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Libraries, indigenous peoples, identity & inclusion

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Abstract

Indigenous people represent a demographic majority –as well as a social minority- in Latin America. They form the basis for the cultural diversity of the continent, a diversity made up by hundreds of different languages, customs, religions, literatures and oral traditions. Hardly included in social development –even if they have achieved a great success in several of their struggles- these human groups have been discriminated and left behind by almost every government. Their losses include their mother tongues as well as much of their original culture. And, since they have always transmitted their memories through oral tradition, their history is also being lost.

Library services for aboriginal populations are scarcely developed in Latin America, though several interesting proposals exist. Among these ones, the author's work in NE Argentina included the development of sound collections in little libraries placed at schools, inside native communities. These collections recovered oral tradition and connected it with the curriculum of the school. By means of this recorded material and its full transcription, both in their mother tongue and in Spanish, an important part of the community's cultural heritage was saved from oblivion and was employed –using the original language- for bilingual intercultural education. Other services –such as “living books”- were also implemented in order to revitalize ancient information channels.

Through this kind of services, libraries can recover vanishing identities and support them in order to push indigenous people to believe in themselves, forgetting social exclusion. And by supporting education –for adults as well as for children- libraries can avoid the perpetuation of ignorance and misinformation, a misinformation that have kept aboriginal communities in the shade for centuries.

The conference presents a summary of the author's experiences and ideas about indigenous libraries, as well as a brief panorama of this kind of work in other parts of Latin America.

Key words

Indigenous libraries – Indigenous peoples – Identity – Social inclusion – Endangered languages – Cultural diversity

Identity, exclusion and libraries

In his classic work of introduction to sociology, Giddens (1994: 15) provides a well-aimed definition of “culture”:

“... [T]he values shared by the members of a group, the rules through which they act and the material goods they produce”.

Culture is a complex, thick frame that connects individuals and establishes different kinds of relationships among them. The assumption of the own cultural traits leads to the creation of an *identity*, a set of features identifying a person and providing him/her a feeling of belonging to his/her group. According to Kleymeyer (1993: 18):

“Culture helps to determine who we are, what we think about ourselves and how we act in front of the rest, both inside and outside the groups we belong to”.

The cultural practices and the views owned by every people constitute the many pieces of an *ethnicity*, an ethnic identity. The members of a group consider themselves as culturally different from the rest, and so are they perceived by others. The differences among the same ethnic groups (concerning traits like language, history, lineage, religion, dressing, etc.) are rarely neutral. They are usually associated with antagonisms among societies or sectors, with wealth and power inequalities, or with a way -the most common one- of building the own image by contrasting it with the image of the “other”.

The opinions maintained by the members of a group in relation to others, generally supporting pre-conceived points of view, are called *prejudices*. When this opinions move from the ideal to the real arena and become an attitude towards a determined human sector, we spoke of *discrimination*: a series of actions that disqualify the members of a group in relation with the opportunities given to others. Disqualification may become *exclusion*, i.e. the annulment of all chances, the total closing of doors to certain persons or to entire populations.

According to “Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom” Report, social exclusion...

“... is about the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society ... [or] to realize their full potential”¹.

Philosopher Alex Honneth (1996) speaks about “struggle for recognition”; he explains that, by being socially excluded, a person is dispossessed of all recognition and social value. UNESCO underlines, in its World Report on Culture (2000), the increasing global levels of those problems concerning human relationships: identity losses, racism, xenophobia, discrimination... Such problems are intrinsically related to a people’s identity, with its culture, its learning ways, its vision of the “other” and its position towards it. The same international organization pointed out, in the “Declaration of principles of international cultural cooperation” (1966), that “every culture has an entity and a value that should be respected and protected” (art. 1.1) and that “every people has the right and the duty to develop its culture” (art. 1.2).

The problems of identity loss, cultural pressure, discrimination and exclusion are spread all around the world. In the case of Latin America, maybe the indigenous peoples are the ones who must stand the stronger crisis.

Libraries -managers of memories and heritages- may become a tool for cultural recovery and identity consolidation. Furthermore, they may provide -from their position as information units- services advocating for a plural and peaceful reality and for constructive approaches and interactions between dominant and minority groups... In addition, they may be social inclusion tools, helping to overcome the circumstances which lead(ed) to exclusion. Within indigenous populations, and fulfilling these functions, libraries could have an important role.

