



Living Cultural Storybases

Nurturing the oral heritage of minority cultures in a digital world



LIVING CULTURAL STORYBASES:

New technologies can strengthen the oral traditions of endangered minority cultures, if they provide appropriable systems that support a dialogue in the local language linked to content. Many anthropologists or artists over the years have collected some of the rich stories from elders of tribal communities - 'last chances to preserve' the oral heritage for outsiders. We want to go further, to create *Living Cultural Storybases* for the communities themselves. **Living Cultural Storybases are vibrant and accessible evolving digital repositories of cultural information that offer a means to gather, search, connect and access the cultural life of a community.** Spoken stories and visual material should be accessible by old and young alike, so they can record and contribute further content and better understand their own identity within the context of their unique cultural system. This core of cultural material becomes the seed to stimulate community conversations about their own heritage and the development choices they face.

THE CHALLENGE

"It's like standing by watching the destruction of the ancient library at Alexandria, without trying to put out the fire."
(Bruce Batchelor)

The 370 million indigenous peoples, rooted to a particular place by history, legend, and language, represent only about 5% of the Earth's population but more than one half of the intellectual legacy of humanity- its languages and cultures. Yet it is these same people who are the most marginalized, fractured and least represented in society: they are virtually being swept away by poverty, disease, conflict, land appropriation and inappropriate technology. For every group dispossessed, urbanized or assimilated, a culture vanishes taking with it ancient knowledge of the environment, unique ways of living, alternative belief systems, irreplaceable skills, artistry and stories - the rich diversity of humanity. Up until now, the digital revolution, rather than creating a "global village", has accelerated this worldwide cultural demise. ICT access is scant and inappropriate for indigenous people, while content is dominated by languages, interests and ideologies of the largest economic blocks.

AIM: Self-Empowering Narratives

These same technologies causing the "digital divide" could nurture indigenous languages and cultures. Until now ICT initiatives have addressed the immediate developmental needs, rarely even acknowledging minority languages or traditions. 'Living Cultural Storybases' seeks to go further: facilitating appropriate, two-way access for all community members to gather and share cultural knowledge through spoken stories. Storytelling is at the heart of social life and personal identity. The recounting of oral narratives plays a vital role in maintaining ethnic identity and group solidarity. They encapsulate the deeper beliefs and values of a culture, promoting role models (heroes) and morals, ways of living, behaving and believing. Stories have social functions, representing the collective memory of the people, combining the past with present and attaching meaning to space and time.

The Living Cultural Storybases' aim to *'nurture the oral heritage of minority cultures in a digital world'* will be realized through balancing two approaches: social and technical. We will:

- a) **Develop trustworthy and participatory methodologies** that engage and empower dispersed communities and displaced members to embrace, grow and re-interpret their traditional narratives. This includes strengthening a sense of cultural identity, motivating youth pride in their cultural inheritance and promoting the intergenerational transmission of oral heritage, community dialogue and decision making in their own language.
- b) **Evolve a generalizable technology** which provides appropriate, secure, two-way access for the entire population around a dynamic database architecture for storing and sharing their own stories. The system should reflect and respect the culture, through the database's ontology, role-based access and protection of their intellectual property. Two-way spoken access will be via devices that are appropriate and easy-to-use within the community setting, thus encouraging further contributions and discourse. In the long term, we propose 'Virtual Cultural Networks': intranets that minority cultures can appropriate and manage, within which narratives are only one type of private resource.

'A culture survives when it has enough confidence in its past and enough say in its future to maintain its spirit and essence through all the changes it will inevitably undergo.' (Wade Davis).



OUR TENETS

- Cultural diversity is as precious as biodiversity
- Culture is experienced and enacted – it's *lived*, it can't be 'preserved' like an artefact
- Cultures are not static, they evolve
- Stories are at the heart of a culture, once the stories are no longer re-told, the culture is dead
- The communities must own the process and its pace: a bottom-up approach, not top-down
- Outsiders can only facilitate - bringing a global perspective and extracting the general principles and tools which can help nurture other minority cultures

JOIN US !

We are interested in talking with possible partner communities and experts in specific oral cultures, potential technology component providers, volunteers with relevant skills or experience and sponsors: Contact information: info@storybases.org website: <http://www.storybases.org>

CORE TEAM:

Paul Rankin (UK)

- Founder, fund raiser and technology architect of project, 'Voices in Your Hand', see <http://voices.stanford.edu> and p.25 of http://www.philips.com/assets/Downloadablefile//SAR2005_screen-15318.pdf
- Previously senior Research Fellow with Philips Electronics: 40 patents and numerous international publications from 36 years project leadership in diverse scientific domains, interactive multimedia and community facilitation.
- Winston Churchill Trust Fellow: studying 'Cultural Impact of Internet on Tribal Communities'
- Reuters 'Digital Vision' Fellow at Stanford University, USA

Nicolas Villaume (France)

- Founder of 'Conversations with the World', see <http://www.conversationsdumonde.net/>
- Photographer and Project leader of current 'Voices of the Andes' exhibitions in Bolivia, Peru and Paris (Alliance Francais & UNESCO sponsored), see <http://voixdesandes.blogspot.com/>
- Online publisher & development director for international media groups

Sarah Edwards (UK)

- Consultant Ethnobotanist, Medical Anthropologist and Bioinformaticist e.g. to Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.
- Technical expert in indigenous knowledge and database design
- Researcher at Centre for Pharmacognosy & Phytotherapy, Univ. of London
- NGO experience, participatory working with marginalized peoples. Personally invited by remote Australian Aboriginal peoples to collaborate on ethnobiology project for community use. See http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/ik/pdf/IEK_Audit_Report24_06_04.pdf

Muki Hansteen-Izora (USA)

- Former staff and board president for the NGO 'Plugged-In', providing IT for underprivileged groups, see <http://www.pluggedin.org>
- Over 10 years as facilitator of multi-lateral partnerships in 'bottom of the pyramid' technology opportunities bringing together communities, corporations, NGOs and other stakeholders – partners included Cisco, Sun, HP, IBM, Americorps, United Way
- Expert in Distance Learning Technology, especially new digital audio media for health education.
- Consultant on the 'digital divide' e.g. on the social impact evaluation of HP's e-Village initiatives,
- Consultant 'Voices in Your Hand' on community engagement & participatory production of two-way interactive content/services

Robin Hansteen-Izora (USA)

- BA in Cultural Anthropology focusing on using story as a form of cultural resistance.
- MA in Education from Stanford University: focus on Social Studies, Language and Literacy
- A decade of teaching and work in under-served populations in the US.
- Contributor & active participant in multiple NGO's focused on youth development in minority populations
- Participant in HP's digital village initiative as the first school site selected to integrate new technologies in the classrooms of disadvantaged school populations.

