

Record my indigenous word. Or how special sound collections may break internal borders

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Abstract:

Probably some of the harshest borders indigenous populations around the world have to endure are the ones created by discrimination, misinformation, ignorance and social pressure. These borders separate them not just from their own fellow citizens: sometimes they become barriers among themselves as well. And these are the most difficult ones to cross and to overcome.

During his work in north-eastern Argentina between 2001 and 2006, the author created a number of small libraries in rural and urban indigenous communities. Under those communities' requirements, the libraries were built upon the collection and recording of oral tradition, and could be basically considered as "sound collections": cassettes with stories and legends recorded from the mouth of the elders to be heard by their (grand)children at the local schools. The work allowed one border to be "opened": the one separating older, traditional generations from younger, modern ones because of their culture and identity.

This paper briefly introduces the topic of library services for indigenous peoples in Latin America, and presents part of the author's experience. It stresses the role that oral/sound-based tradition may play in libraries, and explains how a very small collection of special materials was useful in jumping over barriers and crossing frontiers.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, endangered languages, oral tradition, memory, sound collections.

Introduction

Latin America is marked by the footprints of its past and present indigenous peoples: societies that have inhabited those lands for centuries, developing rich cultural traditions and creating a complex, diverse and plural human landscape.

Speaking about native groups in Latin America usually implies memories of a painful (and usually shameful) past: stories of conquest, slaughter, slavery and oppression. However, aboriginal peoples are not just a vague memory of a by-gone time, a museum exhibition, or a page in a history book. Many of them survived the encounter with the colonial powers during the 16th century and the policies of their heirs, the independent States, from 1810 onwards.

They tried to learn how to cope with (or how to endure) new socio-political circumstances, territorial organization, economic plans, and labor and cultural schemes, as well as all the stereotypes and labels used against them. And they tried to do that losing as little of their identities as possible — which sometimes proved to be just an impossible task.

These surviving, struggling peoples live today in most countries of the continent. Their cultures are weakened, or have vanished within the hegemonic mainstream, and they are considered "minorities" — although in many cases they are demographic majorities. They are ignored, treated as if they were invisible or, in the worst cases, disposable; they have to suffer and face a huge number of issues, from health problems to the systematic violation of all their rights. Barriers, gaps and invisible (but not less real) borders are created between them and the rest of their fellow citizens, founded on discrimination, ignorance and misunderstanding.

And yet, despite the challenges and problems, most of them keep on feeding and watering the few roots they have been left, and they try to take their place in a world that often considers them to be relics from a past already disappeared.

Advocating for plurality, diversity, multilingualism and transculturality as values inherent to a healthy, balanced, and fair human world, necessarily means supporting these societies — as well as any other under-represented group. A support stripped of paternalistic approaches, impositions and charity-like assistance.

In order to provide such support, to help Latin American indigenous peoples deal with their problems, it is necessary to go beyond the (inter)national statistics and official statements, which may be well-meaning but hardly turn into practical, meaningful actions. It is essential to listen to the voices of native societies themselves: they usually know which their problems and needs are, and what they want for their future far better than anybody else — and they definitely know what they do not need, or want.

The work with indigenous peoples should be based on an open-minded, continuous, fluent dialogue as well as in a close collaboration, in order to achieve a set of sustainable, reachable goals.

This also applies to the work of librarians.

Libraries in indigenous communities

There have been very few libraries or library services for indigenous peoples in the continent throughout all its history. There should be more of such services, though. Especially when considering the important, game-changing role libraries might play regarding the many serious issues native populations have to deal with on a daily basis.

Libraries (in the broader sense of the term) are institutions capable to deal both with the newest strategic information and the oldest memories: their function is collecting, organizing and spreading knowledge within a particular community, according to its features, possibilities and needs. Their structures can be flexibly adapted or even transformed to answer to the most diverse situations, or to fit in different environments. They handle tools and methods that allow the storage and management of data in many different forms — and the new technologies, when used properly and wisely, may improve and even multiply their

possibilities. In short: libraries are powerful actors that may (and should) play a decisive part in the sociocultural revitalization of indigenous peoples.

They may contribute their efforts to the recovery of local histories, genealogies and toponymy; they may support oral tradition and endangered languages; they may promote literacy and bilingual/intercultural education; they may supply information on health, labor, sustainable development, etc. Moreover, libraries may connect the indigenous cultural world with the (inter)national socio-cultural sphere, and vice versa.

