

# **A Forum for Indigenous Culture Building and Preservation**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides a context for a professional forum to consider the roles that can be played by museums, museologists, technologists and Indigenous cultural community members to support and rebuild cultural communities and to preserve Indigenous culture. As such work often does not take place within institutional walls, it is necessary to think about the many distributed tasks that can be combined to bridge the gap between ephemeral cultural knowledge and practices and the long-term preservation of representations of the culture.

The authors' experience when working on a project that aimed to help repatriate the cultural resources of a north Australian Indigenous community focuses on the problems associated with the use of technology in the preservation of the culture of a community of which the technologists are not members. A community agent who has 'inside' knowledge and is educated in the ways of the community as part of the culture of the community has a better chance of knowing what matters to the community but perhaps less access to resources and technological expertise.

The forum that is sought is one in which those with experiences from a range of perspectives can work together to find new, appropriate ways of working. In particular, the expertise of museum communities is sought in the hope that the depth of experience of professionals in this field can complement the emergent work of indigenous people in the preservation of their culture.

Keywords: indigenous, preservation, Australia, aborigines, culture, community, indigenous culture, community, collectives

## **Introduction**

This paper provides a context for a professional forum to consider the roles that can be played by museums, museologists, technologists and Indigenous cultural community members to support and rebuild cultural communities and to preserve indigenous cultures. As such work often does not take place within institutional walls, it is necessary to think about the many distributed tasks that can be successfully employed to bridge the gap between ephemeral cultural knowledge and practices and the long-term preservation of representations of the culture.

Victor Steffensen (2006) has developed a process for working with Australian Aboriginal Elders to articulate and represent sacred, secret and generally known knowledge, language and practices before it is too late. Victor works with Elders of the Quinkan region in far northern Australia, recording their stories and practices for their own community. One area of knowledge that has attracted international interest concerns the traditional practices of 'caring for country'. Australia is a fragile country, and this ecological knowledge is being considered very seriously in an effort to reverse the deterioration that has been accelerated in the last 150 years by recent settlers' land use.

The Traditional Knowledge Recording Project (<http://www.tkrp.com.au/>) is one of many at-risk projects operating around the world: the gathering of traditional knowledge helps build community and strengthen the knowledge. But without a secure future, these records may suffer the same fate as the unrecorded knowledge. Museums that traditionally specialise in preservation of many types are interested in and can contribute to the preservation debate in important ways. Other disciplinary experts can point to special characteristics and issues in

the preservation of indigenous cultures. A simple example is the problem for indigenous people of establishing trustworthy relationships with technologists and others who do not have real connections with the culture. Who can and should collect and control access to indigenous knowledge is always an issue and rarely is settled in ways that are satisfactory for all concerned.

How should cultural knowledge be collected, displayed, distributed, published, etc?

We start with some of the identified problems as they relate to the Quinkan culture of far north eastern Australia. We briefly orient the paper to the Quinkan location and community. We consider the problematic role of technology, as we were involved with it, to contribute in a small way to the on-going efforts to preserve Quinkan culture. We raise some of many concerns related to work by outsiders within indigenous communities and the inherent difficulties of such work. We refer to the Australian context where there have been two centuries of interaction between the 'recent immigrants' and the indigenous people. We note the changing models that have prevailed in the dominant cultural preservation activities. We invite the experience of museums and museologists, technologists and others to suggest ways outsiders may help those working within indigenous cultural communities in the future to strengthen and preserve what the indigenous people value of their culture.

#### Background

The extreme north east of Australia has been home to Indigenous Australians for many millennia. Their cultural documentation includes Rock Art that dates back way beyond immediate human memory, partly because it is so old but also because of the tempestuous times through which the few remaining cultural trustees have survived. Nevertheless, there have been increased efforts to conserve and share the rich Quinkan heritage in recent years. In a number of projects, there has been an effort not only to preserve the local culture but also to repatriate some of the wide-spread resources that have been collected and then scattered around the world by those interested in this region. Our work was designed to contribute to this effort by improving access to internationally published Web resources.

In this paper, we start to describe the context of our investigations with respect to the partnerships that can be developed between traditional western cultural organizations, particularly museums, and the people of diverse indigenous cultures scattered around the world. We focus on our experiences in Australia in order to provide a context for discussion of other circumstances.

#### **Quinkan Country**

'Quinkan Country' is in Tropical North East Australia, on the Cape York Peninsula. It includes the Laura sandstone ridge, which extends 100 km along an east-west axis from the coastal Cooktown hinterland to the Hann tablelands. The southern boundary follows the course of the Palmer River, once the focus of extensive gold mining, and in the north, along the alluvial plains of the lower Normanby River. The main population centre, Laura, is approximately 290 km north-west of Cairns, the nearest town. The region is famous for its Rock Art: an estimated 100,000 paintings and engravings scattered in natural galleries and sites throughout the lush savannah and high escarpments.

