

Digitising and handling Indigenous cultural resources in libraries, archives and museums

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Abstract

Indigenous cultural resources expose long memory trails which extend from understandings of origins to engagement with contemporary challenges. The tangible traces of aeons old intangible experience, they include practical and ceremonial artefacts housed in museums, sites of cultural significance, testimony and stories collected in libraries, and records of experience deposited in archives. Many feature images and other elements which may be culturally bound, requiring sensitive and informed handling. Curation of Indigenous cultural resources, including digitisation, raises special and complex issues which go beyond the usual concerns of professional practice, both challenging professional norms and demanding appropriate protocols.

I start by acknowledging that we are in Ngunawal country, the ancestral lands of the Ngunawal people who lived here long before European shepherds and convicts came, long before Canberra was selected as the site for Australia's national capital, and long before this National Library was established. I pay my respects to the elders.

Archives, libraries and museums around the world contain treasuries of Indigenous experience, knowledge and history. The institutions' collections of documents, publications and artefacts represent Indigenous peoples and their languages, cultures and knowledge as they appeared to those who encountered them and, sometimes and increasingly, as they understood and understand themselves. The tangible traces of aeons old intangible experience, they include practical and ceremonial artefacts, sites of cultural significance, testimony and stories, and records of experience. As with the other resources gathered in the memory institutions, they convey the memories of communities and peoples; sometimes providing a glimpse of the forgotten, sometimes amplifying the half-remembered, sometimes misconstrued or false, often challenging memory and demanding interpretation.

Clash of knowledge systems

Curatorial expertise encounters a clash of knowledge systems as Indigenous systems engage in a dialectic with external systems. For example, a gallery places a bark painting from Yirrkala on the wall, juxtaposed with a work in a contemporary style. In doing so, it is suggesting that the visitor assess the bark from an aesthetic perspective and places it in the

context of the development of Western art. A brief exegesis, written by the artist or dealer, may be provided for the interested to peruse. But the art is essentially recontextualised, placed in a gallery context where it will be assessed against the panorama of artistic development offered by the gallery's displayed works. In many ways, this is welcome because it removes the bark from consideration solely as an Indigenous work, a work which might be labelled "Primitive" in an inventory or text, and permits it to be assessed as an art work in its own right. But, without very skilled curation, something important is also lost in that the work ceases to be seen as a manifestation of a well developed knowledge system with deep connections to other aspects of the knowledge system. The focus on largely aesthetic aspects draws the viewer's attention to the similarities to other works, composition, skill in execution and materials but away from its cultural embeddedness. It privileges aesthetic considerations over the significance of the bark as an expression of a complex interconnected body of knowledge which, for the Yolgnu and most other Indigenous peoples, is intimately bound with a strong sense of place, a strong connection to the land.

However, the alternative approach, the culturally dense presentation of ethnographic collections in the best museums and galleries also risks the loss of important perspectives. Such wonderfully rich displays as those in the Museum of South Australia illustrate the depth of Australian Indigenous cultures and indicate the continuities across this continent. In providing insights to the variety of Indigenous expression, the works of culture and technology are separated from other cultural and technological objects so that they are likely to be seen in an exclusively Indigenous context and, generally, as works of the past. They are separated from contemporary expression, both Indigenous and other, and relegated as interesting, often beautiful, relicts of other times. The continuities in Indigenous life and the interactions with settler cultures are largely lost, giving the viewer the impression that Indigenous cultural expression is "Primitive" and no longer living.

Intangible in the tangible

Some museums and galleries have attempted to present both the traditional cultural contexts and the contemporary continuities as well as the interactions with non Indigenous visitors to and invaders of Indigenous lands. Sometimes they juxtapose works by Indigenous peoples with those made by non Indigenous observers. Demanding considerable curatorial skill, such expositions can demonstrate the complexity of cultural interaction and show that the intangible knowledge systems are embedded in the tangible objects.