Libraries in indigenous communities: the theory

Latin American geography is deeply marked by the roots and the footprints of its indigenous peoples. “Discovered” by the European explorers who were just leaving the borders of their own (intellectual and real) world, these civilizations had inhabited their lands for thousands of years, developing highly rich cultural traditions which created a complex, diverse and plural frame. Thousands of languages sounded under those skies which witnessed states and groups development, the birth and death of entire communities and the conflicts and successes of millions of persons.

The result of the encounter (or maybe the “forced crash”) between the newcomers and the residents is well known. History books tell us about battles, slaughters, genocide, torture, humiliation, and the oblivion that followed, along with slavery, discrimination and exclusion.

Speaking about indigenous cultures leads to the remembrance of a painful (and sometimes shameful) past. However, nowadays these peoples are not just a diffuse memory of a bygone age. Throughout centuries, they survived and they learnt to adapt themselves - without forgetting their identity, in some cases- to new socio-political circumstances, new economic schemes, new labour and cultural situations, (*their*) land divisions, as well as

¹ Power and Wilson (2001: 1), quoted in “Social Exclusion in the UK” [On line] available at <http://herkules.oulu.fi/isbn9514268539/html/x2692.html> [Accessed 20 July 2007].

stereotypes and labels applied to them in every conceivable degree of apartheid. These survivors, these strugglers, these resisters *live* today. And they do not live “among” us, but “with” us. Even if their blood is sometimes mixed, even if some of their customs are weakened and vanished within mainstream culture, even if they are considered minorities (though in many cases they are demographic majorities), even if they are still avoided, they are here. They struggle, they defend their roots and their fruits, and they blossom day after day - no matter how many people turn their faces pretending not to see them. They create, they believe, they grow and they seek to occupy their place inside a universe that still thinks they are relics from a past disappeared a long time ago.

Those who believe in plural societies and who defend the value of diversity, multilingualism and transculturality, immediately recognize the need for supporting these communities, always high-spirited even after so many years of struggle. They recognize the deep importance of avoiding paternalistic approaches and views, charity-like help and programs aimed at imposing realities heavily different from their own ones. They are aware of the urgency of acting and supporting a work that should have started centuries ago, but that is still relegated to an uncertain future.

It is necessary to begin a more realistic approach to Latin American indigenous peoples' real problems. Beyond (inter)national statistics and official statements (good intentions but no actions), beyond collaborations of organizations that try to help from different ideological and cultural frames, it is both necessary and urgent to hear the voices of the final users, those with whom we want to collaborate. They know their problems and their lacks far better than anybody else, they know what they are looking for, they know what they want for their future... They know the right solutions for their critical issues, though, because of different reasons, they can not implement them. Any collaboration program should start just by listening them, understanding them and working with them (*grass-root development*). Taking into consideration this perspective, librarians should not think of ourselves as heroes or saviours, but as helping hands supporting the long way to the recovery of identities and strengths.

Libraries may (and should) play a main and decisive role in the cultural and social re-organization and revitalization of native communities. As *cultural lungs* and *memory managers*, these institutions may contribute with many elements to processes such as the recovery of lost histories, genealogies and geographies; strengthening oral tradition and endangered languages; the promotion of literacy and basic bilingual education; warranty of human rights; the supply of strategic information on health, labour and sustainable development; the provision of tools for welfare and wealth; diversion, education and information... Moreover, libraries may connect the indigenous world with international, global reality. This work should not be done having in mind “museum-stored” human groups, but live and vigorous societies who want to progress, to say their words, to shout them in loud voices, to sing their chants and to tell their tales. These societies want to learn, to acquire the best of the mainstream culture for their own profit and to give back to that culture the best of their own. *This is intercultural dialogue*, a dialogue that has failed for five centuries, and whose absence has led to the current situation of isolation, lack of communication and incomprehension.

