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Qadede Idá?at
Ancient tradition running through the family

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Abstract

Latin American indigenous peoples

For centuries, millions of individuals gazed at the stars, rooted in the lands that, today, we consider ours. For generations, they weaved a unique, incomparable cultural tapestry, made of a countless number of small and big characteristic, distinctive and inimitable features of their own.

For centuries, these millions of persons built exquisite and deeply singular visions of the cosmos. They maintained intimate relations with their environment, strong connections with the magical and spiritual universe, artistic expressions of undeniable creativity, and languages endowed with rich sounds and vocabularies. With all these elements, these peoples made up together a vast, immense human mosaic, endowed of a virtually boundless diversity.

Later labeled “ab-original” -natives- they hardly survived the brutal impetuosity of European expansive imperial powers, whose political and socio-economic systems were based on the ideas of conquest, control and exploitation.

Most of those fragile human miracles did not bear the pressure and succumbed. Others just vanished in the middle of the “civilized” world that occupied their lands and their lives. Some of them adapted themselves, through a metamorphosis that forced them to accept certain degrees of assimilation or acculturation. And some others regarded silence and their memories of better times as a refuge from the conquerors.

Many of them, however, never surrendered.

The pressure, the violence and the oblivion were not enough to silence their voices. More than 300 million indigenous people currently try to find their own way amid so much exclusion, so much discrimination and so many problems. Of these survivors, almost half a million, belonging to approximately 12 different ethnic groups, live in the territory that, since two centuries ago, was named “Argentina”. They try to maintain their customs, their habits and practices -mainly orally transmitted-, their wisdom, their beliefs and those features that make them special, different, unique... And they fight to preserve their identity in a day after day more globalized and homogeneous world, dominated by technology.

In spite of the setbacks they suffer daily trying to make themselves a place in societies that never will open their doors for them, they do not give up. Nor do they forget. They keep on remembering that they are the sons and daughters of the Earth, born from their celestial creators throughout the millennium. They are certain to put down their roots again in the mountains, plains and forests that protect the resting places of their ancestors... They firmly believe in blooming, once more producing flowers and bearing their fruit.

It is to support this story, these living memories of a painful past, these living testimonies of a shameful present, and their struggle, that the “Aboriginal library” project was created.

Guaykurú: the fierce warriors

Among the surviving ethnic groups currently inhabiting Argentinean territory, those belonging to the Guaykurúan linguistic family play an important role in the history and the human geography of the country.

Their communities are located in a wide geographic area known as “Chaco”, which includes northeastern Argentina, Paraguay, a part of southwestern Brazil and southeastern Bolivia. This territory is covered by rain-forests and crossed by wide rivers of brownish waters. Vegetal and animal life richness allowed indigenous cultures to live as nomadic fishers, gatherers or hunters, cultivating just a couple of simple crops -such as manioc or cotton- as subsistence agriculture.

The southern section of this huge geographic region belongs to present Argentina. Until the XVII century -when Spanish occupation forces arrived in these places- a great number of native groups inhabited the area, sharing a common language and culture. Spaniards named all of them using a single *guaraní* word: *guaykurú*, meaning “the fierce ones, the indomitable ones”. Within this big group, they included peoples as different as *Payaguá* -river-pirates and fishers- and *Abipón* -fierce warriors and hunters. After decades of wars against Iberian soldiers first and later against Argentinean troops, *guaykurú* peoples were reduced to three groups in Argentina: *Qom* (also called “Tobas” in Spanish), *Moqoit* (“Mocoví”) and *Pit'itaxá* (“Pilagá”). All of them speak dialects and variants of a basic language, *qom'lek* (literally meaning “the language of the people”). Linguists included these dialects, together with other related languages, in the big Guaykurúan family.

Even if Argentinean national and provincial governments do not have statistical data about original peoples (the last -and incomplete- indigenous census was carried out in 1967-8), some reliable information about these populations can be obtained from other sources, like NGOs, religious missions and researchers.

Through these sources we know that *Qom* people live in a wide area, including important urban and rural settlements in the Chaco province, some communities in the Western Salta and southern Formosa provinces, and some groups located in the northern Santa Fe province. There are also some communities outside the “Chaco” area, living in big cities like Rosario, Buenos Aires or La Plata. Their population is estimated at 90.000 persons, but probably this number is larger in reality, as far as most of them deny their indigenous origin, a stigma difficult to delete in Argentinean society. Also known as “Tobas”, they are trying to get back their original lands and to revitalize their culture, including their language, their music, their artistic productions and their oral tradition. Since *guaykurú* peoples never used writing systems, orality was their principal means of transmitting their knowledge from ancient times. Therefore, oral tradition and language are the basis for keeping alive their traditional culture.

