



Indigenous oral tradition in southern Latin America: a library's effort to save sounds and stories from silence

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Abstract

The indigenous cultures of Latin America form the ethnic and cultural structure on which a great part of the continent is based. Their unique features add hundreds of customs, traditions and varied heritage to the cultural diversity that can be found in the Americas. The different independent nations that today populate this region, have been continuously discriminated against, forgotten and excluded from any possibility of development, throughout their history. Although they show some signs of improvement, thanks to continuous struggle and argument, they have suffered severe losses, most important of which is the loss of their original languages. Since a vast majority of them are preliterate societies –which means that historically they did not use written systems- the loss of their language represents the destruction of their means of oral transmission, and, therefore, the disappearance of their knowledge, stories, codes and literatures.

Libraries can play a very important role in the partial recovery of such languages and the knowledge associated with them. However, though there are services that have obtained very interesting results, LIS initiatives specifically designed for aboriginal communities in Latin America are few. Among these can be counted the author's work in the NE part of Argentina, between 2001 and 2006, which included the development of sound collections in small libraries that were created inside schools. Those collections not only recovered community oral tradition, but also put it in contact with a set of activities at the schools. The recorded material and some of its written transcriptions allowed the rescue of a fragment of the cultural heritage of the community and this was later utilised through a variety of services. Among

the contents recovered, maybe the most important ones were those related to the communities' history and the personal stories of each of its members, their genealogies and stories of the way in which the group has behaved in the context of national and regional events. In this way, history was connected with geography and language. Many of the materials were later digitalized so that they might be used in future activities. However, this was only possible in those places where informational literacy had been previously developed and there were the necessary electronic means.

This paper presents a brief summary of the author's ideas and experiences, and a detailed statement of the use of history, oral tradition and sound collections in indigenous libraries. It also presents similar related experiences in other parts of Latin America.

Key words

Local history - Indigenous libraries – Indigenous peoples – Oral tradition – Endangered languages – Sound collections – Living books – Bilingual Intercultural Education – Cultural diversity.

The ones who were always there...

There are a great number of terms used to name the indigenous peoples. All of them, in one way or another, indicate that they are human groups who have always inhabited the same land. That is the meaning of "aboriginal" (from the Latin "from the beginning") or "indigenous" (from the Latin "locally born"). The definitions internationally used (for example the one given by Martínez Cobo (1983) or the one in Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (2003) highlight this intimate relationship with the land, this sense of belonging, this self-acknowledgement of an identity which has lasted through histories and centuries. It has to do with those who were always there, occupying the lands and the waters that see, a long time ago, how they ancestors were born and died...

The indigenous peoples are neither a romantic part of a past that has come to an end, nor a museum curiosity in a globalized present. Those societies are bursting with vitality, and preserve their traditional features while adapting them to the times we live in. They make up an approximate population between 300 and 370 million people, according to the last international estimations (World Bank), organized in hundreds of groups and speaking more than 4,000 different languages and dialects.

In Latin American lands, those societies add up to 300 or 400 groups, including more than 30 million people (Stavenhangen, 1996, among others). In countries such as Bolivia and Guatemala, they constitute the demographic majority, making up more than half the total population in each nation.

Their destinies were violently and radically changed after the arrival of European invaders, who established colonial regimes. The land was parcelled out into lots, its resources were exhausted and they were condemned to survive in slave labour conditions from which they had very few chances to escape. Many original peoples refused to accept the occupation, hiding themselves in areas inaccessible to the conquerors or fighting the invading army to defend their way of life. The stories which retell those fights and their destinies are well known to everybody, and are a very important (and obscure) part of the history of the Americas. Regrettably, even after the birth of the independent states in Latin America, the indigenous peoples continue to be left behind and occupy the lowest part of the social pyramid. Underprovided with rights and overburdened with obligations, their identity has been shattered and silenced, and their memories almost wiped away.

Some native societies have retained their memories, and never lost their hopes to be able to recover, someday, their right to live as they have always done. Nowadays, after five centuries of oppression, discrimination, exclusion and racism, some of them have accomplished what they aimed to do: make the ground on which they stand their permanent home. They can call themselves indigenous peoples and start to recover, revitalize and spread a cultural heritage that has succeeded in surviving, even though they may not have achieved their autonomy and may have lost many cultural features – vanished in the process of mixing with others and cultural assimilation.

