

Koorie Culture and Technology: A digital archive project for Victorian Koorie communities*

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Sharon Huebner has worked for the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. since 2001. The Trust is a Koorie cultural centre in Melbourne, established in 1985 to preserve and protect south-eastern Australian Koorie culture.

At the Trust Sharon has been involved with the Victorian Koorie community in various capacities and has been privileged to share and hear stories from Koorie Elders and community members. Her practical experience has been as the Senior Caseworker for the Koorie Family History Service (KFHS). The KFHS was set up in 2001 and came out of the recommendations of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report; the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*. The Service assists Stolen Generations and Koories in custody to reconnect with family and cultural heritage materials. Sharon was also part of the Recorded Testimonies Project (RTP) - a project to record and preserve the stories of Stolen Generations; and more recently as the Project Officer for the Koorie Heritage Archive Project (KHA) - a digital community archive for Victorian Koorie communities. Sharon is

*This article based on the paper presented at the ASA conference, Wellington New Zealand October 2005. Much of the paper has been drawn from: Cooper, Kooramyee. 'Oral history recording about the KHA project recorded by Sharon Huebner: September 11th'. Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., 2005. This interview demonstrates how we have learnt to work together - as a Koorie and non-Koorie - to create, and implement a digital community archive for the Koorie people of Victoria, in a culturally appropriate way.

also a visual artist and has a Bachelor of Arts (Media Arts) from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

Kooramyee Cooper is a Yorta Yorta woman and has a strong understanding of Aboriginal culture and society from a local, state and national perspective. She was raised with a large extended family and has been working in Aboriginal affairs since the age of sixteen. Her family, like the vast majority of Aboriginal families in South Eastern Australia has experienced the effects of colonisation, the dispossession of country, loss of language and culture, substance abuse, deaths in custody, domestic violence, and the removal of children.

Kooramyee has first-hand practical experience working with a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and individuals (from the Torres Straits, Tasmania, Central Australia, Top End Australia, Western and South Australia) all of which have come from rural, remote and urban environments.

In her current position as Aboriginal Partnership Planner, Kooramyee works with Aboriginal communities, organisations and individuals on a daily basis. This work requires discussion of issues that are at times very sensitive and therefore require a high level of communication, confidentiality, and diplomacy.

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge past and present Victorian Koorie Elders and community members who have contributed their wisdom, stories, and cultural knowledge to the Koorie Heritage Archive project.

We would also like to acknowledge the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. for taking on this project, and the funding agencies who have supported its development - Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) through the Stolen Generation initiatives, and the Myer Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge our partners who agreed that the material held in their repositories needed to go home to the community: National Archives Australia (NAA), Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), State Library Victoria (SLV), and South Australian Museum; and we acknowledge the contribution of personal collections to the project - in particular, the photographic material from Uncle Jim Berg.

We would like to convey to readers, that it is our intention for our paper - both this and the version presented orally at the 2005 ASA conference in Wellington, New Zealand - to reflect the Koorie oral tradition, with the spoken, and the written word, as a form of narrative in its own right. This is our way of bringing together, in a respectful manner, our two cultural perspectives as authors; non-Koorie and Koorie.

Koorie Heritage Archive

The KHA plays a fundamental part in working out who we are. It helps to rebuild oral histories; kinship laws; cultural handing down of past lores; dances; and languages. It allows Koorie people and community in Victoria, to preserve who they are, in their own way.

The Koorie¹ Heritage Archive² is a community-centred project for Victorian Koorie individuals and communities, which utilises digital technology to preserve and make accessible cultural heritage materials. Knowing who you are and where you come from is the foundation of Koorie identity.

The KHA project is based on the Ara Irititja³ archive model established in 1994 for the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara (Anangu) people, and the model exists in Indigenous communities nationally.

The KHA's rich media library of cultural, family and historical materials relevant to Victorian Koories allows individuals and communities to experience: photographs of people and places important to them; images of cultural artefacts, art objects and manuscripts from their family and community; digital video and film footage of significant events and people; and to hear sound recordings of Elders⁴ and community members telling stories - all important for the preservation of Koorie knowledge. The KHA allows individuals to see and hear why they were taken off the land, why this land was taken from them, and why they were put on missions.

