

LIBRARIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews experiences on library services to indigenous people developed in Latin America, from Argentina to Mexico. It provides a brief introduction to the reality of native communities all around the continent, and points out the outstanding projects on this issue. Since native populations are subjected to serious problems -such as discrimination, social exclusion, diseases, unemployment, loss of identity, endangered languages and cultural pressure-it argues that libraries can become an option to the recovery of culture and a way to guarantee the egalitarian access to strategic information, a resource that is vital for a balanced development and progress.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous People; Latin America-Libraries; Latin America-Culture

THE LANDOWNERS

The books of history in our libraries tell us about a large continent, populated with hundreds of different peoples, each of them owner of a unique, different culture, which at the beginning of 16th century suffered the invasion and devastation of its horizons by foreign forces. It was not the only case in the human history: other continents also experienced similar processes that affected them in a way that was certainly not welcome. Rescuing the testimonies that say what we know to be true, casting a speculative look at the numbers of the population and taking into account the detailed studies carried out

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afterwards, it will not be difficult for us to recognize one of the most impressive genocide cases that has ever occurred; a case that continues in new ways and with new actors, being impossible to think of it as finished.

Native peoples of Latin America have been decimated by diseases, aggressions, slavery and wars, and have been subdued in every imaginable front: political, social, religious, cultural, linguistic, educational... Many of them disappeared from the place where they lived as well as from memory: they can only be remembered through others' words, which do not always describe them in the right form. Some others, however, knew how (and were able) to survive, and developed new forms of life, new social structures, new thinking and action patterns. These new paths were not always successful: many peoples stuck in a limbo and neither could go forward nor go back. Others gathered together, in their own space, their peculiar traits with the dominant ones. A few ones persisted in their tradition and built a wall behind which enclosed themselves...

Presently, Latin America counts with more than 40-50 million people (**Matos Mar, 1993; Stavenhagen, 1996; PNUD, 2004**) of those considered to be the old "owners of the land", who nowadays cannot always exhibit such a title. The importance of their cultures, among other valuable things, has its roots in constituting a very high percentage of the global cultural diversity (*cf. IWGIA, 2007*).

Both at Latin American and world levels, indigenous peoples possess an immense mosaic of languages and cultural features, of philosophies and literatures (oral and in writing), of uses and daily customs... Their cultural baggage has an intimate relationship with the environment that they inhabited (which usually is not the one that they occupy at present) and provides a very interesting spectrum of knowledge about the world and its forms, very different from the range of ideas shown by the global dominant culture. In Latin America, many of their words and attitudes have been added to the *mestizo* heritage of each nation, enriching their unique and indisputable identity... And their traditions,

sounds and sense of time have been acknowledged, in their most general terms, through the entire world.

In spite of the relative continuity of their historical presence –more important in some cases and less in others- and the acknowledgement of their rights in a good number of international recommendations and treaties, the native peoples –at both world and regional levels- continue to be, in the vast majority of them, fuel to the flames of oblivion. Current statistics show a connection between them and the highest levels of poverty (*vid. Rural Poverty Portal, s.f.*), with all the problems associated: lack of rights, health related crisis, malnutrition, violence, addictions, unemployment, and loss of identity... National efforts –at a Latin American level- use to be reduced to a series of supplementary helps, which are not even enough to guarantee their temporary welfare or the development towards the future that they would wish for themselves.

They have become playing pieces on a political board, participants - generally against their will- in a game of strengths in which they are only pawns moved according to the most powerful pieces' convenience. Their culture, far from being recovered, spread and proudly lived, has turned, in many cases, into a folkloric postcard unknown for themselves, and in some others, into a burden, an undesirable mark that only generates discrimination. In fact, official and social oppressions have directed them towards the voluntary abandonment of their traditional ways of life in an attempt to “integrate” with the dominant society in order to be accepted, something that, regretfully, they have not got yet: the color of their skin and their facial traits –something that cannot be wiped off- continue being the principal reason for their exclusion in Latin America.

Considering indigenous populations as the “noble savages” of the 18th century, or coming near to them from old-fashion, utopian frameworks is not good for anybody. Neither is the “victim” position towards which we should pay back a “historical debt” (common, even

nowadays, in many politicized currents and others that say to be in favor of indigenous peoples but also use them), nor the perspectives that recover the romantic data and images taken by anthropologist many decades ago, are real though they might seem to... All of them are illusory and distort the truth of a particular reality that has to be acknowledged in its entire depth and width if we want to make the pertinent and successful changes.

