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# Designing archival information systems through partnerships with Indigenous communities: developing the Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes Model in Australia

**Kirsten Thorpe**
University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Kirsten.Thorpe@uts.edu.au

**Kimberly Christen**
Washington State University, USA
kachristen@wsu.edu

**Lauren Booker**
University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Lauren.Booker@uts.edu.au

**Monica Galassi**
University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Monica.Galassi@uts.edu.au

## Abstract

Indigenous peoples in Australia have been heavily documented in colonial archives and collections. The past two decades have seen significant materials from Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) institutions being returned to Indigenous communities in Australia through physical or digital repatriation of materials. The digital return of materials requires both appropriate systems for returning both the digital collections, metadata and contextual information that relates to them, and agreements, policies, and procedures for meaningfully engaging with Indigenous communities throughout the process. Importantly, the information returned needs to be accessible, readable, and usable in local community contexts based on understanding local community needs. This paper discusses priorities around engaging with Indigenous peoples to reshape and build archival information systems and access points that support community requirements for digital return and management of cultural heritage materials in local settings. The paper discusses future priorities for designing archival information systems to support Indigenous sovereignty, including data stewardship and preservation approaches. These concerns are discussed and raised as part of the research and development of the global Mukurtu Content Management System (CMS) project, including within the New South Wales (NSW) Australian Mukurtu Hub.

**Keywords:** Archival Information Systems, Indigenous Sovereignty, Indigenous Digital Return, Indigenous Archives

## 1 Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Australian have been heavily documented in colonial archives and collections. The past two decades have seen significant materials from Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) institutions being returned to Indigenous communities in Australia through physical repatriation or digital return of materials. The digital return of materials requires both appropriate systems for returning the digital collections, its metadata and contextual information, and strategies to develop agreements, policies, and procedures

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for meaningfully and respectfully engaging with Indigenous communities throughout the process. Importantly, the information returned needs to be accessible, readable, and usable in local community contexts based on understanding local community needs.

A number of major Australian and international GLAM institutions work collaboratively with Indigenous communities and local organisations to expand conversations about digital return and engagement. Often, from an institutional perspective dialogue is spearheaded by the development of exhibitions or other projects that aiming to open up access to collections. However, communities may have very different sets of priorities and timelines for collections related to them. As a result, when the information systems and projects that are designed to digitally return collection materials are formed without community involvement, they often do not meet community requirements for proper access, use, and circulation of cultural heritage materials. This paper discusses priorities around engaging with Indigenous peoples to reshape and build information systems and access points that support community requirements for digital return and management of cultural heritage materials in local settings. Finally, the paper discusses future priorities for designing archival information systems to support Indigenous sovereignty, including approaches for data stewardship and preservation. These concerns are discussed and raised as part of the research and development of the global Mukurtu CMS project, including within the New South Wales (NSW) Australian Mukurtu Hub.

## 2  Background

The paper weaves together research and practice from the contributing authors around the theme of Indigenous peoples[1] sovereignty and its implications for archival information systems[2]. The paper identifies mandates for action to support Indigenous priorities with designing archival information systems for the curation, dissemination, and management of Indigenous archives across government, institutional, and community contexts.

This article extends a panel presented on 'Collaborative design through partnerships with Indigenous communities: the Mukurtu CMS Hubs and Spokes Model' with papers delivered by the authors at the International Council on Archives Conference (ICA) held in Adelaide, Australia in October 2019. The broader conference theme was related to the need for archives to design human-centered approaches to ensure benefits to diverse communities (Australian Society of Archivists, 2019). The conference closed with the first Indigenous Summit of the newly formed ICA Expert Group on Indigenous Matters which aimed to identify key issues Indigenous peoples face in relation to archives and examine a proactive international agenda to re-design archives to support decolonisation led by Indigenous peoples. The summit also included the launch of the *Adelaide-Tandaya Declaration*, a statement that calls on the progressive action of archives internationally to support Indigenous people's archive and

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[1] This paper uses the term Indigenous throughout this paper to refer to First Nations people internationally. We use Indigenous peoples in Australia when we discuss specific references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. We acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous peoples internationally and acknowledge the variances of terminology across regions. We also use capital for 'I' for Indigenous as a sign of respect.

[2] We use the term 'Archival information systems' to refer to both the description and classification of archival materials, and the management of born digital or digitised cultural heritage materials and their associated metadata.

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information needs (ICA, 2019). This article brings together the four presentations at the ICA conference to refocus a discussion about how to better support the design of archival information systems with respect for Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty through partnerships with Indigenous communities, institutions and diverse groups of stakeholders.

Each contributing author discusses themes related to transforming archival information systems, policies and approaches to support Indigenous people's goals, particularly systems that support Indigenous cultural safety, governance, participation and self-determination. These themes are discussed against the backdrop of the Mukurtu CMS platform and project, which operates internationally to support Indigenous communities as they manage their cultural heritage materials through informed protocols.[3] Our aim is to highlight how a number of Indigenous peoples and communities are working together with GLAM institutions to create significant change in collections repatriation and return to improve access and management of digital cultural heritage materials. The research connected with the Mukurtu CMS project and the NSW Australian Hub seeks to transform engagement and relationships between Indigenous peoples and the archives in support of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia.

## 3   Introducing the Authors

We begin our article by introducing our standpoints to give background to our work, experiences and motivations as contributing authors. We also provide some context to our relationships in and out of institutional and research contexts in Australia and the United States.

