CREATING DIGITAL HERITAGE COLLECTIONS IN
REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: In this paper I describe the Northern Territory Library's *Libraries and Knowledge Centres* program and examine some of the ways that digital technologies are being used to improve local access to archival materials in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. The development of community heritage databases gives some communities the opportunity to construct small collections of digitised photographs, documents, films and audio recordings of local relevance. Items retrieved from archives, libraries, museums and private collections are entered into the database and enriched with additional information by interested community members. By drawing on examples from the Anmatyerr Library and Knowledge Centre in Ti Tree (Aleyaw), 200kms north of Alice Springs, this paper outlines how access to archival materials has stimulated local knowledge documentation and cultural revivification activities. Some of the inherent complexities encountered when developing collections of this nature are also discussed. This paper concludes by suggesting that improving the flow of information between remote communities and the various cultural institutions will be a major challenge for digital heritage management initiatives into the future.

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Introduction

In this paper I wish to explore just one example of where the library sector is attempting to provide Aboriginal people with access to historical and cultural materials via the development of local, digital heritage databases. This paper is essentially divided into two sections. I will firstly provide an overview of the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) program and some historical information regarding the development of Indigenous heritage databases across remote Australia. Secondly, while academic debate on the suitability of databases to handle indigenous knowledge has revealed some of the limitations of digital archiving there has been little documentation on how these systems are actually being used[2]. I will therefore provide concrete examples of what actually *happens* with these collections from my work at the Anmatyerr Library and Knowledge Centre in Ti Tree.

The Libraries and Knowledge Centres Program and the 'Our Story' database

In 2004 the Northern Territory Library began to implement a new service to its remote libraries centred on a computer database system designed to hold digital materials of particular relevance to each local community.[3] After an initial audit of available database systems the Pitjantjatjara Council's *Ara Irititja* system was chosen and re-branded the 'Our Story' database. A team of researchers, led by Professor Martin Nakata, evaluated the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) model with the database at its locus the following year. They found that programs like this could become key infrastructure elements for building capacity in Indigenous communities into the future.

The *Our Story* database has now been implemented in thirteen remote Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory and each individual community's collection is in varying stages of development. There are currently two LKCs in Central Australia, one in the Arrernte community of Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa), 80kms to the south east of Alice Springs and another for the Anmatyerr community of Ti Tree, a small town 200kms north of Alice Springs.

Systems like the *Our Story* databases have responded to the challenges and the opportunities presented by information, media and communications industry convergence and blur the divisions between media *consumers* and media *producers*. Discussions at the global level also point towards the development of relatively decentralised, local and culturally attuned knowledge and information collections. Recommendations from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) stated that:

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[2] See Christie, 2006. Christie, 2005, Christen, 2004, Verran, 2005.
[3] The State Library of Queensland also have an Indigenous library service exploring similar themes, Indigenous Knowledge Centres.

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2

"Equitable access [to information services] has to be contextualised and as far as possible based on local linguistic/cultural, economic and technological imperatives of communities so as to bolster their local knowledge content and its ownership and management[4].'

In Indigenous Australia though, the notion that Aboriginal 'communities should have the possibility to store and keep their own knowledge in digital format' and that the sharing of knowledge may help to improve livelihoods[5]', has been relatively slow to take hold. The reasons for this protracted introduction are not difficult to adduce; the dearth of technical support and training in remote areas, the lack of accessibility to digital archive materials, low income and employment opportunities, low rates of literacy and a relatively unreliable telecommunications infrastructure are just some of the reasons for this.

Australian Indigenous Heritage Collections

Over a decade ago,[6] the The *Ara Irititja* project on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara lands (SA) revolutionised thinking in regards to the delivery of heritage and archival services to remote Indigenous people. The system was developed by the Social History Unit of the Pitjantjatjara Council in response to senior people's desire to bring back the records of past anthropologists, missionaries and others that so fervently documented their lives in a period of cultural change. There is now growing enthusiasm across the continent for similar initiatives and database projects have begun to emerge in Queensland[7], Western Australia[8], Victoria[9] and New South Wales[10], each with their own particular needs and objectives. Some of these databases feature contemporary documentation of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), such as the *Plants for People* online database in Titjikala[11]; specific cultural knowledge with its associated songs, stories and ceremonies, such as in the *Traditional Knowledge Recording Project* on Cape York; and cultural and ecological site management records featured in the *Cultural Heritage Database* at Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park[12].