Very few aboriginal societies continue with their traditional ways of life in its purest form: all of them have been affected, at a higher or lower degree, by the blows of a global "international" culture. They incorporate western elements within their lives such as T-shirts, plastic, the TV, Coca-Cola, jeans, advertisements and many more. Their oldest stories are filtered through modern attributes such as the Christian God, the "*criollo*" clothing, the "official" language and so on. They are dynamic human groups, who, far from waiting to deal with others at a later time –as if they would have been put on ice-, have evolved, as everybody else, responding to external circumstances. And according to them have also evolved their way of life and thinking. However, it does not mean that they have lost their value or their importance: they are human beings, who share problems and miseries with many of their non-indigenous compatriots; they are peoples that, even though they are submitted to an oppressive form of acculturation, continue to be rich in intangible heritage... They are individuals that, despite everything and in some way or another, have not stopped believing that another future is possible.

When we establish a connection between the concepts of "knowledge" or "information" with the other of "indigenous peoples", two different associations are made. On the one hand, we would be speaking about "indigenous knowledge", the knowledge that is managed by native cultures within their particular intangible heritage, which possesses a richness that is the result of the experiences and reflections built up over the centuries. On the other, we would be referring to the relation between the native societies and the present-day information, in the

context of the "Knowledge Society" modern paradigm. Putting aside the first association, this text will give its attention to the second, in which can be established the main ditches and barriers at an information level. Barriers that can also be found as high, in other social sectors of the Latin American continent: rural communities, marginalized neighborhoods, urban surroundings...

INFORMATION DIVIDE

Information has been, from the beginning of the human civilization a powerful and influential tool. It permitted to acknowledge the nature rhythms and qualities as well as its elements, what also facilitated to take advantage of its resources, from food to medicine. It made human groups organization possible, and allowed the creation of estates and empires that were managed thanks to the efficiency with which the knowledge was organized. It established the grounds for the principal legal and religious system in the world, for the sciences and the arts, for both the most basic and the most complex techniques... Without strategic information about how to deal with all the daily life facets, none of the peoples would have managed to survive with success. The existence of a particular and modern socio-economic model that was born in the light of information provides the best example of its interest and its importance in the development, the welfare and the progress of humankind.

The unequal access to information resources –basic or not- violates a series of rights that have been agreed, over the centuries, by legislative (inter)national organisms and powerful social and humanistic movements. It limits the freedom of accessing the knowledge as well as the freedom of expression, the right to education, the right to actively participate in a democratic system as citizens, the right to get the necessary information in order to decide what will be your well grounded opinions and attitudes towards the issues of your interest, the right to a healthy life, the right to a decent employment, the right to

use your particular language to communicate with others and learn... To solve it, is one of the biggest challenges that the world faces today: the information divides are one of the most regretful injustices and inequalities that are present and alive in our planet at this very moment, and the damages that they may cause –generally in the long term- affect the roots of our society and they are, therefore, as deep as they are long.

In a very general outline of the situation, the native Latin American peoples are “at the other side” of the information divide in two senses. On the one hand, they do not have access to the same opportunities as their more advantaged fellow citizens: ICTs, education, training, up-to-date information about interesting issues, learning processes... On the other, neither have they access to resources and materials that reflect their particular cultural models, their possibilities and their own needs. This situation happens in a very critical context itself: indigenous societies are submitted to a progressive loss of identity, to a growing acculturation and to a strong shortage of both their possibilities of progress and their opportunities to enjoy the basic welfare services. Their claims do not only insist on the opening of sustainable development channels and on getting their lands back, but also on the recovering of their cultural rights. They are conscious that no solution to their problems will be found without information (suitable for their particular traits and needs). However, it is noticeable that the answers to those problems are not limited to the implementation of literacy programs or the diffusion (generally, in a very irregular and unequal manner) of technologies that make it possible the access to the digital universe. Although such elements and dexterities are necessary and useful, there are other movements that should be developed and supported, at least in parallel, in order to achieve a really fair access to and distribution of information goods.

The information problem has to be dealt with from a very realistic perspective, which many times, moves away from the great declarations of interest, written or spoken in forums and international

organisms. If we want to shape reality into an ideal model, we will only achieve failures: we will be widening a divide that is deep enough at the present. And what is even worse, we will be doing it with our own hands, the same that wanted to be of any "help". A helpful tool for dealing with information problems may be libraries.

LIBRARIES IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

From 1996 onwards, in different points of Latin America, many experiences related to the creation of libraries in indigenous communities, both rural and urban, have been implemented. In outline, the aim of such undertakings was to be able of shortening the educational and information distances that existed between the native groups and the dominant society, providing spaces and opportunities that would make smaller the differences, and the above mentioned distances, and creating intercultural areas for new approaches and the interchanges.

