Indigenous Records and Archives: Mutual Obligations and Building Trust

Lynette Russell

Lynette Russell is the Director of the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, at Monash University. She holds a PhD in History from the University of Melbourne and is the author or co-author of several books, including *Appropriated Pasts: Archaeology and Indigenous People in Settler Colonies* (2005), *A Little Bird Told Me* (2002) and *Savage Imaginings: historical and contemporary representations of Australian Aboriginalities* (2001).

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Archives house records about and of interest to Indigenous Australians. This paper outlines a large collaborative and multidisciplinary project entitled Trust and Technology which aims to find ways to include, within archives, (and in culturally appropriate manner) Indigenous knowledge, narratives and records. The three phased approach is discussed with an emphasis on the initial stage which endeavours to understand how Indigenous people want to record and access their oral memory. The project is presented within a historical background which has important implications for understanding the issues of developing trust.This paper was presented at the Australian Society of Archivists 30th Anniversary Seminar, Canberra, 5 April 2005.

As an archive based anthropological-historian I have over the past decade, been involved with numerous historical-text based projects. All of these have had as their primary aim the uncovering of aspects of Indigenous history or culture. This material was, for the most part, the results of the surveillance of Indigenous people and their cultures. In short, these were archival texts within which Indigenous people were the object (and subject) of the gaze of colonial authorities and 'experts', and from which Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and voice were excluded. A key

textual collection, which I have used many times, was formed in 1858-59, a little less than 150 years ago when the Victorian Government through a Select Committee of the Legislative Council (and following similar action in NSW) undertook a survey of the Aborigines of the state. In order to know the numbers, conditions and distribution of Aboriginal people in Victoria a lengthy questionnaire was sent to settlers, farmers, protectors and other interested people. Today these questionnaires and the responses are housed in the Public Record Office of Victoria as part of the massive collection of materials about Aboriginal people. This archive, like the dozens around the country, is made up of literally millions of pages of text which are used in Native Title cases, heritage assessments, and used to create local, family and Indigenous histories. These records were also used in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and The Bringing Them Home Report (1997).[1] The authors of the questionnaire, the responses and the subsequent published report could never have imagined how far and wide their writings would roam. Fortunately today, governments are much less likely to attempt to document Aboriginal experiences merely by asking white observers to comment.

Thirty years ago the Nation's relationship with Aboriginal people was very different to what it is today. The year 1975 was when Australia ended its involvement in the Vietnam War, Australia won the ashes and the Federal Government enacted the Racial Discrimination Act. It is timely to recall that 1975 was only eight years after a Federal referendum was held. The referendum consisted of two questions, the second of which was to decide if two references in the Australian Constitution, which were examples of open racial discrimination against Aboriginal people, should be removed. The two sections were:

> 51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:-
>
> ...(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

And:

> 127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.[2]

The referendum did not give Aboriginal people the vote as is popularly assumed - the Commonwealth had enfranchised Aboriginal Australians in 1962 and the States similarly legislating to allow Aboriginal people to vote. This year does however mark the ten year anniversary since the last State (Queensland) enfranchised Aboriginal people.

It is useful to ask and reflect whether if in 1975 we could have imagined the exponential growth in concern about Aboriginal issues or the forensic analyses that archival records would be subjected to as part of Native Title and other investigations. Could anyone have anticipated the Royal Commission, National Enquiry into Separations, the Mabo I and II cases, the emergence and modification of the Native Title Act, Sea Rights, Reconciliation and numerous other events and legislations which would affect Aboriginal people and place demands on archival repositories.

'Trust and Technology'

In this paper I want to highlight a large and collaborative project of which I am a part, and consider some of the emergent issues, challenges and possibilities.[3] The project is entitled, 'Trust and Technology: Building archival systems for Indigenous oral memory'. This is a multifaceted three stage project which utilises and builds on multi-disciplinary expertise. The funding is via an ARC Linkage grant and industry contributions. The team consists of myself, Sue McKemmish, Don Schauder and Graeme Johanson from Monash's School of Information Management Systems and partner investigators Public Record Office Victoria, Australian Society of Archivists Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group, Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce, and Koorie Heritage Trust.[4]

