



REFLECTION ARTICLE

The Long Road to Self-Determination

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Abstract

This reflective essay considers how Queensland State Archives has responded to the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration since 2021. It weaves institutional reform with lived experience to examine recognition, access, and the challenges of knowledge authority, ownership and self-determination. Examples include projects such as ‘Mob on Mondays’, the First Nations Language Program, and the development of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols. The essay reflects on personal files and surveillance, and on archives as both sites of harm and healing. It argues that truth-telling and cultural authority must guide archival practice, and that self-determination is an ongoing, relational commitment rather than a destination.

Keywords: *Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration; Indigenous archives; Queensland State Archives; Self-determination; Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property; Brisbane; Australia; Gungari; Kullilli.*

Introduction: walking Tandanya’s Road

The release of the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration (the Declaration) in 2019 was a watershed moment. It distilled decades of advocacy by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into a global call for change. The Declaration did not emerge in isolation; it reflected generations of lived experience, resistance, and research that demanded archives to confront their colonial legacies. For Queensland State Archives (QSA), the Declaration became a compass. In 2021, QSA released its Statement of Intent, committing to embedding the Declaration’s five themes: *knowledge authorities, property and ownership, recognition and identity, research and access, and self-determination*.¹ This essay considers the steps QSA has taken to follow that path. It does so through two lenses: the institutional, which traces policy and programmatic changes; and the personal, which reflects on my lived experience as a Gungari/Kullilli Aboriginal woman engaging with the archive as both a professional space and a site of family memory. The road is long and unfinished, but the journey itself is reshaping how archives in Queensland engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The current state of records at QSA

QSA holds more than 60 linear kilometers of public records, making it the largest archival collection in Queensland. Records were created about Aboriginal people and Torres Strait

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Islander people who were from, or lived, in Queensland. These records were created primarily through the administration of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (and subsequent 'Protection Acts'), which allowed previous Queensland Governments extensive control over the lives of many Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. These records range from surveyors' maps and correspondence to court files, school registers, police records, photographs, and administrative series that document government decision making across the state.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples these records carry profound weight. They include evidence of removals, missions and reserves administration, exemption applications, dormitory systems, and everyday family and community life recorded through a bureaucratic lens. The preservation work of QSA means these records remain available for Truth-telling, family research, and community healing.

For more than 30 years, the Community and Personal Histories (CPH) Unit has supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in navigating government records. Under the *Public Records Act 2002 [now Public Records Act 2023]*, decisions about access to records sit with the public authority that created or holds them, making it the responsibility of government agencies to facilitate requests from community. Within this legislative framework, CPH serves as the culturally appropriate mechanism through which mob can engage with sensitive restricted files. The unit's specialist knowledge not only shortens the path to discovery but also provides the necessary preparation for the emotional weight of encountering one's own file. What were once tools of control are now instruments of reclamation. Guided by the Tandan-ya-Adelaide Declaration, QSA is working closely with CPH to refigure the lens so that these files are treated as living stories held with cultural authority, protocols of care, and the leadership of the families and communities to whom they belong.

Recognition and identity: naming what was hidden

Recognition has been one of the earliest and most visible commitments at QSA. For too long, archives catalogued Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through deficit terms or solely through the voices of government officials. People were listed as subjects, cases, or dependents rather than as knowledge holders and authors of history. This has had profound intergenerational effects, silencing voices and reducing identities to bureaucratic fragments.

A significant shift occurred in 2021 with the appointment of Butchulla woman Dr Rose Barrowcliffe as QSA's first First Nations Archives Advisor. Her *First Nations Program Interim Report* provided a critical assessment of both progress achieved and structural limitations that remained embedded within archival systems. The report articulated the need for strengthened metadata practices through the adoption of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) subject headings and AustLang² codes, alongside improved discoverability, community-led interpretation, and sustained investment in digitisation and digital repatriation. Central to these recommendations was the recognition that geographical distance should not constitute a barrier to cultural reconnection or access to records that document lives, families, and Country.

These principles now shape QSA's service delivery for First Nations clients, marking a shift from extractive archival encounters towards relational and culturally informed practice. Recognition is operationalised through the language used to describe records, the provision of contextual and trauma-aware support, and the prioritisation of access pathways that respond to community-identified needs. In this way, service delivery becomes an ethical site of intervention: one that seeks not only to make records accessible but also to restore identity, acknowledge lived experience, and enable reconnection to family, language, and Country. Rather than

reproducing the harms of historical recordkeeping systems, QSA's evolving practice positions the archive as a space where recognition functions as both an act of repair and a foundation for institutional accountability.