From a cold librarian analysis, an indigenous community immediately becomes a set of “users” and “services”. But... who are these users? How do they live? What are they looking for? What are they missing? How do (or should) we provide them with what they

need? How do (or should) we help them to achieve their goals? The answers to these questions should be quickly added to the library planning methodologies, because the outcomes of such methods -libraries, their collections and activities- should really meet and fulfill the requirements of user populations. It is not a matter of simply adapting a widely known and already used model to special circumstances: strange transplants are meant to fail and to be refused by any organic system. It is about creating a new, unique, imaginative model, likely to be continuously adapted to the expected development of any human group by using *action-research*. Maybe it would be necessary to add qualitative tools borrowed from other disciplines. Working in an inter-disciplinarily way enriches horizons and views, and provides a good number of instruments available for both research and action.

Libraries in indigenous communities: good practices

Since 2000, different models of indigenous library are being slowly implemented and evaluated in Latin America, taking advantage of ideas already tested in multicultural units of Scandinavian countries and in aboriginal libraries of Australia, plus conducting additional research and discovering, at the same time, which are the possibilities in the regional context. These local proposals are mainly related to projects on a very small-scale, put into practice by individuals or small research groups in the frame of universities, governmental institutions or independent NGOs. In most of the cases, the theoretical models are developed considering interdisciplinary perspectives which include anthropology, history, linguistic, education and laws, in addition to librarianship. A set of well known experiences are enumerated below:

Argentina

- The library of CIFMA (Centro Integral de Formación en la Modalidad Aborigin, *Integral Centre for Indigenous Teachers' Education*), in the city of Presidencia Roque Sáenz Peña (Chaco province) provides services and materials for *Qom*, *Moqoit* and *Wichi* students, helping them in their practices to become indigenous auxiliary teachers in bilingual primary schools. The library is also open for the entire local community.
- Some public and school libraries working in *Pit'axá* people's area (Formosa province) and *Wichí* and *Avá* peoples' region (Salta province) provide activities for their indigenous users.
- The "Biblioteca Popular Étnica (*Public Ethnic Library*) *Qomlaqtaq*" is a new and interesting project aimed at providing services to the *Qom* community inhabiting urban areas around the city of Rosario (Santa Fe province).
- The Universidad Nacional de Comahue (*National University of Comahue*, General Roca, Río Negro province) has launched the "Biblioteca Mapuche y Pueblos Originarios (*Mapuche and Indigenous Peoples' Library*) *Ñimi Quimün*", an information center which links the university library activities with a local urban *Mapuche* community.

Bolivia

- National organizations such as CIDOB (Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia, *Bolivian Confederation of Indigenous Peoples*), and their local branches CIPOAP, CIRABO, CPILAP, CPIB CPITCO, CPESC, APG y ORCAWETA, manage libraries, web links and valuable information on national native reality, providing continuous services for aboriginal communities in their respective areas of influence.
- Institutions like APCOB (Apoyo para el Campesino Indígena del Oriente Boliviano, *Support to Indigenous Peasants of Eastern Bolivia*) and others belonging to REDETBO (Red de Información Etnológica de Bolivia, *Bolivian Ethnological Information Network*) like CEDEPA, CER-DET, CIDDEBENI, MACPIO, MUSEF and Cochabamba's Ethnology Library, possess a good number of information resources (even multimedia) about the diverse Bolivian ethnic groups. These materials are spread within both indigenous and non-native sectors.
- Aboriginal projects like Aymara Uta ("Aymara house", website dedicated to this culture and its language) and THOA (Taller de Historia Oral Andina, *Andean Oral History Workshop*) are highly remarkable because of their multilingualistic work.

Brazil

- Magüta museum of the *Ticuna* people is installed in the confluence of rivers Javari and high Solimões, in the Amazonas state. It includes a library which provides activities for oral tradition recovery and support to bilingual (local, *Ticuna*) teachers.
- Other experiences close to the *Magüta* museum one, have been tested, in a minor degree, in the *escolas da floresta* (*forest schools*) in Acre region and in the area of Negro river.
- The access to virtual libraries through Internet is a frequent practice among *Ticuna*, *Waimiri-atroari*, *Makuxi* from Roraima, *Karajá*, *Guaraní* and other groups in the Amazonia; web access -when available- is provided by religious missions and rural schools.

Colombia

- The municipal libraries within the *Wayuu* people's region (Guajira) are an excellent example of information units with intercultural services. The one working in the city of Río Acha (main city of the Guajira department) belongs to the Banco de la República (*Bank of the Republic*), and provides services to both *Wayuu* and *Alijuna* (non-indigenous) users.
- Libraries created for the four native peoples of the Sierra de Santa Marta (*Santa Marta's Range*), in Cesar region, have started to recover oral tradition and tales, and they promote adequate services concerning the culture and the needs of their users.