The KHA utilises technology to provide two main features: a rich media library and a metadata collector for gathering information about items in the library. The first of these functions is about providing access to the physical items held in the digital archive. The second is about making the digital archive a living meaningful resource for Koorie people. While the materials may have value as stand-alone items, their true significance is only clear when the necessary story and information (metadata) that

explains the historical and cultural context, is captured and preserved in a recorded form.

This technology makes the KHA a living archive. Each item allows Koorie people to add the stories and information that often only they can provide, such as: the date something was made or happened; the names of people and places they see, or the name of the person who created the object; stories that accompany the item; adding their own story⁵; and responding to stories historically recorded in government manuscripts or reports. They are also able to add the cultural restrictions that may limit its access.

Accessing (viewing and hearing) and interacting (metadata) with the cultural heritage materials supports the journey of reconnecting families and community, and the building of intergenerational relationships.

The KHA allows for the Koorie community to be transported from the past to the modern world, by bringing life to old customs by using modern technology. In a world that has modern technology at its fingertips, each generation of Koorie people are losing the value of Koorie customs and are being assimilated in a world that has no time to stop to hear the voices of the past. Changes in Victoria have seen Koorie people, community and culture destroyed, however the KHA has allowed the Koorie community the chance to preserve and protect customs, and way of life with modern technology.

Developing a digital community archive for Victorian Koorie communities has provided the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc.⁶ with many challenges in terms of technology, and defining the socio-technical requirements needed to respectfully represent the cultural protocols of Koorie individuals and communities.

For the pilot stage of this project, extensive community consultation was undertaken with respective Victorian Koorie communities to determine relevant cultural protocols and to see whether the technology used for KHA supported the communities' needs. For example, the KHA allows for password protection and the ability to protect or restrict private and sensitive materials. The project recognises the fact that Koorie cultural protocols require the technological system to be flexible; in that the system needs to be able to evolve as cultural protocols held by Koorie individuals, families or the community change.

The community consultation process is ongoing, and is currently addressing issues of sharing materials within communities, sharing cultural materials between communities and sharing cultural materials outside of Victorian Koorie communities.

The ability to meld Koorie culture and technology relies on a relationship of trust with community members. It also relies on a willingness to listen and hear the voices of Koorie individuals and communities and from a perspective of understanding the foundation of Koorie culture, determines how this translates into the use of digital technology with the aim to preserve materials of cultural significance, important for the sharing of cultural history and knowledge.

The rest of this paper gives a voice to some of the complexities just mentioned, through personal stories about identity, community, and the role technology can play to create a sustainable digital community archive. The stories reflect the need to preserve the rich and diverse culture of Koorie communities, when there exists a history of displacement from land, family and culture; and how pride in who you are and where you come from is connected to sharing cultural history and knowledge.

Community

My name is Kooramyee Cooper, which means sweet little girl native born. My mother is a Yorta Yorta, Bangerang, Wotjobaluk woman, and my father is a Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti man. My people come from all over Victoria - up as far as the middle of New South Wales, and downwards to the coast.

As a young Indigenous woman in Victoria, knowing who I am and having my identity, plays a major part in my everyday life. I think if I didn't know who I was, I would be a lost soul.

Country and connection to land is the 'fabric' and 'layering' of who I am. The experience of growing up on Cummeragunja Mission,⁷ and living in this country, is the foundation of my life and journey in the world.

When I look back in history, Cummeragunja was one of the first missions to lead a struggle for Indigenous people. The walk off⁸ led to equal rights to housing, and equal rights to work. And, for my people to know what they went through, I think to myself I must be pretty lucky to be here on this earth to fight this fight. So, thinking of having Cummera⁹ as my

home (I come from a pretty strong family line) whenever I think that I'm not doin' the right thing or am lost in the world, or people don't understand Koorie culture, I think about what happened to my people and where they have come from and the beautiful sounds of the Murray River and the gum bush blowin' in the wind. It's a spiritual journey when Cummera' comes to mind for me; it's home; it's my place of sanity; my place of peace; a place of my people's power. I draw from it.

