Traditional games, music and oral tradition
Intangible tools in multicultural libraries [1]

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Abstract

A people's intangible heritage is composed by the non-material part of its culture: tales and narratives, games and songs, music and all the knowledge usually transmitted by oral or sound means, in traditional societies as well as in urban, westernized ones. This heritage is the basis where a human group funds its identity, its projects for the future, its memory, its history, its fears, its desires…

When peoples lose this untouchable, fragile fragment of their culture –as it daily happens to aboriginal societies all around the world- they lose their reason for living, their past and their future…

A library which wants to become "multicultural" should include this kind of materials –orality, music, folk games- as well as the people who still transmit them: narrators, musicians, artists… By recovering these parts of different cultures, the library will keep alive the human cultural diversity; it might use ancient traditional means for teaching and informing in order to transmit traditional and modern knowledge; it might consolidate vanishing identities and familiar / group bonds; and it might revitalize endangered idioms, since orality is mainly based in the perfect and creative use of mother languages…

Oral tradition is based on memory, words, sound and improvisation. It is a living, ancient art, enjoyed by children and old people, literate and illiterate alike. Some of their expressions can be understood by everybody –no matter their race or nationality- and, in this way, they can work as channels for integration and mutual understanding within plural societies.

The conference will present some basic ideas about the use of these valuable elements inside a "multicultural library", using examples tested by the author in indigenous libraries in southern South America.

Keywords: Intangible heritage - Multicultural libraries - Oral tradition.

Cultural heritage

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.

A number of things are included in this wide concept[2], e.g. landscapes, sounds, objects, tools, pieces of work and buildings. They are considered to play an active part in the memory of any community, representing 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. 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 "heritage" allows us to make a clear difference between its two main categories: *natural* and *cultural*[3]. Intimately linked with human nature, the latter includes, according to UNESCO's definition (1982)…

"…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".

Cultural heritage is not just limited to expressions of material nature. Non-palpable aspects of life –such as sounds, words, 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. 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". Customs, tales, languages, music, dances, rituals, festivities, medicine, culinary arts, dressing, games, theatre and the special skills related to material aspects, 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 -mostly in traditional societies- by gestures, oral expression, dance or music, in the frame of collective re-creation processes. Besides enriching the social bonds within a community, they also facilitate the socialization of its individuals and their group identity development.

Identity and diversity

For a good number of societies, *intangible heritage* represents a source of facts and ideas that support and emphasize their *cultural identity*. Cultural identity is the ensemble of traits and features that link a person to a group, maintaining a strong cohesion within society, harmonizing customs, and establishing values, life rules and communication codes. UNESCO recommends the international community to preserve and protect each people's identity, especially those of cultural and demographic minorities[4].

Culture assumes diverse forms through places and time, conforming different identities. This *diversity* is manifested in the plurality and originality that characterize human groups and societies all over the planet. The first article of Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity[5] 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".

Every culture represents an irreplaceable set of values and features. Besides, each member of a group carries his/her community heritage in his/her hands, shaping it in a unique way through their beliefs, capacities and actions. In a sense, 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 (2003a) to define the concept of "Living Human Treasures", 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.

Diverse approaches to the social and cultural nature of plural societies -especially those where a high diversity may be found- have raised a number of concepts like *multiculturalism*, *interculturalism* and *transculturalism*. They are currently used for explaining and understanding the mutual relationships among diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups inside a society (Welsch, 1999), and have strongly influenced disciplines like LIS and services like those provided by libraries and documentation centres.

Heritage, oral tradition and cultural expression

As stated above, "unstable" means (i.e. those strongly based on human memory, a weak and variable support) are often used for collective transmission of intangible heritage, providing it with a fluctuating, dynamic nature, which is enlivened by an immense capacity for transformation and adaptation. Thus, culture has a particular evolution, parallel to the one experienced by people, its environment and its circumstances. By this way, cultural heritage can provide answers and solutions to daily situations, and perspectives for future achievements.

With the exception of books and mass-media (sometimes not available in certain societies), the main systems that perpetuate a non-material heritage are *oral tradition* and *cultural expression*.

Oral tradition -present in traditional as well as in urban, westernized contexts- is based on memory, words, sounds and improvisation. It is a living, ancient art, enjoyed by everybody, literate and illiterate, because nobody needs previous education for getting it. It has an intrinsic value: it codifies 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 do not find spaces or chances for setting down their ideas and experiences in stable supports in order to record them.