**Kimberly Christen**

I am a Professor in and the Director of the Digital Technology and Culture program in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Director of the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University. I am founder of Mukurtu CMS, a free and open source community digital access platform designed to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. I am also the Director of the Sustainable Heritage Network, and the co-director of the Local Contexts initiative. These projects are aimed at providing educational resources and practical applications for stewarding digital cultural heritage and supporting Indigenous communities in the management of intellectual property. As part of this paper, I provide background on the development of the Mukurtu CMS and discuss the principles of engagement, repatriation, and collaboration that guide our ongoing work focused on grassroots priorities identified by Indigenous peoples.

**Lauren Booker (Garigal clan, north-west Sydney)**

I am a Research Fellow at The Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). My research involves facilitating projects with Aboriginal communities for the digitisation of recorded and documented cultural material and

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[3] Mukurtu CMS is a free and open-source digital access platform designed with and by Indigenous communities globally. Communities use the platform to provide culturally relevant access to a broad range of collections materials. See: www.mukurtu.org, and Christen (2019), "The songline is alive in Mukurtu": Return, reuse, and respect https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/24882

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the organisation of appropriate digital archives. I advocate for post custodial archival practice and Indigenous self-determination in the GLAM sector, particularly in relation to Indigenous data sovereignty, the 'right to know' and 'right of reply' in records. My current doctoral research focuses on institutional ethics and the transparency of collection management and administrative processes. As part of this paper, I will discuss the significance of the 'right to know' (Deloria, 1978), introduce my doctoral research on community-led collection care for specific Ancestral remains (hair samples) that are still held in collecting institutions.

**Kirsten Thorpe (Worimi, Port Stephens NSW)**

I am a researcher and professional archivist who has been involved in the library and archive sector over the past two decades leading projects around developing protocols, policies, and services for Indigenous peoples in Australia (Thorpe, 2013). My research interests relate to Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives, with a particular focus on the return of historical collections to Indigenous peoples and communities (Thorpe, 2017). I advocate for a transformation of library and archival practice to centre Indigenous priorities and voices in regard to the management of data, records, and collections. As part of my contribution to this paper, I discuss key concepts of cultural safety related to libraries and archives in Australia.

**Monica Galassi**

I am an Italian researcher who has worked in Australia since 2010 on research interests relating to promoting human rights and equity of access, particularly through digital archives. My doctoral studies focus on how historical records held in Italy and in the Vatican can support self-determination and sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples and communities and deepen the understanding of transnational colonial histories. As part of this paper, I will reflect on lessons I have learned working with communities in institutional settings. I will discuss how I approached this engagement with the aim to shift practice to facilitate cross-cultural and cross-institutional partnerships. I will discuss how I drew on these principles when negotiating practices of digital connection and digital return of Indigenous collections.

# 4 Indigenous self-determination, sovereignty and archives in Australia

As a direct result of the advocacy for self-determination driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, discussions concerning sovereignty are now more visible in Australian public discourse (Behrendt, 2002; Moreton-Robinson, 2007). However, the topic has not been discussed adequately in the Australian library and archival sector or within the literature in the field, despite long-term advocacy by Indigenous peoples in Australia to demand greater control over the management of their cultural collections held in libraries and archives (Fourmile, 1989; Ormond-Parker & Sloggett, 2012). As a consequence, mainstream library and archival approaches, including the development of information systems, are limited in their ability to support Indigenous peoples' self-determination and sovereignty.

The mid-nineties saw a significant shift in GLAM institutions responding to Indigenous peoples demands for greater access to cultural collections. In the Australian library and archive sector, this period also saw the development of protocols that sought to provide clear processes and guidelines for managing culturally sensitive or offensive collections (Garwood-Houng & Blackburn, 2014; Nakata et al., 2005). The *Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* published in 1995 provide sector-wide guidance for working with

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Indigenous peoples to redress issues relating to the failures to manage information in ways that protect and promote a diversity of cultural needs (ATSILIRN, n.d). Although the Protocols do not specifically mention self-determination and sovereignty, they offer opportunities to reimagine different sets of requirements and relationships that may be needed to access and manage Indigenous cultural heritage collections held in GLAM institutions. However, these needs have not been addressed at a systemic level. Often in the Australian context it is only in discrete projects, for example, through exhibition or curatorial engagement, that Indigenous people have a direct impact on how Indigenous voices are represented in collections. While government reports and enquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991) and the Bringing Them Home Report, from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997), provided opportunities for archival access and exposure of Indigenous stories, they failed to disrupt the archival information systems that supported the access and management of these significant records.

Within this paper's context, we draw on Indigenous led conceptualisations of sovereignty discussed across social, political and academic domains. Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner William Jonas has described the many ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to assert sovereignty through, for example, ongoing assertions of Indigenous cultural protocols and systems of law and governance (Jonas, 2002). Jonas stresses the importance of Indigenous sovereignty being determined by Indigenous peoples, noting that sovereignty co-exists, rather than is determined in relation to state sovereignty. In keeping with a bottom-up approach described by Jonas (2002), Moreton-Robinson (2007) dismisses the need to describe a "quintessential definition of Indigenous sovereignty" to instead consider sovereignty as being 'embodied", "ontological (or being)" and "epistemological (our way of knowing)" (Moreton-Robinson, 2007, p.2). For the purposes of this paper, we draw on a wide view of Indigenous sovereignty and acknowledge the many manifestations of sovereignty both formal and informal that exist in diverse settings internationally.

