



Traditional knowledge management and preservation: Intersections with Library and Information Science

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract The African proverb “*When an elder dies, a library burns down*” clearly sums up the importance of traditional knowledge preservation and cultural continuity, which the study found to be a key need and concern amongst First Nations communities in Ontario, Canada. To follow-up on elders’ suggestions that libraries are potential custodians of traditional knowledge, this paper explores how traditional knowledge preservation intersects with Library and Information Science (LIS) practices of knowledge classification, organization, and dissemination and establishes the various challenges that this intersection poses to these LIS practices. The paper concludes that libraries and other information institutions need to re-examine and reconstruct themselves in ways that take into account non-western epistemologies and world-views and develop much needed cultural competency in order to undertake traditional knowledge custodianship.

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“*When an elder dies, a library burns down*”¹

Introduction

The African proverb and Alaskan saying “*When an elder dies, a library burns down*” is relevant to this paper in three ways: first, it is a basis for my call and challenge to the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession to get involved in preserving traditional knowledge and second, it

succinctly sums up the choice of elders as my subjects in this study. Finally, the fact that the same saying (proverb) is used by two communities that are geographically and culturally very distant is not only evidence of the commonality of the issues regarding preserving traditional knowledge, but could also be interpreted as Indigenous Peoples’ convergence on these issues.

There has been increased international recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ activities as creative, innovative, and important contributions to science, to research and

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¹ African proverb and Alaskan saying.

development, and to general human progress. The ubiquitous loss of traditional knowledge that has created an urgent need to protect, preserve, and control its use was one of the issues that prompted the 1993 United Nations (UN) General Assembly declaration of 1995–2004 the *International Decade of the World's Indigenous People* and another such decade from 2005–2014.² The goal of the two International Decades is to identify the problems that indigenous communities face and to foster international cooperation in solving these problems. These declarations challenged governments and the international community to address, nationally and internationally, issues that affect indigenous communities. One such issue, the protection of traditional knowledge, has triggered an ongoing international debate that the United Nations, through the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is spearheading but is also rife in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). As [Blakeney \(2002\)](#) observes, Indigenous Peoples have also realized that the international protection of their knowledge depends on their own efforts and have expressed their views through various declarations as well as through submissions to the above multilateral forums.

In an effort to preserve traditional knowledge, there is a proliferation of such knowledge being stored by, and disseminated through libraries, museums, archives, and herbariums.³ The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2010) has seen the potential for LIS to get involved in traditional knowledge preservation and access and has challenged libraries to take a leading role in, *inter alia*: collecting, preserving, and disseminating traditional knowledge; publicizing its value, contribution, and importance to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples; raising awareness on the protection of traditional knowledge against misappropriation; and involving elders and communities in its production and teaching of traditional knowledge. The above challenge by IFLA calls for an examination of library practices of knowledge classification and management, information access, and

dissemination and how they intersect with the preservation of traditional knowledge. In this paper, I ask whether or not LIS is ready and positioned to take this leading role and argue that the nature of traditional knowledge, its holding communities' needs for, and concerns about its preservation, and LIS tools pose challenges to current library practices if applied to the management of traditional knowledge.

Methodology

The study sought to answer the following research questions: what claims are stakeholders in the traditional knowledge protection debate making regarding the need to protect traditional knowledge, its ownership, control, and access; has the debate considered non-western world-views; and how closely connected is the international debate to the claims and concerns of the traditional knowledge holders? This paper is a follow-up on an unexpected suggestion made by First Nations elders. The suggestion that libraries be future custodians of documented traditional knowledge was unexpected because the interview protocol did not include a question that would elicit such a response.

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to gather grassroots views of traditional knowledge holders and to get a grassroots and in-depth understanding of Indigenous Peoples' needs and concerns. I interviewed 15 elders from a number of different First Nations communities in Ontario, Canada.⁴ These elders are from four First Nations linguistic groups namely: Ojibwa (Chippewa); Algonquin; Potawatomi; and Haudenosaunee (Mohawks). A First Nations person is a "member of any of the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere, although the term often connotes only those groups whose original territories were in present-day Canada..." ([Pauls, 2009](#)). Although not all Aboriginal groups in Canada have always had territories in present day Canada, all have long roots in pre-colonial North America. First Nations people are among the three groups of Indigenous Peoples of Canada as recognized in the *Canadian Constitution Act, 1982*, Section 35. The other two groups are the Inuit and Métis who are an "indigenous nation of Canada that has combined Native American and European cultural practices since at least the 17th century" ([Métis, 2009](#)).

Sampling design and the sample

The choice of elders as interviewees was made because, as the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples \(1996a\)](#) observes, elders are spiritual leaders whom members of a community respect due to the great deal of wisdom and experience that they have amassed throughout their lives and who the community looks to for guidance and sound judgment. An elder is one "thought of as a very highly

² See resolutions adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/59/174) at its 59th session (2004). See United Nations. [General Assembly \(2004\)](#). For the purposes of this paper, Indigenous Peoples are defined as proposed by Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the UN Sub-commission, in his report entitled the *Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations* (UN Doc. E/CNA/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.8). See [United Nations. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues \(1983\)](#). Cobo proposes the following working definition of Indigenous Peoples: Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

³ For the purposes of this paper, I use the term libraries to encompass archives, museums, herbariums, and other institutions that are involved in the organization and dissemination of information.

⁴ In order to ensure anonymity of the elder, I have used a code that consists of the elders' linguistic groups and then a number to distinguish between elders from the same linguistic group. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed in both the interview protocol and the consent forms that I used.

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