

# Perspectives on Safeguarding Indigenous Knowledge and Intangible Cultural Heritage

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## ABSTRACT

This proposed workshop aims to explore and share viewpoints on contentious matters concerning using ICT in the safeguarding of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). As organizers we have formed long lasting partnerships with indigenous communities and are frequently situated in these dialogical situations where topics such as ICT, cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge are debated. With this workshop we intend to give the opportunity to discuss contentious issues of research impact among members of three groups: indigenous people that are contributing to, and affected by, research on IK; invited community-based co-designers and local researchers; and the organizers. Participants will identify and discuss crucial topics around impact and ethics of IK research. We intend to collect viewpoints and arguments on how sensitive research in indigenous communities is to be carried out in order to meet the approval of actors from all three groups. We conclude by drafting a plan to implement suggested actions.

## KEYWORDS

Community-based Co-design, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Knowledge, Afrocentric, Research Ethics

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## 1 BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Rationale

As organizers we have formed long lasting partnerships with indigenous communities and are frequently situated in these dialogical situations where topics such as ICT, cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge are debated. Whenever outsiders enter a community to document, preserve, uplift, improve, modernize, or make economically feasible some long-standing aspect of community life

and tradition they change the objects and subjects of their investigation. Apart from the desired consequences of such projects which might or might not materialize, unexpected and often negative side effects all but destroy whatever positive impact might have been their original intention. For researchers working with indigenous communities a high level of sensitivity towards their own role in the process and the possible repercussions of their work, is to be expected. This particularly applies to endeavours documenting and preserving the way in which community members interact.

Every perceptible research activity in an indigenous community produces feedback in the target group. Paul Watzlawick's famous first axiom of communication theory "One cannot not communicate" and its corollary "one cannot not influence" [10] dictates that any outside interference can and will alter the dynamics of the group. Not too long ago and in the context of a Namibian, Otjiherero-speaking, indigenous group, well-nigh comparable to the ones we are targeting with our workshop, a researcher observed and documented how he became the object of tribal politics. [5, pp. 64-66] He did nothing more than installing himself near the community as a data sink for historical facts.

The amount of force warranted to safeguard African IK and CH has been a matter of fierce discussion and controversy. Some authors, e.g. [4], argue for a digitization of African IK considering that it is tacitly kept in people's heads and thus difficult to record, transfer and disseminate. [4] supports the idea of codifying African IK in any format such as in electronic, print, audio and video to be accessible on the global infrastructure.

Others argue for a digitization exclusively in line with local epistemologies without introducing new outside means of representation. Thus they postulate that an oral culture should only be digitized by technologies supporting their orality, and not according to the logic of the researchers' writing system. [1, p. 24] Even then, however, the sheer acts of observing, participating, recording, providing and introducing technology, teaching computer literacy, and writing academic articles, have their effects, most of which we cannot currently foresee.

However, sensitivity and preservation do not need to exclude each other if the likely effects are discussed and pondered in advance, and if the target community is aware of the impact and approves researchers' interventions. Oral knowledge transfer today is inhibited by the development of a 'skip generation' [1, p. 11] of people moving to urban centers and thus not participating in song, dance, and mime. Oral knowledge repositories already become diminished by deaths of knowledge bearers. The only wholly sensitive approach: To not influence communities at all by letting

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oral traditions disappear completely, is not in the expressed interest of the communities.

The objective of the workshop is to share different viewpoints on important contentious issues surrounding safeguarding of IK and ICH. Specifically, the workshop will unpack three issues:

