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The archive of the community's voices

Libraries and oral tradition in the digital era

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Abstract

A great part of the current human knowledge is still transmitted through non-written means — oral tradition, song and music, etc. The collection, organization, research and management of these non-written sources —and particularly, of oral tradition— has usually been carried out by scholars from an strictly academic point of view; accordingly, the information collected by these specialists has been kept in archives for academic use only. This behavior stripped oral tradition of much of its practical use (especially for the people providing the original materials) and opened a gap between the Academia and the communities of practice.

This paper outlines a brief approach to the nature and the importance of oral tradition in our modern world, and to how to connect traditional knowledge and communities, the Academia and its researchers, and libraries as a common space. It also drafts some ideas about how to deal with it from a LIS (Library and Information Sciences) perspective, and how to use ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in a planned, sensitive and responsible manner, in the collection, organization and revitalization of oral tradition.

Keywords

Oral tradition, library, academic library, research, ICTs

1. Introduction

Part of the current human knowledge is still conveyed through non-written means, one of the most important being orality. Oral tradition —traditional knowledge transmitted by oral channels— forms the foundations of many individual or collective identities and cultures all around the world, including those of modern, urban-based societies.

The systematic collection of these non-written sources, and their organization, study and management, has been led primarily by scholars in the field of Humanities, and has been carried out from an academic point of view and for academic purposes. The information collected —tiny fragments of a huge corpus— has been kept in archives for academic use only, and has hence (with the exception of oral history) been devoid of most of its true value. For when oral tradition is isolated from its community of practice (creators and users), it becomes just a snapshot of a bigger picture, a still-photograph at any fixed time documenting a frozen moment in the past. It turns into a piece of information that may be observed and analyzed by a few curious eyes, and may help future generations work out how a group of people thought or behaved at some point in history. Oral tradition, however, is much more than that. Besides preserving a record of the past, oral tradition continues to be the dominant form of human communication and knowledge transmission in the 21st century. And although it can evidently benefit from being documented and archived, oral tradition is a living tradition maintained by collective memory, created and perpetuated by societies to serve a purpose.

In recent years, there has been much criticism and debate on how the Humanities, i.e. academic disciplines that study human culture, handle traditional knowledge in general, and oral tradition in particular. However, there still remains much to be done to bring researchers and communities together to find better ways to interact and collaborate in such a way as to prevent abuses and misunderstandings. In supporting the search for common ground and points of active cooperation, libraries may play a valuable role not only as spaces for meeting and debate to help bridge the gaps, but as institutions able to make significant contributions. Unlike archives, libraries tend to see information as something with a purpose, aimed at being circulated, disseminated, and (inter)connected; aimed at being useful and contributing something to society. Besides, libraries act upon some of the same categories and mechanisms used by traditional, orally-based networks: both consider knowledge as common human heritage that should belong to and benefit all.

In addition to bring researches and communities closer, there are a number of activities and services that libraries may develop to become the places where community's voices and memories are kept alive and thriving. New technologies and virtual spaces can make a significant contribution towards this goal when all the pros and cons have been weighed up and where feasible and sustainable.

This paper outlines a brief approach to the nature and the importance of oral tradition in our modern world, and to how to connect traditional knowledge and communities, the Academia and its researchers, and libraries as a common space. It also drafts some ideas about how to deal with it from a LIS (Library and Information Sciences) perspective, and how to use ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in a planned, sensitive and responsible manner, in the collection, organization and revitalization of oral tradition.

2. The importance of oral tradition

Human knowledge includes several spheres; one of the most interesting is the one labeled as "traditional". It is a corpus of selected knowledge, communally "curated" by many hands over time, and transmitted from generation to generation, usually by oral means and using well-defined forms; it collects what a human group —no matter its size, composition and structure— has deemed necessary or important to preserve, codify and perpetuate.