To engage the Koorie community in this project it was important to understand the complexities of 'what community is'. One of the aims of the KHA was to assist in the journey of healing; to rebuild Koorie communities.

Community means family. Means mob.¹⁰ Means 'we as one'. I suppose when one falls, we all fall. When we lose an Elder, we all lose an Elder, and when we lose anyone in the family, we lose together and we cry together. Community is about what our community has kept, no matter how much we've lost. Individual people on missions kept songs, kept stories, kept dances and they kept our community alive. Now, today, we have Elders that keep them stories; keep them dances; keep the language. It's that community that kept us; kept our people who we are today. Even though mob might come from different areas of Victoria or Australia, they are still community; they are still who we are. Knowing that plays a major part in any child's life. Because when they're lost and they need help, anyone they see in the community, they know that that's their uncle; that's their mother or father or their brother or sister. Family to Indigenous people of Victoria is community.

Community consultation

The intensive community consultation process with Victorian Koorie individuals and communities revealed there did exist a need for an accessible digital archive that was able to store material forms of Koorie knowledge; including photographs, audio and video recordings and documents. It was important for the KHA to be a dynamic and culturally sensitive community project. It empowers Koorie people; it encourages them to record; to take ownership of who they are; and what place they play in our community. Young or old, everyone plays a part and the KHA allows that. It allows the modern world today to bring the past forward and allows Koorie Elders to sit down and share the past with

the future generations. For example, having school children with Elders sittin' in the room. They may never ever cross paths unless it's a funeral or a wedding or a barbeque. These Elders sit down and they actually get to hear what these young fellas have got to say. And these young fellas get to hear what these old fellas are sayin'.

How KHA constructed its relationship with digital technology and community members was complex, primarily for the reason there are many things that need to be identified about community before technology can be embraced.

Technology alone can never explain why someone was taken; or explain why Indigenous kids hate the system, or hate being at school. It's only the voice given to stories from the past, that can release a shield - that power a child needs, or an individual needs, to fight against anything in this world that is thrown up against them. It's telling that child that being black, even though your grandmother was raped or murdered, or your father was taken away, or your land was raped, or your kids taken away - no matter what's been done to our people to always be proud.

Our Elders have always been there to set the story straight, no matter what was written in them books; no matter what technology has been brought out to try and record the history in 'their own' non-Indigenous context.

It's not until the actual individuals that went through this life stand up and tell their stories so that non-Indigenous people, black people, Chinese people, whatever nationality, can actually feel the pain and begin to understand. It's then not tolerance, it's respect that is shared amongst people. Technology alone can never give that to anyone.

And, young people today don't have respect for who they are. They don't have the respect as an Indigenous black person coming from the strongest culture in the world and surviving no matter what has been put up against them. They are unable to stand there with honour and respect and be representing a hundred thousand odd years of culture. No technology can give you that, no computer system, no sound recording, nothing.

Recognising and understanding these issues allowed the KHA to be developed as a successful digital community archive model. Evaluating the success of the KHA has been based on the commitment demonstrated

by Koorie community members and Elders, who have and continue to share their wisdom, knowledge and cultural heritage materials.

The KHA - it's modern technology, but it's modern technology that has been aimed at Koorie people. It gives them the power to go out and use these modern technologies that have been invented for recording oral histories or movies. It gives them the power to go and record history, through their eyes. Sharing their history their way, instead of having white people, or other people, recording their history in a non-Koorie way. Not everyone sees history the same. Black people see it as one continuous story; a tragedy that happened in Australia. KHA allows these to be told along with the humour, pride and family of Victoria.

