

# Indigenous knowledge preservation as a sign of respect for culture: concerns of libraries, archives and museums

Indigenous or traditional knowledge (IK) holders face a lack of respect and appreciation for such knowledge. Respect for culture means following protocols, accepting diversity and recognizing indigenous cultures as living and continuously evolving. This is a 'hot topic', and the central goal of this article is to advance understandings to allow cultural memory institutions (libraries, archives and museums) to respect, affirm and recognize indigenous ownership of their traditional and living indigenous knowledges and to respect the protocols for their use. The various ways of managing and preserving indigenous knowledge, especially using new technologies in the digital era, will be explored and ideas on how to respect the indigenous culture, even in the process of documenting or preserving in academic libraries, will be outlined. Libraries involved in IK preservation will be encouraged to develop protocols by collaborating with each other and engaging the community, to preserve each unique culture in a respectful manner. Intellectual property rights of knowledge holders, respect for these rights and procedures to adopt will be described. Activities undertaken to preserve indigenous knowledge are assessed and suggestions made on how library and information science professionals could more efficiently handle indigenous knowledge preservation as respect for culture.

## Keywords

indigenous knowledge; indigenous knowledge preservation; cultural heritage; libraries; archives; museums

'In one of the great tragedies of our age, indigenous traditions, stories, cultures and knowledge are winking out across the world. Whole languages and mythologies are vanishing, and in some cases, even entire indigenous groups are falling into extinction.'<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The traditional knowledge of a people or society, useful for them in making informed decisions, is their indigenous knowledge (IK). This knowledge includes the norms, practices, language, dances, stories, folk-tales and other knowledge that could be termed 'primordial', which is handed down from generation to generation, mostly orally. This is the working definition this article is premised on. Documenting the oral indigenous traditions for posterity or ensuring they do not die away with the departure of the elders of the society is an activity carried out in many societies today.

Ensuring that indigenous knowledge does not become extinct is the goal of many cultural heritage institutions as they systematically endeavour to preserve the heritage of the people. Indigenous knowledge preservation, therefore, is a cultural heritage activity to be treasured. The activity that indigenous knowledge preservation entails is dependent on having a close connection with knowledge



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2 holders. These knowledge holders, or custodians, are the ones who keep the knowledge and hand it over to the younger generation. One of their aims, apart from many holders making a living from the indigenous knowledge they impart, is to help society move forward, maintaining their social and cultural norms. The knowledge held is crucial in making decisions that affect the whole society and this importance can never be overlooked.

Unfortunately, many of the indigenous practices are fading out because the holders are dying without passing on the baton, as it were. In some instances, those it is passed on to are not respectful of the heritage handed to them or do not adhere to the instructions they are given. In addition, very few safeguards exist to protect indigenous knowledge holders against misuse of their knowledge.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the palace of the Oba of Benin in Benin City, Nigeria, the artifacts and traditional items are kept locked away.

The tradition is to knock three times on the door to the place where they are stored before entering. This must be done to show that permission to enter is sought. Knowledge handed down needs the conditions associated with it to be followed. This is so as to attain the desired results without problems or challenges. For example, Yoruba elders will say 'e jé ká seé bó se ye ká seé, kó lè baà rì bó ti ye kí rí!' meaning 'things should be done the way they should be done, so that things will turn out the way they should'.

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Being respectful of the traditions handed down is the subject of this discourse. Preserving indigenous knowledge, ways of doing so, the roles of libraries, archives and museums in it, the intellectual property rights of knowledge holders and developing more efficient ways to handle indigenous knowledge preservation as respect for culture will be discussed.

## Literature review

Some holdings of indigenous knowledge have been unethically appropriated, as early ethnographers, missionaries or allies raced to save the histories and artifacts of a 'vanishing race'. In other cases, indigenous peoples from whom the knowledge originated have not been acknowledged.<sup>3</sup>

The indigenous community from which that knowledge originated might have a different conception or expectation of authorship or ownership from those seeking to preserve it, resulting in barriers to access by even those very indigenous community members.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, indigenous knowledge has been orally transmitted for generations for specific cultural use, and it can encompass pieces of knowledge such as traditional technologies and sacred knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge and cultural expressions include the tangible and the intangible: oral traditions, ceremony, songs, dance, storytelling, anecdotes, place names, various forms of art, clothing, hereditary names and many other forms.<sup>5</sup> One can also witness indigenous knowledges taking new forms such as indigenous comics, musical fusions, blog posts or X (formerly Twitter) essays. These new formats are being subjected to new preservation protocols and new concepts of ownership. It could be argued that it is no longer indigenous knowledge once the format has changed. However, that is not the focus of this article.

'Cultural and heritage institutions reuse, reproduce, represent and sell indigenous knowledge ... often without asking permission'

Cultural and heritage institutions reuse, reproduce, represent and sell indigenous knowledge – whether in oral or written stories, art, objects or other works – in numerous ways, often without asking permission, properly acknowledging or compensating the indigenous peoples – the originators. For a country like Canada for instance, cultural memory institutions bear an ethical responsibility to respect and protect indigenous knowledge, irrespective of whether copyright questions are answered or answerable, or whether the pertinent indigenous systems of laws are yet elucidated.<sup>6</sup> These differ in different circumstances and have to be treated accordingly.