In the context of archival information systems and Indigenous peoples in Australia, we must acknowledge the ongoing impact of colonisation in relation to the support for Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. Libraries and archives, by their very nature, are colonial constructs, their systems of collecting sought to define and categorise knowledge, peoples and culture based on Eurocentric frameworks and theories (Cunningham, 2005, p.32). Along with Museums and Galleries, these collecting practices also supported a system of 'Othering' and subjugating Indigenous peoples knowledges held in their institutional collections. Artist Jonathan Jones (Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi) has noted that "Many of these 'hobbyist researchers and adventurers' in Australia amassed impressive collections, often trading objects on the ever-growing market as exotic souvenirs and scientific specimens of a dying race or exhibiting them in International Exhibitions" (Jones, 2018, p. 17). Similarly, Australian colonial archives were developed through patriarchal collecting processes informed by a view of 'the Other' so that Indigenous peoples and communities have been documented primarily as *subjects* of the record through a Western gaze. We consider these collecting efforts to be pillars of the Australian colonial project described by Indigenous scholar Irene Watson as:

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> *The colonial project has embodied a centuries-long, ongoing campaign to annihilate, define, subordinate and exclude the 'native', and an arsenal of tools has been applied to these ends.*
> (Watson, 2016, p.30)

Many Australian library and archival collections tacitly or overtly deny the diversity of Indigenous nations and communities across the continent and surrounding seas, and instead describe people through a homogenous and objectifying "pan-Aboriginal" lenses (Russell, 2001). As Nathan 'Mudyi' Sentance (Wiradjuri) has argued, many collections silence and decentre First Nations peoples by privileging narratives related to the collector rather than the people who are documented. Sentance (2017) describes how as part of his work in libraries, he had a role in describing collections of missionary papers to discuss their usefulness for Aboriginal family history research. He shows how invariably, in opening up these discussions, he spoke more about the missionaries themselves, which was hard to avoid as the collections were named after them (Sentence, 2017, n.p). In this example, the role of historical collections in the erasure and silencing of Indigenous peoples is ongoing and ever present. Indeed, as paper co-author Christen further explains, "Archives were established as places where official records became anchors for nations in the making as they documented the accepted demise of their first peoples. As a result, the archival imagination is both a process of political work and ideological maneuvering." (Christen 2015, p.115) This legacy of collecting and maintaining collections developed by legislation, racist ideology and the colonial archival imaginary profoundly impacts how Indigenous peoples can access and use the archive.

Archival information systems support the structures and process surrounding the description and classification of archival collections, and the processes associated with access and distribution of digital or digitised content. Both professional practice and communities' feedback have largely demonstrated that many of these standards and approaches do not accommodate Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. As such, these systems, unless challenged and transformed, deny a view of Indigenous sovereignty in archives. It is therefore vital that we acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation in opening up archives for the digital return of collections back to their communities. We cannot transform these spaces in line with Indigenous sovereignty without a fundamental rethinking of these colonial practices. As Indigenous author and scholar Tony Birch (2007) asserts:

> *Before sovereignty can become even a viable concept for discussion amongst the wider non-Indigenous community, it needs to redeem and take responsibility for its colonial debts.*
> (Birch, 2007, p.106)

In summary, we argue that library and archival institutions, and by extension librarians and archivists, play a critical role in the movement to acknowledge these colonial debts. A first step is to acknowledge that the colonial archive in Australia holds materials that are culturally unsafe[4] for Indigenous people. These collections document the trauma and conflicts of Australian colonial histories, including evidence of settler relationships and warfare, the forced dispossession of Aboriginal people from their lands onto settlements, reserves and missions, and other atrocities such as colonial massacres and the forced removal of children as

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[4] As further described by Thorpe in this paper, we draw on the term cultural safety as defined by Williams (1999) as "an environment which is safe for people; there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity," conversely a culturally unsafe environment is one where people feel their cultural values and beliefs are silenced and not respected.

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part of the Stolen Generations (Evans et al., 2019, p.131). Without appropriate intervention, these archives become tools to whitewash Australian history and settler histories further. Enabling a transformation of archival and information systems that enable digital return and enhancing of contextual information is one important way of supporting Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in the archives.

## 5 The challenge of digital return of archives to Indigenous communities

Internationally there is growing recognition that the policies, practices and technologies utilised in the information and archive sector perpetuate dominant power structures (Brilmyer & Caswell, 2017; Duff et al., 2013). Within this context, critical archival studies seek to address areas where social justice interests intersect with the sector. For example, Punzalan & Caswell (2016) describe four areas requiring attention, including "Inclusion of underrepresented and marginalized sectors of society; Reinterpretation and expansion of archival concepts; Development of community archives; Rethinking archival education and training; and Efforts to document human rights violations." (p.3). Similarly, Evans et al. (2017, p. 9-10) describe the need for critical approaches to archives and recordkeeping through a "Critical archival methodology [which] is concerned with ideas about decolonizing and pluralizing the Archive, and is influenced by postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, gender studies, sexuality studies, cultural studies, Indigenous studies and ways of knowing, and the "archival turn" — the positioning of the Archive beyond its traditional administrative and academic constituency." A critical view of archiving is key to aspire to structural and long-lasting changes, as it supports the transformation of the hegemonic structures and systems supporting those communities who harness less power in society.