Generally speaking, this type of knowledge forms the basic culture of an individual or a community, determining and keeping their identity alive, allowing them to know where they come from and to decide where they want or are able to go. Curiously enough, it is not easy to realize the strong presence of this knowledge in our lives: only when we compare our cultural maps to the ones that guide another person, or when we live in a society that is not our own, differences are perceived and we come to understand how deep are the roots of that heritage which, to a great extent, make us who we are.

All the values, teachings, ideas and experiences transmitted during the first stages of socialization belong to the "traditional" corpus: from the very concept of "family" and the different kinds of bonds that occur between its members, to customary treatment and respect given to "strangers" (and the definition of who is and who is not "a stranger"), as well as basic rules of behavior and interaction with other people, games and songs to play and sing, food and drink to be consumed, beliefs, expressions and interjections, ways and moments to laugh and cry... And not just that: the corpus also includes legends and stories, myths of creation and destruction, awareness about the environment and its challenges, general guidelines about which is the individual's position in the (natural and social) universe, historical and pseudo-historical narratives, family/community anecdotes, taboos and non-written laws, ways of navigating

through major milestones in life, ways of tackling problems and taking advantage of opportunities, and a very long etcetera.

The above list reveals the close relationship between traditional knowledge and the social fabric. Traditional knowledge encodes a significant share of the information and instructions necessary for the construction of any given community's internal links and fundamental structures, the design of strategies for its conservation, adaptation and transformation, and the development of values, beliefs and behaviors that are consistent with those strategies. It also includes the —often unwritten— history of a human group; a group that can range from a handful of individuals with some interest or trait in common to a nation. In short, that form of knowledge expresses and conveys the paths traveled so far by a number of persons and the strategies that have allowed them to thread these paths together.

In general terms, the traditional knowledge of a community is maintained and transmitted through the spoken word. It is not the only method, though: the same goal may be achieved by using textiles, facial paintings, tattoos and body adornments, baskets, designs on ceramic and gourds, carvings, sculptures, photographs, paintings and drawings. And, of course, by books, magazines, journals, newspapers, letters and other written and printed documents. But the spoken word is, without question, the most popular method.

The oral tradition of a particular community —an urban tribe, the members of a union, the shepherds of several neighboring villages— is made up of spoken knowledge. As other spoken contents, oral tradition is characterized by being grammatically complex (much more than written text), diverse, dynamic, relatively spontaneous (although it uses a number of formulas), immediate and unstable. And very fragile. It can also be misleading, confusing and thorny at times, even for its own users: in oral tradition the tangible and the intangible, the objective and the subjective are so intimately mingled that there are times when they cannot be told apart.

Although some of the pieces of information that form oral tradition are "fossilized", i.e. they have been transmitted without being substantially altered for centuries, it is flexible and changes: on the one hand as the result of losing part of its contents and gaining new ones, and on the other hand by undergoing modifications at different levels. Such changes can be forced, but usually respond to the needs of a particular social group, which is itself changing and evolves over time — sometimes adopting

new routes, sometimes adjusting its steps according to the terrain and the circumstances.

Oral tradition is passed on in two directions: vertically —generation after generation— and horizontally, between the members of the same generation. Therefore, in addition to perpetuating a corpus of knowledge, it reinforces the ties among peers and among adults and young people, and strengthens community structures. It also favors the processes of socialization and education, cultural production, and languages' vitality.

What structures and channels oral tradition uses to gather and convey its contents are limited only by imagination. Items of oral tradition can be delivered as a song or a story, an epic declamation or a nursery rhyme. They can be accompanied by gestures or music, be part of a broader cultural expression —such as theater or dance— or not. They can be transmitted in a bar or in a kitchen, in a workshop or in a classroom, in a formal context or in an informal one.

And the contents conveyed... are practically infinite. Simple anecdotes or the genealogy of a royal family, human or divine, from the beginning of time. The mental map of the Andean pastures for lamas, or the sites for collecting mussels on a rugged coastline, with all its detailed micro-geography. The story of a beverage's invention, of the composition of a piece of music, of the creation of a saying. The anecdotes behind a photo. The instructions to properly manage a piece of forest or a river, to care for a crop, to find a medicinal plant. The trajectory of a political party, a company, a factory, a publisher, a shop. The story that goes through a book, a corner in any city, a wall covered with graffiti... All these contents, small and insignificant as they seem, are pieces of our memory, our history, our essence. Parts of us as persons, as members of a society, as components of a group, as inhabitants of a certain place...