It's only when these fellas (Koories) are recorded by our own youth, and the stories handed down through the KHA, that the full circle of understanding, respect and tolerance is there, for our people; for our youth. And, that's where the KHA plays a fundamental part. It brings the modern world of technology to the past to hear that voice. Koorie people now have that chance to do the flip on the world, of society, everything. They have the chance to have a utopian world where we have the control. Where no-one stands over the top of us and tells us how to record our history. Where no-one can tell us that we don't have the right to say what we want to say. We say what we want, when we want, and record it how we want.

The day that happens, then justice, equality, and anything that we want in this world is ours. KHA opens that door for young people to do that, and that's where we are heading.

When we have a digital archive in each community - you watch - when it does happen, young people are gunna be stronger and powerful. They're gunna be speakin' on everything and anythin' and there ain't gunna be no philosopher, no lecturer, no scientist, no archaeologist - no-one - to tell 'em that they're wrong. Because as long as they've got their history from their Elders, they're the ones that are right. You non-Koorie people are wrong. You haven't lived in our shoes. You haven't lived our injustices. We're right. And, every kid will have that chance to say: 'We're right, you're wrong. You listen to us, now. Sit down and take the time out to listen to us, look at what we've done, look at our history. This is it. This is the truth'. KHA brings the modern technology to the table.

Koorie Heritage Archive

Koorie people may carry the oldest culture, but we ain't ancient. We move with time and we can, and we have, changed as people, but we have never ever lost our power of being black. Never lost it. And that's one thing KHA will keep forever.

It has always been an aim of the KHA project to pave the way for the sharing of cultural knowledge and information using a digital system or database - 'cultural keeping place' - that takes into consideration the communities' need to gain technological skills, to facilitate the use of the system on their own terms.

In Koorie hands it will create a society where Koorie people for the first time ever, can record their history in every context. Let it be an art form, photography, movies - every genre of recording that has ever been considered. Koorie people have it all at their fingertips now - they are able to preserve their history. That power to preserve their history in any way, shape or form that they want has never been given to a Koorie person. It has never been offered. I never got offered that as a child, or as a teenager. But when the KHA did come out, I threw my photos on there, and I want to go out and record my Elders. It gave me a chance to feel a bit of power and respect because I got this chance to now hold on to the past.

No matter what age, the KHA gives them the chance to tell the story of what had happened to them, as a Koorie person. You've got some Indigenous people that don't even want to acknowledge that their black, because of different circumstances, but their story is still valuable to who we are. And then you've got someone that has grown up in a whole complete different circle of life with their family, with traditions and everything and they want to share it with the world! So for a young person that's at school, or doing whatever - hangin' out on the street; they get a chance to talk. Everyone is equal. Because in our society, not many black fellas have a chance. But on the KHA it doesn't matter if you do drugs, you drink, you're a Christian, you're a Jehovah's Witness, or whatever Koorie people believe in these days, or whatever they do.

This is the chance that we come together. We are united. We stand together as one. We become a community that our old people were in the old days when culture was shared amongst and with each other. The KHA brings together everyone and it throws away whatever lies white men had ever

brought to our world. It brings back reality. It brings back the truth of Koorie people; and the truth is of where we come from; our customs, our lores, our kinship, our oral histories - because they are the foundation of our people.

The KHA has all that. It has our photos and oral histories. It also shares the customs and the lores and the kinship within the families. The stories. It has stories that are shared and it allows families to say what happened. At that same time young people can also say: 'By the way Cummeragunja has changed since then. These houses. I lived in that house' or 'Aunty lives in that house'. Then you've got artwork. It allows kids, it allows parents, it allows all of them to do whatever they believe in about being Koorie and to put it on the KHA. It allows kids to make movies of things like what it's like today to be harassed by police. Harassment today by police is totally different to what harassment was back in the 1990s, 1970s, or the 1800s.

If you have different ways of showing experience through different eyes of the generations, then people can see from where Koorie people have come. We have been assimilated in ways, but the KHA shows us how much we have got left of our culture. It brings together the assimilation and the cultural loss. It allows everyone to realise we haven't really lost anything. It's just a matter of how much you remember.