Many projects only worked for a short period of time and were mainly based on the use of a common public library as model, and its insertion in the aboriginal reality. The failure of those efforts can be explained in the light of a very simple fact: the indigenous universe is, in general, reticent about (or even contrary to) the institutions that come from the dominant society, since they have been tools of acculturation, oppression and denial of basic rights, over the past centuries. It has also to be noticed that elements such as the library have, in the native imaginary (and in many others), a sort of "intellectual" and "elitist" aura; the perception is, consequently, that the library does not have anything to offer to the community, neither can it provide a solution to their most urgent needs.

However, when the library structure can adapt itself with enough flexibility to the requirements and characteristics of the final users group; it is able to reach excellent results, and allows noticeable experiences to develop, whose outcomes have perfectly answered to

particular situations. That way, those ventures have provided a solid (small but real) foundation for narrowing the divide.

The main experiences developed on this issue in Latin America are organized and briefly presented here:

➤ **Argentina**

- The library of CIFMA (Centro Integral de Formación en la Modalidad Aborigen, *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'itaxá* 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 multilinguistic work.

➤ Brazil

- Magüta Museum and Cultural Center, belonging to the *Ticuna* people, is installed in the confluence of rivers Javari and high Solimões, in the Amazonas state, at the city of Benjamin Constant. It includes a library which provides activities for oral tradition recovery and support to bilingual (local, *Ticuna*) teachers (**Paoli Fariás, 1996; Bessa Freire, 2001**).
- 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.
- The “Biblioteca escolar *Guaraní*” (*Guarani School Library*, Correa, Dubas & Da Silva, 2005) was an outreach project of the LIS course at UDESC (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, *Santa Catarina State University*). The project started in 2004, and the unit was inaugurated in 2005, in the State School of the village of Itaty, in Santa Catarina state, southern Brazil.

➤ **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 (Gómez Ruiz, 2001).
- Other units were created including the four indigenous peoples of Santa Marta range (*Kankuama*, *Kogui*, *Ika* and *Wiwa*), en Cesar region, northern Colombia. They started recovering oral tradition and tales, and promoting culturally respectful services.
- The library of Guanacasⁱ is placed in Yaquivá reservation, in the municipality of Inzá. It won the First Architecture Award of Guadua in 2004, and it received, for its building, funding from the EU Program “Tierradentro” in 2005.
- The “Directorio digital para bibliotecas indígenas del Tolima”ⁱⁱ (*Digital directory for indigenous libraries in Tolima*) is a weblog that provides valuable resources on line. Within the website,

information is provided on the "Proyecto de Biblioteca Étnica del Tolima" (*Project of Tolima Ethnic Library*), intended to serve ethnic groups *Pijao* and *Paez*.

➤ **Costa Rica**

- The project "Centro de Conocimiento sobre/de Grupos Étnicos Indígenas Centroamericanos" (*Knowledge Centre on/for Central American Indigenous Ethnic Groups*) was launched in 2004 by the LIS School of the National University of Costa Rica. It has completed an initial diagnosis of libraries including materials on indigenous issues, an inventory of materials concerning aboriginal knowledge, the presentation of several web portals on this subject and the design of library models intended to serve native communities (Miranda Arguedas, 2001). Currently, it is aimed to implementing information units in indigenous communities of Talamanca region (belonging to ethnic groups *Cabecar* and *Bribri*).

➤ **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 (**Catrilaf Balboa, 2001**).
- The "Centro de Documentación Indígena"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ (*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.

➤ Guatemala

- It is remarkable the proposal of PROBIGUA (Proyecto Bibliotecas Guatemala, *Guatemala Libraries Project*), and NGO which offers Spanish classes for foreigners and uses the collected funds (as well as other subsidies) for supporting the work of Guatemala rural libraries. Until 1998, they have created six libraries and they keep an interesting network of mobile units to reach those places where physical spaces are not available for libraries (**Zamora, 2001**).

➤ 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 (**Márquez Nava, 2001**).
- Particular experiences involving older adults and indigenous children have been developed in Mexico City (**Líce de Arenas et al., 2002**).
- Since 2004, Mexico has a Programa de Servicios Bibliotecarios Digitales en Comunidades Indígenas (*Digital Library Services to*

Indigenous Communities Program), within the PASDBP - Programa de Acceso de Servicios Digitales en Bibliotecas Públicas (*Access to Digital Services in Public Libraries Program*) coordinadated by the Dirección General de Bibliotecas (*General Library Direction*) of CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, *National Council of Culture and Arts*). The program was aimed at reaching 25 indigenous groups from 120 municipalities to have access to the digital universe between 2001 and 2006 (**Gamboa, 2004**).

