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The use of information and communication technology for the preservation of Aboriginal culture: the Badimaya people of Western Australia

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Abstract
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been applied successfully to numerous remote Indigenous communities around the world. The greatest gains have been made when requirements have been first defined by Indigenous members of the community then pattern matched to an ICT solution.

Keywords
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THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE: THE BADIMAYA PEOPLE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ADOPTION OF ICT BY INDIGENOUS PERSONS IN VERY REMOTE AREAS

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been applied successfully to numerous remote Indigenous communities around the world. The greatest gains have been made when requirements have been first defined by Indigenous members of the community then pattern matched to an ICT solution.

In Australia ICT adoption by Indigenous communities in very remote areas is very low; at home only 3% used a computer and 1% used the Internet (ABS 2001). The opportunity cost of foregoing online services such as e-government, e-banking, e-procurement and e-employment is still perceived to be relatively low by Indigenous communities. One could hypothesise that for the greater part government agencies have assumed Indigenous needs.

ICT SOLUTIONS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE BADIMAYA CULTURE

The discussion below shows the potential uses of ICT in key areas fundamental to the continuing presence of the Badimaya culture. The Badimaya people traditionally occupied a large area around Lake Moore in Western Australia. Their language is classified as a member of the Kardu sub-group, of the south west group of Pama-Nyungan languages.

Geographical Information Systems- the Portal Framework

A vector-based map in a geographic information system (GIS) could be used to show where different generations of the Badimaya lived and what languages are spoken today by their descendents. The interactive map, which could also serve as the portal front-end, would identify that the Badimaya people traditionally occupied a large area around Lake Moore, Ninghan Station and Paynes Find. Various map layers could pinpoint important sites, streets/paths/trails, and traditional locations and provide additional information on each upon querying. Graduated thematic maps could also show that the Badimaya today are scattered in towns throughout the Murchison Region in Mullewa, Cue, Mingenew, Mt. Magnet, Yalgoo, Carnarvon and Meekatharra. Hotspots on the maps would allow users to trigger the selection of photographs of people, places and things from the region. Theme maps could also show which languages are spoken by various communities today, such as Watjarri, otherwise known as the 'Murchison' or 'Yamaay' language. The GIS could also be used to provide evidence for native title land claims.

Multimedia Clips- Content Management

The Badimaya people interviewed by Dunn in the 1980s were all concerned about the potential for the Badimaya language to become extinct. They were pleased to hear that their language was being recorded as many feared that over time it would be entirely lost. Joe Benjamin (now deceased), who was acknowledged at the time of recording the language to be one of the last speakers, was the principal source for the material gathered. While a Badimaya dictionary including phonetic pronunciation was documented by Dunn

(1982, 1989), multimedia footage of Badimaya speakers conversing has not been captured. In 1982 there were only about fifty people claiming Badimaya descent. Apart from Dunn, Douglas (1981) and Gratte (1968) have documented a few Badimaya nouns. The lexicon would act as a directory source to corresponding multimedia clips. These clips could even show sacred locations, people participating in traditional rituals, and even live song and dance performances. Today, most of the Badimaya live in remote towns and non-traditional communities.

Digital Document Archives- Knowledge Management

Although written historical accounts of the Badimaya are scarce, surviving documents could be digitally scanned and made available for access. The majority of material that remains today dates back to the mid-19th century when Europeans first had contact with the Badimaya. There was the Badimaya experience with the missionaries during the 1840s, the pastoralists/explorers during the 1850s and the gold prospectors during the 1890s. Without a doubt, there are mixed perspectives of the benefits and costs of these periods to the Badimaya people. Some have favourable impressions, others do not. Some believe that the interplay between the two cultures caused the Badimaya to fragment as a people, forcing families onto stations and children into non-traditional schools. In other descriptions, the Badimaya are said to have worked in partnership with prospectors in the goldfields. The Badimaya culture was under pressure to change, especially the use of language for communicating with the Europeans. Digital photographs from these periods showing art work, artefacts, people at work interacting, and Badimaya in their natural surroundings could be used to inform future generations. In addition, hearing members of

the community talk about the changes that took place over time would be enriching to preserve myths and stories that have only survived through oral transmission.

PRESERVING CULTURE TAKES MORE THAN ICT

Culture encompasses such things as language, art, music, food, spirituality, craftsmanship, history, ancestry, and geography. The inherent problem with ICT is that while it is good at preserving tangible knowledge it has difficulty with how to treat tacit knowledge. ICT output, no matter how well represented, is usually one-dimensional. Digitally archiving information (encompassing text, audio, graphics, video) is only the first step to cultural preservation. The second is placing the information in a meaningful knowledge management system where it can be accessed via community technology centres (CTCs), re-used by educational institutions relying on networks such as wireless fidelity, and maintained by the community itself. The third step is in defining relationships around that content through various collaborative tools of which email and bulletin boards are only the beginning. Herein lies another problem for ICT, that of confidentiality. There are obvious “secrets” that remain between males and females that have been initiated and these are only passed down orally to other selected members of the community.

Cultural preservation cannot be achieved by ICT alone; it requires the spiritual element behind the history to be actively reinvigorated into a community to make its presence felt in a long-lasting manner. Culture is something that is alive and ever-changing. In brief, it is not machinery that reforms society, repairs institutions, builds social networks, or

produces democratic culture; it is people who make this happen. What has been presented in this paper is a way forward. By getting communities involved in the development of applications, ICT adoption is likely to follow by its members, bringing with it a myriad of benefits.

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