

An exploration of the value of a collaborative model of collection management for Lanna cultural material in libraries from Upper Northern Thailand

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Abstract

The Lanna region in Upper Northern Thailand has a distinct cultural heritage. Libraries have an important role to play in managing the collections of such cultural material. Yet following the management practices of developed countries may be inappropriate. Library and information professionals should encourage local people to participate in collection management to meet the needs of Lanna people and manage local knowledge. The aim of the study is to develop a model of community-based collection development model for Lanna cultural material. The research questions of the study are to explore the character and state of Lanna culture in the present day; to ask how stakeholders believe Lanna collections should be managed, in terms of authorship, ownership, organisation and access; to explore how stakeholders, such as the community, community leaders, experts on Lanna culture and librarians think cultural material should be managed; and to determine what would a collaborative model of collection development

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Introduction

Many people in the Northern part of Thailand see themselves as local or native people who have their own language, culture and traditions which are distinct from those of Siam, which dominates Thai national culture. Lanna culture is heavily influenced by Buddhism, overlaying its matriarchal roots. A good example of Lanna cultural material is the palm-leaf manuscript, an ancient form document used to record the Buddha's teaching and other important local knowledge and is seen as a very sacred form of writing.

Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) suggest that the authorship of indigenous knowledge is multiple and invested in communities not the individual or corporations. As regards ownership, indigenous knowledge has often been appropriated by developed countries as they claim the creations of developing countries as their intellectual property (Hafstein, 2004). There are organisations such as library, archives and the social research institute that collect cultural material, but some organisations ask local experts to follow Western classification systems, yet these may not respect local ordering of knowledge. Lanna cultural materials are also threatened by both the dominant national culture and forces of globalisation. Furthermore, at present, Lanna cultural materials such as palm-leaf manuscripts are dispersed within the country and abroad, making them difficult to access for local people. As regards access, Becvar and Srinivasan (2009) suggest that each community has their own beliefs and restrictions about who should access what, which collections should respect (see also Christen, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to take a culturally sensitive approach to understand and manage indigenous knowledge appropriately. The community itself should participate in the collection management process.

Aim of Study

The aim of the project is to develop a model of community-based collection development for Lanna cultural material.

Objectives of study

There are six objectives of the study which are:

1. To understand better the character and state of Lanna culture in the present day by reviewing the literature and conducting interviews with experts;
2. To explore Lanna community beliefs about their culture by observation in the field and interviews with experts;

3. To examine how do stakeholders believe Lanna collections should be managed, in terms of in terms of authorship, ownership, organisation and access by conducting interviews with local people and observation in the field;
4. To explore how this could be improved and made more participatory by conducting interview and observation in the field;
5. To examine how stakeholders (the community, community leaders, experts on Lanna culture and librarians) think it should be managed;
6. To develop guidelines for a collaborative model of collection development in libraries by conducting a focus group.

Theoretical Approach

The study draws on strands of thinking within librarianship, archival theory and museology which have been concerned with community ownership, such as the “culturally sensitive model of librarianship” (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009), the “participatory archiving” model (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007) and “Indigenous curation” (Kreps, 2005). In the last few years, library science has shown a growing interest in community-focused information services (CIS) which offer people from the community the opportunity to share in the management of their knowledge. The CIS model is premised on collaboration between librarians and indigenous people to respond with cultural sensitivity to community needs (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007).

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist worldview within a critical paradigm in order to understand the world of Lanna culture and to explore collection management in libraries. An ethnographic approach is taken in this research to study of palm-leaf manuscripts and Lanna wisdom classrooms. Case studies are used for the research design, with data being collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, photographic inventory and focus groups in three distinct phases. Thematic analysis will be used for data analysis. Triangulation, thick description and prolonged engagement in the field are strategies adopted to ensure research quality, rigour and credibility. The research raises complex ethical issues and dilemmas around the tension between respect for local beliefs and core professional values.

Initial findings

In phase 1, during April 2014, data was collected by semi-structured interview with two senior librarians, one Anthropology professor and two Lanna language experts. This phase can be considered a pilot study building an understanding of the interviewees’ thinking and feelings about the topic involving social norms and cultural meaning. The findings from Phase 1 were that Lanna is culturally pluralistic. The beliefs and practices of Buddhism are the core value of Lanna culture; they instruct individuals in a way of thinking through how to live their lives. In the past, Lanna culture has been under threat from Burma, Siam or Thailand, United Kingdom and France through territorial occupation and exploitation of its natural resource. And some aspects of Lanna culture such as use of Lanna script continue to be damaged through the Thai government’s educational priorities. In the present Lanna culture continues to be important and is being revitalized in new forms. Interviewees believed that if cultural material’s ownership cannot be identified, then it belongs to the community. For appropriate management of cultural collections in libraries, librarians realize that there is a need to be culturally sensitive, so they engage experts in managing Lanna knowledge in libraries. Yet the experts and librarians did not believe that intellectual property can truly protect their knowledge from developed countries.

