

Librarianship and Traditional Cultural Expressions: Nurturing Understanding and Respect

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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, the enhancement of cultural diversity and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Because TCEs play an integral role within 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. While libraries consider copyright review as a necessary prerequisite to digitization, that same awareness can obscure the many other rights at stake, including protections for traditional cultural expressions, cultural and documentary heritage rights, privacy rights and other rights.

Because preserving and providing access to TCEs is a significant and complex activity, libraries can provide support and expertise to those communities that choose to preserve their own cultural heritage. Libraries that preserve TCEs, in turn, need to consult with traditional communities. Libraries may discover that providing access to information about the materials rather than providing direct access to the materials is the best course given the concerns of indigenous communities.

Libraries will continue to provide and support broad 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.

¹ Traditional cultural expressions are defined as, but not limited to, narratives, poetry, music, art, designs, names, signs, symbols, performances, architectural forms, and handicrafts created by indigenous and/or traditional communities.

² See ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship"

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

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

Meaning and Social Context

- Traditional 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 may hold great power and meaning within indigenous and traditional folk communities and may be part of daily life in source communities.
- Indigenous societies often have customary laws and traditions regarding use of knowledge and expression.
- Traditional cultural expressions and knowledge often are associated with communities rather than specific individuals.

Respect, Recognition, Understanding

- Libraries have a responsibility to 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 should attempt to acquire materials written, produced, illustrated and/or directed by indigenous peoples.
- Libraries endeavor to 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 should make every effort to educate their patrons on the ethical use of documentary materials that reflect traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

Responsibility

- Librarians have a responsibility to develop an understanding of the traditions and cultures associated with materials held in their collections.
- Indigenous communities understand that some traditional cultural expressions are private or sacred knowledge, and should relay this information to libraries that may have these works in their collections. Libraries who hold private or sacred knowledge may prefer to return those materials to the indigenous communities rather than establish internal guidelines that restrict access based on cultural status, gender, age, and other factors.
- When librarians develop policies and guidelines for the preservation of, and access to, traditional cultural expressions, cultural values and legal norms of indigenous and local communities should be taken into consideration.

Reciprocity and Collaboration

- Libraries make an effort to 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 culture, 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 should, when possible, share this expertise with those communities who choose to preserve and access their own cultural heritage.
- Libraries should be 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.
- Libraries strive to provide the necessary social and cultural context in connection with the use of indigenous materials in their collections, and make every effort to ensure the appropriate use of materials.
- Librarians and staff participate in continuing education to stay abreast of issues surrounding the stewardship of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.
- Libraries should identify 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 in advocating for reason and respect in national and international discussions concerning protection of and access to unique creative works of traditional cultural expression.

³ For more information on library values and activities in digital environments, see ALA's "Principles for the Networked World" <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/referenceab/principles/principles.cfm>