Tribal Archives is Self-Determination


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During the 1970s and 1980s, many anthropologists, archivists, librarians, and museum professionals tried to define what Tribal Archives are. Published writings from this time typically defined and described Tribal Archives from a colonial perspective and practice. Similarly, John Fleckner’s Native American Archives: An Introduction supplies the same western ideology in defining Tribal Archives.

In chapter 1, “What is a Tribal Archives?”, Fleckner defines Tribal Archives as “a body of materials permanently retained because it contains historically valuable information for the tribe and tribal members” (p. 1). Clearly, this is an accurate definition of archives. Fleckner supports this statement by defining what an archives is and its purpose for accessibility, acquisition of collections, and physical preservation. Moreover, Fleckner highlights how archives benefit Tribal communities in two main areas:

First, [a tribal archives] contributes to better administration of tribal government by promoting more efficient management of information and by helping to protect the legal rights of the tribe and its members. Second, it is an essential part of efforts to understand and preserve tribal history and heritage.” (p. 1)

Fleckner supports this statement by defining the many actions Tribal Archives must take to fulfill these two areas. Chapter 1 continues to suggest how archives will help Tribal communities care for their administrative papers by implementing a record management program and applying archives methods toward cultural preservation.
Next, Fleckner addresses basic archival fundamentals in Chapter 2, including suggestions to Tribal communities on where their archives should be managed. Chapter 2 also focuses on what an Archivist is and what roles they may play in Tribal Archives, including the proper security, storage, and handling of archival collections—all the same information and practices professional archivists are informed of through graduate school and trained to implement within western archival institutions. Presently, many emerging archivists may look to Fleckner’s booklet to get insight on Tribal archival practices, including the care and management of Tribal Information. Unfortunately, the goal of Fleckner’s *Native American Archives: An Introduction* is to supply guidelines for how western archives can support Tribal communities in their archival endeavors and does not emphasize Tribal archival practices.

Western archives practices are a foreign documentation concept among Tribal communities. Historically, western archival theories stem from building knowledge through documentation that “attest facts and acts, and . . . their trustworthiness is dependent upon the circumstances of their generation and preservation.” This leads to the second archival theory of authenticity, which is “contingent on the facts of creation, maintenance, and custody. Archives are authentic only when they are created with the need to act through them in mind and when they are preserved and maintained as faithful witness of fact and act by the creator and its legitimate successor.” Modern archival theory continues to support these concepts through provenance, respect des fonds, and original order. Western archival methodologies correlate with and support western culture’s dependence on documentation. During the Age of Discovery, explorers perceived Indigenous people as lacking proper written records, which led foreigners to conquer the Indigenous people’s livelihood through documentation by developing written laws and policies, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and the Indian Removal Act. Contrary to foreigners’ perception, Indigenous communities have long been documenting their historical and cultural accounts very differently than the western world of books, paper, audiovisual materials, and photographs. Indigenous recordkeeping takes various forms, such as wood etchings, paintings on buffalo hide, basketmaking, pottery, clothing, and even belts like the Wampum belt from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

The many catastrophic events Tribal communities endured led western explorers to believe Indigenous people would be completely exterminated by the 1900s. This vanishing race theory led to an urgency for anthropologists, ethnographers, and travelers to capture Indigenous culture in real time, yet again, through documentation. These individuals, like Edward Curtis, began their expedition to document Indigenous history and culture with or without consent from Tribal communities, including their ceremonial songs, ceremonial clothing, prayers, and so on. The enforcement of written literacy forced Tribal communities to relinquish

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their oral literacy practices. This forced assimilation to the western education system, in later years, led Tribal communities to discover traditional knowledge and cultural practices documented through books, audiovisual materials, and photographs from the historical past. Tribal communities became aware of the cultural value this information held for revitalization efforts of their culture and language for their communities. However, it also brought to light western institutions’ mismanagement of accessibility and stewardship of Indigenous cultural information. These improper practices violate Tribal cultural values and protocols, thus resulting in Tribal communities’ archives design for archival autonomy.

