

Indigenous libraries, utopia and reality: proposing an Argentine model

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Indigenous peoples

For centuries, millions of individuals gazed at the stars, rooted in this land that, today, we consider ours. Generation after generation, they weaved a unique, incomparable cultural tapestry, composed by an infinite number of small and big own, characteristic, distinctive and inimitable features.

For centuries, these millions built exquisite, deeply singular visions of the cosmos. Owners of intimate relations with their environment, of connections with the magical and spiritual universe, of artistic expressions of undeniable creativity, and of languages endowed with rich sounds and vocabularies, these peoples made up together a vast, immense human mosaic, of a virtually boundless diversity.

Later labeled as “ab-original” –natives- they hardly survived the brutal impetuosity of expansive imperial powers, whose political and socio-economic systems were based in the ideas of conquest, control and exploitation.

Most of these fragile human miracles did not bear the pressure and succumbed. Others simply vanished in the middle of the “civilized” world that occupied their land and their lives. Some of them adapted themselves, through a metamorphosis that forced them to accept certain degrees of assimilation or acculturation. Some of them took refuge in their silence and in the memories of a better past. Many of them, however, never surrendered.

The pressure, the violence and the oblivion were not enough to silence their voices. More than 300 millions indigenous people currently try to build their own way amid so much exclusion, so much discrimination and so many problems. Of these survivors, almost half a million, belonging around 12 different ethnic groups, live in the territory that, from two centuries ago, was named “Argentina”. They try to maintain their customs, their traditions –predominantly through oral transmission- their wisdom, their beliefs and those features that make them special, different, unique... And they fight to preserve their identity in a terribly globalized, homogeneous world, dominated by technology.

In spite of the setbacks they suffer daily in trying to insert themselves in societies that never will open their doors to them, they don’t give up their struggle. Nor do they forget. They keep on remembering that they are the sons and daughters of the Earth, produced by the desires of their celestial creators through the millennium. They know that they will take root again in the mountains, plains and forests that keep guard over the resting places of their ancestors... and that they will bloom again, and they will bear fruit.

To support this story, these living memories of a painful past, these living testimonies of a shameful present, and this struggle, the “Aboriginal Library” project was created.

Aboriginal Libraries

The project starts from a set of ideas which form part of the new trend of Library and Information Sciences: *progressive librarianship*. This movement supports and encourages the free access to information, the respect of the typical cultural structures of each community, the use of imagination in the management of resources, the denial of established and accepted models of service, and the spread of the knowledge to achieve a well-balanced and egalitarian development of human societies.

Using a complete interdisciplinary theoretical frame (anthropology, sociology, law, education sciences, linguistics...) and employing *action research* (with the contribution of social research techniques such as *thick description*), this project proposes the construction, implementation and evaluation of library models specifically designed to meet the needs of indigenous users, respecting their cultural features and considering their resources, their reality, their times and their cultural traits.

“Aboriginal Libraries” is developed in the heart of the community, as a grass-roots project, encouraging the full and continuous involvement, decision and assessment of the final users. It intends to become an institution managed by the group itself, without further intervention or outside influence. It aims at allowing the recovery of ancestral languages and knowledge, the revitalization of current cultural expressions and practices, literacy, the participation of socially excluded sectors (such as women and the elders), the appropriation of strategic wisdom (health and care, nutrition, resource management, law and human rights...) from indigenous points of view, and the introduction of non-native cultural elements (alphabet, books, computing) from a bilingual and intercultural frame.

In order to fulfill these objectives, the library becomes a ductile, versatile organization, adaptable to the living conditions of the community, and to their requests. Those responsible in the information unit, in collaboration with the human group which they serve, must analyze and recognize the features of the group, their space, their resources, their social, cultural and educational situation, their searches, their desires and their needs. The *thick description* and the *life histories* are useful and suitable tools for this task, because they generate the richest reports on the quality of life and the socio-cultural traits of any people. In fact, they contribute with data that are hidden from the quantitative tools (statistics). The use of the latter could compliment the work with some basic numbers.

Human details –especially those referred to beliefs, cosmic visions or idiosyncracies of communities- must be deeply considered in this stage of the previous evaluation: the outcomes of this process will express what is expected from the library, what kind of users will frequent it (or not) and what human and material elements are considered for the implementation of the services.

From these data, a model of the information unit can be designed, always in collaboration with the community. This model will be subjected to a continuous evaluation and improvement. Collection and services must support strongly the oral culture, the native languages (bilingual education), the intercultural exchanges, the role of the women and the elders in the transmission of the information, the channels through which information moves and is expressed inside the group, the acquisition of new knowledges, the rescue of their history and traditions, and the appropriation of the library as an space for development, discussion and recuperation of identity.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this process (i.e., the aboriginal library models generated) could be as different and varied as the ethnic groups they will serve and represent. In any case, they must have common features: they must belong to the community, they must express their spirit, they must satisfy their needs and they must involve indigenous people in the modern affairs without a loss of identity.

In the concrete case of this author, I currently work with *qom* (tobas), *wichi* (matacos) and *moqoit* (mocovies) communities in Presidencia Roque Sanez Peña, Resistencia and other locations in Chaco province, and is expected that, during 2005, the work area will increase to include *pilaxa* (pilagá) communities in Formosa province and *avá* (chiriguano) villages in Salta province (all them inside Argentine territory).

This is a humanistic planning proposal, which fully refutes quantitative methods. It is focused to consider the social, the human and the personal factors. Only from humanistic and supportive points of view, respecting diversity and multiculturalism and understanding intercultural relations, a valid proposal for these long neglected populations could be generated. Librarianship (LIS) could contribute with its wisdom –a wisdom developed from centuries of experience- for achieving the growth and the development of these (and other) human groups. But LIS must give up its silence, its marble tower, its privileged positions in the new “knowledge society”, its “apolitical” attitudes and its “objectivity”. It must become more deeply involved in the problems, side with the helpless and struggle, shoulder to shoulder (maybe without tools, without technology, without money, just equipped with imagination, working wishes and service vocation) with others human beings, who were - and currently are- forgotten, just because they are faithful to themselves.

Maybe the ideas expressed in this report are utopian, and they could hurt the academic and professional seriousness of many colleagues. But I ask you, from my remote location in the heart of South America –surrounded by the smiles of half a hundred of *qom*, *moqoit*, *wichi* and *pilaxa* children who are learning to read in their native languages- to remember just one thing: when utopias were lost and men lost their beliefs in noble ideas, reasons for going on fighting will be lacking in this world.

And if we do not have reasons for fighting... are there reasons for living?