These database systems have allowed for materials from a range of different and distinct collections to come together for the first time as a unique compilation in their own right. In *Our Story* for example, each item in the database is associated with its original catalogue information as well as enriched with annotations entered by trained local library staff and other interested community members. New material is also being captured at a rapid pace, via the use of digital media technologies, and included in these archives. The *Our Story* database in

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[4] Weigel & Waldburger, 2004:56
[5] Weigel & Waldburger, 2004:163
[6] The *Ara Irititja* project began in 1994. http://www.arairititja.org This project is incorrectly described by Hart Cohen (2006:46) in his brief account of indigenous knowledge management systems as Ara Eritja. This is obviously a misspelling of the Pitjantjatjara word Irititja however he has instead used an Arrernte word meaning 'wedge-tailed eagle' in TGH Strehlow's orthography, Eritja.
[7] Traditional Knowledge Recording Project http://www.tkrp.com.au/ and the Desert Channels Traditional Knowledge Recording Project, Longreach.
[8] The *Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa* Martu History Archive.
[9] Koori Heritage Trust http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/domino/Web_Notes/newmedia.nsf/798c8b072d117a01ca256c8c0019bb01/e1c54f481b2bc0d8ca256de000782f95!OpenDocument
[10] The Awaba Database in Newcastle. http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/awaba/awaba/index.html
[11] Titjikala Plants For People database: http://web2.entity1.com/tappy_plants/
[12] http://www.deh.gov.au/parks/uluru/csms/index.html

Wadeye (Port Keats) for example is constantly being updated with new song recordings, photographs and videos. These systems then become very 'organic' in the way that they expand and change over time, mixing old materials with newly created content.

A great deal of the Indigenous cultural material now held in cultural institutions was made during a period when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were studied and documented in unprecedented and *sometimes* unethical ways. Some of this material was gathered without adequate, informed consent or knowledge of how it may be utilised in the future[13] and as a result, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still have little or no knowledge of the location of these collections and/or the procedures that need to be followed in order to access them. Databases are now being used to offer researchers a practical option for making their documentation accessible to the local community.

Aboriginal Communities and the Digital Knowledge Economy

Establishing these systems is of course not without its challenges and each project has to contend with a number of critical issues. Poor ICT access and the vulnerability of digital objects to degradation and unauthorised dissemination are just some of the challenges that will continue to plague these initiatives[14] and in order to minimise these risks none of the databases developed in any of the LKCs to date has been made accessible to a wider audience via the World Wide Web. Those working on similar projects in SA and QLD appear to have reached similar conclusions, opting to publish CD-ROMs of public content and favouring local access only[15].

Online functionality, even with password-protection, would not serve the immediate information needs of many Aboriginal communities anyway, as Internet access is either non-existent or only available via community service organisations such as community councils, libraries or schools where access is often restricted or inhibited in some way[16]. To put issues of the digital divide into further perspective, home ownership of personal computers in the Northern Territory's remote communities is extremely rare and only two years ago was as low as 4% amongst the Aboriginal population outside of Darwin[17]. National figures also support this finding and show that 78.4% of indigenous people in remote areas do not use the Internet.[18]

Offline databases have emerged as the best means of improving access to archival collections at present but there are still concerns about presenting important and often cultural material, in this format. Rules and protocols governing the transmission of Indigenous cultural information obviously vary across different language groups and regions of Australia, but for the most part they privilege the transmission of

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[13] Hudson, 2006:3
[14] Rosenzweig, 2003
[15] TKRP website, August 2006 – formerly the Traditional Knowledge Recording Project
[16] Radoll, 2006:12
[17] DCIS, 2005:11
[18] Radoll, 2006:15

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4

knowledge *in situ* and according to local rules of information exchange[19]. Reproducing culture via elaborate songs, artistic practice and storytelling is considerably different from societies that employ mnemonic devices such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias databases and libraries in order to store and retrieve knowledge. When considered in this way Indigenous modes of information exchange may be regarded as somewhat antithetical to notions of the democratisation of information and textual abundance; underpinning philosophies of public libraries and public archives.

