Digitizing Worldviews Intangible Cultural Heritages

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ABSTRACT:

The tangible and intangible cultural heritages are the visible part of a culture, which is just 10 percent of the culture that is exposed. The hidden 90 percent of the culture determines the visible ten percent of the culture. When one records the tangible and the intangible cultural heritages it would be more appropriate that the world view that forms the basis for expression are also recorded. Stories are the best ways for cultural transmission within communities. Stories recorded along with the worldviews can be used for intercultural understanding and appreciation of cultural heritages.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Convention for the *Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), recognises that "…the processes of globalization and social trans-

formation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage." (Mastuura, 2004) Active steps are initiated to ensure safeguarding of cultural heritages in this multicultural world. One such effort is to digitise the intangible cultural heritages that will enable to share cultures.

The UNESCO's statement above acknowledges the fact that ethnocentrism is predominant, and it is looking towards simultaneously preserving cultural diversity, progressing with globalisation, preserving the tangible and the intangible cultural heritages, ensuring cultural understanding and dialogue between cultures, and being aware of not fossilizing them in digital mode and being aware of intellectual property rights and plagiarism.

In a world that is witnessing movement of people across cultural divides at a greater pace, encountering different cultures becomes increasingly likely—be it for business, pleasure, travel, politics, and volunteering in direct service to communities. However fleeting the interaction, cultural encounters demand for respect and understanding for the tangible and intangible cultural heritages of the other and it cannot be taken lightly.

This has posed a dual challenge for UNESCO and conscientious people around the world working to preserve the worldviews and cultural identity of indigenous communities. The first challenge is to ensure sustenance of identity and the second is to digitise and propagate the same

for a better understanding and sensitising the 'other' to enable a genuine understanding.

With the advent of modern digital equipments, the cultures of the visible majority are becoming systematically digitized. But the cultures from the margins are not due to various social, political and economic reasons. It is the indigenous communities around the world that are fast receding into oblivion as they are in direct line of confrontation and subjugation by the mainstream on account of land, natural resources, habitat and the ripple effects of the mainstream culture on indigenous culture, society and community and above all on their identity.

It is very disturbing to note that there is both internal and external erosion of cultural identity of the indigenous cultures. The cultures from the margins are rendered fragile due to the impact of the bulldozing by the mainstream culture. The media of the mainstream has stereotyped the urban cosmopolitan behaviour as a universal standard. *Universalising* such pattern of behaviour has been on the rise and it has vastly disturbed many cultures in the margins and those that are not so powerful in the media.

There are instances of serious attempts by some of the marginalized themselves to integrate into the mainstream in order to reap economic and social benefits sacrificing their cultural identity. Loss of transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next is due to movement of children away from the community, and advancing age of the traditional keepers of knowledge. With every passing year, the stories and the worldviews of the indigenous communities go unrecorded for posterity.

By declaring the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (2005-2014) UNESCO promotes the international community's commitment toward preservation of the indigenous communities around the world. It urges enhanced understanding between peoples for peaceful coexistence. Thoughtful leaders in the international community see specific pathways toward achieving this important goal. Mastuura opines,

> The process of globalization creates conditions for renewed dialogue among communities ... increased opportunities for interaction and dialogue, thereby contributing to the spread of knowledge about other cultures and heightening people's awareness of their own cultures. One result of this intensifying and deepening exchange is that we can now also document and disseminate information about our shared intangible cultural heritage to an extent previously unimaginable. The opportunity to share the world's intangible cultural heritage and to promote its preservation is contributing to a better understanding among peoples worldwide and is underlining the value and vibrancy of cultural diversity. (Mastuura, 2004)

This essay argues for recording the system of knowledge of communities; digitizing, recording and preserving the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of a community. Such an attempt will vastly benefit the appreciation and acceptance of indigenous peoples and will reveal the ethos to the practitioners to enable them to pass their worldview on to the next generation with conviction. Knowing the values, and the reason

for their artifacts' existence, one arrives at a better understanding of that community.

Hypothesis

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage of a community is best understood only when the worldview of the community is also recorded along with it.

Counter Hypothesis

For better understanding of a culture and its preservation and transmission of the same to the next generation and to people from other cultures, it is enough if tangible or intangible cultural heritage are recorded / digitized without any information and background worldviews or ethos it represents.

Heritages product of culture

There is a growing understanding of the exhaustive list of tangible and intangible cultural heritages along with natural heritage sites that encompasses the documentation of cultural heritages. Natural heritage becomes important as indigenous worldviews are typically tied down to their geographic locations.