Barrowcliffe's leadership was pivotal in challenging institutional habits and guiding systemic change. Under her direction, QSA began a programme of record re-description, piloting new metadata protocols that sought to remove deficit language and restore dignity in description. Public engagement strategies shifted to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices were centred. Recognition became a practice of justice rather than a technical exercise. It is important to stress that recognition does not simply correct the record; it reshapes the relational dynamics between archives and communities. To name someone correctly, to acknowledge their agency, is to restore visibility where silence was imposed.

Personal files: memory under surveillance

The Office of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals was the central administrative authority responsible for regulating nearly every aspect of Aboriginal life in Queensland under the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts and subsequent legislation. From 1941 onwards, the personal files created by the Office reveal the full reach of this control, documenting Aboriginal lives not as private or self-determining, but as objects of constant oversight.

These files contain inward and outward correspondence relating to births and deaths, forced removals, requests to marry, applications for exemption, control of wages and savings accounts, management of deceased estates, and complaints made both by and about Aboriginal people. Decisions that would ordinarily belong to individuals and families were instead subject to bureaucratic approval, delay, or refusal.

Taken collectively, these records expose a regime of surveillance that was intimate as well as totalising. Each file functions as a bureaucratic portrait of a life closely watched where movement, relationships, labour, finances, and even grief were mediated through the authority of the state. While created for administrative purposes, these records now stand as evidence of how governance was enacted through paperwork, and how control was normalised through routine recordkeeping practices.

As an Aboriginal woman I have searched these pages to follow the paths my ancestors took across Queensland, through Thargomindah, Mitchell, and Cherbourg. Sometimes these files hold the only surviving trace of an ancestor's handwriting. Reading a removal order leaves you unsettled. Holding a plea for exemption confronts you with a demand to be seen as fully human. Many families have more than one file, split across head office and regional offices, fragmenting their stories. Within this bureaucracy, there are still glimpses of love, resilience, and resistance. People wrote back, asked questions, and tried to keep families together.

This refiguring resonates in my own journey. In August 2025, my journey back to Kullilli Country in Thargomindah, revealed that reflection on Country cannot be separated from the traces found in the archive. Walking the same roads my ancestors once travelled gave weight to the names and dates I had seen only in ledgers and registers. Standing next to the same tree my father did in 2019, during his own journey back to Country, I felt the continuity of our stories across time. His return created a pathway that allowed me to follow, and in doing so, I recognised how records and memory work together to guide us home. In those moments, the records shifted from static documents into living companions that deepened my understanding of who I am and where I come from. This reminded me that archives have the power to do more than preserve; they can support practices of remembrance, self-knowledge, and healing when returned to community and placed in conversation with lived experience. My father's

journey, my own, and those my daughters will 1 day take are part of an intergenerational continuum of reflection and reconnection. This is why it is essential that archives be made accessible and contextualised – to ensure that families can use them not only to reconstruct history but also to sustain the living practice of returning, remembering, and carrying our stories forward.

Research and access: opening the doors

The theme of *Research and Access* has transformed QSA's approach to public engagement. Archives have long been imagined as locked vaults, with bureaucratic processes acting as barriers.³ For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such barriers compounded the original harms of surveillance. Over the past 4 years, QSA has redesigned its public spaces to be more welcoming and culturally safe. Initiatives such as *Mob on Mondays* have created regular entry points where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members can engage with records on their own terms, supported by staff who understand the emotional and traumatic weight of these journeys. The First Nations Language Program has demonstrated that archives are not only about paper records but also about the revitalisation of First Nations Languages. Language itself is an archive, and its presence within QSA represents both continuity and survival. I have witnessed community members in the QSA public Reading Room encountering their own files for the first time. There are moments of joy finding a grandparent's signature and moments of grief as silences are revealed, and untold stories come to light. These encounters remind us that access is never neutral. Whether deliberate or not, access can cause pain and trauma. This underscores the need for an acute awareness and careful application of both procedural and cultural care to minimise further harm and the lingering trauma embedded within the confines of the records.