The local Indigenous community includes families representing different language groups, some descendants of the original inhabitants. Despite some displacement of the original inhabitants and disruption to traditional life, there is still a strong sense of connection with ancestral places. There is an annual dance festival at which Aboriginal communities from the Peninsula meet to refresh traditional dance and music and to enjoy modern indigenous music.

In the 1960s, bush pilot Percy J. Trezise ‘re-discovered’ the Rock Art and started documenting paintings and recording stories with Aboriginal people whose country covered the Laura sandstone region and beyond (Trezise, 1993).

For Australian Indigenous communities, the desire for return of cultural property and control over its use is matched by an equally strong ambition to produce and disseminate content for public consumption. The Lajamanu Elders of north-west Australia have produced “Dream Trackers” on CD-ROM (Glowczewski, 2000); the Yanyuwa community maintains a public Web site (<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts/diwurruwuru/>); and there is a string of regional visitor centres displaying interpretive content on fixed panels as part of the Queensland Heritage Trails Network (<http://www.heritagetrails.qld.gov.au/attractions/laura.html>). These methods of cultural content dissemination share the common characteristic of being static. Even in non-linear systems, CD-ROMs and Web sites, the content is usually classified according to pre-set categories and is presented in a pre-determined arrangement.

Internationally, the museum community acknowledges that meeting the needs of the on-line users of cultural content requires new ways of fielding data and new ways of creating content. While the Western point of view on management and interpretation of cultural materials is still prevalent, there is an emergent shift away from empirical and authoritative statements about objects towards multiple and more subjective narratives (Cameron, 2003).

### **Collectors And Collectives**

Access and use of their cultural resources are vital to the cultural revitalisation of communities (Fforde et al., 2002; Peers & Brown, 2003). People in remote Australian Indigenous communities such as Laura cannot afford to travel to where their materials are held. Despite having a cultural centre building, they cannot afford to repatriate all their materials ‘in Country’ or maintain a Keeping Place. The principle of expanded use helps promote access to cultural material without imposing the cost of supporting a cultural institution, but it creates the challenge to make remote resources intellectually accessible to an extended (and often undefined) user base.

The Matchbox Project, in which we were involved as technologists, chose to work on supporting the repatriation of remote cultural material after having shown the local community some examples of what was written about them without their permission or involvement. A particularly striking example was a Web page that, printed on continuous paper, presented several metres of unauthorised, inaccurate anthropological material to the world. Such examples prompted the permission of Elders of Laura for the use of technology if it could help bring such materials to their attention.

Matchbox was designed to be a metadata repository that, in time, might become a repository for cultural material as a result of community activity. Matchbox could be used for local materials being repatriated to those who now lived ‘off country’ and for remote materials for those who continued to live ‘on country’. While it seemed obvious to us that metadata could provide a flexible platform from which to tailor content searching, browsing and navigating, and displays of search results to suit user needs, this was not a shared understanding. And clearly, before metadata could be expected to offer any contribution, there needed to be a deep reflection on how metadata might be meaningful to the Quinkan community and whether and how they might choose to use it.

### **Cultural Heritage As A Process**

Edwards (2003) argues that photographs or films originally produced as colonial documents became ‘ethnographic’ records, but they can become family, clan or community history once repatriated. When they are returned to the original location, they inevitably return to different social relations. Edwards stresses that, “communities are faced with what is known to them

from their own ways of remembering, through the eyes of an outsider, with very different resonances” (p. 86).

Cultural heritage professionals who seek new theoretical bases for cultural heritage assessment are moving away from the ‘registrar view’ to include social processes (Byrne et al., 2001). Traditionally, archaeologists adopted the ‘inherent’ value model: the value of a place can be read from the place. Byrne et al. advocate the ‘attributed’ meaning model, in which a community confers significance and meaning on a place. This model places communities, not objects, at the centre of cultural heritage. It recognises the primacy of local knowledge in ascribing social value and meaning to heritage sites.

Byrne’s vision of heritage work in the wider community is quite similar to the Indigenous way of reading a cultural landscape. It is about deciphering the tenuous and invisible markings in the landscape and understanding the discreet network of relationships between place, people and meanings.