In a human rights and Indigenous context, international frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) should inform archival and record- keeping practices (Gooda, 2012). By engaging with international human rights mandates, the archive sector can work with accountability and respect of international standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP):

> *Article 43*
>
> *The rights recognized herein constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world.*
>
> *UNDRIP (2007)*

UNDRIP was ratified by Australia in 2009, after initially voting against in 2007, and has gone on to be a cited document for sector specific and nationally recognised roadmaps, declarations and policies across the Australian GLAM sector, i.e.; *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries 2018, Tandanya Adelaide Declaration 2019, AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* 2020. As UNDRIP is not legally binding, to have its meaning and intention fully realised it requires active assertion and implementation. The right to repatriation, restitution and return of Ancestral remains, ceremonial items and all Indigenous cultural and intellectual property collected and held away from communities is addressed in UNDRIP Article 11 and 12. Both articles refer to the

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imperative for this to be done via 'effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous people concerned' (UNDRIP, 2007).

The potential for action and the delivery on these UNDRIP Articles rests on several overlapping areas of progressive action across professional, educational and institutional contexts. Critical archival studies provide opportunities for a fundamental reassessment of how the sector positions and puts into practice goals of Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. One key area of focus uniting these principles is the development of archive and information systems that are designed to support the digital return of archives to Indigenous peoples and communities. However, this work cannot be done in isolation, and it must be led at a grass-roots level by Indigenous peoples to ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are embedded in the process, recognising Indigenous worldviews, knowledges and realities. Therefore, the library and archive sector cannot lead it, but it can play a key role in supporting those needs and aspirations.

One of the major challenges in relation to digital return of collections to communities is the fixity of institutional power and the prevalence of systems that are not fit for managing Indigenous knowledges. There is also a general lack of awareness of important concepts such as Indigenous self-determination or awareness of community governance structures for institutions to engage with that give recognition to principles where Indigenous peoples have a foundation of control of their future destiny – whether as an individual or as a community (Behrendt and Vivian, 2010, p.2). The calls to action for decolonising research and the academy that have been expressed internationally by leading Indigenous scholars such as Smith (2013) and Tuck & Yang (2012) are not yet realised in the archival, library and information sectors. This transformation requires that library and archival institutions relinquish power over collections policies and structures and implement a range of practices provided by Indigenous peoples and communities. As Smith (2013) asserts, "Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power." (Smith, 2013, p. 101).

While scholarship broadly relating to digital return of archives has had a focus on language documentation and ethnomusicology (Toner, 2004; Barwick et al., 2020) and on the deepening of information related to cultural revitalisation and creative practice (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014; Grieves and Kelada, 2017), there has been limited research and dialogue on questions of self-determination and sovereignty with archives and information systems. This paper contributes to filling that gap while also continuing reflection on the failure of the design of archive and information systems that incorporate requirements for Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. This paper also contributes to the dialogue of the Indigenous data sovereignty movement, albeit with a focus on reclaiming Indigenous data rights (Walter & Suina, 2019, p.237) in the context of archival information systems.

## 6   Transforming Archival and Information Systems in collaboration with Indigenous peoples and communities: The Mukurtu project in Australia

In the next section of the paper, we will introduce background on the Mukurtu CMS project, based at Washington State University (WSU) in the US, and discuss the development of the

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NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub, a collaboration between WSU, the UTS and the State Library of NSW (SLNSW). Within this section, each author shares reflections from their papers presented at the ICA congress, including outlining principles and mandates for action that have inspired research and collaboration with communities to design information systems that recognise Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

## 6.1 'Mukurtu—a Safe Keeping Place' (Kimberly Christen)

Mukurtu (MOOK-oo-too) is a grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share, narrate and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways (Mukurtu (a), n.d). Based at the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation (CDSC) at WSU in the USA, the project leads the development of the Mukurtu CMS, and more recently, support for a Hubs and Spokes model, which aims to support the continued development and use of the software (Christen, Merrill and Wynne, 2017). The main priority of the Mukurtu project is to build a platform that fosters relationships of respect and trust in relation to Indigenous digital cultural heritage.

The Mukurtu project began in Australia in 2002 as part of a collaboration with the Warumungu Aboriginal community in Central Australia. During a visit to the National Archives in Darwin, the Warumungu community members expressed both tension and relief when viewing the images and documents held in the archives. The tension centered on the violation of cultural protocols observed by Warumungu people in distributing, circulating, and reproducing their cultural materials. Materials that were only meant to be viewed by certain families or kin-groups were publicly viewable. Images of relatives who were no longer living were found within the archive and the online catalogue. Following the visit, we worked together to identify the specific sets of needs for a platform to care for those materials. A system whose functionality respected the dynamic social and cultural systems, relationships, and cultural protocols for sharing, circulating and creating knowledge within the Warumungu community. This meant focusing on familial and kin-based systems of relation and circulation and allowing for different parameters for access, viewing, listening and annotating content.

The Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive was launched in 2007. Mukurtu translates directly to "dilly bag" in the Warumungu language however, the Warumungu elder, Michael Jampin Jones recast the term as a "safe keeping place." Like the dilly bag, the Mukurtu platform is meant to protect and preserve cultural materials while also circulating and sharing them in appropriate ways (Christen, 2012, p. 2283). As Michael Jampin Jones described:

> *Mukurtu is that dilly bag. The way that Warumungu people use it, they used to have the old dilly bags. In the early days, old people kept their stuff in that bag and no one else was allowed to open it up or even to look at it. Now we have this archive, it's good. In every archive that you go to there's a lot of stuff that's in a safe place, in South Australia, Queensland. But this archive will be different, it will be here, it will be the safe place for men like me. I can't see women's stories or even if she is my daughter or niece I'm not allowed to see, so it won't open up for me, because we have different passwords. That is very important to make it safe.* (Mukurtu (b), n.d).

After the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari archive launch, it was clear that Indigenous communities across the globe shared similar sets of archival, cultural heritage, and content management needs. From its beginnings, the Mukurtu project and CMS have been developed to assist the management of Indigenous cultural collections aligned with Indigenous ways of

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knowing and doing. The project provides an opportunity for redressing the gap in approaches in systems that currently serve the library and archive management, including online discovery, access and preservation. Mukurtu CMS is primarily an access platform, addressing one component of the larger digital stewardship ecosystem, through access, preservation and collections management sustainability. Directly related to access is digital return. From the original version to the software's newest release, a main component of the platform has been to allow communities to reframe, renarrate, and share collections materials from national, regional and local collecting institutions. Mukurtu's core features and the system's functionality provide pathways for sharing, enriching and circulating materials following local cultural protocols.

Alongside providing a flexible and customisable platform, a key core value of the Mukurtu CMS project are the educational and community engagement components. Mukurtu support has always been a core part of the project. Community workshops, seminars and one-on-one training ensure that communities can use the platform sustainably. As the system matured and moved to a browser-based framework, the Mukurtu team was aware that both online and offline support would be crucial. The Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes project grew out of simultaneous conversations with local communities using Mukurtu CMS and national repositories discussing ways to work with Indigenous communities to facilitate content sharing. There are currently five Mukurtu Hubs, four in the US and one in Australia. The Hubs provide regional support to Indigenous communities, "the spokes" in their areas. Simultaneously, communities provide direct feedback on their needs with the platform. In this way, development, support and training are cyclical. The continued development of Mukurtu CMS through the Hubs and Spokes model expands the Mukurtu CMS support structure and enhances its features through direct feedback from a vast community of users. Working in tandem between hubs and spokes, the project builds sustainability at the community and platform level — indeed, the two are inseparable.

## 6.2 Indigenous self-determination and disrupting centralised systems of archival control (Lauren Booker)

For collecting institutions to consider engaging meaningfully in supporting Indigenous sovereignty over collections held, an institution must, as Birch phrased, *'redeem and take responsibility for its colonial debts'* (Birch, 2007, p. 106). ˆIn the work that I have engaged in across the GLAM sector, I consider a central challenge to Indigenous sovereignty to be the deeply embedded structures of institutional control over collections and how that affects Indigenous people's self-determination regarding knowledges, heritages and identities embedded in collection materials and records. Institutional control of collections includes determining how materials, recordings and records held are cared for, described, curated and shared. I suggest that radical transparency of these systems of control and the ongoing connection to GLAM institution's colonial foundations are the first steps to engaging in meaningful accountability and supporting Indigenous sovereignty.

Karen Martin uses the phrase 'terra nullius research' to describe research that positions Indigenous peoples as the subject of discussion while eschewing Indigenous agency and voice (Martin, 2003, p. 203). The notion of 'terra nullius' - uninhabited land - was a colonising legal definition enabling the possession of land through the disregard of Indigenous peoples as sovereign peoples. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that the legal fiction of terra nullius is so pervasive that it continues to dictate the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait

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Islander peoples and the Australian state today and continues to inform understandings of belonging or not-belonging (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The Australian colonial history, which saw the dispossession of Indigenous nations from their lands, simultaneously comes with the relentless colonial project to undermine self-determination of Indigenous identity and culture as connected to land and water. The collecting institution sector (libraries, archives, museums) in Australia has its foundations in supporting and proliferating what Karen Martin defines as "terra nullius research' (Martin, 2003, p. 203) and has played a substantial role in controlling, constructing and deconstructing Aboriginal identities (Russell, 2001).

Systems of control in the GLAM sector that I have experienced directly impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focused projects, include data governance, institutional time constraints on projects, and digital systems that flatten and assume Indigenous knowledges into archival paradigms that push cultural materials deeper into digital spaces for research findability rather than community usability. I have seen these systems of control push reciprocal relationship building and Indigenous data sovereignty to the back of the list time and time again. Conversations that do not centre Indigenous methodologies in the realm of data and technology - often work to decentre Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges, even if there is the intention to facilitate and support communities.

I want to highlight the importance of the 'right to know' as developed by Native American scholar Vine Deloria Jr (Standing Rock, Sioux) in the 1978 paper titled ''The Right to Know'', prepared for The White House Pre-conference on Indian Library and Information Services On or Near Reservations. I became aware of Deloria's clear imperative of the "right to know" through the papers of Jennifer O'Neal (The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde) and Allison Boucher Krebs (Anishinabe); both papers consider "Deloria's Right to Know to do list" as highly influential in strengthening tribal repositories and the broader archive decolonisation movement in North American (Krebs, 2012; O'Neal, 2015). In my own work, and the work of my colleagues, I likewise consider the "right to know" central to the work of Indigenous archives, archiving and archivists. The transparency needed in the Australian GLAM sector to centre Indigenous self-determination and disrupt centralised systems of archival control closely follows that of Deloria's "right to know," that Indigenous peoples;

> *need to know; to know the past, to know the traditional alternatives advocated by their ancestors, to know the specific experiences of their communities…* (Deloria, 1978).