> The standard format for a heritage mapping activity is a matrix of heritage resources— natural, built, movable and intangible - against their intrinsic and associative attributes to capture their meaning. Natural heritage resources include landscapes, mountains, lakes, forests, rivers, valleys and other geological formations. These resources are documented

based on name, other names, geological history, outstanding features, contents, settings, approach and statutory protections. Movable heritage resources include artworks, costumes, jewelry, documents, weaponry, machinery and other material with spatial transference. These resources are documented based on name, other names, owner, maker, dimensions, material, function, and location. Intangible heritage resources include festivals, songs, prayers, myths, legends, language, dance, skills, and local technology. These resources are documented based on name, purpose, history, seasonality, process, documentation, materials used, music used, costumes used, language used and participants. (Zerrudo, 2010)

But when these are recorded and documented, they provide only the visible part of that culture. While the expressive and visible part of the culture is dynamic and subject to change, the culture that underlies the expression is that which determines the perception of the community behind the movable, immovable, tangible and intangible cultural resources.

'Intangible' represents the abstract and nonmeasurable. The notion of orality and oral tradition acts as the main vehicle of the intangible. The elements 'bias' and 'prejudice against the preservation of nonmaterial heritage' have pervaded much of our conceptualisation and appreciation of literate versus oral expressions. ... Tangible heritage is knitted into the intangible heritage domain. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan argues that oral (intangible)

products are the result of interactions between a vast range of different participants and are not simply 'picked up like pebbles' along the way. 'Tangible heritage, without intangible heritage, is a mere husk or inert matter', argues Kirschenblatt-Gimblett. (Vuuren, 2008)

What goes beneath the tangible and intangible expressions and understanding of the natural world is the worldview of that culture. However, it is the culture that is instrumental in bringing out these expressions in a particular fashion. Every culture has a system and a structure. In order to understand the system and the structure of that culture, one has to understand the worldviews of that culture. Worldviews are the centres that determine the form and the play of its elements: According to Derrida,

… structure–or rather the structurality of structure … has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure … but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. (Derrida, 2002 p352)

The total form being the sum total of all the tangible and the intangible cultural expressions that are well within the culture of that society. The center being the worldview, the visible structure is the expression of that culture. Apart from constructing a structure, worldview also

determines the perception of reality. According to Marsden:

> Cultures pattern perceptions of reality into conceptualisations of what they perceive reality to be; of what is to be regarded as actual, probable, possible or impossible. These conceptualisations form what is termed the 'world view' of a culture. The World view is the central systematisation of conceptions of reality to which members of its culture assent and from which stems their value system. The world view lies at the very heart of the culture, touching, interacting with and strongly influencing every aspect of the culture. (Royal, 2007)

These expressions of culture and understanding of the appreciation of natural heritage is based on what Bourdieu refers to as "the habitus":

> Habitus can be understood as the set of values and dispositions gained from out cultural history that stay with us across contexts. These values and dispositions allow us to respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways, but those responses are always largely determined – regulated-by where have been in culture. (Schirato, 2000 p42)

However, a basic question remains: whether one can really appreciate other cultures.

> A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence that is the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation, which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is hidden condition for recognizing styles characteristic of a period, a

school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. … Thus the encounter with a work of art … presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code. (Bourdieu, 1984 p 3)

This understanding of the habitus, and cultural code of Bourdieu, structure of Derrida that is being shared by the 'collective actant'- the community that shares the culture and acts accordingly - is due to their worldview. The worldview determines the play (Derrida), work of art (Bourdieu), literary text, stories and all expressions of a culture. Thus a text, story or expression "… cannot exist outside the culture." (Sonesson, 1998) Stories and literary texts of a culture have to be within the culture of its creator. Artifacts, literature, stories are the visible texts and products of that culture.

When recording heritage stories / oral traditions we tend to record the rendition by the practitioners. What we are digitally recording is the visible part of the culture. Even if one hears the stories of the 'other', one cannot but interpret the same with the perception of one's own knowledge and cultural bias and not what the other culture intends. Hence there will be or can be paucity in that communication.

Thus without understanding the worldview, it is not possible even to appreciate the intangible and tangible artifacts, texts, stories, and cultural products of societies. Hart is of the opinion that:

"... understanding worldviews is necessary … our worldviews affect our belief systems, decision

making, assumptions, and modes of problem solving. … understanding worldviews of both the targeted community and ourselves is imperative if we are going to do more good than harm" (Hart, 2010)

Worldviews

This draws us to the need for understanding the worldviews of the "other." Worldviews according to Jenkins is,

the common concept of reality shared by a particular group of people, usually referred to as a culture, or an ethnic group. Worldview is an individual as well as a group phenomenon." It is called Cognitive Culture. This is the mental organization in each individual's mind of how the world works. Expressions of commonality in individual worldviews make up the cultural worldview of the group. This leads to the social culture....