Due to its strong dependence on languages, oral contents can survive only if the words that make them possible also continue living. Accurate use and full comprehension of a language are needed if an oral heritage is meant to be correctly transmitted. The speaker and the listener should know all the words and their diverse meanings, the different styles and codes, the corporal signs associated with the spoken discourse… But languages are vanishing alarmingly. According to current predictions, during XXI century the 80 % of the languages of the world (more than 6.000) may disappear in front of the beating of (a few) dominant ones (UNESCO, 2003). Minority languages, unfortunately, are the most menaced ones.

This means that there are hundreds of currently endangered linguistic structures, and an identical number of non-material heritages whose destinies are intimately associated with those of their languages. If intangible heritages are meant to be protected and spread, great attention should be put on the preservation and revitalization of the idioms that provide them with a transmission channel.

But there are other means that perpetuates non-material heritage: *cultural expressions*. This wide, loosely defined category includes performing arts as music, chant, dance and theatre; products like masks, designs, graphic art and handicrafts; traditions like games and ceremonies, and a big set of diverse intellectual and artistic expressions. Mainly based on memory and popular inspiration, they are threatened nowadays by mass-media, social pressure and mainstream culture, as anyone can notice when checking the constant stream of traditional crafts, dances, music instruments, games and feasts disappearing all around the world.

Endangered non-material heritages can be clearly identified in societies like Latin American indigenous peoples. These groups provide a good example of orally-transmitted culture and traditional expressions menaced by social pressures. Their languages have slowly vanished in the last two centuries, and a good part of their heritage has already been lost. Even if these examples can also be found in rural and urban communities -even in European and North American contexts- this paper will deal with examples taken from Latin American aboriginal societies, due to the work the author has

developed among them in north-eastern Argentina (Chaco region, 2001-2006).

Games, songs, tales…

As every human group in the planet, traditional and urban aboriginal communities in Latin America "live" their intangible heritage on a daily basis. Even if, as stated above, a good part of such a heritage is under pressure or endangered - and, shamefully, many traditional expressions has been lost forever-, some groups have conserved it healthy and alive. It is the case of Andean peoples like Quechua or Aymara, forest people like Guarani and Patagonian people like Mapuche. Other groups, who have forgotten a great deal of their memory and their language, still make efforts to preserve what is left. Good examples are the people from Chaco region, like Qom, Wichi, Moqoit and Pit'laxá, or groups like Wayuu (Colombia), Kuna (Panama), Shuar (Ecuador), Ashaninka (Peru) and Ayoreo (Bolivia), among others.

Within these social and cultural frames, oral transmission is a matter of the greatest importance[6]. Usually it adopts the form of inter-generational communication, from grandparents to grandchildren (even if nowadays most young people are not interested in listening to their elders) and, on certain topics, it is stronger and deeper among mothers and daughters. In this way, familiar and local history, natural medicine, kitchen recipes, dressing and clothes-making are handed down from parents to children.

Tales and narratives are the most usual form of oral transmission. In a single night, a good narrator can explain the story of the world from the very beginning until present days, including the origin of the different plants, animals and human institutions and customs. In some cultures, the narratives can assume the form of theatre performing, involving several actors and the active participation of the audience. The author thought that these "narrative qualities" would profit the services provided by little school libraries inside indigenous communities in Chaco region. Putting the idea into practice, the selected narrators were presented as "living books" for a tale-hour, performing traditional legends both in Spanish and native language. Children and their families were delighted, and discovered a link with an institution -the library- that was strange for them because of its very nature.

But stories, knowledge and memory can also be passed down through music and chant. The Latin American indigenous organology presents a high number of instruments that are played in intimate contexts, just as accompaniment for personal stories, legends and tales[7]. A good example is the m'biké, a one-stringed fiddle from Chaco region (Figure 1). It is used as a soft background for chant, and, curiously, the melodic line drawn by the instrument is identical to the one drawn by the singing voice[8]. M'biké players use to sing stories, like native troubadours did, but just in familiar spaces. In other indigenous contexts, like among Patagonian and Andean peoples, an instrument called "trompe" (jew's harp or mouth harp) is also used for love courtship and sorrow chants,

