

Custodians of fragility

Public libraries, intangible heritage and cultural diversity

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Abstract

This paper deals with the intimate relationship between the library work and the cultural identity, heritage and diversity of its patrons' community. It briefly reviews a set of international standards on culture and heritage, identifying elements that should be added to Library and Information Sciences social practices.

Key-words

Intangible heritage - Cultural diversity - Public libraries - Endangered languages - Identity

Part 1. Cultural heritage

“Memory is the basis of the individual personality, as tradition is the basis of a people's collective personality. We live *in* and *for* the act of remembering, and our spiritual life is nothing else but the effort we make to perpetuate our memories and turn them into hopes, for our past to become the future”.

Miguel de Unamuno
(Basque writer & philosopher, 1864-1936)

Heritage is defined as a heterogeneous ensemble of environmental and cultural elements -material or not- that are transmitted from generation to generation, creating the grounds on which every person builds and orientates his identity and his vision of the world.

According to the definition reached during the UNESCO Experts' Round Table in Turin (Italy, 2001) (UNESCO, 2001), *heritage* includes...

“... peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of the social and natural context necessary to their sustainability”.

A number of things are considered to play an active part in the memory of any community: landscape, sounds, objects, tools, pieces of work and buildings that show the path trodden by them; all of the parts that hold some clues to their motivations, their

hopes and their quests; any element that may reveal their failures and losses, the reasons why they came into existence and, some of them, vanished in the mists of time.

They represent the history of every human group, as well as making clear the elements used in the relationship with their physical environment and their magical-religious world. The understanding of the laws that regulate both universes –the material and the spiritual one- is a major step toward the community’s survival, from which a number of cultural goods and expressions drew their inspiration.

Besides giving people a feeling of continuity in relation to previous generations, these elements are also important for their identity and the safeguard of human diversity and creativity.

A first approach to this matter, allows us to make a clear difference between two main categories of heritage: *natural* and *cultural* (UNESCO, 1998). The latter represents the most valuable product of human intellect and sensitivity, and therefore it is the most intimately linked with human nature.

According to UNESCO’s definition (1982), *cultural heritage*...

“... includes the works of [humankind’s] artists, architects, musicians, writers and scientists and also the work of anonymous artists, expressions of the people’s spirituality, and the body of values which give meaning to life”.

Most of this rich heritage –used, enjoyed, renewed, enlarged and improved on a daily basis- is *non-material*. In fact, *cultural heritage* is just not limited to expressions of material nature. Non-palpable aspects of life –such as sounds, feelings, sensations, thoughts and beliefs- are considered to form the *intangible cultural heritage*, a group of manifestations belonging to the very spirit of a people. In addition to channeling community’s interests and different pursuits, it also acts as a means and a guide for the production of the *tangible heritage*, the material one.

UNESCO (1989) defines this *intangible heritage* as “all forms of traditional and popular or folk culture, i.e., collective works originated in a given community and based on tradition”. The definition almost coincides with that of *culture*, understood in the broadest sense of the word:

“Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2002).

Customs, tales, languages, music, dances, rituals, festivities, medicine, culinary arts, dressing, games, theatre and the special skills related to material aspects (e.g. tool making or agricultural knowledge), are pieces of a huge mosaic that fits out every person with unique features, turning them the owners of an invaluable richness. All these traditions are usually transmitted by gestures, oral expression, dance or music, in the frame of collective recreation processes; besides enriching the social bonds within a community, they also facilitate the socialization of its individuals and their group identity development.

Part 2. Orality and endangered languages

“When they [the old people in indigenous communities] die, it will be for you, for your civilization, as if all the libraries were burnt”.

Léopold Sedar Senghor
(Senegalese president, poet and politician, 1906-2001)

The use of “unstable” means of collective transmission (i.e. those strongly based on human memory, a weak and variable support) provides *intangible heritage* with a fluctuating, dynamic nature, which is enlivened by an immense capacity for transformation and adaptation.

One of the systems that perpetuate the *non-material heritage* of a people is *oral tradition*. Orality –whose presence is still very important among indigenous peoples, rural communities and minorities (UNESCO, 1997)- is not limited to traditional societies anyway: in urban contexts, a large quantity of knowledge is still transmitted through this means.

The orally communicated contents possess two intrinsic values. The first one refers to the fact that they codify the wisdom of groups and sectors that, in most cases, have not had access to written means of communication, do not have reading-writing skills (illiteracy) or neither find spaces nor chances for setting down their ideas in stable supports in order to record them. This knowledge does not contain just traditional or folk information: it also includes *alternative discourses* (to socio-political mainstream) and the stories of defeated, silenced peoples, who have kept their memory alive by transmitting it orally through time and generations.