Fleckner briefly expresses some valid key points in the contribution of western archives to Tribal cultural preservation. For example, Tribal communities can use archives by reversing the dictation of western institutions in the management of information, thus leading to self-determination (p. 5). Fleckner mentions that Tribal self-determination can include the retelling of the inaccuracies of Tribal history narratives. This form of self-determination led to the restoration era of Native American Information, which Jennifer O’Neal describes as “a quest to assert and reclaim their [tribal communities] sovereignty.”3 The restoration era that O’Neal describes also includes the “focus on Native American religious and cultural practices rights.”4 This focus led to the development of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM).

Since the Society of American Archivists’ endorsement of PNAAM, western institutions have shown a much greater interest in Tribal Archives. This interest and eagerness to implement PNAAM has led many western archival professionals to want to provide training programs to help Tribal communities develop their own archives. As an Indigenous archivist with an upbringing in Traditional Knowledge cultural protocols, the issue I see with most of these training programs is that they still emphasize western archival methodologies and lack Indigenous cultural significance concerning Indigenous historical and cultural information. In my experience training and working with Tribal communities, including my own, I have heard many community members call out the lack of Indigenous cultural significance and cultural community protocols within western training programs, including the lack of Indigenous archivist representation. Due to western culture’s deceptonal past, Tribal communities are more receptive to Indigenous persons. It is imperative for western institutions to employ Indigenous members as Tribal Archivist Liaisons and allow Indigenous Archivists to care for and manage Indigenous archival materials. There is no denying that Tribal communities are seeing the benefits archives attribute to their cultural identity, sovereignty, and history; however, Tribal communities do see disparities when applying western archival concepts. The discrepancies point to provenance, respect de fonds, copyright, ownership, description, and accessibility.

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4 O’Neal, “‘The Right to Know,’” 12.
PNAAM has created challenging and inconvenient situations for western institutions that hope to find a centralized approach in the care and management of Indigenous materials. Unfortunately, I am here to say a centralized approach is unforeseeable. Tribal communities share commonalities in values and sovereignty, but each community’s cultural belief system and governance are different. Similarly, each Tribal community’s archival method is nonidentical to its neighboring community. Tribal Archives share commonalities in the mission and purpose of cultural preservation, revitalization, activism, advocacy, and awareness. The definition of Tribal Archives and its practices can only be defined by the Tribal community. In fact, many Tribal communities are slowly transitioning and replacing the word “archives” with a more culturally significant term for their community, such as memory keepers, traditional knowledge keepers, cultural centers, heritage centers, and so on. Although decolonial constructs of western practices within Tribal Archives are being applied, communities are using a western framework of collection management policies as a template for procedural consistencies; preservation applications of books, photographs, papers, audiovisual materials, and facilities storage conditions; and disaster preparedness.

The decolonization of archival structure and functionality that many Tribal communities are implementing reflects a community archives approach. Community archives refers to “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control.” Tribal communities believe cultural information is community owned and is property of the people, unlike the western approach of information as an individual’s property and right. This individualistic ownership makes it difficult for Tribal Archives to apply the provenance theory and respect des fonds to cultural information under western arrangement. The provenance theory applies appropriately among contemporary Indigenous collections by Indigenous artists, activists, federal government documents, and Tribal council or administration papers. Nonetheless, provenance has its ties to the western laws of copyright and intellectual property, which affect Tribal cultural property, stewardship, and sovereignty. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) did set the stage for repatriation among museums, but it does not address the stewardship of the documentation of Indigenous information. The shortcomings of NAGPRA and the western law of intellectual property led many Tribal communities to develop policies that reflect Indigenous Data Sovereignty and repatriation considerations for all Indigenous information and research in libraries and archives, including scientific data gathering and medical research projects involving Tribal communities.