Chile

- UFro's bookmobile (Universidad de la Frontera (*Frontera University*), Temuco) and DIBAM (Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos, *Chilean Direction of Libraries, Archives and Museums*) was an activity implemented in 1998 in *Mapuche* territory. It included the generation of a sound collection in *mapudungu* (*Mapuche* language) and a wide field work with the community, especially with women and children.
- The Centro de Documentación Indígena (*Indigenous Research Centre*) of the Instituto de Estudios Indígenas (*Indigenous Studies Institute*, Universidad de la Frontera, Temuco) is dedicated to the study of *Mapuche* culture and to the spread of information materials within community.
- Libraries of organizations such as LIWEN (disappeared around 2005), and archives in indigenous radio-stations like "Wixa Agenay" (Santiago de Chile, 2007) spread information within urban and rural *Mapuche* communities.

Mexico

- The community information centers in Puebla, in the *Náhuat* people region (Sierra Central, *Central Range*) have been experiences organized by the CESDER (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural, *Centre for Studies on Rural Development*) and its Information and Documentation Centre "Lorenzo Servitje". Their services were focused in the recovery and spread of local and traditional knowledge.

Peru

- In Huancavelica (Sierra Central, *Central Range*) works the Red de Bibliotecas Rurales (*Rural Libraries Network*), about ten libraries serving the -mainly *Quechua*- population of the region.
- In the public libraries placed within *Ashäninka* communities in the area known as Gran Pajonal (south-eastern Peru) *Ashäninka Net* was launched in 2000; it was one of the first digital projects in the region including this ethnic group.
- The project "Biblioteca Quechua" (*Quechua library*) in Ayaviri (Puno department) is currently developed by the government of Ayaviri and the Colegio de Bibliotecarios de Perú (*Peruvian Librarians Union*), and it includes, among other direct actions, the collection of oral tradition.
- The fluvial libraries network in high Marañón River was a project implemented by the National Library of Peru in collaboration with OEA (Organización de Estados Americanos, *American States Organization*). Concrete services were offered to *Aguaruna* and *Huambisa* (Jivaroan) peoples.

Venezuela

- The "Sistema Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas de Venezuela" (*Venezuelan National System of Public Libraries*) offers a service of bookmobiles (boat-libraries and "traveling boxes") alongside the rivers in the high Orinoco River basin. They provide services to indigenous populations (especially *Piaroa*). Their activity is organized from the Central Public Library "Simón Rodríguez" in Puerto Ayacucho, Amazonas state.

- The “Sistema de Escuelas Bolivarianas en Red” (*System of Bolivarian Schools network*) was an experimental project implemented in Zulia state, where *Wayuu* people lives. It had a library and the participation of “living books”.

There are some other brief references about works in *Aymara* locations in northern Chile, in *Guarani* libraries in Paraguay; as well as information units inside Ecuadorian Quechua communities (Otavalo, Salasaca, Napo), and afro-descendants groups from Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador and Suriname; in villages in Costa Rica and Panama; and, specially, in the Mayan area of Guatemala and southern Mexico. In addition, there are news about proposals of “frontier libraries” in the borderline between Colombia and Brazil, and in religious schools and missions in northern Argentina. At present, bibliography on them is not available, and the only references are merely personal ones.

In Argentina, the author has developed, since 2001, the implementation and evaluation of a model of his own, aimed at meeting the needs of native populations in north-eastern areas, where *Qom*, *Moqoit*, *Pit'axá* and *Wichi* peoples live. The project, called “Bibliotecas Indígenas” (*Indigenous Libraries*), evaluated -first of all- the requirements of information and the cultural features of every community in order to accurately provide an adequate answer to them from the library. This goal was achieved by modifying the library structure and adapting it to the most different conditions and situations.

Experiences in Argentina: the “Indigenous libraries” project

The first approaches to the indigenous communities where the project was meant to be implemented allowed the author to evaluate the situation and identify requirements. The addressees were totally aware of their need to recover the communitarian memory, to revitalize the traditional cultural expressions and the oral tradition, and to achieve that the youngest ones of the group feel them part of themselves. Likewise, they wanted to insert the local culture between the schools activities (that include, in the north-eastern region of Argentina, some bilingual education programmes) and also to find the way of spreading valuable information (health, rights, employment, sustainable development, technology) joining together the indigenous information channels with the modern means used by the library (writing skills and ICTs).