- (1) We are currently conceptualizing the digitization of Ovaherero praises, most of which are performed, not written. Will a textual representation help preserve them, or will it infringe upon cultural practice? Will a published video recording help disseminate oral history and culture, or will it make visiting elders and attending cultural festivals less frequent? And if both effects are likely, is the envisaged outcome net positive or negative?
- (2) Another issue is the position of the IK holder in the safeguarding process. This issue aims to address whether the IK holder is regarded as an informant or as an equal partner in the research process, constructing the technology and knowledge creation. In which way can an afrocentric perspective [7] influence existing research paradigm redefining roles, methods and values?
- (3) An further ongoing debate has been the issue of introducing emerging digital technologies as human–technological constructs for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Current trends of ICH have leveraged augmented, mixed and virtual realities, which have proven to be of entertaining value and able to re–construct no longer existing objects and practices. On one hand, making ICH appealing to indigenous youths can be pursued using ICT, see e.g. [8]. ICH as a lived/performed set of values and practices, traditionally dynamic and adaptive to a contemporary world, must remain meaningful if not replaced by other ways of living. Yet when opening up for hybridization by introducing digital technologies, often in direct collaboration with ontologically different world–views and the liberalization of modalities, it becomes a question between idealism and realism, and its effects on indigenous communities and their own ICH. [9]

## 1.2 Goals

This workshop will allow community members as well as participants to outline how they perceive the safeguarding of IK within their contextual setting. The ambition is for colleagues who might not be fully familiar with the societal impact of research in indigenous communities, or have contentious matters of their own, to become engaged in talks with indigenous community members from Namibia. The goal will be to share the different viewpoints surrounding the contentious issues that are mentioned above. The participants will be given an opportunity to learn and understand the viewpoints of indigenous participants within a dialogue setting. We embrace Bohm’s theory of dialogue [3] of the mindset of freely allowing people to listen to each other, suspend their pre–conceived personal assumptions so as not to influence each other. It is vital and mutually beneficial for community members to express their concerns to a group of listeners, who in turn can share their concerns based on their past experiences gained through work or reading.

The outcome we hope to achieve is a collection of viewpoints and arguments on how sensitive research in indigenous communities is to be carried out in order to meet the approval of actors from all three groups, from which—likewise during the workshop—a plan is drafted to implement the suggested actions.

## 2 ORGANIZERS

Thus far, the organizers of the workshop have been co–designing technology as well as facilitating and conducting various technological interventions with rural communities. The community–based co–design (CBCD) approach which the organizers have been using [2][11] ensures that the technologies involve the IK holders’ voices as well as their values and views. [6] As such, each organizer will be tasked to demonstrate the setup used during the past engagements with the community members.

The workshop will be facilitated by the following research team members:

- Mr Colin Stanley, a lecturer at Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), has focused on Afrocentrism and community–based co–design of crowdsourcing applications for safeguarding IK.
- Mr Peter Gallert, a computer science lecturer at NUST, investigates changes in content and representation of oral knowledge repositories. He is Wikipedia’s ambassador to Namibia and publishes on Wikipedia’s relationship with indigenous communities and their knowledge repositories, as well as the online encyclopedia’s systemic bias against non–Western epistemologies.
- Dr Kasper Rodil, an assistant professor based at Aalborg University, Denmark. Since 2010, he has been engaged with co–designing digital systems together with indigenous groups for the digitization and protection of intangible cultural heritage.

## 3 WEBSITE

The call of participation will be presented on the website of the affiliated research cluster, [www.indiknowtech.nust.na](http://www.indiknowtech.nust.na).

## 4 WORKSHOP

### 4.1 Pre–Workshop Plans

Some indigenous community members who have been working with the researchers in the past years will be invited to the workshop. The indigenous community invitees are:

- Mr Uariaike Mbinge from the Ovahimba community. He is from Otjisa, a village situated in the Northern part of Namibia, in the Kunene region. Mr Mbinge has been involved in co–designing a crowdsourcing system for the past five years. During that time he has shared his concerns on the preservation of IK and ICH, and co–authored several publications with the workshop organizers.
- Mr Marabo Kazongominja is a well–known journalist and author in the Otjiherero speaking communities attached to the Otjiherero radio station. One of his mandates is to collect and disseminate IK to interested listeners and readers through the radio and other more traditional means such as

at cultural gatherings and events. He will share his concerns he encountered during his time connected to the Otjiherero speaking communities.

- Ms Kileni Fernandu is a !Xung San speaker from Tsumkwe–West Omatako Valley. She is a co-founder of the ||Ana–Djeh San Trust which is a San youth organization based in Windhoek. Currently, Ms Fernandu is coordinating the work of a San organization based in Windhoek called *The Namibian San Council* (NSC).