Worldview denotes the complex of beliefs, concepts, sense of order and social constructs, role-models and moral precepts which are unique and peculiar in comparison to other such complexes of other such socio-cultural groupings…each culture's worldview is adequate for that culture and thus valid in its own terms. (Jenkins, 2004)

According to Michael Lind, "a worldview is a more or less coherent understanding of the nature of reality, which permits its holders to interpret new information in light of their preconceptions." Talking on aboriginal worldview, Loiselle opines,

The Aboriginal worldview is comprehensive and spiritual in nature ... spirituality as a vital

element since it is seen as pervading every aspect of life ... the Native significance and purpose of spirituality is "the process and relationship we have with our greater power… the part of you which helps you see the beauty along the way…[and] the goodness in [others]". ...the Aboriginal perspective of life is "a systemic approach to being in the world" ... "Self-in-relation" that is: immanence (respect for all life forms), interconnectedness and balance. (Loiselle, 2006)

Ouellette quotes Kawagley:

A worldview consists of the principals (principles?) we acquire to make sense of the world around us. Young people learn these values, traditions and customs from myths, legends, stories, family, community and examples set by community leaders. The worldview (cognitive map) is a summation of coping devices that have worked in the past [but may not work in the now or future]… The worldview [allows a people who self-identity] to make sense of the world around them, make artifacts to fit their world, generate behaviour and interpret their experiences. (Ouellette, 2010) (Parenthesis not mine.)

Further bolstering this perspective Poonwassie, states that:

Worldviews emerge from the totality of peoples' social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual perceptions and beliefs. Ermine ... describes Aboriginal worldviews as founded on a search for meaning from a metaphysical, implicit, subjective journey for knowledge based on the premises of "skills that promote personal and social transformation; a vision of social change

> that leads to harmony with rather than control over the environment; and the attribution of a spiritual dimension to the environment" (Poonwassie, 2001)

From a linguistic perspective, language has a potentially intricate relationship with worldview. According to Sapir–Whorf hypothesis,

> the principle of linguistic relativity holds that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its speakers are able to conceptualize their world, i.e. their world view … that language determines thought and that linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories and … linguistic categories and usage influence thought and certain kinds of non-linguistic behavior. (Worf, 1940, 1956)

Rebecca Ash wrote an interesting essay about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis where she notes that the hypothesis is not only controversial, but has been the basis for research in a wide range of disciplines. Some of that research seems to reinforce the Hypothesis suggesting linguistic relativism is at least likely while a greater number of studies deny this view and favor linguistic universalism (Ash, 1999). Noting that the controversy continues, Ash argues that more research is necessary to settle the competing findings of existing research.

Communicating Culture

Language is driven by the worldview that constructs the culture. Culture of a community forms an integral part of any communication of that community. Stories are part of communication, hence, are very close to express the worldview in a subtler manner. While digitally

documenting intangible cultural heritages like stories, songs, adages, proverbs, etc, one records communication that has cultural content seeped into it.

> Each epistemology is linked to the precepts of its culture in intricate ways; the interrelationships of precepts form its conception of reality. Epistemology, or the specific Aboriginal way of knowing, is the foundation upon which each tribal society builds its web of knowledge. (Bastien, 2004 p38)

The web of knowledge is transmitted in indigenous communities through stories. The stories encompass within them the knowledge and the worldviews in a more intricate way. However, from the indigenous perspective, which is being pushed to the margins more resolutely than ever before, preserving and transmission of culture and establishing itself in the multicultural world becomes essential for its survival.

> An Indigenous worldview or philosophy is intrinsically holistic, interdisciplinary, intergenerational and spiritual. Because it has also had to exist, survive and now thrive within and beside a colonial worldview, it must also involve the processes of conscientization and decolonization. (Rock, 2007)

The best bet to survive is to rely on stories more than cultural artifacts and natural heritage sites.

Why Stories?

Stories were used by generations from time immemorial to record and retransmit ideas over generations and geographical locations. They are

the best way to communicate the ethos from one generation to the next. They are the best way to communicate to the cultural "other" as it plays a vital role in driving the ethos in a most objective manner, by incorporating within itself the worldviews. Stories can create a mental space for the reader to be transformed into another sphere hitherto unknown to the reader and experience a new culture. Though one might in all likelihood read it from one's own perspective, stories create space for alternate thinking.