Smith and Holland (1999) develop a concept of ‘digital collective’ that offers a way to reconcile the views of Indigenous people on ‘memory work’ and the technical limitations imposed on the technologists. They propose “an organizational structure that draws in contributions from individuals and collectors and encourages comment and connections amongst viewers”. They use the word ‘collective’ instead of ‘collection’ for their model because it is envisaged as “a community space where non experts and ordinary people can enter their digital objects along with their information, stories, and experiences about their own or other objects in the collective database”. Smith (2002) argues that, “the collective becomes a record of society itself in addition to a rich repository of objects and descriptive information.” In the digital collective model, institutions of memory contribute on a par with individuals. The model appeals to us, as outsiders, as having particular relevance to the Quinkan context because of the distributed nature of the Quinkan cultural property. Also, it places a strong emphasis on the notion of collective responsibility in repatriating cultural artifacts to communities.

Exactly what model is suitable and what will appeal to the Quinkan community is not to be determined by us. It is our desire to inform the choice by offering enabling technology. But technology alone cannot solve the problem. Finding ways to identify, describe and implement a chosen model is clearly a difficult exercise.

### **Cultural Collections And Community Archives**

In the Quinkan project, we were working with the assumption that a distributed digital museum might be of interest and value in the process of repatriation of Quinkan culture.

We are aware that distributed digital museums have altered the traditional definitions and boundaries of what constitutes a ‘collection’. In the physical museum world, a collection is usually defined by physical demarcation or co-location of resources. In the networked world, objects need not be co-located. One of the qualities of distributed digital objects is that they can exist in multiple collections, have multiple instantiations and retain differing cataloguing and administration rules (Lagoze & Fielding, 1998; Lee, 2000).

In Australia, community archives in Indigenous communities are promoted by initiatives such as the Australian Indigenous Cultural Network (AICN) and the creation of Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKC). IKC initiatives focus primarily on infrastructure building and support as well as training opportunities. Other projects involve the return of cultural materials through the creation of digital surrogates of artefacts that are then held locally (Partos, 2003). Other types of initiatives include traveling exhibitions or the return of photographs to communities of origins such as the project “Bringing the Photographs Home”

(<http://www.berndt.uwa.edu.au/>) led by the Berndt Museum (Western Australia). The Berndt team stressed the necessity to repatriate materials both in a digital and hardcopy format, to let indigenous communities access their own archives. An inherent danger in such projects is that the returning of objects, or facsimiles of them, can too easily become more a symbolic process than a reality.

Community archives are primarily organised around local use and local needs, not for interaction with other systems. Compliance with standards and inter-operability are seldom considerations in these activities. The challenge for the Quinkan research was to design an application profile for the Quinkan Matchbox records that is both locally specific and interoperable with standards-compliant DC records of existing subject gateways, museums, libraries and other Australian (and international) collections. The aim was to facilitate the importation (or harvesting) of metadata about cultural material without having to negotiate the return of digitised materials.

The basic functionality of an information system for Indigenous cultural management should respond to challenges set for its future and be more than just a catalogue; it should provide a 'cultural environment'. It should enable users to connect things they perceive as related. This aim is informed and limited by the system developers' understanding of the concepts of culture and heritage. Ideally these should reflect an Indigenous point-of-view, best summed up as 'Country' or cultural landscape.

We recognise the contradiction between acknowledging indigenous cultures as living cultures and attempting to hold them captive in 'systems' for preservation (Merlan, 2000), and we are aware that repatriation of objects or archival materials (digitised or not) may have a destabilising effect on communities if not handled sensitively and with respect for indigenous protocols (Saunders, 2002).

We struggled with the difficulty and inadequacies of applying conventional requirement gathering techniques in our context. We failed to satisfy even ourselves that we had determined appropriate requirements, and we are not sure how this could be done. We note the experience of museums in this context, and we recognize the difficulty of working with people whose understanding of the technology is very different from our own. We suspect that only by working together can we learn from these experiences and communicate openly to develop effective and desirable designs.

In our digital collective model, metadata is at best a small component of an amalgam of technical infrastructure, legal agreements and human engagement that could be built, financed and staffed. Far from being a final delivery, at best our metadata profile could provide no more than the first iteration of a process requiring ongoing scrutiny, assessment and feedback from the Quinkan community.

The Quinkan Matchbox was intended to be a 'content free' cultural tool, but we recognized that the development of a metadata profile for the Quinkan culture would introduce questions of cultural definitions. We were confronted with a methodological and ethical dilemma. How does an outsider investigate 'culture' in an environment where the right to speak is highly regulated? Can systems represent the infinite nuances and variations of human experience and affects?

### **A Registry Of Tangible Assets**

When designing application profiles, the main parameters are usually users and objects. The most visible incarnation of the Quinkan culture is represented by a large corpus of Rock Art. For these types of objects, descriptive profiles are readily available or easily devised. A catalogue with an archaeological focus can easily be built to describe archaeological artefacts

ranging from an isolated Rock Art motif to a large site and its immediate environment. Its profile could replicate the record-keeping structure of archaeologists or environmental agencies with attention paid to physical description, condition and degradation reports. If need be, a few interpretive stories could be appended. An established profile, such as that used by the local government's environmental protection agency, might be used in a standard form such as a cross-walk to the Dublin Core metadata standard, without dramatic loss of data.