Its second value can be easily understood if we think how the use of oral resources forces ourselves to make a much more creative use of the language. At this point, we should remember that in the world there are majority and minority languages (yet not being very clear the fine line that separates one from the other). For the latter, *oral tradition* might be one of the last opportunities for the survival of words and sounds, otherwise doomed to extinction (UNESCO, 2003a) as in many regrettable cases. The importance of such languages lies in the fact that they are an irreplaceable part of the human *diversity*, as well as being the basis that supports hundreds of identities that are developed from them. It is well known that every culture expresses itself through particular vocabulary and grammar rules, which shape the different ways of understanding and explaining the universe; without them, individuals and groups can only adopt alien languages and will progressively lose their cultural identity and their ability to perceive and explain the meaning of reality, neither being able to understand themselves, nor to draw the paths toward their future.

Part 3. Identity and acculturation

“We know that memory loss mortgages future. Those who are not able to learn from the past are condemned to accept the future without being able to imagine it”.

Eduardo Galeano
(Uruguayan journalist and writer, born 1940)

For a good number of societies, *intangible heritage* represents an inexhaustible source of facts and ideas that not only support their struggle for development, but also

emphasize their *cultural identity*, which they proudly protect day after day. Cultural identity, as it was said above, is the ensemble of traits and features that link a person to a group, maintaining a strong cohesion within society, harmonizing customs, establishing life rules and communication codes. Inside this ensemble, languages act like a sticky substance, fixing some elements to others and giving the rest of the cultural traits a sense.

According to UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 1978), cultural identity is the basis for the life of peoples, stemming from the past and projecting itself into the future; never static but simultaneously historical and forward-looking, and, therefore, always improving and renewing itself. It is enriched thanks to daily contact with the traditions of other groups. This dialectic relationship -exchanging ideas and experiences- allows their constant growing and reciprocal understanding. As happens with *diversity* and *intangible heritage*, UNESCO recommends the international community to preserve and protect each people's identity, especially those of cultural and demographic minorities (UNESCO, 1989, *op.cit.*).

This recommendation deserves great consideration: *heritages* and *identities* stand tremendous pressures from dominant cultures and ideologies, represented by mass-media, official educative systems, religious creeds and socio-economic policies, all of them generally influenced by Euro-American models, thoughts and idioms. Such pressures on such fragile human miracles results in the phenomenon known as *acculturation*, the progressive abandonment of one's own culture (or a great part of it) and the adoption of massive, major structures. Besides alarming identity losses, the resulting homogenization menaces the natural human *diversity* and leads to the disappearance and the oblivion of valuable features which are part of our universal heritage.

Part 4. Diversity and individuality

“The unity of human genre is expressed by the diversity of its cultures”

Franz Boas
(American anthropologist, 1858-1942)

Culture assumes different forms through places and time. This *diversity* is manifested in the traits plurality and originality that feature human groups and societies. The planet surface currently lodges infinite communities, each of them showing unique facets of our diversity, particular parts or aspects that make them be what they are... Different ways of facing the same (or very similar) problem, different rhythms and sounds expressing the same feeling, different words used to define broadly similar concepts, different images for the same belief... all of them form a set of infinite pictures that presents common contents in the widest diversity of manners.

The first article of Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2002, *op.cit.*) proposes that it must be “recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations”, for it is a continuous “source of exchange, innovation and creativity ... as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”.

The creative development of diversity presumes the total accomplishment of cultural rights, as defined by art. 27 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and arts. 13 and 15 of the International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural

Rights (United Nations, 1966). National policies (necessarily supported by pluralist ideologies) must help achieve such a goal by encouraging cultural exchanges and development. They must also extend election opportunities to everybody, warranting the free circulation of ideas and works, and creating the proper conditions for producing and spreading diverse and varied cultural goods and services (Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity, arts. 2, 3, 5 and 9).

Every culture represents an irreplaceable set of values and features. Besides, each member of a group carries with his/her community heritage, shaping it in a unique way through their beliefs, capacities and actions. It could be said that there are as many cultures as there are inhabitants in the world, for each person adds a particular variant to his/her own cultural heritage. This individualization pushed the UNESCO to define the concept of “Living Human Treasures” (UNESCO, 2003b), unique persons who personify, to the greatest degree, the skills and techniques necessary for the representation of certain aspects of the cultural life of a people and the survival of their heritage.

Part 5. Libraries

“The book is the light of the heart,
and the mirror of the body”.

Codex miscellaneus, XI century text

The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (UNESCO, 1994) proclaims the confidence of the international community in this kind of information unit, considering it as “a living force for education, culture and information” and as “an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women”. Among the library’s missions with a special emphasis in this Manifesto, the following should be underlined:

- Promoting awareness of *cultural heritage*, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievements and innovations.
- Providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts.
- Encouraging inter-cultural dialogue and favoring *cultural diversity*.
- Supporting (the) *oral tradition*.