On the other hand, there were many others that disappeared along the way. They were not able to stand up after falling over, and were put aside, ignored, forgotten, censored or destroyed. The facts that made possible such genocide, ethnocide and memoricide beyond our scope, and we can do nothing but regret and remember them with pain and shame. However, nowadays, we can observe that surrounding us, in Latin American lands, there are hundreds of languages and original cultures blossoming and being part of our diversity as a species. These cultures, the ones that are still within our reach, are what we should respect, learn from, assist and share.

Although many successes have been achieved by indigenous organizations through decades of struggle, their socio-economic, political and cultural situation is far from having improved. In spite of international conventions and the numerous national and regional laws that have been introduced concerning their rights, the aboriginal peoples continue to be forgotten, dispossessed and least favoured when it comes to welfare and resources. They continue to be under the pressure of educational systems that hardly recognize nor accept their unique features, of governmental policies that never pay attention to their wants and needs, of religious movements that only seek to add sheep to their flocks, of organizations that want to turn them into heroes no matter how, of labour structures that force them into hard and poorly paid physical work. They continue to be the ones at whom “white” societies scoff, because they have been stigmatized as “different”... The “others”...

They have achieved a few victories, but their defeats and their derivation should worry us, for it indicates that the world paradigm is still unfair and unbalanced, continues to exclude anything different and peculiar, continues to homogenize or reject, increasing poverty and condemning many to a life with no future. The indigenous peoples are the ones who were always there... Although, sometimes, we do not even know it, or do not want to see them beside us.

Sounds that fall silent

Among the great losses suffered by indigenous peoples of Latin America are their original languages. It was during the XVIII century when their use was first forbidden in the territories occupied by the Spanish monarch, and similar policies were evident under Portuguese rule. After independence was achieved in the XIX century, these languages were still not taken into account, since the newborn States aimed at copying the European model of nationhood, by eliminating linguistic peculiarities and trying to paint a smooth and monochromatic picture without internal differences.

Languages such as Quechua, Aymara and Guaraní (used as “general languages” during the colonial period), thanks to their broad area of diffusion, continued to exist despite the impact of European culture. Other, less lucky, languages started to lose both the people to speak them and the spaces where oral transmission could have been practiced. These peoples did not have writing systems – relying on oral tradition of knowledge and memories – so the loss of their languages also meant the disappearance of their history, their values, their customs, their cultural heritage and their identity as peoples.

Even today, this process has neither been stopped nor reversed. Native societies are now more aware of the importance of using their own languages and the value they have but, when it comes to institutional consciousness, there is no general recognition of the urgent need for including them in teaching at school. Regrettably, intercultural and bilingual curricula (theoretically provided by the state as of right, according to all national constitutions in Latin America) have not been introduced in many of those societies, neither have they had access to mass media, strategic information or valuable knowledge, translated into their own languages. Many of these societies –the minority ones- are in a twilight world, and will fade away completely when their last speaker dies and nobody saves those words, grammars, vocabularies and sounds from disappearing.

According to studies carried out by a number of organizations connected with linguistic and cultural diversity (including UNESCO), in the course of the XXI century 80% of the languages alive today will disappear. The majority belong to aboriginal peoples, including those currently inhabiting Latin America.

A language gives structure to the ideas and the world vision of a culture. It does so in a unique and inimitable manner. Through language, the legends that explain the origin of every natural thing, our personal stories, creation myths, recipes,

traditional medicine and many more things are transmitted and perpetuated. Methods to prepare and use the land for growing plants and crops; to make and use instruments and tools; chants and dances, tales and games; customs, communitarian laws, wise counsel, and the memories of heroes and popular bandits - everything has a place within the language. And when it does not have a written system it can only be expressed orally. The lack of writing skills –which are currently being introduced in a certain number of languages, but which are not always useful for the speakers of them - increases the value of the spoken language, for it becomes the only channel of communication, education and cultural transmission that a people has. If the language disappears, culture also vanishes. Without culture no identity is possible. Without identity, nobody knows where they come from, why they are alive, or which path their steps should follow.

Oral tradition – combined with other means of cultural expression, such as music, dance, painting or singing - is particularly strong among the original peoples of Latin America. Its continuity is threatened by the acculturation processes already mentioned. If it came to disappear, the basis of many cultures would vanish as well, and a huge part of our intangible cultural heritage would be lost without trace.

The house of words

The word for “library” does not exist in Indigenous languages. In fact, there are very few libraries for indigenous peoples, at least in the Latin American context. Such institutions have been seen as alien in aboriginal eyes, just like books. However, as time passes, peoples gradually develop, and many institutions become more flexible. Nowadays, the possibilities that an information unit may successfully offer within a native community are plenty and valuable, so long as the mission of the library has been adapted to the circumstances, the needs and the characteristics of its target population.