It is unlikely, however, that such a standard material heritage management system would represent Quinkan culture as a whole or that it could replicate the kind of 'cultural doing' taking place in real life. The focus on material artefacts is too narrow and does not encompass the wealth of human experience that makes up 'culture'. The search for the future content of the Quinkan Matchbox is also a search for definitions for 'culture' and 'heritage' and what it might mean in the Quinkan community context. The common definitions of these terms have been in constant evolution, over time and across intellectual disciplines. These changing definitions in turn have had an impact on preservation practices and philosophies, as has the legal framework in which the preservation work takes place. Slowly, preservation practices are seeking to reflect and encapsulate indigenous views on matters of culture and heritage.

Australian 'cultural heritage management' was born in urgency, to preserve fast disappearing sites. It was administered in a bureaucratic style through the establishment of agencies attached to either museums or government departments (Byrne, 1991). Byrne feels that heritage values are still perceived as being 'in the field' rather than in communities. Definitions of content for the Quinkan Matchbox can be derived from a better understanding of the Indigenous view of 'heritage' and the role played by archaeological sites within it. When Indigenous authors explain their world (or world view) to a wider, non-indigenous audience through writing, the central and recurring word is always 'Country' (Rose, 1996; Sharp, 2002). Langton (1994) points to the necessity of understanding cultural landscapes. "The concept of 'country' embraces all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with the geographical area" (p. 16).

### **A Technology-Driven Approach**

Although our original aim was to write 'the' Quinkan metadata application profile (MAP), it is clearer now this could only be one of many, modified and developed iteratively. In fact, the MAP is now offered as a base from which to define more local rules and imagine more facets to represent Quinkan culture. It is impossible to design a profile that is 'true to Country' without engaging with the Country itself and its custodians. A real MAP needs community endorsement and the contribution of local terms and values.

The Western agenda is well served by the building of large, interoperable networks of information and the increasing standardisation of knowledge representation. Indigenous preferences and demands are often obfuscated in this process. The Quinkan MAP is located at the intersection of two seemingly contradictory currents: global inter-operability and local specificity. Standards deal with these issues through internationalisation and localization, but these processes often work at cross-purposes (Duval et al., 2002). Global discovery is best served by internationalisation and the adoption of general conventions and terminology. Meanwhile, the needs of any community (be it a cultural or an intellectual community) are best served by the adoption of local conventions. This tension is familiar to the metadata community.

### **Cultural Property Rights**

In his writing about the introduction of television in the Warlpiri community, Michaels (1986) noted that

kinship can also be thought of as a communication model. It establishes who will communicate to whom, around what issue and in which setting. A chart of a kinship system then can also be treated as a cybernetic model for information flows, accounting for the circulation of news and knowledge around the kin network (p. 8).

By extension, a mapping of kinship in Laura could be modeled and form the base for the Quinkan Matchbox's rights and authentication sub-system, but again there is the problem of who would determine the model, and how? We know that this particular location's kinship system cannot be reduced to a simple flow chart, where the usual parameters, such as gender and age, provide the basic (and static) architecture for the authentication sub-system. Again, standard technological solutions are inadequate, and the best solution is likely to be a lot more complex and fluid than creating layers of authentication levels, as is often done in network administration.

### **Conclusion**

Our experience in Australia with Quinkan culture has raised many questions for us. We cannot find models, examples, practices or principles that provide local satisfaction and global interoperability in ways that satisfy our goal of supporting the repatriation of Quinkan culture. We extrapolate from this experience, and others, to boldly suggest that in the current context, even with an abundance of technology and expertise, being technology driven is not the way. Community engagement is paramount. Working with people and from content is paramount. If this is recognised, then perhaps the technology might be built to suit the circumstances.

Museums seem to have benefited in the past from the asset registrar way of recording information that prevailed, but many have more recently adopted the latest fashion in technology to produce new exhibition forms from what they already have. Local knowledge is often an afterthought, to establish provenance or meaning. Too often there is a split between technological capability and rapport with the community.

When there is work of the quality and nature of the recording exemplified by Victor Steffensen, there is an opportunity for the technology to contribute in new ways. Victor, as a community agent, can accumulate content and understanding of the culture but needs the highest level of technological support to realize his unique contribution in the long term.

Just because we can't find good models does not mean it can't be done. Possibly the problem is that the people who do the work, and spend the money, do it from the laboratory, not from within the community. Perhaps, the issue is not about finding new models of requirements gathering, or MAP making, for example, but new models of working with communities.

NOTE: This paper is based on an unpublished thesis (Lissonnet, 2005).

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