

Rowasu'u: An A'uwẽ-Xavante Community Archive

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Digitized materials that document human lives and knowledges raise important questions about the relationships that led to their creation, and the responsibilities and reciprocities at the core of those documentary interactions. As archivists and information technologists have increasingly turned their attention to social justice issues that arise from colonial archives,¹ accessibility has emerged as a source of both hope and concern. Improved search and retrieval functions can make materials that were formerly difficult to access widely available. After early optimism regarding the democratizing potential of digital archives, researchers have turned their attention to the ambivalent role of these collections in challenging and reinscribing power relations.²

Indigenous archives, in particular, highlight the tensions of reinventing archival systems without recreating systems of

¹ Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace, "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation," *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 317–48, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9198-x>.

² Joshua A. Bell, Kimberly Christen, and Mark Turin, "Introduction: After the Return," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1–2 (2013): 1–21; Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (2019): 23–43; Ellen Cushman, "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive," *College English* 76, no. 2 (2013): 115–35.

domination and exclusion.³ Materials in these archives are often the product of colonial practices and have also often been beyond the control of the communities and people they document. A growing number of projects seek to reunite Tribal Nations and Native or Aboriginal people, families, and communities with archival holdings. These efforts stem from a wide range of motivations in addition to working to redress the harms of unequal access to documentation. Scholarly work in this context ranges from the development of new understandings of visual culture and the power of photography,⁴ to creating more complete understandings of historical processes and the Indigenous actors who shaped them,⁵ to investigating the very architecture of knowledge systems so as to create different dynamics of power.⁶

Rowasu'u is a digital archive project that shares priorities with these bodies of work. It is a collaboration among three A'uwẽ-Xavante villages (autodenominated A'uwẽ or A'uwẽ Uptabi) and non-A'uwẽ researchers from three institutions. Rowasu'u seeks to both reunite villagers with documentation of their families and home—particularly materials produced by a diverse group of researchers who have worked in A'uwẽ territory since the 1950s—and eventually provide a platform for the collection and use of new self-generated materials. In Xavante, the term *rowasu'u* has a broad semantic domain including “show,” “tell,” and “history/story.” At the time of writing (December 2020), the archive is a prototype, which has been shaped by initial consultation as well as longer-term relationship building with the villages of Pimentel

³ Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, “Toward Slow Archives,” *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 87–116, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x>; Kirsten Thorpe, “Indigenous Records: Connecting, Critiquing and Diversifying Collections,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 42, no. 2 (2014): 211–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2014.911692>.

⁴ Jennifer Deger, “Thick Photography,” *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 1 (March 2016): 111–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515623312>; Amy Lonetree, “A Heritage of Resilience,” *Public Historian* 41, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 34–50, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2019.41.1.34>; Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵ Allison H. Fischer-Olson and Claire Perrott, “The ONWARD Project and Native Voices: Interventions in Biased 1930s Archival Collections,” *Public Historian* 42, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 80–97, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2020.42.1.80>; Thorpe, “Indigenous Records.”

⁶ Melissa Adler, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xhr79m>; Kimberly Christen, “Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 185–210; Robert Leopold, “Articulating Culturally Sensitive Knowledge Online: A Cherokee Case Study,” *Museum Anthropology Review* 7, nos. 1/2 (2013): 85–104; Hope A. Olson, *The Power to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in Libraries* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002).

Barbosa, Etênhiritipá, and Paraíso in the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land in Mato Grosso, Central Brazil.⁷

In these early stages of the project, we have encountered challenges ranging from the technical and practical constraints of working with collaborators who have limited access to computer infrastructure to the more complex issues of navigating local politics in the context of generations of marginalization and exclusion. In this article, we focus on three themes related to these challenges: (1) our understanding of how A'uwẽ-Xavante knowledge-sharing practices relate to the functionality of the content-management system we are using, Mukurtu CMS; (2) decision-making authority for sharing of content, including that which highlights deceased ancestors of living individuals; and (3) ambiguity relating to creator attribution and cultural heritage.