'Trust and Technology' has three broad and interrelated phases. In this paper I will focus only on phase one in which we are gathering the primary data. We term this the 'user needs analysis' phase. It is an often quoted truism that traditional (by which I mean pre-European contact) Aboriginal culture was an oral culture. Children learnt from their elders,

and information be it secular, sacred, religious, ritual, economic, humorous, medical or other was passed from one generation to the next by harnessing memories and the songs, narratives, epics and other forms of associated storytelling. This ensured that cultural knowledge was transmitted and younger generations knew what was important to know. In the 2003 Massey lectures Canadian academic and Indigenous scholar Thomas King explored some of the differences between Native stories – which he deemed to be oral – and the normative stories of the Western world – which are largely written. A key difference he observed was that written stories have a way of fossilising the past, of setting it in stone. Ever changing stories, evolving, shifting in ways dependent on both the storyteller and their audience have other purposes as well. King reminds us: 'We tell stories for ourselves – to help keep us alive'.[5]

'Trust and Technology' begins by acknowledging the importance of oral tradition which continues to underwrite much Aboriginal culture. Memories, and the storytelling associated with them, played an important role in the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. We have applied the term 'oral memory' as a shorthand reference to historical knowledge that has been transmitted orally across the generations. The term is highly problematic and it raises as many questions as it attempts to answer; however at present it suffices. Archives, state libraries and other repositories house many significant records about Indigenous communities. These are the products and consequence of colonisation, dispossession, removal and the relentless surveillance to which Indigenous people were subjected. These are virtually all written records and not oral (however there are some instances of conversations being recorded).

The 'Trust and Technology' project has as its key aims:

- To explore the emphasis that Indigenous people place on stories, storytelling and other forms of oral memory, and whether this has implications for the provision of archival services to Indigenous peoples.
- To examine how Indigenous people interpret trust in relation to key issues such as authenticity, intellectual property, and access. To identify the key mechanisms for developing and maintaining trust more broadly.

- To investigate the current service models of government and other archives, to see how well they currently meet the needs of Indigenous people for access to oral memory.
- To model Indigenous community-oriented archival services.
- To examine how archival techniques and information technology can be used to build archival systems that meet the needs of Indigenous people.

Objectives and motivations

'Trust and Technology' emerged out of the interests of a diverse group of researchers and practitioners. One of our key concerns was to offer Aboriginal people the opportunity to incorporate their oral memories into archival institutions (though not actually collect those stories, memories or narratives). Over the course of nearly seventy interviews and aiming at around one hundred we hope to ascertain if Aboriginal people want to incorporate their stories, memories and other narratives into archival services. Importantly we are not collecting oral traditions, stories, memories or any other form of Indigenous knowledge. Rather, we are in the first instance asking Indigenous people how and if they would like their material to be collected, represented, accessed and delivered through archival services. We are also interested in identifying the use of archival services by Aboriginal people and range of their experiences. These interviews form our 'user needs analysis' and, based on the outcomes of this phase, we will explore a range of archival techniques and technology to build an archival system that provides access to oral materials and memory. We certainly hope that such a system will also enable Aboriginal people to add to records already housed in archives and libraries and thus value add to existing records.

Whilst we are focusing oral material, stories and the like, we anticipate that the project's outcomes will play a fundamental role in building trust and understanding between archival institutions and Indigenous communities. This is something that my experience to date would suggest is lacking, not withstanding the goodwill that exists on both sides of what often seems like a divide. Many significant records about Indigenous communities reside in institutions such as libraries, public record offices and other archives, these are invariably written from a non-Indigenous perspective. Some Aboriginal people have sought access

to these for family history research, Native Title cases and other community based endeavours. Both the individual and community researchers, and the institutions involved have had a mixed response regarding records access. Perhaps one of the most regrettable outcomes has been the way the judicial system favours written evidence and European observations over Indigenous memories. One only need look at the transcripts of the Yorta Yorta Native Title case to see that Justice Olney chose to privilege the written observations of the white pastoralist EM Curr over the memories and traditions of Yorta Yorta elders. One of the objectives of our project is to consider the range of interactions and comment knowledgably on ways forward.

Perhaps our greatest challenge will be the attempt to build trust between the Indigenous communities of Victoria and archival services so that the security, authenticity and integrity of memory and knowledge captured in physical form can be promoted. By emphasising the building of trust we are not merely suggesting the development of confidence or reliability in terms of the archival systems. Rather we are emphasising the development of trust because, as I noted previously, for many Aboriginal people archives and archival services are seen as the repositories of materials which are the result of surveillance. Amongst many Indigenous people there is a sense of distrust or at least guarded concern about such institutions. As I have heard often from elders there is a perception that State-run institutions, however kindly the staff might be, are still considered to be an arm of the Government and therefore not to be trusted.