When visitors walk into the archives, I want them to think beyond a building of boxes and catalogues. The archives can be approached as a space of responsibility, a place where histories live in relation to us rather than as static records to be retrieved. Historians such as Minoru Hokari,⁴ who lived and worked with the Gurindji people, reminds us that history is not only written in books or archives, and that there are modes of history that are perhaps impossible to translate into Western historical practice.⁵ This reorientation helps me articulate what I want visitors and myself to do differently when we enter the archive.

Truth-telling and healing: the policy landscape

QSA's journey has unfolded alongside broader policy developments in Queensland. The former Path to Treaty agenda and the now ceased Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry created an environment where archival records were recognised as evidence of both harm and resilience, and critical for processes of truth-telling. The establishment of QSA's Indigenous-led First Nations Strategy team reflected this shift, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the institution. The passage of the *Public Records Act 2023* further cemented these changes, recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights in the management and access of records and establishing the future responsibility of a First Nations Advisory Group to provide strategic advice to the Queensland State Archivist. While the Declaration advocates for changes to nation-state recordkeeping legislation and practice, legislation alone cannot transform relationships. Trust cannot be legislated. Trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is built or lost in daily practice through how staff engage with visitors in the Reading Room, how records are described, or how families are supported when encountering painful histories. For many communities, researching and accessing these records is itself an act of truth-telling: confronting intergenerational trauma, piecing together fragmented narratives, and reclaiming voice.

The Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA), of which QSA is a member, has also endorsed the Tandanya–Adelaide Declaration and encouraged jurisdictions to implement its principles. This national alignment strengthened QSA's commitments, and moved QSA closer to its goal of being an archive that embraces Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, knowledge and culture. Practical work underway to do this includes prioritising the digitisation of records related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, improved metadata using AIATSIS subject headings and AustLang codes, workshops, and support for educators who will teach with the records.

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and protocols: respecting knowledge authorities

Recognising Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) requires moving from acknowledgement to action. Priorities include digital repatriation of sensitive or culturally significant records, funded Indigenous subject matter experts to guide interpretation, and advocacy for legislative reform so ICIP is recognised in law.

The Tandanya Declaration called for *recognition of Indigenous knowledge authorities*. This remains one of the most complex challenges for archives. Traditionally, archives operate on the assumption that the State is the ultimate owner of public records. For Indigenous peoples, however, authority over knowledge often rests with Elders, families, or communities, regardless of who created the record. QSA has begun the process of developing ICIP protocols to guide daily practice. This involves respecting and recognising that cultural authority may belong to those represented in the records rather than the agency that produced them. This shift requires archives to confront the reality that many of their collections were created through dispossession. Respecting and recognising ICIP may at times mean restricting access, sharing authority, or even relinquishing control. It is a shift that challenges the very foundations of archival practice, but it is essential if archives are to transform into spaces of justice and healing.

Ownership and property: the colonial bind

Models of shared custody and community-led interpretation are necessary steps while legislative frameworks catch up. True recognition of ownership will often mean surrendering authority to cultural custodians whose responsibilities are grounded in kinship and Country.

The issue of property and ownership highlights the colonial bind at the heart of archives. Government archives operate on the premise that once a record is created by the State, it belongs to the Crown. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ownership is not about possession but about responsibility, kinship, and connection to Country. At QSA, these tensions play out regularly. Communities may request the return or restriction of access to records, or the application of cultural protocols to their use. Yet legislative and government-mandated frameworks often prevent full community control. Pathways forward could include shared custody agreements, community-controlled digital platforms, with some elements dependent on future legislative reform. Yet the deeper challenge is philosophical: *how can ownership be reimagined not as possession but as stewardship?* Until this question is addressed, the long road to self-determination in archives will remain incomplete.

Self-determination: the unfinished horizon

Self-determination is both the goal and the greatest challenge. To be self-determined in archives would mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples set the terms of collection, description, access, and use. QSA has taken steps in this direction by resourcing Indigenous

leadership, embedding advisory mechanisms, and supporting community-led initiatives. But self-determination cannot be granted by institutions – it must be realised and lived into existence by communities themselves. For me, this is not abstract. In engaging with archives, I am also engaging with my family's history stories of surveillance, removal, and endurance. The archive is both a wound and bandage, both harm and healing. As Kirsten Thorpe reminds us, Indigenous archiving is not rhetorical but relational. It requires active disruption of colonial structures, and a commitment to creating archives that are useful to Indigenous peoples. This work is slow, often painful, but necessary. Self-determination is not an endpoint; it is an ongoing practice of humility, responsibility, and courage.⁶