Archives and libraries, of course, frequently hold drawings, paintings and other objects but are principally concerned with documentary artefacts including manuscripts, records, books, audiovisual items, etc. Those documentary resources have, until recently, consisted mostly of depictions of Indigenous peoples and their cultures by non Indigenous observers. Often sympathetic, they nevertheless describe and seek to explain Indigenous customs and beliefs from outside and set their analyses in external frames of reference. Even when sympathetic, well intentioned and well advised by Indigenous informants, such documentary records remain outside the cultures they seek to depict. Frequently, however, they are misinformed, partial, inaccurate or tendentious and provide an incorrect record. They are nonetheless important as records of cultures which may have disappeared or been severely damaged and because they offer insights into cultural perspectives and cross cultural interactions.

For example, the records compiled by the Protector of Aborigines, when that oppressive and paternalistic system of managing Indigenous peoples was in operation, report important facts

about those subjected to their 'care'. Dates of birth, parentage, siblings, removal to other locations, employment, permission to marry and many other important and very personal details were recorded, often along with gratuitous, and sometimes offensive, comments about the subjects of the records. In those comments and the structure and substance of the records, they also convey much about the non Indigenous attitudes of the time. These bureaucratic records are important cultural objects which have immense personal value to the families of those whose lives they report, even when they are inaccurate or offensive, but also tremendous value to the historian and social analyst. However, they record the observations of outsiders, outsiders with considerable power over the lives of the observed and with a view of their own superiority even when paternalistically kind.

Other archives include collections of letters, diaries and other manuscripts in which the authors commented on Indigenous peoples and their customs. While still providing an observer's view, they offer an immediacy of observation which can contrast with governmental records or newspaper reportage. Such records have been used in concert with oral testimony by Indigenous people to gain great insights by such scholars as Henry Reynolds¹, Deborah Bird Rose² and many since. The older documentary records have been amplified through the addition of other collections, including oral history recordings, many of which record Indigenous peoples' experiences and views directly.

Books in libraries dealing with Australian Indigenous peoples and cultures extended from the thoughtful notes of observers as early as Watkin Tench³, the serious ethnographic studies of such pioneers as Baldwin Spencer⁴, *We of the Never-Never*⁵ and other frontier novels, and the romanticised retelling of Aboriginal beliefs including those by Charles Mountford⁶ to an avalanche of more recent works. Over the last two decades they have increasingly included works by Indigenous authors such as Ruby Langford Ginibi⁷ and scholars such as Martin Nakata⁸. But the point to be made here is that, like the vast majority of records in archives, most books in libraries dealing with Indigenous peoples and cultures still provide the perspective of the visitor or the observer, not that of those whose lives and beliefs are described.

Thus, in the tangible resources gathered in libraries and archives as in museums, we find a wealth of Indigenous cultural resources including artefacts made by Indigenous peoples, recordings of their music, oral history recordings, letters and diaries, books, films and many other formats. But we also find much that has been recorded by others which describes with varying levels of accuracy and empathy, the history, language, culture and experience of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous cultural resources become much more manifold than the obvious Yirrkala bark to include works both by and about Indigenous peoples and cultures.

In these many faceted cultural resources, we experience a clash of cultures between the intangible beliefs and experiences of Indigenous peoples which are described, usually from the outside, and the perspectives of the reporters and, indeed, the readers and viewers. Onion-like, the tangible record, video or artefact includes many layers of intangible cultural expression and interpretation.

The professional practices of curators add further dimensions to this clash of knowledge systems. Those practices are derived from the Western curatorial tradition and, for libraries and archives, largely the Anglo-American models. Well developed, they offer many potentialities for the effective curation of diverse cultural resources but, nevertheless, they juxtapose a positivist professional habitus with diverse tangible and intangible cultural

resources. The necessary sorting, labelling and other judgements which are integral to curatorial practice frame the cultural resources in particular ways which may be neglectful of some characteristics, and distorting to the knowledge systems.