3 Much indigenous knowledge is shared via intergenerational transfer, and sometimes elders are reluctant to share it for fear of indigenous laws of ownership not being respected.<sup>7</sup> There is some African research that demonstrates this, and its reality underlies many indigenous knowledge preservation protocols, especially in Africa. Developing protocols to engage respectfully, work toward decolonization and support indigenous resurgence is thus imperative. Institutions must ensure that the collections, staff and spaces are responsive to the needs of indigenous communities' unique intellectual property concerns, issues and opportunities. This will make it easy for professional practitioners in the cultural memory sector to facilitate reconciliation between themselves, the collectors and preservers (custodians in formal settings) and the knowledge holders to maintain respect for culture. The different indigenous cultures will naturally reflect their own characteristics as there is no single global indigenous culture.

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Statistics gathered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2020, reveal that the Asia and Pacific region has the highest proportion of indigenous peoples (70.5%), followed by Africa (16.3%), Latin America and the Caribbean (11.5%), Northern America (1.6%) and Europe and Central Asia (0.1%). Earlier, in 2018, UNESCO launched the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage<sup>8</sup> to strengthen dialogue with indigenous peoples and ensure policies respect their rights. According to them, respect for indigenous peoples' rights is increasingly embedded in the management plans of World Heritage sites, such as the site of the Megalithic Circles in Wanar, Senegal or the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Culture features prominently in the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169)<sup>9</sup> and in the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),<sup>10</sup> which together form the main international instruments framing indigenous peoples' rights. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, pursuant to the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2001 by the Commission on Human Rights, UNDRIP is the most comprehensive statement of the rights of indigenous peoples ever developed, giving prominence to collective rights to a degree unprecedented in international human rights law. The UNDRIP has been translated into almost 60 languages, most of which are indigenous.

The intellectual property rights (IPR) of indigenous people are being catered for in the efforts of UNDRIP. Article 31 of the UNDRIP states that:

'Indigenous people have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their science, technologies, and culture, including human and genetics resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of properties of flora and fauna, oral traditions, literature, designs, sports, and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.' It is further declared that 'In conjunction with the indigenous people, states shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of their rights.'<sup>11</sup>

These are concerns that cultural heritage institutions have to focus more on.

Kotut and McCrickard<sup>12</sup> presented the challenges that indigenous community members specifically face as they seek to interact and preserve their indigenous knowledge. This includes the challenge introduced by geographical distance, language fluency and the presence or lack of participation by key members of the community. They noted that indigenous knowledge is constantly evolving, as community members reinterpret what it means to them given the times they live in, their context and their needs. This makes it challenging to design technologies to interact with the indigenous knowledge (since preserving it limits its evolution). Indigenous knowledge is fluid and dynamic and this means

- 4 institutions will need to update their staff and develop their procedures for indigenous knowledge preservation as community members bring new aspects of the indigenous knowledge to be preserved.

Kotut and McCrikard<sup>13</sup> also investigated how an indigenous community, the Kalenjin community in Kenya, leveraged technology to record, engage with, preserve and discuss indigenous knowledge, and the repercussions of this, considering the online versus offline communities, and the local versus diaspora needs in the documenting of indigenous knowledge. This is where libraries, archives and museums have to be proactive and dynamic in preserving the indigenous knowledge they collect and document. To aid the process, they need to keep abreast of the best technology to use that suits the indigenous knowledge to be preserved, and in what format. Research and continuous cordial relationships with the indigenous communities are called for from the heritage institutions. Re-establishing those connections when indigenous knowledge is reformatted or repackaged is desirable. Indeed, indigenous community members should be employed by, or encouraged to work closely with, heritage institutions on such research projects. No matter the technology to be used, respectful management of indigenous knowledge should be maintained.

'libraries, archives and museums have to be proactive and dynamic in preserving the indigenous knowledge they collect and document'

## The here and now

Indigenous knowledge preservation is being taken more seriously than it was some 100 years ago. Libraries, archives and museums are evolving units that go all out to gather knowledge from knowledge holders. Research teams are working on finding out about events, activities, rites and practices in many remote or indigenous communities. Records are being kept of ancient practices. These are gathered from elders or from younger people who have been handed the knowledge. Indeed, some researchers have had to join the communities in participatory activities to be able to qualify to do the documentation.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Affiliated Institutions (IFLA) has in place an Indigenous Matters Section, which aims,

'to support the provision of culturally responsive and effective services to indigenous communities throughout the world. Its main objectives are to promote international cooperation in the fields of library, culture, knowledge and information services to indigenous communities that meet their intergenerational, community, cultural, and language needs, and to encourage indigenous leadership within the sector, exchange of experience, education and training and research in all aspects of this subject.'<sup>14</sup>

Participation in preparing documentation is not enough; recording and transcribing interviews and preserving pictures, tapes, slides, videos and other forms of records have also been done. Libraries, archives and museums are constantly involved in updating and upgrading the formats in which the documentation is carried out. The era of artificial intelligence and 5G technology is taking its toll on indigenous knowledge preservation. Digitization of indigenous knowledge materials is on the increase.