telling old stories of love and despair that are a part of the community's memory. The language of drums and other membranophones has also a deep meaning among traditional aboriginal societies, being associated with ceremonies expressing the links between human beings and natural forces are expressed and celebrated. M'biké and "pim-pim" (a water-drum) performances were used by the author in libraries in Chaco region. Their sounds brought to the participants' memory an astonishing number of remembrances from ancient times, as well as tales, legends and experiences that were shared in the same place. Little by little, the rumour of voices and instruments, gave raise to the creation of new spaces of meeting and common use of indigenous language were created.
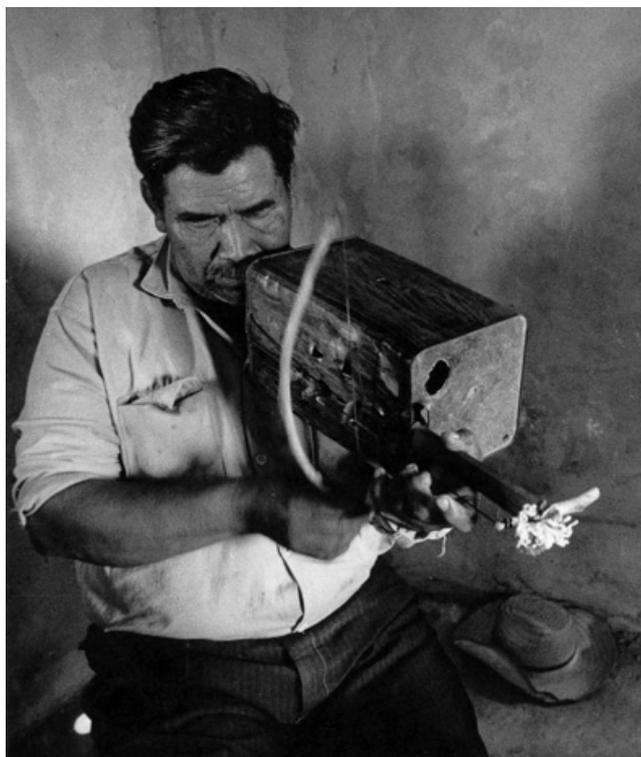
Figure 1: M'biké player.

Finally, games are other means of transmitting traditional information. A much known game is the "cat's cradle" or string figure (Figure 2), performed with a simple string bound by both ends and crossed among the fingers of both hands in order to create diverse shapes[9]. Since each figure has a name and a meaning, the combination of several of them may be used to illustrate a story[10]. This game is spread worldwide, but in Chaco region was very popular, and was also used in author's libraries as a means of captivating young patrons' attention, interconnecting different generations within community, recovering intangible heritage and creating one space more for the use of native language.
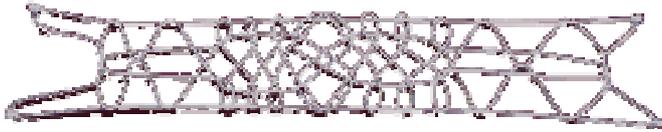
Figure 2: String-figure.

Other means of transmitting information among indigenous societies in Latin America are textiles, especially among Andean societies. By geographical reasons, they were not included in author's direct experience. Textiles like renowned "ponchos" codified, in ancient cultures like Paracas, Nazca and Moche, a large amount of information. Currently, this tradition is still preserved in Bolivia, Chile and Peru Andean highlands, as well as among Chilean Mapuche people[11]. The Kuna people (Panama) are famous because of their "molas", little textiles where they express their legends and their vision of the world (Figure 3). Woollen hats also used to carry information expressed by means of their diverse colours and their intricate designs. Traditional basket work follows the same pattern[12].
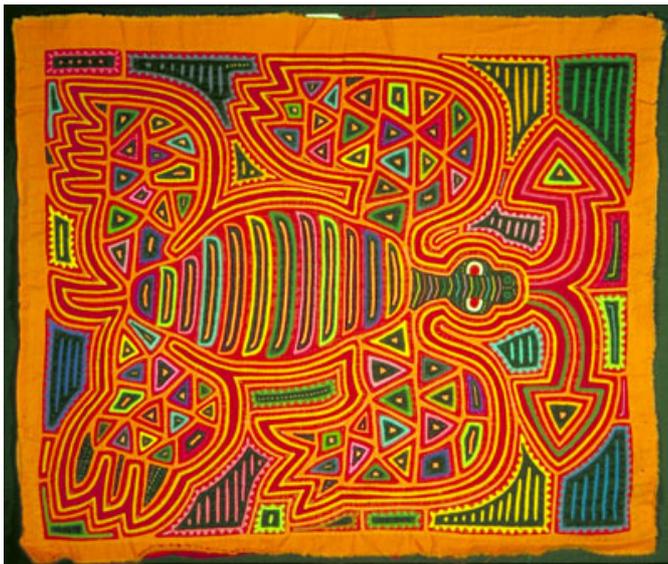
Figure 3: "Mola" woven by Kuna people (Panama).