- In 2003, DGB created the Grupo Asesor de Servicios Bibliotecarios en Comunidades Indígenas (*Group on Library Services to Indigenous Communities*), which elaborated a draft including proposals and information needs all along the country. Alongside with the Sistema Nacional e-México (*National System e-Mexico*), they designed the web portal e-Indígenas (*e-Indigenous Peoples*). Through this system, 109 communities have accessed Internet and its contents (**Gamboa, op.cit.**)

➤ 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 (**Castro Aliaga, 2003**).
- 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 (**Castro, 2003**).
- 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 (**Soto Coronel & Gamarra, 2003**).

- 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 (**Castro Aliaga, op.cit.**).
- The Bibliotecas Rurales de Cajamarca (*Cajamarca Rural Libraries*) are an interesting experience starting in 1971, and extended to 9 provinces of Cajamarca department. It includes more than 600 reading places, managed by the own users (usually *Quechua* peasants) (**Mires Ortiz, 2001**).

➤ 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 (**Medina de Silva y Zapata, 1998; Medina de Silva, 2001; UNICEF, 2005; PicBip, 2007**).
- 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 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-descendents 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 –in the northern part of the country, next to the Paraguayan border– the author set up, between 2001 and 2006, the project "Indigenous Libraries" (Civallo, 2004). He worked with the *Qom*, *Moqoit*, *Wichi* and *Pit'laxá* ethnic groups in the provinces of Chaco and Formosa, both areas affected by sanitary problems, a lot of people living below the poverty line, malnutrition, high levels of unemployment and loss of identity. Starting from an initial evaluation of the situation, and using with imagination the very few resources at hand, a number of activities were created from a grass-root perspective and following action-research methodology. Among them, were included the review of the well-known documental languages (Civallo, 2005a), the collection of oral tradition (Civallo, 2007a) and the creation of sound collections (Civallo, 2005b). An emphasis was put upon identity and social inclusion issues (Civallo, 2007b). Of special interest were those activities concerning strategic knowledge diffusion such as the bio-medical information (Civallo, 2007d). In addition, it was also very important the recovery of games and music (Civallo, 2007c), as well as literacy programs, the support given to some tasks of bilingual education and family reading (Civallo, 2006).

This venture has demonstrated the possibility of combining successfully LIS tools with the specific knowledge and particular characteristics of the addressee population. It is worth mention the fact that those "libraries" were not information units *stricto sensu*, but small collections located in schools, through which valuable knowledge (from the users' perspective) was spread and their memory,

recovered. The traditional library models were dramatically changed and adapted in order to serve community better. It can be said that those changes were very important in order to eliminate the first barrier: the fine line that separates potential users from public libraries. A second one was removed when it was possible to demonstrate, through the activities carried out, that strategic information can be provided respecting the ethnic features of the addressees.

LIS projects inside aboriginal populations have not pulled down the information barriers that separate them from the (inter)national dominant currents. A long working path still remains for it to happen, which we will have to tread with tenacity, determined not to give up easily. It will be necessary to multiply the efforts in order to respond to the enormous population of addressees. However, all the projects mentioned show that it is possible if we tackle the problem from a different perspective, not with the same mechanisms but in search of a common objective.

CONCLUSION

The experiences on a small scale –those that respect the old maxim “think globally, act locally”– have been proven as the best tools for achieving some sort of change, however minimum it might seem. These propose a sort of action in direct contact with the environment as well as the commitment with a situation and a group of people in defiance of adversity and as a way of winning the struggle against it. In these cases the path trodden clearly approaches positions.

Information professionals have a social role to play in a society where the rough material that they manage –*knowledge*, a good that is common to all and every of the human beings– is a decisive factor of development and welfare. By having the capacity for managing that good, they automatically assume an ethical duty: to guarantee the egalitarian access to everybody who needs it, whoever they might be. It will be along their committed steps and movements –at academic, personal, political or educational levels– that they will attain the major

goal of closing those ditches, which, as open wounds, cross the social countenance of the planet.

Deprived people –naming them as you want to- are not individuals or groups that live in a world different from ours. They live next to us, at our side, with us and, perhaps *because of us*. To respond to their demands in a realistic and human way is the only manner of preventing them from being where they are, at the base of the social pyramid where they neither chose nor wished to be placed. Whether they are indigenous communities or *favelas*, peasants or excluded by the way they feel or act, all of them must have the same opportunities, for the skin they wear on the body is the same that ours. They also suffer from our same pains and dream with the same illusions as we do.

A different way might exist and the possibility that it happens is in our hands, and in all the things that they are able to do. It depends on us whether we decide to use them in digging the ditch and making it deeper and deeper, or to collaborate in removing it from the map of our memories.

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