They live in rural contexts, working in agriculture or making handicrafts, as well as in urban settlements -usually in the surroundings of the main cities- working as cheap manpower in any kind of activity. They face serious problems of illiteracy, health, alcoholism and violence, as well as a deep lack of education and information. However, they are organizing several popular movements in order to struggle for their rights and their development as Argentinean citizens and as *Qom* people. They have achieved some success in obtaining the ownership of their primitive lands, and in getting basic bilingual education at primary schools. They get help from several national and international organizations and NGOs but, in many aspects, they are still under the social and cultural pressure of the surrounding non-indigenous society.

Moqoit people are usually considered to be a sub-group of *Qom* people. However, according to historical explanations they were two different groups, and today *Moqoit* consider themselves as another and independent culture. Brave and feared warriors in the past, at present *Moqoit* share lands, problems and destinies with their *Qom* neighbours, although they mainly occupy some areas in the southern Chaco and

northern Santa Fe provinces (southern limit of *Qom* territory). They live in rural areas, and some estimations point out that their population may reach 7.000 persons. They speak a dialect of *qom'lek*, and they are trying to save and to recover the remains of a cultural identity destroyed after decades of never-ending conflicts with Argentinean society.

Maybe *Pit'axá* people, nowadays inhabiting the Formosa province, are the ones who have better kept their original identity. Even if they live in urban locations (as well as in rural communities), they continue dealing with their daily gathering and hunting practices (called “marisquear”). They also face terrible problems -including diseases and severe political pressure- but, as they did many years ago, they go on fighting bravely for their lands, their rights and their culture. They speak a variant of *qom'lek*, different from the one used by their southern neighbours and, though they are in a critical situation too, they are trying to recover their oral traditions and to keep alive their indigenous identity. They organize, on a yearly basis, an international meeting of aboriginal peoples, and they have given rise to a great number of socio-political movements in their territory.

As regards *guaykurú* peoples, they have been slaughtered, persecuted and oppressed. They continue being treated as cheap -almost slave- workers in cotton fields and other commercial exploitations. Their rights have been systematically violated: this fact has produced several serious uprisings during their recent history (all of them finished in bloody massacres). Well known editorials do not publish works in their language, official education systems do not promote their literacy skills, religious sects push them to acculturation, and social discrimination forces them to forget their traditional ways and their cultural traits. Even so, they still resist and struggle, and go on pronouncing the old sounds of *qom'lek* every night, under a dark sky filled up with the silhouettes of the ancient star-goddesses.

“Aboriginal Libraries” Project

As pointed above, *guaykurú* peoples never developed writing systems. Thus, all their knowledge is transmitted using their memories and spoken words, through oral tradition. Current acculturation and socio-cultural pressure (by means of official education systems, religious organizations and public discrimination) are leading them to lose their most precious treasure: their wisdom, an ensemble of beliefs and certainties gathered together through centuries and kept safe in the minds of the elders.

At the same time their culture vanishes on a daily basis, they also lose their identity as people. Immersed in a western, Spanish-speaking society which does not respect the diversity they represent, they seem to be lost between two worlds, not belonging completely to any of them. They speak fluently neither *qom'lek* nor Spanish, they are mainly illiterate and children leave basic education in their early years; all in all, these features are the reason for a deep lack of basic education and information. Their main problems (health, rights, resources) would find an initial solution if they could have access to basic knowledge. But public libraries and primary schools services hardly meet their needs, and when they do so, there are not materials available in their native language.

Facing the absence of a solid structure which provides indigenous communities with education and information tools, the “Aboriginal libraries” project was designed and

implemented by the author, with an extremely limited funding, in several *guaykurú* locations from 2002 to 2005.

The project stemmed from a set of ideas which are part of the new trends of Library and Information Sciences: *progressive librarianship*. This movement supports and encourages free access to information, respect for the original cultural structures of each community, the use of imagination in the management of resources, the denial of established and accepted models of service, and the spread of knowledge to achieve a well-balanced and egalitarian development of human societies.

Using an interdisciplinary theoretical frame (anthropology, sociology, law, education sciences, linguistics...) and taking advantage of *action-research* (with the contribution of social research techniques such as *thick description*), the project proposed the construction, implementation and evaluation of a library model specifically designed to meet the needs of indigenous users, respecting their cultural features and considering their resources, their reality, their rhythms and their cultural traits.

“Aboriginal libraries” has been developed in the heart of these communities, as a *grass-root project*, encouraging the full and continuous involvement, decision and assessment of the final users. It has wanted libraries to become an institution managed by the group itself, without further intervention or outside influences. It aimed at allowing the recovery of ancestral languages and knowledge, the revitalization of current cultural expressions and practices such as oral tradition and history, the development of bilingual literacy, the participation of socially excluded sectors (such as women and the elders), the appropriation of strategic wisdom (health and care, nutrition, resource management, law and human rights...) from indigenous points of view, and the introduction of non-native cultural elements (reading-writing skills, books, computing systems) from a bilingual and intercultural perspective.