As for the conference participants, there will be an open call for position papers where interested people will outline their concerns on contentious issues that they have experienced or read about.

## 4.2 Participants

Participants will be selected and accepted based on the position paper submitted which is due on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2018. The acceptance notification due date is the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2018. As we are targeting people whose level of literacy is not known and not important for participating, we will accept audio and audiovisual submissions as well as written contributions.

The position “paper” consists of three sections, each about 300 words (or 5 spoken minutes) long. The first section of the position paper should cover biography and background of the participant. This includes their current engagement in the field of IK and ICH safeguarding. Alternatively, a motivation should be provided in a case where the applicant has not been engaged with rural communities or in the safeguarding of IK or ICH but would like to participate in the workshop.

The second section is for the participant to show contentious issues they have experienced. The issues should be around practices and involvement the participant had with rural communities. Alternatively, issues identified in the literature should be expanded upon.

The third section is for the participant to position themselves in relation to the issues or general approach to the digital safeguarding of IK and ICH.

The organizers will choose a maximum of 10 participants based on their submissions, and in particular how they position their involvement with communities and their academic view on the topic at hand.

## 4.3 Workshop structure

### 4.3.1 Context.

### 4.3.2 Tasks and Activities.

The following activities are planned:

- (1) Introduction and welcoming [60 minutes]
  - (a) Welcoming remarks by the organisers to the community members and participants
  - (b) A brief introduction of the purpose of the workshop
  - (c) Individual introduction of the participants and their background
- (2) Theme selection [30 minutes]
  - (a) Collectively agree on the themes of the workshop, to be identified through the position papers and other suggestions

- (b) Themes will be displayed on the wall, and participants will decide on the level of precedence. Five themes deemed most favourite are to be selected.
  - (c) The themes will be ranked, and 5–6 favourites will be selected
- (3) Consensus meeting [90 minutes]
- (a) Depending on the number of participants and themes chosen, formation of subgroups might be required. The rules for the consensus meeting are explained.
  - (b) The theme is briefly explained by one of the organizers.
  - (c) Each participant will get five minutes to state their viewpoint. This is based on the themes decided in activity 2.
  - (d) Each community member will be granted an unlimited opportunity to state their viewpoints based on their vast perceptions in safeguarding their IK and ICH.
  - (e) Consensus agreement on the different viewpoints
- (4) Way forward [90 minutes]
- (a) The organizers, community members and participants engage in a collaborative focus group discussion for one hour. This discussion is to share, review and collect practices on how these themes can be managed.
  - (b) Suggest possible techniques and methods on how this concerns will be attempted and resolved. Design outcome and propose a possible future community engagement to help researchers in future negotiate the issues with communities.
  - (c) draft a work plan for future

Since some community members only speak Otjiherero, there will be a two-way translation from English to Otjiherero.

**4.3.3 Timing.** The workshop will run for half a day. The workshop will start at 09H00 and end at 15H00. There will be a half-hour tea break before activity 3, and a one-hour lunch break before activity 4.

**4.3.4 Resources.** The workshop will be held at the conference venue. The invited community members introduced in section 4.1 will design the workshop room in a setup familiar to IK bearers, and conducive of group discussion. The style of the workshop will thus not be in presentation form beyond the initial opening and introduction of the participants. During the introduction, some technology currently used in IK preservation by participating researchers will be demonstrated, for instance Virtual Reality applications.

## 4.4 Post-Workshop Plans

The workshop will gather information on:

- (1) Perceptions of safeguarding IK and ICH
- (2) Different perspectives on the contentious issues
- (3) Collective themes
- (4) Suggestions on acceptable methods for IK preservation and representation
- (5) The participants’ learning and understanding

A summary of experiences and findings encountered during the workshop to be written in a workshop report. All workshop sessions will be recorded for further processing. Various tools for recording audio and video will be used. After the workshop we will invite

participants to become co-authors on a collective paper and/or journal article from the information gathered at the workshop.

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