But it would be even more beneficial when the ethos of the community is also recorded while recording the stories and preserving the artifacts of the community for the benefit of the community and for the connoisseurs from other communities to appreciate it holistically.

Thoughts are structured and constructed through the stories as they create the mental frame. The mental frame thus created would form the basis of further expansion on that particular line of thought. Language helps constructs the structure of the thought. The worldviews decide the language. Hence, understanding worldviews will provide the reason for a community's thinking in one particular way for the story readers.

At the level of children, in the multicultural context, understanding each other is easier as they have a limited set of conditioning through stereotyping. Stories can act as a medium of teaching the worldview of the other. Hence stories play a vital role in establishing the worldviews of a community among the community and to others who wants to understand the community. Stories after all are meant to create an experience. Thus when a story is recorded, its connotation lies

elsewhere in the society and in its cultural repertoire. The story thus is intricately relates to the worldviews and forms an integral part of the semiotic structure of that culture. Let us work on stories and how they encompass the worldview in them.

A Blackfoot Story

Once there was a (man) Siksikaitsitapi who was hunting in the foothills and mountain area. He had but one horse. In those days people usually had different horses and another with which to pack the kill. However, this man had but one horse. He was a poor man. He was very fortunate, though, for on this day he had a kill. He had cut up the meat and packed it on his horse. Also, he had left enough for a good meal for the coyotes or wolves. On the way back home, he ran into a pack of wolves. He knew the wolves were on their way to the remains of his kill. A little later, he ran into an Old Wolf, who was having a hard time keeping up with the pack. The hunter stopped and offered the choicest cut to the Old Man and told him, "By the time you get there, there may be nothing left for you to eat." As it was a cold winter and everyone was hungry, he replied, " I am in a hurry, those ahead are hungry. I need to get there because they will not start without me. You see I am the grandfather. You will receive a gift for your generosity." Later, the hunter was very fortunate in his hunting expeditions and as a result had many horses. (Bastien 36)

Recording the story – an intangible cultural heritage as narrated down generations when taken out of the cultural milieu of the native Canadian

traditions, reveals only partially the ethos. Let us attempt to read the story without any cultural input from the First Nations. The reading will go thus: A poor man hunting is understandable, but when he leaves behind the kill for the wolves and coyotes this is not understandable outside the cultural context. Why should one have to leave a kill, which he made (accomplished) to the wolves? Wolves are dangerous and need to be killed in order to escape from them.

"A little later, he ran into an Old Wolf ... the Old Man and told him...."

The shift from old wolf to old man is a transformation, which defies reason for people outside the culture. Why should someone revere an old wolf?

But the concluding sentences are more dramatic: " I am in a hurry, those ahead are hungry. I need to get there because they will not start without me. You see i am the grandfather. You will receive a gift for your generosity." Later, the hunter was very fortunate in his hunting expeditions and as a result had many horses. The fact that the animals are communicating to the man is not unreal for the First Nations; there is a continuum that permeates the existence of all life on earth. The relations cutting across species is because of the world view of the Blackfoot, who believe that there exists an interconnection among all things created on earth and that the man need not perceive the wolf or the coyote as a competitor to his hunt for his food.

The consideration of the Old Wolf for his pack, and the mutual respect the pack has for their elder reflects the mutual respect for each other. The fortune that befell the hunter for helping the

wolf pack and the concern he has shown for the Old Man is a direct benefit for his good deed and thought.

The worldview of the Blackfoot is that all creatures are interconnected. A good deed is always rewarded. Respect for other life and concern for the elders.

A Pulayar story

Once there was a young girl of the Pulayar community who has lost her parents. There was one young man from the settler community who also lost his parents. There was no one to support him. As the boy was from the settler community, the Pulayar community did not extend any support to the boy. He was also left uncared for by his own community.

Feeling sorry for the boy, this girl extended support to the boy by way of feeding him. Fearing reprisal from the elders, she chose to deliver food during the nights. One day the community elders found out this gracious act of the girl and decided to punish her as she was against the dictates of the community.

The elders threw her off a cliff. She clung to a root and pleaded for rescue. The community elders lowered her rope made of twines. When she held to the twines, they cut off their hold and allowed her to die in the abyss. Going down she shouted back that she will come back as strong wind and will destroy all those who do not respect her.

Now it is the practice of the settler community and that of the tribals to come together and pray to that girl before embarking on any

festival in their area. They have deified her.

A Tradition to follow ...

In yet another traditional activity, before embarking on any festival by the community they need to bury their differences among themselves for the better unity of the community and for the smooth functioning of the function. The community has devised a method to execute it.