From a narrow LIS (Library and Information Sciences) perspective, an indigenous community may be seen as an ensemble of users. But... who are those users? How do they live? What are they looking for? What do they miss? How should libraries support them? How can libraries help them to achieve their goals? Most libraries do not have answers to these questions (some of them never bothered to ask this kind of questions in the first place); after many years of experiences and research, a few ones have been able to find some basic responses, which have allowed them to design and implement library services that try to meet the requirements and fulfill the needs of their users. Among those ideas, one needs to be highlighted: it is not about cosmetically "adapting" the standard "Western/Euro-American" library model to "special circumstances" (or, more realistically, to force the community to accept that model), but about envisioning a plural, multicultural, interdisciplinary model, likely to be continuously adapted to the (expected) evolution of any human society.

Since the early 90s, a reduced number of library services for indigenous societies have been put into practice in Latin America. They were small-scale, local experiences carried out by individuals or small research groups, sometimes backed by universities, government institutions or independent NGOs. Although they were irregularly developed and most of them did not last but a couple of years, they brought to light the possibilities of this kind of services in the regional arena — and allowed to realize the many things that are still left to do, and the many others that librarians do not know yet.

Among those experiences there was a project put in place by the author of this paper in a small number of native communities in north-eastern Argentina. It was named "Indigenous libraries".

The "Indigenous libraries" project

This project was developed between 2001 and 2006 in north-eastern Argentina (provinces of Chaco and Formosa), in the region known as "Chaco", in rural and peri-urban communities belonging to the Qom, Pit'laqá, Moqoit and Wichi peoples.

Like most societies native to Latin America, those from Chaco never developed their own writing systems; therefore, all their knowledge has been (and continues to be, to this day) transmitted by means of the spoken word. They live in (or are surrounded by) a western-style, Spanish-speaking society, and suffer acculturation and strong sociocultural pressures. Those processes have ravaging effects, especially on indigenous languages and, hence, on the transmission of traditional knowledge.

In addition, these populations have suffered negative sociocultural impacts both from Argentinean authorities and from society in general, at all levels.

The project was aimed at providing them with a basic library service, focused mainly on recovering their languages and supporting their oral traditions, but keeping also in mind a number of other problems (health, human rights, labor, resources) that could be ameliorated and even have some sort of solution if access to basic information was granted — something that local libraries, schools and government agencies had hardly tried or achieved so far.

The project's work started by approaching the targeted communities in order to make a qualitative evaluation of their context, their problems, their resources, their reality, and their information needs. Those first contacts provided an initial picture that, in general terms, was dramatic and unexpected. Putting aside more urgent things (epidemics and hunger, labor exploitation, murders of local leaders, lack of water and sanitation services, traditional lands' illegal appropriation, police raids, evangelical acculturation...), communities pointed to the need for recovering and strengthening their memories, and for revitalizing their traditional expressions and their oral traditions, in order to regain and reinforce their identity as "a people". They also emphatically remarked the necessity of getting younger generations to feel the indigenous culture as their own.

However, this last concern appeared not to be shared by everybody: some indigenous (grand)parents were ashamed of their heritage because of devastating social pressures and had tried to get their (grand)children as far as possible from their native environment, so they would not have to endure the discrimination and racism they had suffered. That said, most indigenous communities (and their ethnic leaders and social organizations) understood that, in order to regain their consciousness of being a people, they needed their "roots" (their elders) as well as their "fruits" (their children).

As a second stage, they stated their willingness to increase the presence of their culture in primary schools (which, in that particular area of north-eastern Argentina, have bilingual/intercultural programs in place) and to have access to relevant information (on health, law, employment, labor, technology).

When it was explained to them that a library could help them achieve those goals —recover their culture and their identity, and reconnect with the new generations— they looked hesitant and eventually dismissed the idea. Those indigenous communities did not feel libraries to be well suited for the tasks at hand, since the libraries they knew kept their culture outside their shelves — and them outside their rooms. For those institutions, they were anything but "dirty Indians", and their culture was worthless.

At that point, it was evident that trying to put into practice the standard, traditional library model in those communities would have been absolutely useless. Even if it were possible, there was a remarkable lack of materials written and published in indigenous languages (a situation that has not changed much over the past decade). Anyway, pushing communities that openly expressed their disbelief in libraries to accept a library would have been a waste of effort and time — and would also have been arrogant and disrespectful. So, upon reflection, the author took the concept "library" and reduced it to its very basic lines, stripping it of anything that could result accessory or irrelevant in that context. Stemming from those basic assumptions, and taking into account the users' needs, a "new" idea was produced.

The author designed a model of "local library" initially based just on sounds — the main traditional way of transmitting knowledge among Chaco's indigenous peoples. These "libraries" would be small, movable, adaptable and based at local schools, a place where the whole community (and especially children) would be able to use them. The sound documents would collect local oral tradition both in native languages and Spanish. Besides being the "main collection" of the "library", those documents could be used as "practice materials" for bilingual/intercultural learning-teaching activities. The project's initial idea of an "indigenous library" was, then, divested of shelves and walls, catalogues and labels; it was completely modified in order to meet the communities' needs — and expectations.

