



Edgardo Civallero

Sheltering voices

Sheltering voices

Edgardo Civallero

This text was published on Princh Library Blog

© Edgardo Civallero, 2021.

Distribuido como *pre-print* bajo licencia Creative Commons by-nc-nd 4.0

"Bibliotecario". <https://www.bibliotecario.org/>

Sheltering voices

Much of Abya Yala's traditional knowledge has been elaborated, expressed and transmitted through oral channels and other "unconventional" means of coding and distributing knowledge: painted cloth and pieces of bark, textiles of all kinds, tattoos and body painting, body, songs, choreographic representations, designs on basketry and ceramics, masks, games of thread... Those media are labeled "unconventional" by the dominant standard perspectives, used to certain forms and materials that are practically "normative" to store and disseminating knowledge. But from a non-dominant, non-hegemonic or standardized point of view, they have been perfectly fulfilling their functions for generations.

Of all of them, orality is probably the most important channel. One through which the greatest amount of information is still transmitted, even within fully literate and urban societies – a fact that clearly delinks orality from the stereotypical image of being something rural and typical of illiterate groups.

In order to "rescue" information from such a form of transmission –considered unstable and, therefore, unreliable–, it has been encoded by means of some type of writing. However, doing so is not without problem. On the one hand, because in some cases –e.g. a good number of indigenous languages– there are no standardized writing systems to reliably write and/or print such contents. And, on the other hand, because,

even if there are alphabets, a good part of the information transmitted orally is lost when it is transcribed.

Hence the importance of audio libraries: places that, although including written documents in their collections, emphasize the role of sound in the transmission of knowledge.

In Latin America, a handful of diverse projects labeled as "audio libraries" have been launched and are maintained, seeking, each in their own way, to preserve sounds of different types. Including those that collect and reflect traditional knowledge.

Among such projects, probably one of the most recognized for the quality of its work is the National Music Library of Mexico (Fonoteca Nacional de México, FNM). Operating since 2008, the first of its kind on the continent and currently dependent on the National Secretariat of Culture, the FNM contains numerous collections related to the history of the country in general, and with its many rural and indigenous societies in particular.

The National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, CDI) maintains a similar space, although more focused on multimedia. In the documents preserved in its audiovisual collections, expressions in native languages are collected; many of them are freely shared through their website.

Without leaving Mexican lands, the civil association Ruta del Venado is developing an online audio library with vocabulary from the largest possible number of the 62 aboriginal languages recognized in the country. The project, which has been running since March 2014, is promoted by Ricardo Ibarra, founder of Radio Indígena. Its participants and collaborators visit rural communities across the country and record words and phrases from the lips of local speakers and storytellers. One of the main objectives of Ruta del Venado is to bring those words and phrases closer to those young people who, due to the strong discrimination they suffer in Mexico (the same that exists in the rest of the continent), are uprooted (sometimes out of their own shame, sometimes because of what they see in their elders) of their indigenous past.

A slightly different way to create an audio library is by recording videos. So does "68 voces, 68 corazones" (68 voices, 68 hearts), a series of animated indigenous stories, narrated in their native language, and created in 2013 by Gabriela Badillo and the producer Combo under the premise "Nobody can love what they don't know." The videos collect the sounds of languages such as Huasteco, Mixtec, Totonaco, Ch'ol, Seri, Paipai, Otomí or Mazatec, and are freely distributed through digital platforms such as Vimeo.

A little further south, the Mesoamerican Network of Indigenous, Garifuna and Feminist Community Radios (Red Mesoamericana de Radios Comunitarias Indígenas, Garifunas y Feministas, Honduras and Guatemala) maintains a virtual audio library in which it offers some of its digitized radio broadcasts. The value of this audio library lies in the community nature of the information it disseminates, and in that of its participants:

ethnic and social groups that have little visibility in other spaces and, therefore, have to create their own ones.

This review would be incomplete without one of the most popular initiatives in recent times: " De agua, viento y verdor. Paisajes sonoros, cantos y relatos indígenas para niños y niñas" (On water, wind and greenery. Soundscapes, songs and indigenous stories for boys and girls.) It is a proposal for an "audio library" of the Ministry of Culture of Colombia, supported by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF) and materialized by Fundalectura.

This audio library is, in reality, a book with striking yellow covers, accompanied by nine CDs. In one and the other, nine indigenous Colombian languages are included, all of them in the brink of extinction for various reasons, among which are, as expected, the Colombian armed conflict and the subsequent human displacement.

The peoples included are the Etté Ennaka or Chimila, the Wiwa, the Sáliba, the Ñihamwo or Yagua, the Kokama or Omagua, the Korébahü or Coreguaje, the Kamëntsá or Camsá, the Awá or Cuaiquer and the Embera Chamí.

This is the first experience of its kind developed in Colombia: one that has made it possible to collect oral expressions, transcribe them and translate them into Spanish, allowing the elders of the different peoples to speak so that they could freely transmit their memories and knowledge. The work is aimed above all at a children's audience, and is intended to bring a compendium of sounds and images through Colombia (and

beyond): bilingual songs and stories, illustrations, photographs, games... But also nine different soundscapes: those who cradle the cultures reflected in the "audio library".

Throughout human history, the spoken (or sung) word has been the main form of expression and transmission of knowledge. Today it remains so, millennia after its appearance, in a world of written documents and powerful and omnipresent digital media. If the Latin American memory conservation centers (libraries, archives, etc.) intend to serve as such, they must urgently consider the creation of audio libraries or media libraries, and the development and sponsorship of collection programs of all types of oral tradition. Because a good part of the memories of Latin America still travel through oral channels. And for many Abya Yala cultures, these channels have become a kind of last refuge: one constantly threatened by silence.

Picture

Project "68 voces, 68 corazones" from Mexico.
<https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/reinounido/images/stories/2017/Abril/68voces1.jpg>