The elders in the community collect water from all the families in a settlement in a huge drum in the middle of the village. The water thus collected from all the families in the village is redistributed to all the families and even the just born babies are also provided with a little drop.

This event could be recorded digitally in video, or recorded in a story. But will it be enough if it is done so? The questions now arise is what does this practice signify? Can it be replicated in another community? Why does this community do this? This takes us to the belief of that community that they all belong to one family. Differences are bound to arise. But for the common cause and for the unity of the community, they need to be united. That they are all related to one another all the minor or major differences have to be dissolved before they take up a common cause. This is not just a symbolic gesture of burying the differences, but a deep-seated belief that is brought to the conscious mind of the community in order to bury their differences.

Landscape beliefs

One more story about the nature around is the folklore of the community. There were warriors

from another community who came to occupy the hill tracts where the Pulayars were living. But they were driven away by their goddess Rakkatchiamman. The soldiers from the plains retracted, only to regroup and attack again. But when they came back reinforced with mightier force with camels and elephants, the Goddess got wild and transformed them into stones. The belief is that the present day stone formations are the cavalry of yesteryears who were turned into stone by their Goddess.

The rocks in the forest region are considered to occupy a sacred ground and we were asked to remove our shoes well before entering the area. Though this is the practice, the stories about the sacred grounds are handed over from one generation to the next. Without understanding the worldviews of the community, any event, belief, story and practice could well be branded as superstitious. But when the worldviews of the community are recorded along with the artifacts/stories, one understands the ethos with which they have created the stories, artifacts, beliefs and motifs for expression. Recording the same with the worldviews ensures better appreciation of the other culture as they are. Such a recording will also help the community to realise the potential of their own community, its genealogy and heritage. Such an understanding among the community members will ensure its transmission to the next generation, thus preserving the cultural diversity.

This draws us to the meaning part of the stories, which communicate the worldviews and ethos the community holds closer to itself. In order to understand the ethos of the target community, one needs to understand and

appreciate the values they hold.

Clyde Kluckhohn proposes the *Values Orientation Theory* in which it is stated that cross-cultural understanding and communication could be facilitated by analyzing a given culture's orientation to five key aspects of human life: Human Nature (people seen as intrinsically good, evil, or mixed); Man-Nature Relationship (the view that humans should be subordinate to nature, dominant over nature, or live in harmony with nature); Time (primary value placed on past and tradition, present and enjoyment, or future and posterity or delayed gratification); Activity (being, becoming, inner development, or doing,striving,industriousness); and Social Relations (hierarchical, collateral/collective-egalitarian, or individualistic). (Gallagher, 2001)

The basis of the Clyde Kluckhohn's Value Orientation Theory is that it may promote a better understanding of the worldview of "the other." Gallagher gives depth to this assertion we he writes:

> If we understand each other better, across cultures, we can better avoid conflict and work through our differences ... that ignorance of, or misattribution of another's values and motives, cannot possibly aid conflict resolution. To better understand each other, however, we need useful insights -- the VOM provides this insight. It helps us to understand ourselves at a new, deeper level, and it helps us to understand others. (Gallagher, 2001)

If, for instance, an Indian says *Hari Om* to you, with folded arms, it means salutations. How will you interpret it? Greetings? ... or, an equivalent of Good day or good morning? It

means more. It means that I salute the part of the whole in you. You are an indivisible part of the whole and to that I salute. It is a salutation at the spiritual level and not at the physical level. From all the above, we understand that the world views of a community which is 90% beneath the surface and subtle determines the communication, content and language, which in turn determines the tangible and intangible cultural heritages that could be digitally recorded or preserved for posterity.

This essay closes with the view that the stories are best mode of understanding the other and positively works towards conflict resolution. Recording stories along with the worldviews will be more beneficial

For a better presentation of a culture, it is not enough if one records the tangible and the intangible heritages alone in the digital mode, but also record their world views along with their stories. Emma LaRoque in her book '*Defeathering the Indian*' suggests that for effective intercultural education that students need to be consistently taught that different values, religions, systems exist and that each is viable within the context of its people, era and location. Worldviews are to be recognized as unique systems and hence they are to be incorporated while recording the visible expressions of cultures be they tangible or intangible cultural heritages.

A short note on Pulayar tribes
Pulayar of Palani Hills is one of the tribes that migrated to hill tracts in the subcontinent of India and has spread all over the hills. They have their own names for the hills. They are now

restricted to a few pockets of settlements on the fringes of the present day towns and villages. They face the same fate that is being faced by many indigenous communities around the world. Their stories and cultural identities are fast vanishing and efforts are being taken by the community elders to train their youth in the cultural traditions, stories and songs.

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