Poetic as it might seem at first glance, the reality was much more prosaic: these "libraries" were just small shoes' cardboard boxes, or nylon bags, with a bunch of cassettes inside, where the author recorded local narratives from the elders of each community: tales, legends, stories, riddles, a couple of songs accompanied by an indigenous rebec called *mwiké*...

However, as incredible as it may seem, the idea worked out pretty well.

Creating a sound collection

Developing the "special/sound collection" for the "indigenous library" took many hours of recording, which put the author in contact with a true treasure: Chaco's indigenous oral tradition.

The task of collecting the spoken word benefited from the active —and much appreciated— participation of a number of the older members of the different communities. Their voices were recorded in 60' magnetic cassettes, the simplest support that could be acquired, used and reproduced in indigenous communities in those days. Collected materials covered a wide range of topics: from creation myths to legends and popular tales, and also local (micro-)history, medicine, cooking, songs, games, a couple of jokes, etc. Some of the stories retold the semi-mythic origin of the indigenous people, the appearance of their villages, the events in national history in which the narrators or their acquaintances have been involved (including massacres and human rights violations unreported in official sources), and the details of their own genealogies. Those accounts were filled with toponyms that suggested an old (micro-)geography, as well as personal names out of use. Family trees were sketched out, as well as connections between neighboring native groups, migrations, disputes, alliances and settlements.

The recording process allowed some long-forgotten memories to be brought to life again, and the art of telling to be practiced once more. And, for the most part, in the indigenous languages.

Languages —and every piece of knowledge that depend on their use for its survival— are one of the most endangered cultural traits of the Latin American indigenous peoples. During the 18th century their use was forbidden in the territories occupied by the Spanish crown; after the Independence Wars in the 19th century, they continued to be ignored, since the newborn States copied the European model of "nation", wiping out linguistic peculiarities and painting a monochromatic picture that disregarded nuances and differences. Because of their great number of speakers, languages as Quechua, Aymara and Guaraní continued to be spoken despite the pressure of European culture; others were not so lucky and lost both

speakers and the spaces where oral transmission was put into practice. Lacking writing systems, language loss resulted in the disappearance of entire narratives, cultural heritages and identities — entire spoken libraries and archives.

When a language vanishes, it will not take long for the culture it codifies to follow suit. Without culture, no identity is possible. And without identity, peoples do not know where they actually come from or which path their steps should follow. In the case of Latin American indigenous peoples, they were forced to acquire the "national" identity of the newly-formed countries — but they were never treated as full, national citizens. Instead they were placed at, and for the most part have remained in, a sort of limbo.

Language loss in Latin America is a process that has hardly been stopped or reversed. Although First Nations are nowadays more conscious of the importance of using their own languages, institutional responses are still scarce, intercultural and bilingual curricula are limited, the editorial production in native languages is poor, and strategic information translated into languages different from Spanish and Portuguese is almost non-existent.

All these facts were kept in mind when designing activities for the "Indigenous libraries" project: besides collecting oral stories in cassettes, "living books" (the same story-tellers that were recorded) were recruited. Both resources were presented at schools, trying to connect children with the narratives of their people, even of their own families. The local teachers suggested that some of the materials (tales and legends) might be reproduced on paper, written down by the children; such texts would later be illustrated and bound between cardboard covers, becoming the first "books" of the "libraries", as well as good materials for practicing reading skills.

These activities at schools, where children listened to recordings containing the voices of their elders —or to the elders themselves— showed that a bridge over the generational gap could be built by using these sound materials. That was how an activity named *qadede idá?at* was born.

Breaking down inner borders

Generational gaps are sadly common all around the world, usually cutting off family communication and relationships. However, when this kind of "internal barrier" or "inner border" raises within an indigenous society (the different parties marked by the possession and use, or not, of traditions and language), it can pose a serious threat for the survival of the native culture and identity: the chain of knowledge transmission is broken.

Taking into account the positive answer the "sound collection" received at schools, the "Indigenous library" project attempted to go one step further and take reading and writing activities to the children's homes, in order to involve their families even more. This way, the author proposed an activity named *qadede idá?at* — an expression from the Pit'laqá people meaning "the old tradition", which is used to designate a set of traditional sayings encouraging appropriate behavior, or perpetuating basic social rules.

The activity required students to take with them some children's books written in Spanish and to read tales and short stories from them to their elders (translating them into their language, if they were capable of) and, in turn, asked them to write down —in Spanish and/or the

indigenous languages— a traditional tale, a story, a tradition, a little something of the many things still told at home.