A key difference in context that should be recognised is that Deloria situates the right to know as necessary under treaty obligations (Deloria, 1978). Recognising that in Australia, we are without the history of a treaty - but not without a dedicated conversation on a treaty - there is still a settler- colonial relationship between the Australian state and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that requires accountability of the state (ATSIC & AIATSIS, 2003). Deloria points out that to move forward on upholding obligations to support Indigenous people's "right to know" in the archive sector there is but left the straightforward "will to act" (Deloria, 1978). In the Australian archives context the mandate for centering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's needs, imperatives and self-determination, and institutional accountability is increasingly being pushed forward with the creation of GLAM sector policies, guidelines and protocols. The most recent being the Tandanya/Adelaide Statement (ICA, 2019), which shows a sector that is poised with intention - it is now *the will to act* that needs to follow through.

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In my PhD studies, I am building upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led conversation to engage in deep listening and communication, focused on ideas and imperatives of community-led collection care for Ancestral remains in the form of hair samples that are still held in collecting institutions. The research questions I am considering centre on building reciprocal relationships with an Indigenous-led participant group to examine issues of transparency and control of Ancestral remains and related documentation, and imagine together what a radical reorientation of Indigenous self-determination for these collections and stories could and should be. The research aims to interrupt centralised systems of archival control and terra nullius research by asking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts what is a proper way forward and centring the right to know and the right of reply in the collecting institution sector.

The NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub, and connections with the US Hubs and Spokes projects, enable international discussions on addressing historical systems of colonial and assimilatory archival control. Mukurtu functions in support of working collaboratively on collections that require community response to negotiate access protocols, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights, handling protocols, and the right of reply. Mukurtu approaches enable discussion on those higher mandate questions of how can we engage with Indigenous self-determination in the archive, post-custodial archives, institutional transparency and reciprocal relationship building. It supports a reconsideration of notions of time: including the time it takes to build relationships before building digital projects, and that consent and consultations are not one-time events - they are conversations built upon dynamic relationships. The hubs and spokes model supports a reconsideration of how we in the GLAM sector share information and skills and how we can continue to ask and re-ask questions that are not focused on software. Rather they are focused on relationships.

## 6.3   Indigenous Cultural Safety and Collaborative Design (Kirsten Thorpe)

For many Indigenous people in Australia, GLAM institutions are places to either love or loathe (Andrews, 2017, p.91). They are institutions that have supported the colonisation of Australia through their collecting practices, and as such, they have assisted the creation of a colonial narrative that portrays Indigenous peoples as dangerous, barbaric and nameless peoples (Behrendt, 2016, p.5). Although Australian libraries and archives can play a significant role in supporting Indigenous peoples aspirations, they remain sites of great distrust (McKemmish, Faulkhead & Russell, 2011) and trauma (Russell, 2005, p.164).

Narungga researcher Natalie Harkin describes her encounter with the colonial archive as being witness to "extraordinary acts of surveillance" and the trauma of accessing and engaging with family records held in government archives as a witnessing of "histories of silencing and forgetting." (Harkin, 2019, p.15). Colonial archives, by their very nature, can be highly traumatic for Indigenous people to access. They are often bureaucratic and challenging to understand because of the context in which they were created. Many records held in collecting institutions contain derogatory and offensive language; they are also incomplete and biased and sometimes contain information that has been fabricated or inaccurate (Garwood-Houng, 2005, p.144). These records and their narratives were created in violent, intrusive and racist contexts, with collections being developed as an outcome of administrative processes associated with the control of Indigenous people and communities. This includes, for example, records created as a result of the removal of Indigenous children as part of the Stolen Generations.

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Traditional archival and information systems do not accommodate Indigenous peoples counter-narratives, including oral memories, histories and records. Instead, they support a single view of history, written by those who held positions of power (Faulkhead, 2008, p.88). These historical archives support dominant narratives constructed within the broader Australian colonial project. They privilege the view of the records creator rather than the person or peoples who are the subject of the records. Providing access to these historical archives in digital environments, particularly through online library and archive catalogues and systems, is hugely problematic, and the lack of context and existence of Indigenous voice and perspective further perpetuates existing biases. As I have argued elsewhere (Thorpe, 2019), Caswell's (2014) discussion on "symbolic annihilation" helps us to understand the impacts of how marginalised people are silenced in the archive, and so, are not able to see themselves represented within history. This silencing of Indigenous perspectives has a major effect, for example, on the teaching of history in Australia and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in school and university curricula.

My research interests relate to how Indigenous people in Australia can be culturally safe when accessing libraries and archives and how more broadly, Indigenous people can build self-determination to support local priorities for information and knowledge management. My doctoral studies focus on investigating *Indigenous Archiving and Cultural Safety*, including questioning the role of decolonisation in Australian libraries and archives. The research investigates how libraries and archives can negatively impact Indigenous peoples wellbeing through a failure to produce archive and information systems that can best meet communities' cultural and information needs. I utilise Williams's (1999) concept of 'cultural safety' to investigate how libraries and archives can either make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel *safe* or *unsafe*. Williams (p.213) defines cultural safety as:

> *[A]n environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.*

I argue that current archival information systems, methods and approaches do not acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma on Indigenous peoples lives, so they do not meet the requirements of being culturally safe.