'The process of indigenous knowledge preservation has to respect the knowledge holders' rights'

Ethical considerations and the intellectual property rights of those parting with the knowledge are a great concern. Many knowledge holders in the past have had their knowledge taken and commercialized without their permission or consent. They have effectively been robbed because the knowledge they shared for purposes of preservation is thrown carelessly into the public domain, destroying the sacred nature of the knowledge and trivializing the culture they hoped to preserve. This is highly disrespectful. The process of indigenous knowledge preservation has to respect the knowledge holders' rights. If any knowledge is given and there are pecuniary benefits, agreements must be reached, the principles of fair use respected and the monetary or other compensation given as agreed. Due respect and acknowledgment must be provided.

- 5 Librarians, archivists and curators are often not adequately trained on how to handle the indigenous knowledge components of their collection. It is very important to be sensitive to this aspect. Policies governing indigenous knowledge preservation within collections have to be drawn up specifically. All aspects of the preservation cycle need to be carefully considered and the procedures detailed with instructions on what to do. Policies should cover what training is given to handlers of indigenous knowledge collections, what to do with the knowledge holders and how to proceed when the medium of preserving the knowledge is to be changed. Failure to do so has implications – for example, some indigenous knowledge is easily documented, and some is not. Without permission, taking photographs of some heritage sites results in nothing being recorded, in spite of advanced technology!

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## The concerns of libraries, archives and museums (LAMs)

Cultural heritage institutions often lack the funding (or enough funding) to carry out indigenous knowledge preservation. They are limited in their activities and cannot do what is necessary to ensure that respect for the culture is maintained. How do you move out to contact knowledge holders when there is no mobilization? The research mostly involves repeated visits to get appointments and even to seek indigenous knowledge holders' permission. Some are approached at specific times so that preparation for sacred rites of passage can be observed.

Having personnel that are properly trained is essential. An institution's indigenous knowledge preservation team may actually need to employ local research aids or members of the local community who are well-versed in the local history, traditions and ways of handling the indigenous knowledge on a permanent or temporary basis. These special researchers or personnel must be compensated.

The handling of technology for indigenous knowledge preservation is a concern. Not all technology is compatible with all types of indigenous knowledge. Careful choices have to be made so as not to diminish or water down the original indigenous knowledge content. Pictures, recordings, and so on, taking care of artifacts (in archives and museums) are established technologies that are already carefully used. Nowadays with digitization, even more care has to be taken. The procedures may vary depending on the cultural context of the indigenous knowledge collection being processed. Naturally, the means of carrying out the procedures will be different for different indigenous cultural heritages. The variation in accounts from generation to generation is reflected in the case of the Kalenjin of Kenya as reported by Kotut and McCrickard.<sup>15</sup> The younger generation narrate the stories differently from the very old members of the community within the same culture.

The dissemination of indigenous knowledge once it is preserved is another major concern. What should be put in the public domain by managers of indigenous knowledge and what should be kept in closed access, what should be restricted, what should require a special request to access and what should require paid access. These are critical issues. Indeed, one concern could be whether libraries, archives, and museums really are custodians of indigenous knowledge. Should they disseminate indigenous knowledge (it is indigenous, is it not?)?

'Cultural heritage institutions are pivotal in the knowledge industry. They are gatekeepers as well as gateways'

## The way forward for LAMs

Cultural heritage institutions are pivotal in the knowledge industry. They are gatekeepers as well as gateways. Their role is crucial and therefore they should be very proactive in being respectful of the culture being preserved and instilling respect for culture in their clientele. They need to find more collaborators to partner with in indigenous knowledge preservation, so as to be properly funded.

- 6 The formulation, implementation and monitoring of policies about indigenous knowledge preservation within cultural heritage institutions will be their highest priorities if respect for the culture is seriously considered. As a result, knowledge holders will have their intellectual property rights safeguarded and thus will be more willing to come out and share their indigenous knowledge. They will more readily give, knowing that the knowledge is safe and will be handled with the respect and care it deserves.

## Conclusion

Respect for culture is a thing of the mind and psyche, therefore, people bound by their culture will respect each other and those outside of their culture as well. Unity of purpose is ensured when culture is preserved and observed. Cultural heritage institutions and their staff have a huge stake in the preservation of indigenous knowledge for future generations. What they do or leave undone, how they do what needs to be done and the maintenance of respect for culture is in their hands, while a lot depends on them, especially in this digital era. It is time for stakeholders to preserve indigenous knowledge with proper respect for culture.

'It is time for stakeholders to preserve indigenous knowledge with proper respect for culture'

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

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The author has declared no competing interests.

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