With this in mind some critics have suggested that 'outbreaks of archive fever' will unavoidably lead to the commodification of Aboriginal knowledge and extract it from the domain of human performance and its relationship to the storied landscape.[20] Nonetheless, it is 'reluctantly accepted' that

> '…databases may well have a useful purpose for Aboriginal knowledge makers and owners. They do not distort or deny Aboriginal knowledge traditions; they merely represent small, commodifiable, transferable parts of it… They can be understood as collections of resources.[21]'

This is an important observation and leads to, what is in my mind, critical research questions; What value do these digital resources hold for those in remote Aboriginal communities? And to what ends could these resource collections best be utilised? Central Australian elders commonly evoke the prospect of intergenerational transmission of knowledge through the use of various documentary records but on the other hand realise these records are incomplete and ultimately unsatisfactory. Warlpiri elder Darby Jampitjinpa described the difficult relationship between documentation and performance this way:

> 'No matter when they take that video, that's nothing. It's in the ground, belonging to Yapa (Aboriginal people), it's always there…' [But] 'when those old people pass away, those young people can watch that video and they can learn and think about it, and they might dance.'[22]

The hope that the younger generation will have access to the information now managed by archives, libraries, museums and art galleries is clearly important to many of these elders but they do not confuse these *mere resources* with their *profound 'knowledge'*.

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[19] Michaels, 1985
[20] Christie, M (2005)
[21] Christie, 2005
[22] Campbell, 2006:22

Anmatyerr Angkety: using digital texts

I now want to turn to my work with Anmatyerr people in the small township of Ti Tree. Opened in 2003 the Anmatjere LKC has since become a popular place for Anmatyerr and Warlpiri people from nearby communities to access traditional library services and new digital resources including Internet access and the *Our Story* database. The *Our Story* database, given the local Anmatyerr name of *Anmatyerr Angkety* (translated roughly as 'Anmatyerr people communicating'), has been critical to making the library and knowledge centre a more relevant place to the local Indigenous population. *Anmatyerr Angkety* now contains over 1000 items specifically relevant to the Anmatyerr region and its people including scanned historical documents, images, sound files and video materials sourced from a range of private and public collections. The existing database fields are generic, including, 'Place', 'Names of People', 'Dates' and 'Collection' and do not presume to mirror Indigenous view of the world and instead allow for rudimentary affiliations and linkages to be made when conducting simple searches. Over 1000 individual names and over 60 place names specific to the Anmatyerr region have been entered into the database to date, mainly by local people, in both Anmatyerr and English languages.

A resident of the Nturiya community 12kms west of Ti Tree explained to a group of men the importance of maintaining archival records in the community:

> "Our family connections are a big mess. All of these photos help explain to family members who they are related to. People living today might be family of these old people. Today's grandchildren want to look. People who have [recently] passed away, we leave them alone. We look at these pictures to help us remember our families. By showing our community what's in these books - this is true. This person here [young Anmatyerr trainee] shows everybody these photos. This is true. They can put it in the library. He [the author] brings it back and shows it to us[23].'

The *Anmatyerr Angkety* database, like all of the NT Library's supported heritage databases is a *community resource* and is not designed to hold sensitive or restricted material. The following two examples, taken from my notes during implementation fieldwork, illustrate the value of locally managed archives when used *in situ* and to assert the connections between people, place and a collective memory.

Connecting Up Past and Present

One of the first Community Library Officers to work on the project in Ti Tree expressed a desire to write her own story into the database describing her relationship to people mentioned in documents and photographs.

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[23] Personal Communication with Don Presley at Mer Ilpereny (Harding's Soak), 1/11/06 translated by Sebastian Pwerrerl Walker and Hamilton Morris.

After a few months of digital media training, she requested information about her Grandmother (her grandfather's sister) and a photograph was sourced from a collection held in Canberra. Samantha and I added the following to the database:

> 'Topsy Nelson was a Kaytetye woman who lived at Phillip Creek and Alekarenge. This photo
> is taken from Peter and Jay Reads book 'Long Time Olden Time' (page 97) See
> Audio/Sound files 5000/5 (in the Anmatyerr Angkety Database). Anthropologist Dianne
> Bell worked with Topsy for many years. See 'Daughters of the Dreaming' book for more
> information and pictures. Topsy is featured on a *Coloured Stone* song.... song name unknown.
> This is [my] Grandfather's sister. Grandfather is Jupurrula Nelson. Topsy passed away in
> 1999 in Tennant Creek.' (From the *Anmatyerr Angkety* database, item p2/107)

In this instance the database was used to reinforce this person's connection to place, family relationships, a local historical narrative and contemporary culture as well as to point people to other texts held in the library. In addition to the image of her grandmother an oral history, digitised from a now out of print series of cassettes, was also included in the database system to provide further context for anyone perusing the database. The digitised audio was then copied to CD, the scanned image printed, laminated and posted to relatives on the Central Queensland coast. Subsequent Community Library Officers working on the database has since been equally enthusiastic about adding to and using the collection in similar ways.