In order to fulfill these objectives, the library became a flexible, versatile organization, adaptable to the living conditions of the community and their requests. Those responsible for the information unit, in collaboration with the human group which they served, analyzed and recognized the features of the group, their space, their resources, their social, cultural and educational situation, their searches, their desires and their needs. *Thick description* and *life histories* were useful and suitable tools for this task, since they generated the richest reports on the quality of life and the socio-cultural traits of any people. In fact, they contributed by adding important data that were hidden from the quantitative tools (statistics). The use of the latter complimented the work with some basic numbers.

Human details -especially those referred to beliefs, cosmic visions or idiosyncrasies of communities- were deeply considered in this stage of the previous evaluation: the outcomes of this process showed what was expected from the library, what kind of users would frequent it (or not) and what human and material elements would be needed for the implementation of the services.

From these data, a model of an information unit was designed (always in collaboration with the community) through the application of methods of library planning and management, and information systems’ design. This model was submitted to a continuous evaluation and improvement. Collection and services were intended to strongly support the oral culture, the native languages (bilingual education), the intercultural exchange, the role of women and elders in the transmission of information, the channels through which information passed and was expressed inside the group, the new knowledge acquisition, the history and traditions preservation, and the

appropriation of the library as an space for development, discussion and identity recovery.

The work with *guaykurú* communities (2002 - 2005) showed results even richer than expected. A great quantity of oral traditions was recovered, and several little *sound collections* (collections of tapes where the voices of elder villagers were recorded) were created, employing the native, endangered languages. Small libraries were built in the communities' schools, and the *sound collections* were used there as complementary educative materials, as children cannot usually possess books written in their own idiom. Texts (in Spanish) related to issues such as health, communal organization, food and agriculture, building techniques, water and soil management, etc., were delivered to the library, and partially translated into indigenous languages, in order to give to the illiterate people the chance of obtaining some education in those important subjects.

Even if the reduced funding did not allow generating structures and services as strong and solid as suggested in the initial theoretical model, one of the implemented services - based on a simple idea, and using local resources- was extremely successful. It was developed for the first time in *Qom* communities in the Chaco province, and later carried out in other communities. It was called *Qadede Idá?at*.

The old traditions are alive

Among *guaykurú* people there is an ensemble of traditional knowledge -orally transmitted- consisting in sayings encouraging an appropriate behaviour or perpetuating basic social rules. This ensemble is called *Qadede Idá?at*, meaning “the old traditions” in *qom'lek*. This knowledge was first compiled by anthropologists, local teachers and some linguists in 2002, in *Pit'axá* communities in the Formosa province, and the results were published in a small book, but they quit their job soon. Based on the idea of using traditional knowledge in mother-tongue, the “Aboriginal libraries” project decided to implement a library service also named *Qadede Idá?at*, involving children at primary schools and their (grand)parents in *Qom* communities in the Chaco province (2004), and to widen it later to include *Pit'axá* communities in Formosa.

The service encouraged children to read tales written in Spanish to their elders, translating them into *qom'lek*, and to write down -in Spanish and *qom'lek*- the traditional tales and stories told by their families, who had stored them in their memory but had never written them down before. The activities were carried out in primary schools, under the constant *surveillance* of the community teachers. At this point, it is necessary to point out that the most important schools located at *guaykurú* indigenous communities -those who try to implement bilingual education- have “aboriginal assistant teachers”, indigenous teachers who collaborate with the official teacher in translating the educative contents to the native students. Their work inside *Qadede Idá?at* service was extremely important, if we consider that children are not very confident either in Spanish or in their own language.

The service was primarily aimed at reinforcing the family structural bonds in the community, using oral transmission. By sharing the oral tradition, grandparents got closer to their grandsons, and they could express themselves in their own language, too often neglected by themselves or denied by the globalization of actual society. Inside *guaykurú* communities in Argentina, young people usually think that the native language and oral traditions are just “old things” belonging to “old people” (their

grandparents); some parents even encourage their children to forget their identity in order to be accepted and avoid the discrimination they had to stand when they were young. This cultural gap between old and new generations (marked by the use and possession of traditions and language) usually breaks family communication and relationships. And this “break” is the reason for the lack of traditional knowledge, in as far as the chain of oral transmitters is broken.