Conclusion

A core issue for all libraries, archives and museums are their responsibilities in managing indigenous knowledge, in terms of collection, authorship, ownership, organisation and access. The terms of authorship and ownership need clarifying respecting local understandings of these concepts. As regards organisation, classification of materials must be done with the needs of local people in mind. Collections should also pay respect to the community’s culture, traditions and beliefs, which may involve restrictions on access rights to indigenous knowledge. In addition, libraries and other institutions need to make sure that indigenous knowledge will be represented to the public in the form and manner the indigenous community wish and should not be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the public. It is central

that collection management processes requires active participation from local people. Becvar and Srinivasan (2009) and Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) have created models raising librarians', archivists' and curators' awareness of indigenous peoples' voices. Yet there is no simple predetermined collection management model which fits every local community, it needs to be defined based on each community's cultural characteristics. This study will engage the Lanna community to ensure appropriate collection management occurs in the relevant libraries. Participation of indigenous people will lead to a better understanding of Lanna culture and preservation of Lanna knowledge in the context of globalization.

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1. Collaborative methods
2. Direct indigenous involvement
3. Ensuring appropriateness
4. Establishing the "right" kind of research relationship
5. Ownership of the project (goals and products)

Table 1. A culturally sensitive model for collaborative LIS research

Adapted from Becvar & Srinivasan (2009, p. 432)

1. **Community centric methods**
2. **Meet the need of indigenous people**
3. Ensuring appropriateness
4. Establishing the "right" kind of research relationship
5. Ownership of the project (goals and products)

Table 2. Adapted approach to be taken in the research

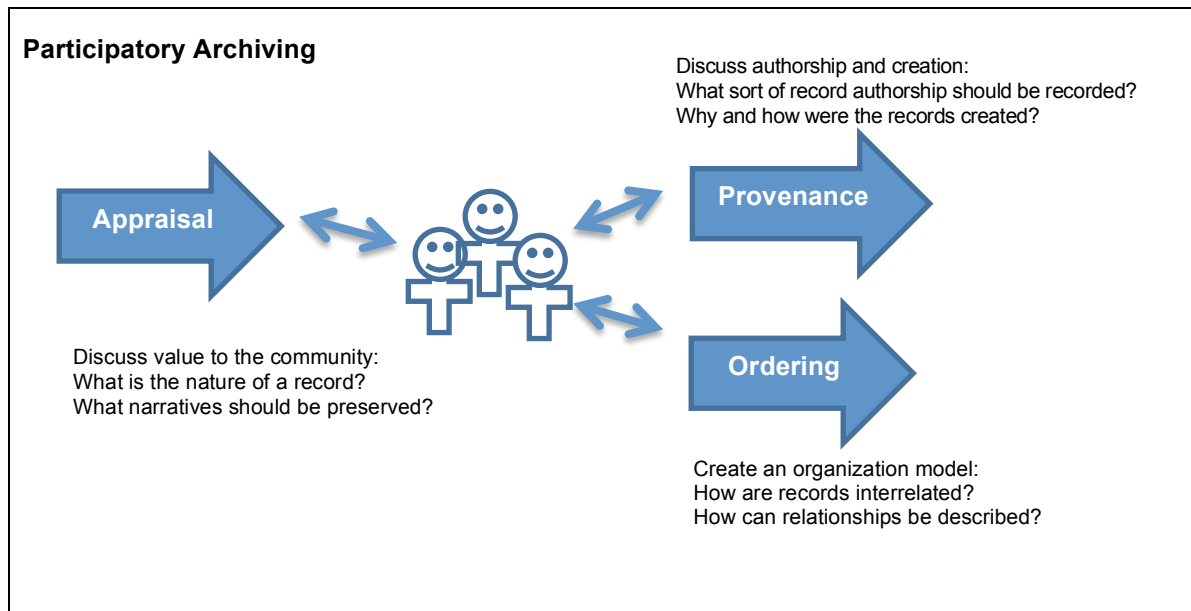


Figure 1. Participatory archiving model
Adapted from Shilton & Srinivasan (2007, p. 98)