Thus, through the children, entire families got involved in the activity, which led to a strengthening of the generational bonds and the overcoming of internal barriers and gaps. By sharing oral tradition, (grand)parents got closer to their (grand)children, and they expressed themselves in their own language, too often neglected or denied. Some adults were initially reluctant to transmit their traditional knowledge (or whatever they had left of it), and children were nervous due to their imperfect reading skills, but in the end they discovered together a number of books and many traditional stories.

The activity made a very positive contribution, and several lessons were learnt from it.

1. Knowledge can be transmitted by several means and none of them should be underestimated by libraries. Libraries should push their book/written-based structures into the background and understand that they are "memory managers" first, and that memories can be retained and handled in different ways. Orality and other sound-based channels, for example, continue being the main way to preserve knowledge and vocalize thoughts for a great number of cultures all around the world. To provide those cultures a relevant service, libraries should begin by understanding and adapting themselves to their communities' social and cultural realities and needs, whenever possible.

2. When designing library activities that include families or other community actors, librarians should endeavor to get to know them, and be aware of their problems, needs, strengths and weaknesses. Ignoring these elements is a recipe for failure — and would represent a major missed opportunity.

3. Books (when available), recordings and traditions related to local reality are usually the best choices when starting library activities in indigenous (and, in general, in rural) communities: the link between the reader/listener and the knowledge becomes clear, and it is easier to establish relationships.

4. In traditional environments (rural, indigenous ones, but not only), children are the best allies of libraries. They are usually the best way to access/contact families: they will take home both all their questions and all their answers and discoveries. Children may also be the best way to engage and involve (grand)parents in library activities, although sometimes the other way around works as well.

5. Library activities related to reading and oral tradition provide a perfect basis for bilingual/intercultural literacy campaigns (wherever possible) addressed to both children and adults, as well as for actions of cultural recovery.

Libraries' services and activities can provide spaces for indigenous communities to voice, express and recover local cultures and heritages; they can provide opportunities to explore and develop new skills and learning; they can support and encourage diversity and multilingualism; they can offer other forms of entertainment and enjoyment... But, more importantly, they can provide tools for bringing down barriers, borders and fences, and to jump over gaps and divides, no matter their size — whether they are the huge barriers between an indigenous population and the rest of the national society, or the walls between father and son.

Conclusion

For the last years, a number of projects have been carried out to recover oral tradition within indigenous populations in Latin America. Slowly but surely, the most important indigenous languages are being written, and a handful of daring publishers are editing books in those languages. Even some governments (Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay) are taking a stand in the promotion of their aboriginal languages and traditions.

The outcomes of these actions still need to be assessed. Undoubtedly these are steps in the right direction, but there are a lot of remaining problems and issues to be resolved. Probably one of the most important one is the development of "indigenous activities" without the direct, active participation of the indigenous communities, and bringing no benefit to them. For the most part, indigenous knowledge has been collected and disseminated in an atmosphere of exoticism (and ignorance), while the daily reality of these peoples remains quite unknown, as do their problems and challenges.

The good news is that there is a small number of Latin American projects connected with native peoples which are doing an excellent work. The bad news is that libraries are still relegated to the sidelines and do not play the significant role they should.

There are several reasons for that. On the one hand, there is little LIS-related information on topics like indigenous knowledge, oral tradition, and endangered languages in Latin America. In addition, spaces for research, development and discussion are few if any; the same happens with training courses, educational materials, etc. Librarians who have to deal with indigenous users (and indigenous communities who have to deal with standard-model libraries) do so on their own — and the results are usually far from optimal.

On the other hand, managing orally-based materials and working with "minority" cultural expressions (including languages) are tasks considered to be "alien" for LIS, at least in Latin America. They are not included in most university curricula or professional profiles, there are no books and few articles addressing them, there are no significant guidelines... Needless to say, dealing with issues like "internal borders" and "generational gaps" within indigenous communities, or with thorny problems like discrimination or racism, is absolutely out of scope for a great number of librarians in the continent. And little is being done about it.

Yet, the small and limited success achieved by the "Indigenous libraries" project more than a decade ago —and the greater or lesser success of a number of other small, mostly undocumented projects developed in several corners of Latin America during the last years— demonstrates the potential of libraries in serving native populations, especially when the traditional, standard library model is put in second place and more creative formats, tailored to respond to the local context, are brought to the foreground.

In short: Library and Information Sciences should definitively contribute their experience and know-how, their methods and tools, to support indigenous and other "minority" groups and their struggles to keep alive their cultures and to overcome all kind of barriers and bridge gaps. However, LIS must first overcome their own barriers and jump over all the obstacles in its own path in order to get closer to their core values and to their users — these obstacles including stereotypes, ignorance, biases, and ideas like "neutrality" and "objectivity". Only then, libraries will be able to be side by side with their users, granting them access to

knowledge, and supporting the conservation of their cultural heritage and the perpetuation of their identities.

And helping them overcome the many barriers, divides and fences that keep us separated.

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