Oral tradition is not limited to those societies or groups lacking reading/writing skills; it is also present amongst literate societies. Actually, there are few branches of human activity, regardless of their size, not having an oral corpus associated with them. In contemporary urban communities, oral tradition has a strong presence, especially amongst social groups (minority, disadvantaged, alternative or dissident) who have not been able, for whatever reason, to see their opinions and memories fixed in writing. But it also channels certain knowledge among hegemonic literate sectors: it keeps alive family memories, local histories, individual or group experiences related to a number of historical events, traditions, games, crafts... Therefore, besides keeping the threads

of the social fabric together, those narratives supplement and balance the "official history", i.e. the tailored account that typify a people, a culture or a country. And they allow the existence of *plurality* and *diversity*, two values often pushed to the background to favor prevailing stereotypes and mainstream discourses.

Oral tradition is also a "living repository" of a category of knowledge that cannot usually be found in any other place. In fact, in some cases oral tradition becomes the last refuge of information on the verge of disappearance, encoded in equally endangered languages.

A wide majority of this intangible tradition still circulates from mouth to ear, devoid of any material support. This is the most delicate part, and the one that needs more attention and care, especially when it belongs to social groups suffering cultural pressure, discrimination, or oblivion.

The other part has been converted, for different reasons and by different methods, into tangible documentation: written, printed, graphic or audiovisual materials. Academic researchers and scholars in the field of Humanities have had a remarkable role in this process — a role that has not been free from issues, and has been subject to criticism and debate.

3. Academic research: collection and archive

Being practically ubiquitous, orally-transmitted knowledge could not go unnoticed by scholars for too long. Popular storytelling was under the focus of many authors for centuries, although it was not the only element to be targeted — portraying customs and traditions was also the aim of a good number of works, from travel diaries to chronicles and ethnographic descriptions.

However, academic, systematic research in the field of Humanities is relatively recent, especially the one related to oral tradition.

Since the first decades of the 20th century, the development of early recording technologies has boosted this kind of investigations; they allowed researchers to recover a number of sound-based cultural expressions, including oral tradition, in a

more systematic, precise way. This was done within a very specific, narrow scope of academic disciplines: namely, anthropology, linguistics and ethnology.

Audio-visual media improvements (and Information technology later on) opened up new possibilities for working with oral sources, widening the range of research activities and surveys and getting more fields of Humanities (politics, sociology, history...) involved in the process of collecting sounds. Oral history —the methodology of which was already used by Thucydides and Herodotus in classical Greece— witnessed a renaissance after World War II. Adding to this, alternative, personal and collective approaches to specific historical events were provided by Spanish miners and fighters, French anarchists, Latin American guerrillas and trade unionists, Brazilian *sem-terras* among many others.

Oral archives were then created to preserve, organize, and study these collections — just small pieces of a seemingly endless mosaic. But its access and use at the time was —and, in many cases, still is— limited to the Academia. Oral tradition had become a new object to be analyzed and theorized about in the "dissecting rooms" of social science schools, and, more often than not, ended up becoming "dead knowledge". While those contents had been collected and preserved to "save" them from the uncertain fate awaiting most oral knowledge, once "rescued" they were isolated from the living socio-cultural structure that produces, revises, maintains and re-elaborates oral tradition day after day. The very reason why those contents exist and are remembered is to be transmitted, in order to continue living in somebody else's lips and memory. By just storing them in archives for faculty/academic-staff use only, they had been (a) turned into a mere record or a simple piece of writing (stripping them from many of their main features), and (b) isolated from the living chains and the linking agents that made them "oral" and "a tradition".