Digitisation

The resources in archives and libraries are increasingly in digital forms and there is a growing desire to digitise resources which are not, including those in museums, to enhance access and to promote preservation. The Art Gallery of New South Wales for example, has digitised many of the Indigenous (and other) works in its collections⁹. No longer limited to the small proportion of the collection which can be physically hung in its galleries, interested viewers can now work their way through the collections online. In such digital galleries, viewers can employ the metadata and links to construct virtual expositions on particular themes, enable free or guided searching, and switch to additional explanatory or related materials. Such technologies, and especially those now emerging under the rubric of Web 2.0, have tremendous potential to revolutionise the concept of collections and their use.

For Indigenous cultural resources, digitisation offers those same benefits of broader and more comprehensive access to materials in institutional collections and the capacity to annotate or link to other related or explanatory materials. But those benefits have additional force in that they can make accessible vital information which can assist the process of self identification, family reconnection and healing as has been seen in the use made of archival resources since the publication of the report into forced removal of Indigenous children¹⁰. By providing readier access to the resources and related materials, digitisation can build understanding between Indigenous and non Indigenous people and thereby assist the processes of reconciliation and community building. And the possibility of enabling annotation allows Indigenous people to provide alternative perspectives or correct the record. For example, archives can enable Indigenous people to correct or amplify records relating to them, their families and their communities by attaching annotations or comments while preserving the integrity of the records themselves.

However, the cultural issues discussed in this paper have an inhibitory effect on digitisation of Indigenous cultural resources. In addition to the usual complexities and uncertainties imposed by copyright law, the handling of Indigenous cultural resources raises many additional concerns¹¹. Particularly challenging are issues relating to legitimacy, misportrayal and giving offence – unless the cultural owners are all safely dead or very distant in time. In current research into digitisation initiatives in Australian libraries and archives, Martin Nakata, I and our colleagues have observed a reluctance to digitise Indigenous cultural resources for these reasons. In spite of their awareness that digitisation would be valuable because it would improve access to the cultural resources by the peoples to whom they refer, as well as others, and would protect sometimes fragile cultural resources, library and archives institutions and their staff hesitate. There is an uncertainty about whom to ask for permission or even to determine whether obtaining permission would be necessary. There is a concern that the dissemination of digitised resources, especially images, may give offence as most Australians are aware, at least from labels on television programs and films, that the presentation of images of deceased people can be offensive to some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

And there are good reasons for those anxieties. It can be very difficult to identify the appropriate cultural owners especially for older resources. And, even when the owners have

been identified, they may be uncertain, unwilling or unable to give permission particularly when there are divisions among members of an Indigenous community or family. One of the aims of the current research is to seek ways of negotiating that impasse so that institutions may undertake digitisation projects with greater confidence.

For cultural institutions and the scholars associated with them, there are further challenges when professional habitus meets Indigenous custom. The deeply held professional commitment to free inquiry that is a central tenet of Western scholarly practice can be challenged by the belief that certain cultural resources and understanding must be restricted to the initiated, or males (“men’s business”), or females (“women’s business”), or in some other way. This is especially hard for librarians who have abjured a strong commitment to unrestricted access to information but also poses major difficulties for museum curators who manage materials acquired to support scholarly investigation and for archivists who expect that the records under their care will ultimately become available to historians and other researchers. However, as we have seen in the negotiations with museums over human remains and cultural objects, it is often possible to find a solution which will be acceptable both to the cultural owners and the curators and researchers.

Respectful practice

I commenced this paper with an acknowledgment that we are in Ngunawal country, the ancestral lands of the Ngunawal people. While far from universal, such traditional Indigenous acknowledgments of country are being adopted increasingly in Australia as a gesture of reconciliation between settler society and Indigenous communities. At the University of Technology, Sydney where I work, for example, there is a standard acknowledgment of the traditional owners of the lands on which the University’s campuses stand, the Gadigal and Kuring-gai peoples, which is used at the commencement of graduation ceremonies, conferences and other occasions. This gesture of respect is much appreciated by Indigenous people both because of its intrinsic recognition of traditional ownership and continuing association with the land and because of its implicit acceptance of Indigenous protocol.