Yarning as method and metaphor

One of the most important lessons from QSA's journey is the centrality of yarning. Yarning is not merely a method of consultation but a philosophy of relation. It is the physical practice of deep listening, reciprocity, and the creation of spaces where all voices can be heard. In practice, yarning has shaped initiatives such as *Mob on Mondays*, Language workshops, and advisory forums. In reflection, yarning offers a metaphor and mechanism for how archives might transform – suggesting circles of conversation rather than hierarchies, reciprocity instead of extraction, and trust instead of control. The long road to self-determination is best travelled through yarning, listening and action.

Honouring those before us: the legacy of Loris Williams

No reflection on QSA's journey would be complete without honouring those who came before. The annual Australian Society of Archivists Loris Williams Memorial Lecture stands as both a tribute and a call to action. Loris was a pioneering Aboriginal archivist whose career was dedicated to ensuring visibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in collections. Her advocacy carved pathways for those of us working in archives today. The lecture held in her name sharpens our vision, reminding us that recognition and cultural safety are not optional extras but core responsibilities. Listening to her story reminds me that our work must be grounded in respect, reciprocity, and courage. Every time we describe a record, welcome a community member into the Reading Room, or design a programme such as the *First Nations Languages Program* and *Mob on Mondays*, we do so in the shadow of her determination. Loris' story is not only a memory but also a directive.

Walking with our ancestors: a family journey

The themes of recognition, truth-telling, and reclamation become intensely personal when I think of my own family. In my research journey, I have traced family lines through Thargomindah, Mitchell, and Cherbourg, searching for fragments of story in the records. Engaging with these records is not only research; it is healing. It is a way of returning stories home. This work also sparked my decision to return to Thargomindah Country in August 2025, carrying with me not just files and photographs but a commitment to restore dignity to the lives captured in these documents. These family journeys illuminate why QSA's reforms matter: the archive is not abstract, it is intertwined with our bloodlines! In this sense, my return to Country is also a return to the archives each making the other more complete. Minoru Hokari reflected on a similar shift in his work with the Gurindji, moving from 'me and them' to 'me and you'.⁷ Like him, I have come to see that returning to Country and returning to the archives are not separate acts, but relational practices of maintaining history.



Figure 1. The long road to Thargomindah. Picture by Becky Bligh.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and archival futures

Beyond institutional reform, the framework of Indigenous Data Sovereignty provides a lens for imagining archival futures. It insists that Indigenous peoples have the right to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their data. For archives, this means recognising that records relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not neutral assets of the State but elements of Indigenous identity and sovereignty. Embedding Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles requires structural change: creating governance models led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rethinking access protocols, and ensuring that data use serves community aspirations. At QSA, early steps towards this include the development of ICIP protocols and the establishment of a First Nations Advisory Group. But the work is far from complete. Data sovereignty is not simply about consultation – it is about jurisdiction, authority, and the rebalancing of power.

Conclusion: walking together

The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration continues to serve as a compass for archives in Australia and globally. At QSA, it has inspired a Statement of Intent (now replaced with Our Commitment to Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples),⁸ institutional reforms, and new ways of engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Significant progress has been made in areas of recognition, access, and cultural protocols. Yet the most difficult challenges – authority, ownership, and self-determination – remain ahead. This essay has sought to weave together institutional record and personal reflection, recognising that archives are not neutral spaces but active participants in colonial histories. For Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander peoples, the archives is at once a site of trauma and a site of reclamation. It can wound, but it can also heal.

In writing this essay, I realise I am trying to do the same work I ask of others. Like Hokari shifting from ‘me and them’ to ‘me and you’,⁹ I am learning to stand within the archives not just as a public sector employee but as a participant, community member and ancestor of those living in the physical records in maintaining history. My role is to create conditions where histories are co-held with community, not simply managed on behalf of the state. The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration calls me into that responsibility to step beyond the habits of historian-centrism and into a practice of relational history-making. In this way, I too am learning to think differently about what the archive is and what it might yet become.

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As the Archives are a place for learning, we also respectfully recognise the continuing role of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first knowledge keepers.

Notes on the contributor

Becky Bligh (Gunggari/Kullilli) works within the First Nations Strategy Team at Queensland State Archives. Her work focuses on culturally safe access, and community-centred engagement.

Notes

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