Share it; pass it on, because if you don't, then we've lost it, then we really haven't got anything. The KHA allows all of that in one - the kinship, the oral histories, our lores; all of them. The KHA brings all of that together, and people get the chance to hear past, present and future. Each generation gets to hear it and the KHA will hopefully still be here for many years to come.

Koorie community and government archives and agencies

There are many community members who prefer to hear stories and view cultural material on a digital community archive rather than visiting a large archival institution. There are various reasons for this.

Koorie people, even though a lot of the mob don't say it out loud, have a fear of government organisations. That stigma. Children are still being removed today and children who were removed are still coming home and will be coming home for the rest of our lives.

The government organisations are scary and they're not culturally appropriate; it's scary for Indigenous people. There are services, such as the Koorie Family History Service at the Trust, where they can put their request through to access their information from the archives or government agencies. Then the Trust can put their documents on the KHA if that is what they want. Sometimes our mob want it on the KHA because they want the world to know what injustice happened to them. They don't want sympathy. They want much more than that, they want respect.

And, that's what it comes down to. Understanding that archives have been kept away from Koorie communities. All them documents and all them photos in the State Library of Victoria, the National Archives Australia, or the Public Record Office Victoria. Whenever we bring the archival institutions to the table we say to them: 'Give us what rightfully belongs to the people and we will take it back to the community. We will do the right thing for the Koorie community'. By taking them back to the community we are saying, these were written in hatred, and were taken under duress, but we've returned it. We've returned it to you and what we want you to do with it is something positive; somethin' right by your community. Prove them documents wrong. That you are a strong black person. You are not a savage. You are not a slave. You are not a servant. You are a strong black man. You are a strong black woman. That's what giving back those documents allows. It returns everything back to country; back to people.

And, I suppose that one day, hopefully, one day these government organisations might fund us and keep the KHA runnin'. Because, we're doin' their job. We're returnin' things that they don't return back to country properly. What I mean by properly is, sittin' down with these Elders and hearin' their stories. And what you've done is help close someone's door; you've healed the pain; you've closed the circle; you've made a community whole; you've stopped the hurt from happening to the next generation. And, that's what these government organisations don't realise. They don't realise that if they return it back to country properly, this hurt that has been carried for many generations will stop. It won't stop overnight, but the next generation will have that chance to heal properly. And, that's what we've gotta start doin' - working as one with them archival

institutions, and they have to do it our way. Culturally and appropriately our way. The way we have started with the KHA project.

Koorie Heritage Archive and the Koorie community

I suppose that when our mob don't go to these organisations, we got the KHA as an alternative. Having the KHA on a computer to take out to individual communities, in their own environment; to be able share their history and take these documents that were written about them under duress - it is important in giving back these documents. To have this in the safety zone of their home, and allowing the community to freely voice what they felt at the time when these were written or what they felt now - you can't do that in an organisation. They don't have the skills or the capacity to handle Indigenous people's cultural protocols.

Having the KHA out there in the community deals with cultural protocols, because when it's taken there it's shown by a Indigenous or a non-Indigenous person who can explain that some of the documents were written back then, and can be offensive. And they don't use the documents as negative, but as something positive; that those documents can help you understand what your grandparents went through. Reading those documents allows you to have more respect for that old fella, because he went through hell. There ain't no more the government can do to him and it allows that young person to look at their Elders in a different light. It shows that no matter what the governments have done to us in the past, we still survive. These documents are proof that the government belittled us; that they tried to destroy us.

I'm writing to say to readers of this article and the government organisations that it's not good enough. Because my family, my people aren't healed. There are generations after generations that need these documents and these photos and these archives and everything. And they need to be out front, out in the open for us to see in our own time; in our own houses; in our own homes; in our own community. Not in your exhibition halls, not in your libraries, not in your hallways, but on an archive system like the KHA. We can do it our way, not like how others want. The KHA and its partners allow that.

Future of digital archives and the Koorie Heritage Archive

Having the KHA in each Victorian Koorie community is an ideal future. Because it's only then, when Elders and children, in their own time, can sit there and share. Share everything, even the sound of trees, the sound of the Murray, the sound of the horses that run in our paddocks - share everything. Everything plays a part, and every journey that every child and every person is on, in each community, needs to tell their story.