The management of oral collections has been just one of the many reasons for a notorious disconnection between the academic world —specifically disciplines, researchers, repositories and publications in the area of Humanities— and the communities, i.e. the (re)producers of orally-transmitted knowledge from which researchers borrow their study materials. For some time, gaps between the work done by academic researchers (mostly serving their own interests, or pursuing their own goals within their closed circles) and society got wider, the former failing to help communities to keep their memories alive, active, circulating from mouth to ear, and also documented, organized and stored to be easily accessed.

Only recently, a few tentative first steps in the right direction have been taken to bring the Academy closer to people. On the one hand, by trying to establish a different type of relationship and, on the other, by looking for ways and spaces to work together for a common good.

Libraries in general and academic libraries in particular may become a key piece in building the relationship between researchers and communities of practice, and getting it to work. And not just by providing physical spaces for meetings and activities, but as institutions capable of making a number of important contributions in terms of know-how, techniques, contents, strategies, services and activities. Not for nothing have libraries worldwide exercised a thoughtful and insightful leadership in organizing human knowledge over the centuries.

4. Libraries and oral tradition

Libraries are institutions that, within their possibilities, bring together the materials and tools necessary to provide societies with the knowledge they may need.

Libraries make every effort to integrate into and be part of the community they serve. In responding to their users' needs and queries in a planned, sensitive and responsible manner, sometimes they work as lighthouses, while on other occasions operate as harbors. All of them provide access to strategic information; support literacy and education; promote broader and more in-depth understanding; bring distant horizons closer, and much more. Besides, they are memory archives, hosting and storing different manifestations of the cultural heritage of humankind.

However, for a number of reasons "traditional" knowledge in general and oral tradition in particular have not been included in library collections and services as assiduously as they should, despite of the fact that this knowledge is considered to be essential for any human group, and that a number of international recommendations concerning cultural diversity and intangible heritage have encouraged the use of oral tradition as a means for preserving and disseminating different societies' cultural expressions and languages.

With their extensive experience as information managers, libraries could do a brilliant, much needed work with oral tradition. But they have to understand that the object of this work is not to record orality or other "non-conventional" sources, but to promote

and making the best possible use of them. As already said, "traditional" knowledge, its creation, acquisition and transmission are part of an ongoing, dynamic process in constant motion. By limiting the work with oral tradition to its collection and storage much of its importance, meaning and value are lost.

Therefore, as a first step LIS professionals should gain a greater knowledge of what oral tradition is, how it works, why it is important, what its flaws and biases are, and what their problems and risks are — something for which, unfortunately, there is no specific, LIS-oriented training, guidelines or recommendations. Librarians willing to deal with oral tradition might have to reframe their own concepts, tools and techniques, or create new ones from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Once this initial step has been given, libraries would be ready to organize, promote and disseminate oral tradition, taking into consideration particular formats, channels, contents, actors and spaces. Memory and knowledge encoded orally or through "non-conventional" means would then become alive and vibrant in libraries; this would make libraries' collections richer and would enhance their role as the memory archives of their communities, developing stronger bonds with one another. This inclusion would also serve as a form of acknowledgement and recognition for certain social sectors —for example, indigenous peoples— that have been systematically underrepresented or ignored in/by libraries.

By including oral tradition in their collections and services and fostering its use, libraries may reinforce some damaged threads of the social fabric they are part of. They may help make certain groups visible, challenge stereotypes and prejudices and favor exchange, learning and mutual recognition; they may recover local history and local expertise while rediscovering customs and traditions and updating some of them in a conscious manner. Libraries may identify the best practitioners of oral tradition in their communities ("living books") and support and encourage them; they may inform their users (individuals, groups, organizations, institutions) about the body of knowledge they preserve and transmit, explaining why that tradition is important, and what can be done with it and for it. In addition, books, audiovisual materials and any other kind of documents may be provided to inform and support those interested in approaching, understanding and put orality into practice. Libraries may also create spaces for oral practitioners to teach their art and exchange their wisdom, expand storytelling possibilities, and raise cultural awareness through heritage workshops, language classes, and all the rest of it.

