

Librarianship and Traditional Cultural Expressions: Nurturing Understanding and Respect

Draft 4 – July 20, 2009

Contact:

Carrie Russell, Director, Program on Public Access to Information
American Library Association, Office for Information Technology Policy
crussell@alawash.org

Introduction

Libraries hold in their collections resources that constitute or reflect a vast array of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions (TCEs).¹ TCEs are integral to the cultural and social identities of indigenous and traditional communities that produce them. They embody knowledge and skills; they transmit core values and beliefs. Their protection is related to the promotion of creativity, enhanced cultural diversity and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Because TCEs play a special role in the communities that create them, libraries must manage and care for these materials in a manner that recognizes the unique qualities and concerns of their owners. Many indigenous and local communities struggle with the preservation of their culture. Preserving and providing access to TCEs is a significant and complex activity.

Libraries provide access to much of the world's intellectual creativity and cultural accomplishments. This practice of librarianship is reflected in eleven Core Values identified by the American Library Association (ALA).² Among the core values are access, diversity, preservation, service and social responsibility. Together, these values address librarians' responsibility to meet the information needs of library users of all kinds by providing equitable access to a wide range of resources and services, and by supporting individual expression as a tenet of intellectual freedom.

The five concept areas addressed in this document are central to the topic of collecting, preserving, organizing and accessing TCEs. They represent the relationship between libraries and TCEs as a holistic cycle. This cycle begins with the understanding of the cultural meaning and context in which these expressions are created. Library activities relating to TCEs must recognize and respect these meanings and contexts within the overall mission of the library to serve as a forum for free expression and access to ideas for all people of the community the library serves. The central activity of the library is defined as one of stewardship of information to its users—in the case of TCEs this

¹ Traditional cultural expressions are defined as, but not limited to, narratives, poetry, music, art, designs, names, signs, symbols, performances, architectural forms, handicrafts.

² See ALA Core Values at

<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/corevaluesstatement/corevalues.cfm>

means respectful caretaking of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. Therefore, librarians, indigenous peoples and other tradition-bearers should establish frameworks designed to encourage reciprocity, collaboration and access in the stewardship of cultural heritage collections.

Meaning and Social Context

- Traditional knowledge and cultural expressions exist and are created within an indigenous or folk cultural environment that may include culturally-specific meaning, reflecting cultural history, spirituality, world view, artistic expression, respect for the land, and continuity of culture.
- Traditional cultural expressions do not exist separately from the living cultures they reflect. Tradition-bearers are the living repositories of cultural heritage.
- Traditional cultural expressions hold great power and meaning within indigenous and traditional folk communities and are a part of daily life in source communities.
- Indigenous societies have customary laws and traditions regarding use of knowledge and expression.
- Traditional cultural expressions and traditional knowledge often are associated with communities rather than specific individuals.

Respect, Recognition, Understanding

- Libraries consider the cultural authority of the tradition-bearers who practice traditional knowledge and create traditional cultural expressions that may be held in library collections.
- Libraries respect, recognize and understand that cultural traditions of Indigenous societies have been disrupted over time, and that libraries may hold vital links in their collections for the restoration, maintenance or on-going cultural conservation of traditional cultural expressions.
- Libraries that collect materials on indigenous cultures attempt to acquire materials written, produced, illustrated and/or directed by indigenous peoples.
- Libraries develop access guidelines and protocols that respect traditional cultures and fulfill the library's obligation to serve as a community forum for ideas and information.
- Libraries educate their patrons on the ethical use of documentary materials that

reflect traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

Responsibility

- Indigenous communities define what traditional cultural expressions are private or sacred knowledge.
- Librarians have a responsibility to develop an understanding of the traditions and cultures associated with materials held in their collections.
- Librarians have a responsibility for developing policies and guidelines for preservation and access including for research purposes, of traditional cultural expressions in while considering the cultural values and legal norms of indigenous and local communities.

Reciprocity and Collaboration

- Libraries collaborate with indigenous and local communities on a continuing basis to maintain a dynamic and reciprocal relationship that guides acquisition, preservation, and access to traditional cultural expressions.
- Libraries have a responsibility to share their guidelines on access and use of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions with their users.
- Libraries and communities manage physical collections and develop information systems appropriate to indigenous cultures, in a spirit of reciprocal curation that encourages knowledge and respect for tradition.

Stewardship

- Libraries continue to play an active role in using technology to preserve and provide access to intellectual content.³ Librarians share this expertise with those communities who choose to preserve and access cultural heritage.
- Libraries are sensitive to the fact that digitizing traditional cultural expressions could expose the content to a world beyond the boundaries of the library, and makes it potentially more vulnerable to misuse.

³ For more information on library values and activities in digital environments, see <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/referenceab/principles/principles.cfm>

- Libraries strive to provide the necessary social and cultural context in connection with use of indigenous materials in their collections, and ensure appropriate use of materials.
- Library staff engage in continuing education to stay abreast of issues surrounding the stewardship of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.
- Libraries seek opportunities to consult with traditional and indigenous communities concerning identification, treatment and use of works, and concerning repatriation of cultural heritage when appropriate.

Conclusion

Librarians are professionals with a social responsibility to provide and promote public access to information. We recognize the distinctive needs and concerns of the cultural communities we serve. We embrace and respect the diversity of all peoples.

The special sensitivity and care TCEs require are supported by the fundamental tenets of librarianship. These principles serve as a reminder of core library values and our mission to safeguard and provide access to materials without sacrificing individual liberty or respect for cultural differences.

Embracing these principles will advance the role of librarians as stewards of knowledge and cultural heritage. Consensus on these principles within the library community will establish the library's voice advocating for reason and respect in national and international discussions concerning protection of and access to unique creative works of traditional cultural expression.