Through this service, some oral tradition was recovered and bilingual literacy was encouraged, as long as children realized that they committed a lot of mistakes trying to write simple tales in both languages. These failures encouraged them to improve their skills. Another goal of this service was to make children familiar with books and texts. Most of them just knew text-books, and never had had contact with illustrated books, tales or recreational materials. And, through children, their whole families got involved in the discovery of reading and writing in Spanish and in *qom'lek*. Maybe this was the most important goal achieved by the service: for a magical moment, a lot of grandparents found their cheeks wet with tears when they discovered their old narratives written down on a paper and being read aloud by their grandsons.

The activities of *Qadede Idá?at* were implemented during six months in *Qom* communities in the Chaco province, always in collaboration with primary schools and their teachers. They were also developed in some *Pit'axá* locations during a test period of four months, with the same good results. Even if adults initially seemed to be reluctant to openly express their traditional knowledge in front of their children, and even if children were nervous due to their imperfect skills, the pleasure of discovering together the book and the family cultural identity overcame every fear. The library service made a very positive contribution towards reinforcing family links and developing a kind of “taste” for books and orality. In this sense, it was a kind of double, complimentary process: bilingual (oral and written) knowledge brought the family together, and, from this family space, the native identity transmitted by books and oral traditions was re-discovered.

The outcomes of these experiences allow us to establish some basic outlines for future programs of family reading in minority / traditional / rural communities and groups:

1. Knowledge can be transmitted in several ways (using written *and* spoken words) and both of them should be considered by librarians, taking into account that orality still represents the principal means of information transmission for a great number of cultures all around the world. Libraries should forget about their book-based structure and accept that they are *memory managers*. And, that memory can be retained in different ways, libraries should adapt their structures, in a flexible way, to the needs and features of the users they serve (and not the opposite: adapting the users to the library structures).
2. Family reading programs should firstly understand the nature of the community family structure they serve, along with their problems, their inner conflicts, their weaknesses... Rural / traditional / minority societies usually have significant differences between old and young generations, and library programs should not ignore them, since such differences can easily result in the whole project failure.
3. Once social and family structures have been understood and oral / written programme materials have been found, the role of every actor in it should be clearly identified. Children are the major characters in these activities, in as far as they usually go to primary school and they already have some writing and reading skills. Library programs should be focused on them, encouraging them to recognize the beauty and the value of

books (and oral tradition), especially those representing their own universe, their own culture, their own place. In fact, books and traditions related to local culture are the best elements for starting a family reading program in rural / traditional communities: the link between the reader and the knowledge kept in the pages of any book seems obvious and clear, and the relationship is easier to establish.

4. Children -and their curiosity- are the best “library workers” in a family reading program; they will arrive at home carrying many different questions and all the marvellous discoveries made at school... and they will ask for more. (Grand)parents will get involved in the program through children, trying to answer their questions, trying to give them more information about their own (oral) culture, and trying to share with them the adventure of discovering a new world through the pages of a book.

5. Family reading programs can provide a perfect framework for (bilingual) literacy campaigns -for both children and adults- and for cultural recovery. They should work as *grassroots development projects*, and an *action-research* method should be used in their implementation. Qualitative data should be collected during the program, in order to establish the results of the activities in humanistic parameters, in as far as libraries provide a service to human beings.

When used in an intelligent way, this kind of services can become the basis of a rural / traditional library: they open doors and they provide spaces for socialization and for the expression of local culture and heritage; they give chances for learning new skills; they support and encourage diversity and bilingualism; and they fill the community life with reasons for enjoyment and laughing. And maybe the last point makes these kinds of activities the most important ones among all the existing library services.

Conclusion

The proposal shown in this paper is a humanistic one, fully focused on social considerations, thus human and personal factors. Only from humanistic ideas and supportive points of view, respectful towards diversity and multiculturalism, and understanding intercultural relationships, an acceptable proposal could be submitted for those long neglected communities, not only in Argentina, but in the rest of the world. Library and Information Sciences (LIS) should contribute with their wisdom -a wisdom developed during centuries of experience- to the growth and development of indigenous (and other) human groups. But LIS must first overcome all the obstacles that they have placed in their own path to coming closer to communities, such as their silence, their marble tower, their privileged positions in the new “Knowledge Society”, their “apolitical” attitudes and their “objectivity”. They must become deeply involved in the problems of their users, fighting side by side with them in order not to leave them helpless to struggle alone and opening their horizons so as to grant their freedom, their access to knowledge, their education, the conservation of their cultural heritage and the perpetuation of their identity.

Maybe these thoughts look like utopian ideals, and they may injure the academic and professional seriousness of many colleagues. But I ask you, from my remote location in the heart of South America -surrounded by the memories of thousands of *Qom*, *Moqoit* and *Pit'itaxá* smiles- to remember just one thing: when utopias are lost and men lose their beliefs and noble ideals, reasons for going on struggling just vanish.

And if we do not have reasons for struggling and dreaming for a better world... are there reasons for living?