Orally-delivered contents such as local geography and history, ethno-botany and ethno-zoology, recipes, crafts, and many others fragments of traditional knowledge, should be added to the tales, legends and myths usually kept in libraries' "oral tradition" sections (when/where they exist). These contents could be collected by the library staff or by any other member of the community through different means, and arranged in such a way that they become available for the rest of the library's users.

In the same vein, libraries can join forces and collaborate with schools and other cultural, social and educational organizations and institutions, to foster the use of oral tradition. Formal and informal courses on geography, history, literature, language, music, natural sciences and crafts may benefit from the information contained in oral tradition; additionally, intercultural, bilingual programs should make full use of them to support endangered languages and strengthen the preservation of cultural identities.

Libraries that have learnt how to support oral tradition and its practitioners provide the best environments for academic researchers and communities to work together in the study, preservation and revitalization of traditional knowledge and traditional means of knowledge transmission. New Information and Communication technologies (ICTs) may be helpful tools in this process.

5. New technologies

"Digital Humanities" are a set of disciplines belonging to the social sciences branch, benefiting from the use of electronic means for the production, management and dissemination of information — i.e. ICTs.

It should be noticed that ICTs are tools, and as such they should be used according to needs and requirements; the fact that they exist does not imply that they must always be used, or that they are always necessary or effective, much less that they must be imposed. It should neither be forgotten that while technology allows doing a number of things, it also forces its users to make a number of others of which they are not aware on many occasions.

With that in mind, there is no doubt that ICTs can open up new possibilities, especially when it comes to designing and developing library activities related to oral tradition: from the production of ebooks on local history to the creation of online oral collections taking advantage of open software and cloud storage, and the distribution, through

certain networks and platforms, of videos, images and recordings, accompanied with explanations, as a way of allowing other people to get to know community cultural expressions.

To achieve certain goals, appropriate tools, techniques and formats should be selected. There will be occasions when new technologies may join old ones: depending on the context, sometimes a handwritten book or fanzine can be much more effective than an ebook; an exhibition of photographs at a community center, sponsored by the library and supplemented with relevant background materials, can be much more attractive than a Flickr gallery; a radio ad, much more useful than a post in WhatsApp or Facebook; an outdoor storytelling session, much more interesting than a video on YouTube. Practice has shown that a balanced combination of "traditional" and "modern" elements is often the wisest and fairest course of action.

6. New alliances

From what has been exposed so far, it is worth considering the elaboration of common projects taking into account (a) libraries know-how, structures and spaces; (b) the opportunities that technology offers today; (c) the academic research and writing on oral tradition; (d) communities where orally-transmitted teachings consolidate and enhance their traditional knowledge; and (e) communities where oral tradition has been broken.

Libraries can help academic researchers and communities to collect, organize and disseminate oral tradition, and materials related to it (papers, books, audiovisual documents...). They can help communities reconnect with their traditional knowledge (oral tradition collected for academic purposes in the past and stored in archives) and update it — which may also trigger a number of research programs. Together with their community libraries can develop oral tradition activities, involving researchers and other actors in cases where this is advisable or necessary; through some of these activities they can cast light on local problems, challenge stereotypes, debunk fake stories, etc. Libraries could bring into contact communities' oral tradition and written documents and collections, opening doors to numerous opportunities (and to more academic-supported research). They could even help the Academia to reformulate its position about a number of past issues regarding traditional knowledge and oral cultures.

By making these and any other connections possible, and by exploring new paths for improvement, libraries, researchers and communities may gain knowledge and experience and discover mutually beneficial ways of interaction with each other, cultural exchange, collaboration, and learning.

Lastly, it is worth noting that a large number of voices, past and present, in rural and urban contexts, have found and continue to find refuge in "traditional" knowledge and all its forms of transmission, including oral tradition. All of them are part of human memory. If libraries are meant to be the managers of that memory, the archive of the community's voices, they should include all these fragile expressions in their collections.

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