The project itself is one of building relations, through which A'uwẽ and non-A'uwẽ researchers will explore the reciprocal nature of political and epistemological labor and solidarity. As three of the non-A'uwẽ project members, we bring a variety of expertise. We also have very different types of experience and depth of relations with A'uwẽ-Xavante project members and their villages. Anthropologist James R. Welch is from a region of Northern California traditionally occupied by the Coast Miwok. He began working more than fifteen years ago with Pimentel Barbosa village, which then included the current populations of all our pilot villages (Etênhiritipá village split from Pimentel Barbosa village in 2006, and Paraíso split from it in 2013). Over the years he has worn diverse hats, varying from sociocultural anthropologist to public health researcher, and member of a governmental land claim working group to coordinator of an audiovisual documentation project, which was a preliminary incarnation of the Rowasu'u project. While studying the history of non-A'uwẽ researchers in A'uwẽ territories, historian of science Rosanna Dent joined the audiovisual documentation project to attend to villagers' requests to access historical documentation. She grew up and continues to live in the greater Philadelphia area, a settler on Lenape land. Anthropologist Lori M. Jahnke is a librarian who comes to the project through her friendship with James Welch and her shared interest in promoting

⁷ Since submission in December 2020, the project has grown to include three additional villages (Santa Vitoria, Soripre, and Wederã) and received funding from the National Science Foundation.

equitable and sustainable access to knowledge resources. She is from a region of the Upper Midwest traditionally occupied by the Wahpeton band of the Dakota. A'uwẽ-Xavante members of the project live in several villages located in the Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land, a small parcel of their traditional territory that has been officially recognized by the federal government. Some of these individuals were born outside this Indigenous land in now-vacated villages within their greater traditional territory. Members include community leaders, photographers, cinematographers, schoolteachers, and cultural heritage specialists. The configurations of project members from some villages have not yet been finalized because of interruptions in collaborative work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Project Origins and Development

As with many Indigenous groups, a large and dispersed set of images, audio recordings, and texts document A'uwẽ-Xavante villages. Spread out in libraries, archives, and personal collections across three continents, there are hundreds of publications and many times more photographs, audio recordings, and digital files. Village residents have long been interested in accessing this vast corpus.

Much of this material has been created over the past six decades by academic researchers. Indeed, A'uwẽ-Xavante are among Brazil's most studied Indigenous groups. This body of work constitutes one of the starting points for our current efforts. The villages of Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land have hosted formative anthropological, genetic, ecological, demographic, and public health studies, among others. In the two decades after they initiated diplomatic relations with the Brazilian federal government in 1946, journalists, filmmakers, and researchers began to travel to A'uwẽ territory. Journalists wrote sensational accounts of the so-called pacification of a fearsome Indigenous group,⁸ and scholars arrived to scientifically scrutinize a people they referred to as relatively "unacculturated."⁹ By the 1970s, A'uwẽ-Xavante leaders realized that pursuing collaborations with researchers, artists,

⁸ Seth Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1937–1988* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 58–59.

⁹ Rosanna Dent, "Studying Indigenous Brazil: The Xavante and the Human Sciences 1958–2015" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2017).

and other kinds of external professionals and nonprofit organizations could work in their favor; inserting themselves into the processes of knowledge creation could help them shape the ways they were represented and also create relationships with outsiders who could be called on in the future.¹⁰ Today, the collaborating A'uwẽ-Xavante villages have cultivated extensive networks of friends, allies, and colleagues, both nationally and internationally. The Rowasu'u project grows out of these networks, and through our collaboration we are responding to A'uwẽ-Xavante requests for support in preserving new cultural documentation, as well as facilitating access to historical materials stored around the world.

Since the 1970s, residents of Pimentel Barbosa Indigenous Land have expressed interest in accessing materials created about them by outsiders. Anthropologists Nancy Flowers and Laura Graham began early forms of sharing research materials, including creating duplicate Polaroid images¹¹ and returning copies of audio recordings in response to villagers' requests.¹² As early as the 1980s, A'uwẽ-Xavante who worked with researchers have expressed the desire to form village archives.¹³ Since these early examples of researchers returning materials, village residents have consistently requested that researchers return research documentation—particularly photographs and film—as well as publications.

This project grows out of more recent work to establish a community-based archive and documentation center, initiated in the mid-2000s by Tsuptó Bruprewem Wairi Xavante and James Welch. Tsuptó, one of the key A'uwẽ researchers in this project, approached Welch to develop a documentation project to record traditional foodways knowledge and make it available through a community-based archive. The resulting project—carried out with the Museu do Índio, a part of the federal agency the Fundação Nacional do Índio—successfully created a wealth of documentation but ran out of funding for the implementation of the archive. These materials are among those to be incorporated into Rowasu'u.

¹⁰ Ibid.; Laura R. Graham, *Performing Dreams: Discourses of Immortality among the Xavante of Central Brazil*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); James R. Welch and Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr., eds., *Antropologia e história Xavante em perspectiva* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu do Índio-FUNAI, 2014).

¹¹ Nancy M. Flowers, *Entre os Xavante de Pimentel Barbosa: Memórias fotográficas* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu do Índio-FUNAI, 2011).