Dances, tattoos, riddles, jokes, disguises, masks (Figure 4), pottery and the many different customs around community feasts and ceremonies are also valuable means of guarantying the transmission of intangible heritage. They are not different from the ways western societies employ to transmit their own wisdom. However, the latter can also write down their knowledge and keep it safe from the danger of oblivion. Illiterate societies usually do not have this chance.

Figure 4: Mask from Avá / Chiriwano people (Argentina)

Oral transmission and cultural expressions are often not taken into account as elements for library services. Since librarians are generally educated in westernized, literate contexts where the book and (now) the digital information are the basis for knowledge transmission, traditional elements like the quoted in this paper are sometimes discredited or their potentials are misunderstood or undervalued. However, if the library is understood as a memory manager, a cultural community centre, and a place where people trust their story to be safeguarded and spread for new generations and for other social groups, librarians should seriously consider its inclusion in the collections. They should become familiar with the intangible heritage of their patrons, with the mechanisms and channels used for its communication, and with the intrinsic value of every cultural expression. They should face an interdisciplinary, intercultural, plural and multilingual activity without considering these expressions as "alternative" or "special" resources but as priceless knowledge and information that is important for the healthy development of the intellectual and spiritual life of the society s/he is serving.

(Multicultural) libraries

The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (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 favouring *cultural diversity*.

- Supporting (the) *oral tradition* (cf. UNESCO, 1997).

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 accomplished, 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. IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section should be considered as a good example of these practices[13].

Beyond the conservation of human knowledge, 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 -from the most simple to the most complex ones- 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.

In a multicultural arena, the library can (and should) become a space for active exchange among diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups within a society. And, for this task, perhaps the most basic cultural expressions are the most useful ones. Maybe some customs and traits cannot be understood from outside the culture that generates them, but common, simple aspects like games, music and tales are shared by the whole humankind. So, from coincidences -the things that happen to most of us- the differences can be more easily explored and comprehended, adding fun to the (sometimes difficult) approach to "the other", and allowing us learning together.

Conclusion

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 "global" 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[14]*. And, with this freedom, far from censorships, shames, taboos and other similar considerations, it should develop its labour, spreading its services far beyond shelves and walls, reaching classrooms, houses and community centres. 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 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 where 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 marvellous librarian started to stock and order little clay tablets covered by an entangled net of wedge-shaped signs.

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Notes

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[1] Adapted from the author's article "Custodians of fragility: Libraries, intangible heritage and cultural diversity", appeared in its Spanish version in the Chilean LIS journal "Pez de Plata" (n.5, Dec.2005), and shortly published in English.

[2] The definition reached during UNESCO Experts´ Round Table in Turin (Italy, 2001, quoted in UNESCO, 2001) provides a description of the elements included in the concept of "heritage".

[3] Definitions and differences July be checked in UNESCO, 1998.

[4] See UNESCO, 1989.

[5] UNESCO. 2002. Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Preamble.

[6] For this issue, articles published on *Oral tradition* journal are strongly recommended.

[7] For a Latin American approach, *cf.* Pérez Bugallo (1996) in Argentina and Cavour Aramayo (1994) in Bolivia. Articles published on *Latin American Music Review* are also recommended.

[8] More information on m'biké available on line at http://www.mapuche.info/indgen/clarin040207.html (in Spanish).

[9] More information available at the website of International String Figures Association and its web "World Wide Webs - String figures from around the world" (http://www.darsie.net/string/). For a Latin America approach, *cf.* the work of O. Plath "Origen y folclor de los juegos de Chile" (Origin and folklore of Chilean games) and of A.M. Dupey "Los secretos del juguete" (The secrets of the toy).

[10] R. Cmapbell, in his book "La herencia musical de Rapa-Nui" (Rapa-Nui's musical heritage) provides several valuable examples of the use of this game for transmitting traditional songs in Easter Island, using native language.

[11] Examples of oral tradition and textile weaving among Mapuche people can be read in Wilson (1992).

[12] Examples among Mapuche people can be checked in Rebolledo, 1992.

[13] IFLA. *Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section* [On line] available at http://www.ifla.org/VII/s32/index.htm [Access 20 July 2007].

[14] *Cf.* Civallero, 2006 and Civallero, 2007.