The trust aspect of the project will be developed and attempted through a consistent and sincere effort to consult, cooperate and collaborate with Indigenous communities. It is essential for relationship building that the Indigenous community is a crucial and inalienable part of the decision-making process with regard to how their oral traditions and memories should be handled. The comprehensive exploration of the needs of Indigenous users of archival services will develop understandings on both sides and enable models for archival strategies and services for Indigenous communities that are driven by their needs. There will also be significant benefit for Industry partners who have all striven to work ethically and respectfully with the relevant Aboriginal community groups. All anticipate an improvement in the delivery of services to both Indigenous and other community groups. We do not however anticipate

a 'one size fits all' solution and fully expect that there will be a range of alternatives which emerge from the project.

One of the key ways we have included Indigenous people, not least through the involvement of CAIS (Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University), an Aboriginal Research Fellow and a Koori PhD student, we have also established a community advisory committee. As we see it (and no doubt this committee may well have other ideas) this group will provide the project with feedback, both positive and negative; will assists us with identifying community priorities; identify and advise us of protocols for both research and community; and allow for inputs to research perhaps highlighting extra questions or issues that we need to address.

The aims of the project were developed by bringing together a multidisciplinary group consisting of historians, archival specialists, Aboriginal scholars and a cultural liaison officer with expertise in Aboriginal community protocols. Whilst we quickly discovered we did not always speak the same language (even though we were using the same words) we have discovered just how amazingly fruitful collaborative and interdisciplinary work can be. We anticipate that the comprehensive exploration of the needs of Indigenous users of archival services will develop understandings on both sides and enable models for archival strategies and services for Indigenous communities that are driven by their needs. There will also be significant benefit for our industry partners especially the Public Record Office of Victoria through improved service delivery, and we hope this will filter through to the archival community in general. As a result of this project we expect that archives, libraries and other record-holding agencies will develop culturally appropriate access to their collections for Indigenous people which will extend vastly beyond existing procedures and policies.

The main beneficiaries of the outcomes of this research will be Victorian Aboriginal communities, including those in rural and regional areas. As communities and individuals rebuild family connections and continue to recover from ongoing dispossession and disempowerment we believe that the results of 'Trust and Technology' will play a key role. At a minimum enabling access to oral memory that has been previously unavailable should aid the process of recovery for Indigenous people affected by past government policies. Aboriginal people in regional and rural Victoria will have increased access to oral materials relevant to

their communities, and communities will be supported to develop collections housed locally if they so desire. This will hopefully promote the healing of family and community ties and subsequently encourage the regeneration of community life and culture, thus making an important contribution to national efforts of reconciliation.

Other outcomes, some grandiose others pragmatic and procedural, include the facilitation of access to oral materials and memories for Indigenous communities in regional and rural Victoria. 'Trust and Technology' will extend the efforts of record-holding agencies to provide culturally appropriate access to their collections for Indigenous people, outside of existing procedures and policies and allow for the systematic capture and preservation of representations of oral culture, to lead to an accumulation of heritage in some cases not available in the public domain. This may result in new collections of oral materials (if communities so desire) developed through the systematic capture and preservation of representations of Indigenous stories and memories which will lead to an accumulation of valued heritage.

'Trust and Technology' is setting about investigating and identifying the best manner of securing and conserving representations of oral materials and spoken forms of memory for at least one hundred years.

Methodological issues

The preliminary phase of the project has undertaken the usual academic traditions of literature review, abstracting and analysis. To this we added consultation with numerous other researchers and organisations with a view to review relevant systems and procedures. This took place in parallel with our first series of interviews. In many ways our research approach has been quite organic, though sufficiently structured and flexible to enable adaptation and change. This has been facilitated through an iterative methodology which builds on an accumulation of understandings, providing our research direction.

Thus far we have been delighted with the overwhelmingly positive feedback from Indigenous people. Each interview has with permission been tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim and on completion the transcripts have been returned for interviewees to check. Our preliminary analysis has consisted of looking for similarities and differences as well

as categories of issues; disruptures; gaps; principal anxieties and common concerns.

Some findings from Phase One

The employment of an Aboriginal research fellow, experienced in community protocols and well known to the Victorian community has been crucial to the success of the project and especially the efficient development of the user needs phase. The Aboriginal research fellow advises both the Chief Investigators and research partners on matters of protocol, while also making initial contact with interviewees. This person has established a network of interested people and distributes information out to Aboriginal communities, individuals and cooperatives and other organisations. The job also requires work on an occasional newsletter which will flag research activities and outcomes. 'Trust and Technology' have been very fortunate in the choice of the research fellow (Diane Singh) as she is both academically and community minded - the ideal blend of what is needed - for what could be an onerous position.