These points make it clear that there is an interest –inside international spheres- in turning the public library into a space for recuperating and diffusing knowledge, including the most traditional one, which might be easily forgotten due to some of their features (e.g. oral tradition). They also show the desire to achieve the recuperation and diffusion of the expressions of every people, looking for preserving cultural diversity and, through their acknowledgement and diffuseness, to attain a greater understanding and acceptance between different cultures. On this basis, taking irreplaceable and diverse materials in consideration, a promising intercultural dialogue could be accomplish, as well as making it possible the existence of multicultural, plurilingual societies living in peace and solidarity. (Inter)national associations –as IFLA and ALA- concentrate their research work in developing practical models of action, in order to make these ideas come true. Beyond the conservation of human knowledge, the IFLA Manifesto emphasizes a recurrent theme: the library’s capacity for creating informed societies which could live in *freedom*. This ideal includes independent decision making,

free access to information, free expression of ideas and constructive and democratic participation in every social process. And this should lead, in the long term, to the prosperity and the intellectual progress of every human group. The knowledge of their own culture and history, of their identity features and the recognition of the traits of the surrounding peoples, are the points from which a society will be able, with no doubts, to face and obtain the so called “development” on a basis of sustainability, equality and justice.

Part 6. A sort of conclusion

“I have always imagined Paradise as a kind of library”

Jorge Luis Borges
(Argentinean writer, 1899-1986)

Libraries must overcome the limits imposed by the dominant media-driven, uniform, homogeneous society, an environment dispossessed of all the particularities which could provide it with some identity, value or richness. As a cultural institution which aims at providing information, it should offer its users community the highest number of available options: a wide spectrum of possibilities for listening to *all the voices*: their own –ancestral, traditional or modern- and the foreign ones as well. It should also include “the others”, those social sectors which, for one reason or another, have been historically excluded, silenced or forgotten: peasants, native peoples, homosexuals, sick and old people, women and children, political sectors ...

The library *must be free*. And, with this freedom, far from censorships, shames, taboos and other similar considerations, it should develop its labor, spreading its services far beyond shelves and walls, reaching classrooms, houses and community centers. It must not lock itself inside virtual shells and shields, condemning itself to an artificial isolation. It must not keep their collections and services for a certain category of users, because the material it manages –human knowledge- is the common heritage of all humankind. And every person –no matter what his/her condition is- has the right to have access to it.

The library should open channels that allow the recuperation and dissemination of the cultural heritage of every community, no matter what the means is used to attain this objective. Thus, from the recording of *sound books* in order to materialize the miracle of oral tradition, to the revitalization of narrators –real *living books*-, every action and activity deserves approval if, designed with imagination, works out as it was foreseen when goals were established..

The library should provide the tools for recuperating, perpetuating and spreading popular and traditional knowledge. It should facilitate (and teach, when it is necessary) these tools to every person, so that the whole community can be able to gain this wisdom. Last but not least, it should work for the literacy of its community and for the education and socialization of children.

Intangible cultural heritage is one of the most precious human treasures, even if its actual importance has not been fully recognized yet. It is a common heritage to every person, no matter what his/her race, language or religion is. It is what makes a person be what s/he is. It is what gives a person his/her identity and allows s/he to live. The library can manage such a heritage. In fact, it has not done anything different from the beginning of times, when an unknown and marvelous librarian started to stock and order little clay tablets covered by an entangled net of wedge-shaped signs.

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Personal profile

Edgardo Civallero (Buenos Aires, 1973) graduated from the LIS School of the National University of Córdoba (Argentina, 2004). His field of expertise is focused on library services to indigenous peoples and rural communities, as well as on oral tradition recovery in endangered and minority languages. On these issues he has developed a great deal of fieldwork (2001-2006), he has published two e-books, a number of papers and he has given international courses and conferences. Besides of this, he has worked in areas like Open Access, critic librarianship, documental languages, blogosphere, human rights, bilingual intercultural education and sound archives. He has been referee in the journal *Biblios* and E-LIS editor for Argentina, and he has acquired sound knowledge on the language, culture and current situation of South American native peoples.

He is a member of the *Standing Committee* of IFLA *Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section*, of the UDC (Universal Decimal Classification) *Revision Advisory Committee*, and of the editorial committee of the journal *Information for Social Change*. He is professor within the National University of Córdoba PROPAL program on reading and writing skills. A former marine biologist, musician and editorial / graphic designer, he currently works as a LIS papers' translator, independent researcher, writer, weblogs editor and teacher in (inter)national courses concerning his field of knowledge.