm	Madera, posible cedro	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Bolivia
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	58663	Disco zumbido	57 x 4,7 x 4,7 cm	Madera	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Cochiro River
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	59439	Children's Shirt with Magical jewelry	53x47 cm	Fibra corozo, picos de [aves]*	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Bolivia
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	56470	Charm with 7 rope figures	22 cm	Wood	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Bolivia
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	59480	Back charms for children	22,5 x 9 cm	Seeds, bird beaks	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Cochiro River
Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden	Tsimane'	59481	Charms for children	30 cm	Snails	Richard N. Wegner 1927-1929 (1964)	Cochiro River

The Tsimane' Collection at the Dresden Museum of Ethnology

DORMANT KNOWLEDGE

Although some objects are no longer made or used in everyday life, researchers recognized the materials, techniques, and functions associated with them. The knowledge had not disappeared: it remained in the collective memory, waiting to be reactivated through an encounter with the collections.



Children's blouse with protective amulets

This protects me from the environment, animals, and the forces of the forest.



Object Record
Children's blouse with magical jewelry:
Inventory number: 59439
Place of origin: Bolivia, before 1929
People: Tsimane'
Year of acquisition:
Collected between 1927 and 1929, added to the collection in 1964.
Material: Woven corochó fiber
Size: 53 x 47 cm

This bark blanket was likely made from the Bibosi or Corochó tree.



Fabrics and textiles

The corochó or ashaba' (*Poulsenia armata*) is a tree widely used by the Tsimane' and Mose'tén peoples. A fiber was obtained from its bark, which was then pounded and softened until it became a durable fabric. This material was used to make clothing, hammocks, blankets, mosquito nets, and other everyday objects. Its production required specialized knowledge regarding tree selection, bark extraction, and fiber processing techniques.

Objects related to childhood feature prominently in the Tsimane' ethnographic collections. The emphasis on protecting children is striking: blouses adorned with bird beaks, amulets, and specific garments designed to protect them from animals, spirits, and the forces of the Amazonian environment.



Kushma garment made of raffia bark



Although this garment is no longer used today, people wore it until the mid-20th century. It was worn for hunting or work.



Feather crown

This feather crown, which contains the body of a bird at its center, was likely worn by a person of authority or a ritual specialist.

CHILDHOOD OBJECTS

In total, the museums visited with Tsimane' collections contain 95 childhood objects. These range from leisure items such as toys, balls, and rattles to everyday objects like baby hammocks and protective items. These objects reveal an elaborate system of care and child-rearing deeply rooted in the territory, animals, ritual knowledge, and the relationships between humans and other forest creatures.

Amulets for protection

A small object with seven figures, tied to children's beds to protect them.

Necklace

Baby hammock

Play and protection doll

Pouch for girls and boys

"Museum objects are not merely testimonies to a distant past, but active entities endowed with vitality. They can reawaken memories, emotions, and knowledge among the descendants of those who created them." (Rodrigues et al. 2026)

ARIEL'S DREAM

At the end of our visit to the Dresden Museum, Ariel, one of the Tsimane' researchers, told us that the night after the visit, he had a dream about the feather crown. That night, the spirit of the feather crown appeared to him and told him that it felt lonely there in the museum and that it was hungry. It asked him to please bring it something to eat; it would like grapes. This dream invites us to reflect on the relationships that many Indigenous peoples establish with material objects. Objects are not necessarily inert entities: they can possess agency, form connections, and communicate with people. For the Tsimane' researchers, the feather crown was not merely a museum piece, but an entity with its own history, presence, and needs.

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

The project Heritage and Territoriality: Past, present, and future perceptions among the Tacana, Tsimane', Mositén, 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.



Project website

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

Anthropology of the Americas at the Uni Bonn

The Department of Anthropology of the Americas at the University of Bonn conducts interdisciplinary research on indigenous societies, heritage, and archaeology, promoting collaborative and critical approaches to the study of the Americas.

Bibliography

Rodrigues, I. M. M., García Soto, L., Cascon, L. M., Wai Wai, J. X. & Jaimes Betancourt, C. (2026). Between Images, Objects and Memories: Indigenous Dialogues with Ethnographic Collections in Europe.

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