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Libraries for indigenous communities

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"Bibliotecario". <https://bibliotecario.org/>

Libraries for indigenous communities

Latin America is home to numerous societies with very diverse origins and traits. Human groups that have inhabited the continent for millennia live side by side with others who, in relative terms, have just arrived and have adopted it as their own land. Scenario for migrations, fusions, conquests and extermination campaigns, the continent ended up becoming a melting pot of words, faces, beliefs and thoughts. Many societies retain all their roots; others do not even keep the memory of having had them. And between both extremes, a wide range of possibilities unfold.

For those societies having a special link with their territory as well as distinctive cultural features, and for all their descendents, several labels have been used. Among them, probably the most widespread is "indigenous".

Whether used by them to define themselves and strengthen their particular identities, or by strangers to point to (and even stigmatize) groups that have suffered pressure, contempt and oblivion for centuries, "indigenous" is a term that has acquired some visibility, especially after the last four decades: a period during which many social and political movements have claimed for the rights of these groups.

In a place, Latin America, where scarred pasts, confusing presents and uncertain futures combine into a blurred social and ethnical environment, libraries open their

doors every day, ready to provide their services to their complex communities. Including, in some cases, "library services for indigenous societies".

In theory, there would be little to say about this kind of library-related activities devoted to aboriginal populations. Libraries —especially public libraries— have to provide services to all its patrons equally, respecting their features, rights and idiosyncrasies. By simple demographic statistics, in Latin America it is highly probable that such patrons include people belonging to one or more indigenous groups. Therefore, a library must naturally provide services to native users.

The fact is that it has rarely been the case.

On the one hand, there are many aboriginal peoples who were not and still are not seen as part of the different national societies, but as external, strange, unintelligible, and even despicable "aggregates". In Latin America, racism and discrimination against them can reach an unusual virulence.

Alternatively, libraries provide services according to their possibilities, and since those possibilities are usually limited by countless factors, the services are constrained to respond to a "generic" (i.e. majority) patron's profile. And, unfailingly, the so-called "minorities" are never included in such profile.

Even in regional societies where the majority turns out to be indigenous (e.g. Guatemala or Bolivia), libraries are loaded with so many historical biases —they are

entities coming from Europe, focused on writing, supporting a particular culture, authors and voices— that seem to be unable, at least conceptually, to answer to certain needs of their community.

A brief review of libraries' history adds that the institution has often been (and, in a way, still is) at the service of the victor and the dominant ones. Control of libraries and other knowledge centers allows exercising power over memory, over discourse and over information. In general, the defeated groups are invisible in those spaces: they have no presence other than their defeat. In addition to this, libraries have been used as a strong tool for acculturation / colonization (like schools, archives and museums), establishing what is "culture" and what is not; rather than fulfilling the requirements of those patrons that are "different", libraries have attempted to mold them to the dominant pattern.

The patient work of a number of librarians (especially in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, but also in many parts of Latin America, Africa and Indochina) has managed to clear up some doubts regarding services for indigenous populations, allowing to address and solve issues and biases, to reach agreements and to design relevant projects. Nowadays, most libraries agree that to serve their aboriginal users they must prepare themselves as they do for any other kind of patron: they must acknowledge the differences and be ready to cover any gap and to jump over any wall, always acting with respect and sensitivity, and being open to other possibilities, to other patterns of thought and action, to other ways of understanding the world and transmitting knowledge. And, above all, they have to put aside stereotypes, discrimination, cultural

pressure, invisibility, "otherness" and denial; that is, they must stop being a tool for the powerful ones and start working for those who never were.

The examples of such a work are still just a few in Latin America. A beautiful one is the "comunitecas" at the municipality of Tecpán (Chimaltenango department), in the highlands of southern Guatemala. They are three small libraries that, in addition to housing their usual collections (books, magazines, etc.), offer the surrounding communities a meeting place where they can carry out cultural and training activities. They also support education, working closely with rural teachers in the area. Since they are located in areas populated by the Kaqchikel indigenous people, they are attended by young natives from the near villages. The services and educational and cultural projects are sustainable over time, and respond to the specific needs of patrons, taking on board their own, traditional perspectives.

Something similar happens with the public library "La Casa del Pueblo", located in the village of Guanacas (municipality of Inzá, Cauca department), in Colombia. The library was built by the residents themselves over the course of a year, using thick cane, stone and grass for the roof. It provides all kinds of traditional services —reading, loans, educational support— to the communities in the area, including some belonging to the Paez indigenous people.

The design of library services for patrons belonging to aboriginal societies has become one of the big challenges of the Library & Information Sciences in Latin America. So, I

would like to extend an invitation for all those who like to map new professional territories to rise up and reach out to discuss more.