¹² Graham, *Performing Dreams*.

¹³ Ibid.

Research materials occupy an interesting position for thinking about the responsibilities and reciprocity that constitute knowledge-sharing relationships, including our own relationships both with villagers and with those who hold the collections in their personal or institutional archives. The collections that will be incorporated into the archive include culturally sensitive material, and the return of these materials raises a series of political and ethical questions, in addition to technological issues of access.

The Rowasu'u project underwent significant changes since its first incarnation, and its current direction ties into A'uwẽ-Xavante motivations to assert control over their cultural information, to have access to knowledge produced by outsiders about their population and society, and to facilitate intergenerational transmission and preservation of knowledge. Many A'uwẽ-Xavante are adept audiovisual documenters of their own society, especially in the smartphone age, although many encounter difficulties curating, controlling, and accessing their own materials owing to technological limitations.¹⁴ It is extremely common to encounter A'uwẽ-Xavante observers filming and recording rituals, dance performances, and ceremonial competitions for their own consumption. People play recorded A'uwẽ-Xavante music on their stereos; it is relatively rare to hear non-A'uwẽ-Xavante music in the villages. They watch filmed ceremonial events on their televisions, but these recordings are fleeting, as memory cards are erased to make room for newer material.

The ephemerality of the content is even more acute for materials created by outsiders, which may never be returned to villages. Most researchers and visitors retain their photographic collections for their own purposes or eventually donate them to, most often, foreign libraries and other institutions, to which A'uwẽ-Xavante have no practical access. Those who return photographs or research results do so in formats that are not easily preserved: slideshows, speeches, paper printouts, or perhaps DVDs, all of which are transitory because of the difficulty of maintaining paper and plastic products in thatched houses in a tropical environment. A'uwẽ-Xavante motivations for collaborating with the Rowasu'u project include the desire to increase the permanence of these returned

¹⁴ Laura R. Graham, "Toward Representational Sovereignty: Rewards and Challenges of Indigenous Media in the A'uwẽ-Xavante Communities of Eténhiritipa-Pimentel Barbosa," *Media and Communication* 4, no. 2 (April 26, 2016): 13–32, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i2.438>.

materials and thereby have ongoing control and access to information created about them. They have exposure to computers, especially through village and local schools, and recognize the potential of digital technologies to satisfy their preservation desires.

An additional concern among elders and some other village leaders is that increased access to governmental wage labor and social benefits is resulting in a generational information gap; elders often emphasize that many youth and young adults lack interest in traditional knowledge. At the same time, these younger people have the most exposure to computers and motivation, interest, and skills in using digital technologies for documentation or interaction with historical materials.

There are specific sociopolitical issues that bring these dynamics to the fore. For example, in addition to contributing to a sense of identity for some A'uwẽ-Xavante, traditional subsistence knowledge has proven valuable in the past for weathering inconsistent government programs and broader market fluctuations. In the 1980s when a mega-mechanized rice production project failed after a decade of exaggerated governmental inputs, A'uwẽ-Xavante from Pimentel Barbosa returned to spending a greater proportion of their time collecting, hunting, and fishing for their livelihood.¹⁵ The current surge of monetary incomes from governmental sources may not be permanent, as suggested by previous boom-and-bust cycles. In fact, at the time of this writing the Bolsonaro presidential administration is discussing ways to end or potentially merge currently available cash transfer social benefits. Thus, preserving traditional subsistence knowledge has become another motivation for villages to collaborate with the Rowasu'u project.

Although our initial emphasis is on including historical records, published material, and researchers' collections, we intend to support inclusion of the audiovisual records already created about foodways during the first incarnation of the project, as well as new information produced by village residents about traditional subsistence knowledge and other themes of interest to participating villages. Rowasu'u will be the first community-coordinated

¹⁵ Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr., Nancy M. Flowers, Francisco M. Salzano, and Ricardo V. Santos, *The Xavante in Transition: Health, Ecology, and Bioanthropology in Central Brazil* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Ricardo V. Santos, Nancy M. Flowers, Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr., and Sílvia A. Gugelmin, "Tapiers, Tractors, and Tapes: Economy and Ecology of the Xavante Indians of Central Brazil," *Human Ecology* 25, no. 4 (1997): 545–66.

archive available in these villages to facilitate intergenerational transmission and preservation of knowledge, which has previously occurred through living oral tradition, dispersed audio-visual recordings, and several isolated external projects that produced films and primers. Eventually, Rowasu'u will be managed autonomously by A'uwẽ-Xavante community members and governed by their knowledge protocols.