The challenge looked huge, since the traditional model of library could not be implemented in such spaces. The lack of materials written and published in indigenous languages was (and even today continues to be) almost complete. Facing this situation, the author decided to design a library model mainly based on sound collections. These units would be small in size, with a totally adaptable structure and located at the schools, a place where the whole community (and especially children) would gather together. In this way, the documents would become practice materials for bilingual learning and teaching.

Therefore, the library was divested of shelves and walls, of catalogues and labels; it was adapted to extremely difficult weather conditions and building features, and was modified almost completely in order to meet the different communities’ needs. In some of them, the library was a simple cage kept in a corner of the classroom; in others, it was an uneven shelf or an indigenous bag made of *caraguatá* vegetal fibres...

The work of oral recovery was carried out between 2002 and 2005; even if hard, it included the active participation of the members of the community, who wanted their memory and

their culture to be perpetuated. Voices in four indigenous languages were recorded in simple one-hour magnetic cassettes, the easiest support, either to buy, to use or to reproduce in indigenous communities. The materials collected covered a wide range of knowledge, from genesis myths, to legends, epic tales, personal stories, oral history, medicine, cooking, chants, riddles, games and much more. In general, the indigenous oral transmission is accompanied by other cultural expressions such as chants, dances, body language or music, elements that not always were picked up or recorded with the instruments used. The recordings gave rise to memories recollection and to the creation of spaces where the art of speaking was practiced again. This fact allowed the inclusion of “living books” -narrators and tale-tellers- among libraries’ activities.

Some of the sound materials were transcribed –using an adaptation of the Latin alphabet- and written in a paper support, especially tales and legends. Such writings were illustrated by children and became the first volumes of their raising libraries as well as texts for practicing writing and reading in their original language.

The oral channels were of use to recover local history, genealogy and geography. Health practices and indigenous natural pharmacology were rescued and compared with the western medical knowledge, in collaboration with local health services. The project was improved with other works on human rights, labour training, natural resources management and similar subjects, always considering the group interests and priorities. Finally, some services regarding family reading were also implemented.

It was in 2004-5 when some of those materials started to be digitalized. By that time, in some of the computers provided by the government, in a number of communitarian schools it was possible to listen to the sound collections and write (and read) some of the stories of the village. Granted that the materials yielded by the libraries belong to each community (since they codify their traditional knowledge), they will be the ones that decide what their destiny will be.

The library has demonstrated, through various and varied small experiences, that it can make a very positive contribution to improve the welfare and the growth of those communities, by being adapted to the particular circumstances (not the other way round).

Words for an end and a beginning

The work with indigenous libraries just starts. The experiences keep on developing, small but powerful, with very little institutional support but with a lot of enthusiasm on the part of researches, librarians and information professionals who are willing to put them into practice. Sound collections, mobile libraries and books written in indigenous languages are only a few, the same as the librarians trained in the particular native community; thesaurus that really fulfil the needs of the original cultures or codes that put away the custom of labelling natives as “primitive peoples” should continue to be improved in a very substantial manner. There are also scarce theoretical works on this subject: studies on indigenous users and needs, work with anthropological methods, sound collections management, oral tradition recovery, cataloguing of materials in indigenous languages...

Within the numerous services and activities that can be developed in an indigenous library –whose only limit would be the imagination and the available resources- those related to languages recovery and oral tradition, of spoken heritage and sound histories, are of special

importance. These services –whatever the shape given- will rescue from oblivion sounds and words that conform one of our biggest values as specie. They will not only recover them, but will also preserve and spread everyone, for they should keep on sounding in their speakers' mouths as well as in other individuals' ears, and should continue to codify tales and legends, recipes and remedies. Above all, they will allow their speakers to retrieve, appropriate and value their own culture, their identity and their dignity...

And, through this appropriation, an opportunity will be created in order to start the intercultural exchange which will allow social inclusion. For exclusion is based upon prejudice, that is, in ignorance. Only through knowledge, new bridges will be built over these divides created by Man: the divides that, day after day, persist in fragment and separate more and more the incredible human mosaic.

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