As I reflect on my own experiences of developing policy, protocols and being involved in practice-based research around Indigenous engagement with archives (Thorpe, 2001; Thorpe, 2005; Thorpe, 2014), I would consider relationships and consent to be vital elements for building culturally safe archival information systems. I am interested in developing methods and approaches to facilitate the digital return of archives to local communities based on principles of respect and trust. That means that digital return needs to be considered in its fullest sense, including the handing over of decisions around the overall management of archives - spanning access, description, distribution and use of materials - and facilitating a "right of reply" to the records. Relationships are vital to building archival information systems for digital return, and the wider grass-roots Mukurtu community of practice works to support these principles of engagement with archives.

I have experienced working in culturally unsafe libraries and archives. I became interested in how archival information systems were failing to support Indigenous people's information

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needs while contributing to reparations projects at the NSW State archives. In the mid-2000s Indigenous people in NSW become more aware of the state archives collections, including records created by the former NSW Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards. The NSW Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme (ATFRS) and the *In Living Memory* exhibition, challenged normative approaches to archival management[5] . They also identified multiple and complex wicked problems concerning access and use of these historical records, problems that require a rethinking of approaches to support Indigenous people's agency and self-determination.

The Mukurtu CMS and wider hubs and spokes model aim to engender respect for Indigenous perspectives and experiences to build dialogue around the different ways people see, know, and operate in the world. Being engaged with other Indigenous peoples in the Mukurtu project also activates a research and community agenda for change in the sector. Drawing on the words of the former Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda, who called for Indigenous people in Australia to move from being "passive and powerless subjects, to active participatory agents" (p.97), McKemmish et al. (2012, p.108) note that:

> *Digital technologies, participatory models and postmodern concepts like co-creatorship and records as social entities have the potential to support the 'decolonisation' of the archive, and the exercise of cultural rights in archives as human rights, repositioning Indigenous peoples who have hitherto been the 'captives of the archives' (Fourmile 1989), the subjects of records, and the objects of the archival gaze as active participatory agents in archival and recordkeeping program and system design and implementation* (p.108).

The research associated with the NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub enables investigation into Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty and the challenges that need to be unshackled with traditional archiving approaches. We need to invest time to discuss communities' requirements to design archival information systems that do not perpetuate trauma and the silencing of Indigenous people's voices. Culturally safe archives and libraries require new investigations into Indigenous peoples' user needs, and this design can only be achieved if archival institutions work in partnership with communities.

## 6.4 Collaborative Design through partnerships with Indigenous communities: the Mukurtu CMS Hubs and Spokes Model (Monica Galassi)

In my professional journey I have been interested in how partnerships can be built to co-design digital systems and tools to support access of Indigenous archival collections held in collecting institutions, and the mechanisms that are required to support the local management of cultural heritage collections. I came to appreciate the Mukurtu CMS as it has been adopted by a number of different communities in Australia and internationally as a tool for this collaboration and

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[5] The records of the NSW Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards, 1883 – 1969 document the policies of the Boards which had a major impact on the lives of Aboriginal people in NSW, including for example in relation to the removal of children and establishment of Aboriginal Reserves. The ATFRS was established by the NSW Government in late 2004 to investigate the repayment of monies that were held in trust by the NSW Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards and never repaid. See: Thorpe, K. (2019). Ethics, Indigenous Cultural Safety and the Archives. *Archifacts*, 2018, No 2, 33 – 47. Retrieved on 29 May 2020,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339014668_Ethics_Indigenous_Cultural_Safety_and_the_Archives.

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community engagement. My experiences have been that Mukurtu has been considered a system suitable for Indigenous communities because of the distinct features of the CMS to manage Indigenous knowledges, and the overall guiding principles of the project that prioritise partnership with communities. The support network built around Mukurtu has a *democratic ethos*; it is a platform that is free, open-source and encourages interconnections with other systems. This long-term view of sustainability was also at the core of establishing the NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub – a key interest of mine in connecting with the project - to support communities in building and managing their local collections.

As has been argued in this paper previously, the information systems that support access to historical archives relating to Indigenous peoples in Australia often do not meet their primary users' needs.  In many instances, they lack the ongoing relationships needed to conceptualise and co-design new ways of managing and curating digital archives springing from communities' needs and aspirations. From an institutional point of view, providing access to historical documentation can be complex, particularly in archives where the scale and depth of collections are diverse (for example, where the collection materials relate to communities across Australia). Providing transparent and culturally safe access to historical collections for many cultural and collecting institutions is still limited to isolated projects due to funding constraints and tight timeframes. Likewise, some of the opportunities which arise when trying to support digital keeping places at a local level tend to slow down quickly when negotiations start to center on authority, ownership, and ongoing support of partnership models which are not aligned with institutional collecting strategies. Often, the goodwill of opening up archives and information is there, but making it an ongoing process embedded at the core of institutional practices is more challenging to achieve.