We have adopted Mukurtu CMS as the repository platform for its ability to support A'uwẽ-Xavante cultural needs that do not align with Western conventions around sensitive information, intellectual property, and knowledge authority.¹⁶ The Mukurtu permissions structure allows for the definition of protocols that respect cultural norms for privileged information such as those relating to gender, age set membership, moiety, and village membership. These protocols can also be applied to scientific and historic documentation created by outsiders that includes information on cultural practices that should not be made available to every A'uwẽ-Xavante individual, let alone the broader public. The Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University continues to develop the platform, and it has been adopted by Indigenous communities to support a variety of storytelling and film projects and community-centered archives (for examples, visit <https://mukurtu.org/showcase/>).

Thus far, Rowasu'u development consists of a basic site structure that allows each village to maintain its own content, as well as share its content with a broader A'uwẽ-Xavante public and the general public. We are starting with several sets of collections we believe will be of special interest to the villages and are of low sensitivity regarding sharing protocols. One includes four sets of historical photographs taken by Indian Protection Service expeditions to visit A'uwẽ-Xavante in the 1940s and 1950s. These collections are already widely used in publications and are considered shared heritage by participating villages. Another includes photographs from the 1990s taken by anthropologist and public health researcher Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr. We will also include several collections of photographs from 2004 and 2005 taken by anthropologist James R. Welch. The Coimbra and Welch materials have

¹⁶ Christen, "Opening Archives"; Kimberly Christen, Alex Merrill, and Michael Wynne, "A Community of Relations: Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes," *D-Lib Magazine* 23, nos. 5/6 (May 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1045/may2017-christen>.

not yet been viewed in their entirety by the participating villages and were taken before the three split from one another (until 2006 they comprised a single village), making them of common interest.

A'uwẽ-Xavante Knowledge-Sharing Practices

A'uwẽ-Xavante intellectual property protocols are complex and sometimes can create conflicts of interest that are not easily reconciled. Some contours of their sharing practices include age set membership, village residence, gender, and lines of descent from ancestors. Age set membership is based on a system of formal age cohorts, called age sets, formed when girls and boys participate in age-set inauguration ceremonies approximately every five years. Age sets last a lifetime and enjoy extraordinary camaraderie among their members and their mentors, including participating in secret activities and keeping one another's secrets from members of other nonaligned age sets.

Village residence is a fundamental social unit with political autonomy and a sense of social identity. There is no more inclusive intervillage social unit among A'uwẽ-Xavante that might be called a "tribe" or "community," although occasionally multiple villages of a single Indigenous land will hold meetings to discuss matters of mutual interest.¹⁷ Therefore, our use of the term "community" in conjunction with digital archives does not map neatly onto emic notions of social organization. Our intention in referring to "community archives" derives from our hope that the Rowasu'u project will result in its own form of community generated through a common intervillage interest in developing and maintaining the platform and some of its content for mutual benefit. This "archival community" will also grow through relationship building with those of us non-A'uwẽ who are collaborating, including individual and institutional donors of archival material.

Gender is another basic A'uwẽ-Xavante social distinction because women and men understand their own genders to properly have distinct cultures, knowledge sets, and secret information.¹⁸ Sharing between women and men what will become digital archive

¹⁷ David Maybury-Lewis, *Akwẽ-Shavante Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 205–16; James R. Welch, "Age and Social Identity Among the Xavante of Central Brazil" (PhD diss., New Orleans, Tulane University, 2009).

¹⁸ Welch, "Age and Social Identity among the Xavante of Central Brazil."

content may not always be desired by one or both parties. Finally, descent from ancestors is part of what makes people consider one another closely or distantly related. This is also a potential source of friction between related groups who underwent divisions due to political conflict in the past. Occasionally, closely related individuals who share relatively recent ancestors do not get along and contest one another's rights to ancestral inheritance of such prerogatives as ceremonial roles, secret family information, and potentially control of photographs of shared deceased ancestors.¹⁹

One of our early challenges was determining which of these elements to include and, if included, how each would work in practice on the Mukurtu platform. Owing to an understandable level of distrust that the technologies of the project would be deployed without errors, Pimentel Barbosa village decided that no sensitive materials should be uploaded at this time. For example, photographs of plants that pertain to secret women's knowledge would not be uploaded for fear that men might unintentionally gain access. Similarly, videos of secret age set activities would not be uploaded to avoid the possibility that members of other age sets might see them. While this decision made things a great deal easier for us at this early stage, we must still contend with issues related to village-specific heritage and deceased individuals.