Such practices establish a climate of good will based on mutual respect. They build a foundation for genuine negotiation based on a willingness to understand the concerns of both institutions and Indigenous peoples. In a very simple way, they recognise cultural difference and acknowledge differing knowledge systems. The challenge for the memory institutions is to identify and adopt appropriate and respectful practices when dealing with Indigenous cultural resources. That is, to accept the challenge to our professional modes to find ways of recognising and respecting different knowledge systems so that we may deal with the cultural expressions we handle in terms of those knowledge systems while still maintaining our curatorial responsibilities.

Attempts are being made to establish new models of library and information service which are based on mutual respect. For instance, the Knowledge Centres developed in the Northern Territory and Queensland seek to respond to the challenging needs of very remote Indigenous communities in the central and northern parts of Australia. The communities face many difficulties due to isolation and a history of marginalisation and deprivation. Nevertheless, they have maintained their cultural traditions while embracing many aspects of modern Australian life. The knowledge centres assist community well-being and development by providing vehicles for community members both to access mainstream information and also

to store and access culturally important information while observing cultural rules. Their success has been documented in a review by Nakata¹² and recognised by the award of the 2007 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award to the Northern Territory Library Service¹³.

Protocols

More than a decade ago, the compilation and publication of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*¹⁴ provided a framework for such respectful practice in archives and libraries. The *Protocols* have been influential: the document is frequently cited as a key document on curatorial practice for Indigenous materials and services to Indigenous peoples. It has been adopted as guide to both good practice and aspiration by many institutions and was recently reframed in the USA as the *Protocols for Native American archival materials*¹⁵.

A review of the *Protocols* strategy found that it had been effective but needed greater support and guidance¹⁶. The *Protocols* strategy offers a framework for identifying and responding to issues relating to services for Indigenous peoples, the handling of Indigenous resources and the involvement of Indigenous people in the governance and management of the memory institutions. To some degree it relieves the burden of being the expert on all things Indigenous which is placed on Indigenous staff members in institutions and it provides guidance for institutions without Indigenous staff. However, the review found that the *Protocols* had been inadequately communicated across the sectors, were too complex for some smaller organisations and needed an accompanying source of advice on specific issues. To the extent that resources permit, these needs have been addressed by representing the *Protocols* on a new website under the aegis of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN)¹⁷.

The review also found that the 1995 *Protocols* were still valid but that they needed to be augmented with sections on digital materials and digitisation. The second sparked the current research into digitisation practices relating to Indigenous cultural resources. The intent of the research is to trace the processes involved in digitisation, identify the decision points and seek to frame standards or protocols which will guide decision making and smooth the processes. It is hoped that this will enable institutions to undertake digitisation projects with greater confidence so that the benefits may be realised and the pitfalls avoided.

Significance – tangible and intangible

To return to the questions of tangible and intangible resources and significance, it is clear that when considering Indigenous cultural resources, the assessment becomes a multilayered evaluation of both tangible and intangible aspects. To take one example from the Northern Territory, the experience of the poet, Bill Neidjie, is surely of great significance. Born in the 1920s, Big Bill grew up on the frontier between aeons-old traditional Gagudju life and the expanding buffalo, crocodile and mining industries. He lived to see the decline of his people followed eventually by a resurgence supported by some recognition and respect for Aboriginal culture and, finally, to see his country protected as the now world famous Kakadu National Park.

Big Bill Neidjie's words remind us to think deeply about our professional practices and to consider how we might respond better to Indigenous peoples, Indigenous cultural resources and the other challenges faced by our memory institutions¹⁸:

*White European want to know ...
asking 'What is this story?'
This not easy story.
No-one else can tell it ...
because this story for Aboriginal culture.*

*I speak English for you,
so you can listen ...
so you can know ...
you will understand.
If I put my words (language) in same place,
you won't understand.*

*Our story is the land ...
it is written in those sacred places.*

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