My experience has been that the process of embedding a CMS like Mukurtu at the core of cultural institutions often highlights tensions that are far from being just linked to technology or funding availability. Some of the questions that arise during this process concern the *why* ('why do we need a 'special' system dedicated to Aboriginal collections?/why can we use a system built/used by *other* multicultural communities who want to access the collections?). The *how* ('how are we going to manage the ownership of the information, and how do we manage the storage and preservation of the information which will be provided?'). The *what* (what does it mean to support Aboriginal sovereignty? What is going to happen to the future of collecting institutions if we don't own these collections anymore?).

In most cases, support for local collections (both in terms of sharing skills through training and provide assistance with tools and physical and digital preservation) is currently ad hoc and supported differently by the various archival and collecting institutions. That is, often it is the institution that decides when and how to provide support according to its own opinion on the interest of the local collections, perpetuating power over community interests. This results on lack of long-term sustainability, in particular through not supporting community employment. Importantly, current approaches also largely lack a focus on community driven local translation of meanings and requirements.

These are just some of the reasons why new models of engagement are required to support the recognition of Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignties. The development of the NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub supports this model of capacity building and training communities in curriculum related to digital stewardship. The Hubs and Spokes model works

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together to share information and resources and discuss challenges surrounding digital curation and the management of protocols for collections. The project also enables meaningful conversations around systems development, keeping people in dialogue about design, functions and features that might be suitable for their community's needs. Again, the focus is not on the technology, but on the relationships.

When conversations started around building the NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub, I worked as part of the Indigenous Engagement team at the State Library of NSW. There, my role was responsible for developing of the first platform for the digital return of the Library's archives to communities, using the CMS Mukurtu. Called *Gather*, the site aims to return copies of historical documents, manuscripts and photographs digitally, collaborate to identify people, places and stories in historical photographs, and add local knowledge and perspectives to this historical material (State Library of NSW, 2020). Since then, I have been actively involved in the establishment and development of the Hub, which was launched in December 2018. The NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub is now a participating Hub in the Mukurtu Hubs & Spokes model to connect Australian communities to the Mukurtu project in the US. It functions as a central point of connection with the Mukurtu project team at WSU and with local communities and other interested users across NSW and beyond. The NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub aims to support regional centers in providing guidance and training to communities who wish to gain more insights into how to manage their local collections digitally. A key focus is on keeping collections on Country while also gathering feedback on how local communities want to use and further develop the list of requirements related to the Mukurtu CMS. A commitment of the Australian Hub is to develop tools and guidelines in partnership with communities to support processes relating to the return and maintenance of Indigenous collections. We also aim to drive a national agenda on research community needs related to Indigenous archives and digital stewardship for the responsible dissemination and access of collections (NSW Australian Mukurtu Hub, 2019).

I have learned many valuable lessons from my experiences of working in institutions to support the digital return of collections. Both professional and structural changes need to occur in cultural institutions to fully embrace Aboriginal sovereignty on information and data held across collections. Adopting a digital system for Indigenous collections, and supporting communities to manage their own, is not just a matter of adopting the right technology or to have access to funding. It is a matter of strong leadership and willingness to make internal changes, such as building cultural competence among staff. As has been previously argued, to build collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal communities around the design of archival and information systems that support sovereign community views, we must first acknowledge the deep harm that these past colonial practices have involved. Hence, to do this, we need to be culturally competent to understand the impact that these histories had and still have on people. A meaningful and respectful user experience when accessing Aboriginal collections starts asking people what they want and requires staff working in this space to have cultural competence to understand the complexities that will arise. This deep listening is fundamental in understanding diverse standpoints and worldviews, and supporting direct calls for action, both from an organisational and personal point of view. Non-Indigenous allies and accomplices, working to make changes in the overall power structures embedded in archives, can play a vital role in supporting Aboriginal sovereignty in this space. Hence, I strongly believe that the labour to progress these agendas should not rest solely on the

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leadership of Indigenous people working in the cultural sector. It requires broad support from all levels of leadership to transform the way we do things to support shifts and changes, starting from our own professional area. It is all about learning from each other and establishing long-lasting relationships with communities, taking responsibilities in letting communities drive us through their needs, aspirations and priorities.

# 7   Conclusion

This paper brings together discussions on the area of Indigenous self-determination, sovereignty and archival information systems. It looks at how mainstream archival information systems do not support the appropriate management and digital return of Indigenous collections held in archives, and connects these actions to supporting Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. It is an ongoing issue that libraries, archives and museums often ignore Aboriginal sovereignties and disregard existing community governance and language structures to maintain an institutional status-quo. This is particularly apparent in the information systems used by libraries, archives and museums that lack appropriate community governance and respect for Indigenous peoples cultural safety. Indigenous systems of governance and knowledge access needs are complex, nuanced and vary widely from nation to nation internationally, and this needs to be reflected in the information and knowledge systems used by institutions that work with communities and their collections. Furthermore, to engage with building systems and services that more appropriately serve Indigenous communities, there must be a focus on relationship building and sustaining. The research and projects associated with Mukurtu Project, including the Mukurtu CMS and the Hubs and Spokes model, provide an example of information systems and collection management projects that centre on building relationships of respect and trust in relation to Indigenous digital cultural heritage. The reciprocal relationship model engaged with by the Mukurtu Project is an example of how collecting institutions should be reconsidering the services and information systems they provide to communities. The development of statements such as the recent ICA Adelaide-Tandaya Declaration provides an international call to action to centre Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in the archives sector, however, what remains is, as Vine Deloria Jr observed, the will to act.

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