Lastly, western descriptions of Indigenous information in libraries and archives are not accessible for Tribal communities to find their cultural information. Western

descriptions are guided by the principles of authority control, generating a centralized approach for western research. Authority control supports the western culture of written literacy and research methodologies. Simultaneously, the historical descriptions and narration written at the time of documentation raise concerns for Indigenous communities. Many historical documentations hold derogatory descriptions and narration of Indigenous communities, creating a dehumanizing quality toward and erasure of Indigenous communities’ identities, cultures, and histories. This had led Tribal communities to construct descriptions to reflect their culture and traditional knowledge, including the retelling of accurate historical accounts, and to inform the world “we are still here.” Furthermore, the accessibility and management of digital collections are a growing concern for Tribal communities.

Western content management systems, such as CONTENTdm, Omeka, and DSpace, make it difficult to restrict non-Tribal members’ access to digital collections with cultural information and create a community-driven platform. Platforms like Mukurtu supply more cultural responsiveness that many Tribal communities need regarding restrictive accessibility, cultural respectfulness, and reciprocity for their community. Mukurtu supports this community-driven approach by allowing Tribal members to contribute to their community’s digital collection. Other examples include the collaboration between federal government repositories and Tribal institutions in making documents such as treaties, Bureau of Indian Affairs School records, and Census records more accessible. Moreover, cultural and community-focused platforms help western institutions in the reparative descriptions of their collections and allow Tribal communities to retell their history from the voice of the community.

I have discussed some of the contributions that Tribal community members make toward their archival institutions, but many people may wonder what role the archivist plays in Tribal community archives. Tribal Archivists will have more responsibilities than western Archivists. Tribal Archivists are still considered trained experts in the management and preservation of historical and cultural records and documents. However, the distinct roles placed upon Tribal Archivists include acting as educators, liaisons, and facilitators for their community. The western culture of documentation has generated much mistrust and suspicion among Tribal communities toward western institutions. Indigenous people’s distrust toward documentation derives from Spanish conquerors, United States Indian policies affecting their livelihood, western explorers’ historical documentation of culture, and the unethical research of Tribal data gathering from western institutions. As a result, Tribal Archivists must play a role as educators in repairing and healing their Tribal community’s relationship toward documentation, thus proving, informing, and assuring their Tribal communities that their information is respectfully shared and accessible to their community, and allowing them to have a voice in the management of their information.
Tribal Archivists’ liaison responsibilities are to ensure their community’s Indigenous Data Sovereignty is upheld in western archival relationships and partnerships. As the trained archivist for their community, Tribal Archivists take on archival leadership roles to support their community’s archives mission, goals, and objectives; including strategically integrating archival collections and continuation of their Indigenous Knowledge Systems through community engagement and programming. The duties of a Tribal Archivist will also include being the facilitator and event planner for their community’s involvement in collection gathering, descriptions, and archival policies. Tribal Archivists do not work for one institution or department, as is the case with Fleckner’s recommendations or the model of western archives. Tribal Archivists work and report to their community on all archival-related matters and are driven by their community’s needs. The archives’ collective voice includes elders, Tribal leaders, spiritual leaders, teachers, family members, and so on.

Fleckner had good intentions and strongly advocated for western archives methodologies for Tribal Archives, but it is a western enforcement approach Tribal Nations know too well and have endured throughout history. Tribal communities have made attempts to apply western archival practices that were not conducive to their social and cultural belief structures, cultural values, philosophies, traditional knowledge, and Indigenous Knowledge systems. Tribal Archives have come a long way since Fleckner’s article, and Fleckner is correct in saying Tribal communities can use archives for their self-determination. But it is evident that Tribal Archives have proven this self-determination through a community archives framework—a cultural framework defined by the holistic foundation of the Tribal Nation’s cultural belief structure, kinship, traditional knowledge philosophies, governance, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and Indigenous Knowledge systems.