Outreach work has also started whereby materials held in the knowledge centre in Ti Tree are taken to relevant families in nearby Anmatyerr communities. When presented with these archival photographs, police records or sound recordings for the first time people respond with comments like, 'that's my father!' or 'that's my big brother!' and in the words of the my co-worker Sebastian Pwerrerl Walker, these people are often 'overwhelmed, speechless and happy to hear or see their family again'.[24] Attitudes to viewing/listening to materials depicting those who have passed away is different across Aboriginal communities, but in these Anmatyerr communities people are, while generally careful and cautious, happy to access these materials and hold on to them for future generations.

Mer Ilpereny

Late last year the LKC hosted a secondary class from Ti Tree School researching the political history of their region. Two elders were invited to attend the session and assist the young people in their research. The *Anmatyerr Angkety* collection quickly became the focal point for their discussions and during their journey through the database, the elders provided meticulous descriptions of some of the archival images complete with historical context and Anmatyerr cultural information. This knowledgeable elder was particularly

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[24] Personal communication with Sebastian Walker June 2007

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7

interested in a collection of historical photographs sourced from the State Library of South Australia (SLSA) and was happy to have his stories recorded into the database system.

The re-entry of these photographs into the Ti Tree community, for the first time since their creation in the late 1920s, inspired a string of related activities. The elders organised a trip to the site of the old 'Faith Mission', at a place known to Anmatyerr people as *Mer Ilpereny* (Harding's Soak). The majority of the conversation at the site revolved around the SLSA images and spanned key historical events for the area – the Coniston massacre, the first missionary on Anmatyerr country and an old sheep and goat farm where many of the men had worked when they were young. A young man digitally recorded the conversation and each sound file was later entered into the *Anmatyerr Angkety* database for community access.

From this simple photo elicitation exercise the elders were able to supplement an archival photographic collection with relevant and valuable Anmatyerr perspectives; place names, people's names, how people and places were linked by the kinship network and other stories from their lives. Unsurprisingly the original SLSA records featured only the most rudimentary catalogue information and had not even recognised the people pictured in these photos as belonging to the Anmatyerr region.

These examples give an indication of some of the potential for locally held digital collections and some of the activities that they may encourage and inspire.

Towards Participatory Digital Heritage Management

The stories from the Anmatyerr LKC illustrate just one response to a changing cultural environment that supports participation in the production and distribution of digital media. Cultural institutions are now beginning to respond to the emergence of new media technologies that make it possible for average citizens to archive, annotate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. The examples presented here show that contemporary materials created with digital cameras, video cameras, sound recorders etc can now coexist with the old and offer new perspectives on archival heritage. For this reason, my role has involved not just training in database operations but has had to incorporate digital media training also.

As we move into an environment characterised by increased digital documentation we will require better protocols and practices designed to manage associated risks to Indigenous knowledge integrity and security. Not all of the information shared by the men at *Mer Ilpereny,* is suitable for sharing with the SLSA but certainly portions of it could be. Cultural institutions and Indigenous communities could work more collaboratively to achieve a great deal. Nonetheless, it ought be remembered that while the subject matter of these digital heritage collections would be of great interest to anthropologists, historians or linguists none of these collections has, at this point in time, been intended for use outside of the local community.

I think the examples provided here also suggest that concerns about the impact of databases on the way Indigenous knowledge is treated could be significantly allayed if there was greater involvement of Aboriginal people in the documentation and storage process. With this achieved digital heritage databases become less like *artefacts* and more like *living resources* – imbued with the strengths, struggles and stories of the past and linked to a vision of the future. As shown here, making digital copies of previously unavailable historical items to the Anmatyerr community in Ti Tree has enabled people to not only review historical documents and provide a measure of ownership over these records but *'speak back'* to the historical record in the form of annotations or through newly created video or audio recordings. Enabling this flow of digital objects, - the ethos that inspired projects like *Ara Irititja* in the first place - offers an exciting opportunity for the revitalisation and remembering of community heritage.

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