And when the KHA is at home in each community it would become something that is beyond anything that we've ever seen. It's that flip again. It's having the whole of our society, our whole community, back together as one. And as the passing hours go; passing minutes go; the passing of each Elder; the passing of each child; the passing of each person - we know their stories are preserved. Communities are preserved and we can go to our grave knowing that we have done the right thing by our community.

The KHA is all of it. It's the start of our life, it's the end of our life and it's preserving every part of it. It's preserving our good, our bad, and our vilest times on the world in one. And it's sharing it. It's the fundamental parts of our kinship laws, our oral history lores, our laws, and our customary lores. That's the dream, and hopefully it can be a reality, if we could do it.

One day, I want to walk along my country with one of my nieces, or one of my grandchildren, recording *me*, my voice, recording the history of Cummera', or the history of Mooroopna or Rumbalara. I want to record what it was like for me to live on these places, and then they can go back and do their own stuff with it and put it on the KHA. Then I know when I'm dead in that grave, that I've left my voice behind on that recording telling my grandchildren the history of who they are.

My photos, my paintings, my stories, my movies of my dancing or my family dancing are there forever on the KHA. At least I've made a change. I've left my relatives and my community something to hold on to and that's the way every person's gotta look at it.

We gotta leave every part of who we are and every part of our culture behind, on the KHA. And, if the KHA is allowed into our community, and into the safety of our homes, our comfort zone, then we've achieved what our Elders thought unthinkable in the 1800s. Keeping it. Just keeping

every word, every dance, every cultural thing, every boomerang, every artefact, every dot painting, every painting, and every song that was ever sung - to keep everything alive.

And it's the past with the future. No matter how much you change in the future, the KHA will always be there. We may never ever see the end story of it, but as long as we play our part in our journey, we have started the journey for the next generation. I suppose that our children will hold the keys to the next step in the journey, because they are our future. The KHA will grow with them, with every changing hour and our history is kept with them.

So hopefully, it will be at home where each community shares everything: their heart, their soul, their culture. And that's where the KHA belongs - at home in the country with the Koorie community. Not in a building, not in an organisation.

The KHA belongs in the hands of the people where the stories are - in the hands of our people.

Endnotes

¹ Koorie is a term used by many Indigenous people in Victoria when referring to themselves.

² The Koorie Heritage Archive Project is an award winning pilot project created for Victorian Koorie communities in 2003.

³ More information about the Ara Irititja project is available at <www.irititja.com>.

⁴ 'Elders' are community members recognised by their respective community as having the authority to provide advice; give permission; offer support; and pass on wisdom and knowledge to others. The term Elder in Koorie culture is not necessarily reflective of age.

⁵ A story can be written, recorded, or images.

⁶ Koorie Heritage Trust Inc (The Trust), is an Indigenous cultural centre with museum status and was established in 1985, by Jim Berg, the late Ron Castan AM QC and Justice Ron Merkel. The Trust focuses on building pride and strength in Victorian Koorie communities and actively supports emerging Koorie artists and promotes the unique artwork of this region. The Trust also provides a family history research service for members of the Stolen Generations and an oral history program to record the stories of Elders and Koorie community members. The Trust's collection of photographs, family

trees, artefacts, artwork, oral histories and manuscripts are a rich resource for Koorie communities to maintain cultural heritage for the present and future generations.

⁷ Cummeragunja Mission was established in 1881 on 1800 acres of land on the New South Wales side of Dhungala - the Murray River - on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang peoples. Many of the original residents moved there from Maloga Mission, five kilometres down river.

⁸ On the 4th February 1939 approximately 200 to 300 residents of Cummeragunja walked off the mission protesting against the conditions and settled in places such as: Barmah, Echuca, Shepparton, Mooroopna and Fitzroy.

⁹ 'Cummera' refers to Cummeragunja Mission.

¹⁰ 'Mob' refers to an Indigenous community (which can also mean a family group or tribe) from Victoria; or Australia-wide.