The library is an institution that deals with memories. It collects, organizes and spreads the knowledge that has been acquired over centuries, a cultural heritage that belongs to all of us, which, according to basic human rights, should be freely accessible to everybody. It has tools and working instruments which allow the storage and management of knowledge in many different forms, and its structure can be flexibly adapted to the most varied conditions, including or putting aside particular elements according to the needs of its users.

With the arrival of new information technologies, the possibilities of the library are improved, making use of means and supports that traditionally it did not have. But even without them, the library is a very powerful institution, which might turn itself – through relevant design and coherent methodology - into a valuable and useful entity for those societies whose cultural identity is at risk. Thanks to the services provided by a library, oral tradition can be collected and organized in a way which would be of use in many other contexts (academic, artistic, industrial, or institutional). It is also able to set free such sound and audiovisual information through digital networks, and can even transcribe it in order to create books and

multimedia materials. By simply reproducing and sharing it within the community that has developed such information, understanding and skills, the library would be achieving something really important as well.

In Latin America we have not made the most of such opportunities yet. The majority of LIS initiatives that have occurred in aboriginal communities have tried to put into practice western popular and public models, which did not achieve much cultural progress inside the group. In many cases, they may even have been complicit in the secular mechanisms of cultural assimilation, alongside official education and religion. It can be concluded that very few LIS initiatives have been planned according to the genuine needs of the aboriginal peoples.

The author has developed, between 2001 and 2006, the project “Indigenous Libraries” within the *Qom*, *Pit'itaxá*, *Moqoit* and *Wichi* communities in the NE part of Argentina. These are indigenous groups which have suffered a severe socio-cultural impact on the part of the Argentinean state, which has rarely been worried about their welfare. He started its work by approaching the aboriginal populations in the first place, in order to make a qualitative evaluation of their information needs, their problems, their context, their resources and their reality. By using a *grass-roots* perspective and an *action-research* methodology, in addition to making use of anthropological assessment tools, the author designed a final user profile considering the particular voices of the addressees, their hopes, their wishes and the solutions that they thought might be possible for their cultural, linguistic and educational problems.

From that information, the author planned a “made to measure” library model. Due to the very few texts available in indigenous languages, and the fact that the books addressed to aboriginal readers were not very useful, the library turned itself into a sound collection, which collected – on simple 60-minutes magnetic cassettes - the oral tradition of the various communities where he worked. The library structure consisted of a unique shelf, a bag or a drawer, which was placed in the community school, for it was there where the narratives and knowledge of the group were shared. To develop such a collection, it was necessary to spend many hours recording. During that time, elders and adults joined together and took part in the project, for they were genuine conservators who understood the traditions of their people. The collected contents included history, literature, legends, chants, stories, recipes, advises and a wide set of traditions, and were retold in their *mother tongue*, in Spanish or a mixture of both of them, reflecting the peculiar linguistic heterogeneity that these communities show in Argentina.

With this collection inside their walls, the school became, in some of the populations where the author was working, a “House of Words”, the place where the sound library was kept, a product and an asset that belonged to the whole community. Thanks to this collection, many school activities were developed and improved through time (reading practice in the *mother tongue* and in Spanish, story hours, etc) and new services were created such as the one called *Qadede Idá?at* (family bilingual reading and retelling programme) (see the Author’s General

Bibliography, below) and support for the diffusion of strategic health information (combining traditional bio-medical knowledge with modern inputs from doctors and nurses who visited the community). Oral history spaces were set up to house “living books” (local narrators and tale-tellers), almost-forgotten sounds were recovered, legends and tales were transcribed (creating hand-made books illustrated by their readers) and the whole community was involved in a project that sought to restore part of their roots so that they could grow and blossom through the seasons to come.

Old histories, new materials

A high percentage of the materials collected through recordings embodied historical narratives, in which they retold the semi-mythic origin of the indigenous people, the historical appearance of their village, the events in national history in which the speaker or his/her acquaintances have been involved (including massacres and human rights violations that have been unreported by the official history), and the details of his/her own genealogy. The plot of those stories was strewn with place-names reflecting an ancient geography now lost, and personal names out of use nowadays. Family trees were sketched out, which – with careful study – depicted the connections between related tribal groups and traced their migratory travels throughout the broad area of Chaco, their disputes with neighbouring ethnical groups, their alliances and their settlements.

