

Indigenous Librarianship

Profile of an Indigenous Melanesian librarian

Mr Robbin Kemmo Aua

Mr Robbin Kemmo Aua was born on the 28th of March 1948 in Mariki village in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. Third in a family of twelve children, he started primary education at the London Missionary Society School in his province. His secondary education was completed at Koaru Mission High School in East Kerema. In a career that has spanned three decades, Robbin has taken on a diverse range of library roles and experiences; from Library Assistant in the Readers Services Department of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), to becoming the Librarian with the College of Distant Education Library in Port Moresby, before progressing to the position of Librarian in the College Library at the Papua New Guinea Education Institute, where he can be found today.



Robbin Kemmo Aua at work

Robbin lives in two different worlds: the world of the librarian who services the information needs of his clients, alongside the Melanesian culture that underpins his family and culture. Robbin is a very competent librarian and believes strongly in the power of knowledge to provide opportunities for both young and old people to grow and develop and seize opportunities for promotion and new directions in their work and lives. He lives in a world of print, surrounded by books, pictures audio and video tapes and discs. Western influence has led to an understanding of the importance of committing knowledge to concrete records.

Robbin's Mariki village culture is but one of over 820 different Melanesian language and cultural groups found in the great diversity of peoples found in Papua New Guinea. Common to all of these cultures is the unerring belief in the power of knowledge. A Melanesian clan's source of power lays in the knowledge and expertise its members possess for physical and metaphysical technology. Knowing how and when to plant and harvest crops, how to fashion weapons and implements, construct bridges, canoes and houses are all vital for survival. Knowledge and skill in the art of medicine and magic are also critical to survival. In Melanesian culture, the repository of this vital information is the collective memory of individual members of a clan. Melanesia is an oral culture supported by richly diverse forms of visual and performing art. Much to the traditional knowledge is represented and remembered through a rich repertoire of song, dance, verse, stories and sculpture.

There is a significant role conflict for the Indigenous Melanesian College Librarians who go to great lengths to give their clients access to information on one hand and on the other, is required to protect the intellectual property which is a key source of wealth and power for their clan. For Robbin, there is no dilemma. His job as a librarian is to make information available to clients and he is very proud of his record. As elder member of his Melanesian clan, Robbin

holds much of the clan's secret intellectual property. It is a right and a duty that is jealously guarded with great pride. This knowledge gives him a position of great status in his clan. He will only pass on this knowledge to selected and proven clan members when he is near the end of his life.

Robbin believes there is no conflict at all between his work as a Librarian and his position as clan elder. His role as a librarian is a technical function to access, catalogue and retrieve information systematically. His role as an elder in his clan, a significant repository of the intellectual property of his clan, is less systematic and requires great vigilance to maintain the integrity of the knowledge in his memory. The visual and performing arts of his culture provide an important stimulus to maintain this knowledge base. Robbin will gladly give his College Library clients information in his Library collection, but it will be a different story in regard to his clan's intellectual property. "Keep your head clear about what you are doing," he says, "and you will not have problems."

Hiris Grace Birney
President of the PNG Library and Information Association
hiris.birney@aptc.edu.au

Initiatives of the Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group

The Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group (IISIG) is one of ten special interest groups that are attached to the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA). The IISIG is made up of members from a diverse range of professions including a number of librarians. Amy O'Donoghue is a librarian with the Central Land Council in Alice Springs. Amy joined the IISIG executive committee in 2007 after attending the ASA national conference with some of her colleagues. Amy says she has always had an interest in both Libraries and Archives because she sees similarities in the work and areas of overlap. Some of the of the reference enquiries that Amy receives as a librarian at the Land Council are for records held in either the NT Archives or National Archives. Amy is impressed by the work done by the ASA and IISIG in promoting indigenous study and employment in the profession.

Two initiatives of the IISIG aimed at promoting study and employment in the profession include the Pathways brochure and the ASALW scholarship.

The Pathways brochure 'Pathways to your future and our past: careers for Indigenous peoples in archives and records' was first produced in 2004 with the support of the Records Management Association of Australasia. Aimed at encouraging Indigenous Australians to get involved in the Archives and records profession, the brochure describes the work of archivists and records managers, the value that Indigenous people bring to the profession and advice on and how to get involved and where to get support. http://www.archivists.org.au/files/Branch_and_SIG_pubs/IISIG/Pathways_brochure.pdf

One area of support provided by the IISIG is the ASALW Scholarship. The scholarship was established in 2007 in response to recommendations in the Bringing Them Home Report that it was important to train Aboriginal and Torres