Preliminary trends from the interviews: Storytelling, recording issues and access

Storytelling

Storytelling and the production of oral narratives was universally regarded by the interviewees as fundamental to both group and personal Indigenous identity. When we use the term story we are keenly aware that it can carry negative connotations. A story for us should never be confused with notions of fiction or the imaginary. Within 'Trust and Technology' the term is interchangeable with a narrative or message that conveys the particulars of a period of time; relationships between people; with land; a family recollection; a memory, an act; occurrence or course of events. These narratives can be accompanied by songs, dances, art or other activities or they may operate alone. As such these narratives need not be what might be regarded as traditional (eg creation stories) but may relate to historical events or recent actions. Passing on such stories is regarded as essential for cultural continuity. Every person interviewed noted that storytelling is both a feature and a necessary marker of their Aboriginality.

Telling stories, constructing narratives and talking about the past is invariably regarded as part of knowing oneself, from where they come and to whom they are related. Knowing such stories is seen as a mechanism for sustaining core social, familial and community relationships. Our research so far has suggested that within the group we are working (Victorian Aboriginal communities) women are central in maintaining and sustaining culture. Within the families where they have the roles of mothers, aunties, grandmothers and so on, and during the course of child rearing and nurturing, women engage in the telling of stories and the relaying of narratives of memory. Many participants have suggested that there has been a palpable change over time and as there is now a perception that the external threats which in the past had resulted in such horrors as the Stolen Generations have diminished. Storytelling is perhaps enjoying resurgence in this climate, as particularly from the 1960s there has been a growth in public expressions of identity, pride, and yearning to know. Importantly, private expressions of identity and pride have always existed.

Recording issues

Other preliminary findings relate to issues surrounding the extant records housed in public and other archives. A close reading of the transcripts reveals that the participants generally do not have a detailed appreciation of the understanding of current collections of records, where they are housed, or how they might be accessed simultaneously with limited understanding about the means of keeping (or collecting) records. However as I noted previously the requirement for creating genealogies for Native Title cases and other issues including reconnecting with Stolen Generations has increased interest and knowledge in the area.

Access

A constant theme within the interviews has been the participant's request to be able to add their own stories and versions of other stories to the records held in public archives and other institutions. This was most keenly expressed as a desire to set the record straight. Another clear concern has been over the issue of control, who decides what can be seen, what can be kept and so on. Emerging from the interviews is the non-negotiable issue that Indigenous people exercise control over collection and access to records in the future. Such control however is

metered by an acknowledgment that the role of preserving the records is one that will need to be shared with the relevant institution.

Although it is early days for this research, we can confidently anticipate a number of significant outcomes and benefits for archives and libraries, Aboriginal communities, and the relationships between the two. As I have indicated above there have been some very significant findings which shall shape both the future of the research and archival services more generally. Settler colonies around the world and the dispossessed and disadvantaged Indigenous peoples face comparable issues relating to access to, and control of, information about themselves and their communities. With these preliminary findings it is clear that 'Trust and Technology' can contribute towards the development and provision of a model for archives across the globe to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Indigenous people.

The 'Trust and Technology' project builds on the experiences of the Chief and partner investigators. My key concern, as I have observed, is to create archival systems to which Indigenous people and Indigenous knowledge can be interactively added. Perhaps we might even develop systems that not merely acknowledge the inherently different nature of Indigenous knowledge but celebrate the ontological incommensurability of various knowledge systems and work towards making the two systems at least comprehensible and of equal value. It would seem that the next thirty years of archival research and services shall be as exciting and ever changing as the last three decades.

Endnotes

1 *Bringing Them Home*, 1997, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Commonwealth Government Printer: Canberra.

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991, Commonwealth Government Report. Vols. 1-5, and *Bringing Them Home*, 1997, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Commonwealth Government Printer: Canberra.

2 *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 1991, Commonwealth Government Printer: Canberra. Vols. 1-5.

3 As with any collaborative project reports and articles such as this are the result of many minds and many discussions. I gratefully acknowledge the others working with me on this project.

4 Chief Investigators: Professor Lynette Russell (Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University), Professor Sue McKemmish (School of Information Management Systems, Monash University), Professor Don Schauder (School of Information Management Systems, Monash University), Dr Graeme Johanson, (School of Information Management Systems, Monash University).

Partner Investigators: Public Record Office Victoria: Justine Heazlewood and Andrew Waugh. Australian Society of Archivists Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group and Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce: Emma Toon. Koorie Heritage Trust: Jason Eades. Research Associates: Fiona Ross and Jen Sullivan. Cultural Liaison Officer: Diane Singh. Australian Postgraduate Award Industry (PhD): Shannon Faulkhead. Research Coordinator: Carol Jackway.

5 King, Thomas. 2003 Massey lecture no 1. *The Truth About Stories: a native narrative.* Canadian Broadcasting Commission.