The knowledge created through oral transmission has been collected spasmodically in the Argentinean academic context. During the first half of the XX century there were a number of anthropological studies carried out without the knowledge of how to link what has been learned from the individuals interviewed, with the reality of their lives. In the second half, the work of sociologists, linguists, and professors facilitated a deeper approach, but it continued being much too diverse and diffuse. As a consequence the outputs of such professionals are not coordinated, and were produced for consultation by other academics, rather than for the use of Argentinean society as a whole (let alone by indigenous societies).

In the meantime, teachers, writers and artists have been collecting, from another point of view and applying different methodologies, the same knowledge without any recognition or success. At present, there are few trustworthy sources (with the exception of the original ones) when it comes to finding out about the indigenous world at a national level. Therefore, if initiatives such as the one implemented in Chaco by the author, were to be planned on a different level (to some extent deeper and wider) and considering interdisciplinary academic frameworks – always taking into account the continuous participation on the part of the target groups- this would lead to the recovery, use and effective diffusion of indigenous knowledge, which would be pertinent and useful to non-aboriginal populations as well as to native groups.

Within the “Indigenous Libraries” project, some materials used in the “houses of words” were digitalized, taking into account what formats would best suit the new

reality faced by the participant aboriginal communities. The digital divide continues to grow day after day, particularly in the rural areas of Latin America and especially within native societies. However, it is clear that those societies will also be in contact with new information and communication technologies in the near future, being able to use them for their own benefit and development in addition to promoting an intercultural dialogue that will be, without doubt, fruitful and lasting. Even though ICTs are not the solution for any of the sufferings and problems that distress the original peoples, they can be a meeting point, a space where they can join with each other, not only to exchange their knowledge but also to develop new means of revitalizing and recovering it and make the most of their cultures. The number of Latin American proposals for portals to indigenous language and culture (shamefully not related to libraries), and managed by aboriginal peoples, clearly demonstrate that new opportunities can be found, with excellent preliminary results. Libraries should not distance themselves from them; on the contrary, they should get involved with them – in a responsible and committed manner - in whatever ways the native groups would need.

Closed doors, open doors

Numerous projects have been carried out to recover oral tradition, genealogy and legends within indigenous populations of Latin America. Slowly, many languages are beginning to be written down and a few publishers are timidly beginning to do some publishing in *mother tongues*. Regretfully, the results of such activities are not clear, and most of them have neither been done with the permission of those communities, nor with their participation. *Neither for them, nor with them*. Aboriginal knowledge has been distributed in an atmosphere of exoticism and ignorance. This is obvious to anyone who wants to learn an indigenous language or acquire some *real* knowledge about the situation, the traditions and the customs of *real* (not literary) aboriginal peoples.

The good news is that there are a small number of reliable projects connected with original peoples which are showing excellent results. The bad news is that libraries have had little –if anything at all- to do with them.

On the one side, there is little professional information related to the subject, in the Latin American LIS university schools. In addition there are very few spaces for research, development and discussion. Moreover, there are few training courses for librarians where the indigenous element is strongly represented, and no manuals exist that may help to plan a library for native users. On the other side, management of oral materials and work with languages different from Spanish or Portuguese are not included among the skills that LIS degrees pursue. The collection of oral tradition is definitely not a task undertaken by librarians in Latin America. Neither is the management of historical, linguistic or educational resources.

Working in an indigenous context is a difficult task, for they inhabit territories that are usually either very far from main urban areas, or within urban sectors suffering

from poverty, insecurity, violence and marginalization. Indigenous users continue to be marked out in ways that exclude and discriminate against them. Ethnic and linguistic barriers are as high as the social ones, when it comes to offering aboriginal communities a service for information, training, or simply recreational purposes.

Unless such problematic issues change, library services for indigenous groups will continue to be a dream in Latin America, a dream similar to the dream of living in a multicultural, diverse and peaceful society. Decades of differences and centuries of oppression have raised walls that hamper and complicate open dialogue and understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous individuals. Fortunately, some librarians dream of Utopia, and continue to implement small initiatives with the intention of breaking the silence and building a model aboriginal library that achieves the aims of the community. Such a model can contribute towards the rescue operation that has been started by many aboriginal cultures, seeking to save their culture from silence and oblivion.

This paper represents an attempt to show a handful of ideas and hopes, in order to demonstrate that, however unlikely it may seem, another reality is possible if we believe in it and don't give up trying.

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