Authors such as Hope Olson²⁰ and a host of others,²¹ discuss the difficulties inherent in imposing structure on a body of information. When choosing to group, to classify, or to name, one must emphasize some similarities or differences over others. As Olson puts it, "The organization of the mob into an army, of bricks into a temple, of type into a text always causes violence by imposing a marginalizing and exclusionary order. This order may not hinder the prosperity of the successful man, but its imposition can do violence to those it excludes."²² This is a critique of the linear hierarchies and universal language that comprise formal library

¹⁹ Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil*, 74–77; Maybury-Lewis, *Akwẽ-Shavante Society*, 242–69; Welch, "Age and Social Identity Among the Xavante of Central Brazil."

²⁰ Olson, *The Power to Name*, 2002.

²¹ E.g., Adler, *Cruising the Library*; Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, 1st paperback ed., Inside Technology (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Deborah S. Rosenfelt, "The Politics of Bibliography: Women's Studies and the Literary Canon," in *Women in Print: Opportunities for Women's Studies Research in Language and Literature*, ed. Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982).

²² Hope A. Olson, "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs," *Signs* 26, no. 3 (2001): 649, <https://doi.org/10.1086/495624>.

classification systems, such as the Library of Congress Classification and the Dewey Decimal Classification. She notes that by imposing such an order, groups at the top of the hierarchy are always gathered together while those further down will always be dispersed.²³ Indeed, it is the exclusionary nature of formal recordkeeping systems—whether in libraries, archives, or state bureaucracies—that creates the need for community archives in the first place.

There is ample research documenting how biases of gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, class, sexuality, age, race, and language are created by and reside in knowledge management systems.²⁴ This is unsurprising when we acknowledge that most of these systems emerge from societies marred by inequality and the excesses of colonialism. However, the efficiency of these systems obscures the millions of decisions that simplified, pruned, and prioritized the unruly multitudes. It is doubly problematic when we agree to view a knowledge system as value neutral and as reflecting a natural order while forgetting that the very idea of creating a universal order represents distinctive cultural features rather than their absence.²⁵

How then can we approach the development of Rowasu'u without replicating these pitfalls? Some authors and practitioners have adopted the term “radical archive” to describe a rethinking of the political and legal structures that determine the management and use of archives.²⁶ However, in some cases much of the rethinking is deferred to technological mediums as a means to constrain institutional or state authority, leaving the complications surrounding who is allowed to speak for the community unexamined. As Jan Bender Shetler points out, “Most digitization projects with material from indigenous people deal directly with ‘community gatekeepers,’ who make the decisions on behalf of others, without questioning the dynamics behind their

²³ See also Kristin H. Gerhard, Trudi E. Jacobson, and Susan G. Williamson, “Indexing Adequacy and Interdisciplinary Journals: The Case of Women's Studies,” *College & Research Libraries* 54, no. 2 (1993): 125–35, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_54_02_125.

²⁴ Adler, *Cruising the Library*; Michelle Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222–35, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692299>; Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics”; Ellen D. Gilbert, “Diversity and Collection Development,” *Library Philosophy and Practice* 1, no. 2 (1999): 1–7; Olson, “The Power to Name,” 2001.

²⁵ Sandra G. Harding, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*, Race, Gender, and Science (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 61.

²⁶ Haidy Geismar, “Museum + Digital = ?,” in *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, English ed. (London: Berg, 2012), 266–87.

authority.”²⁷ Indeed, projects that overlook the diversity of beliefs and internal divisions within communities risk replicating many of the problems presented by the colonial paradigm. In practical terms, evolving opinions and community goals will affect administration of the archive, and failing to engage a diverse range of community voices could undermine its long-term relevance.

While Mukurtu CMS operates by a set of principles that are intended to support reciprocity, heterarchy, and engagement, the act of defining groups and categories cannot be avoided. For Rowasu'u to be useful and fulfill its purpose in preserving A'uwẽ-Xavante cultural information, its structure must have some measure of stability. Yet the decisions we make at this stage represent a particular perspective on A'uwẽ-Xavante village life and their history that may not be easily disentangled from the archive by future stewards. For example, the Mukurtu platform includes “community” as one of the three core elements of every site, which we have already shown does not correspond to emic notions of A'uwẽ-Xavante social organization. We have opted to use this function for “village” as well as other configurations of site users, recognizing that by doing so we are imposing external notions of how Indigenous peoples organize themselves socially. Shetler acknowledges that her work in establishing the Mara Cultural Heritage Digital Archive may have the unintended consequence of reifying one version of Mara oral history rather than allowing it to continue as a living dialogue that expresses multiple perspectives on the past—a realization that emerged through her subsequent field work with Mara women and the revelation of their differing historical memory.²⁸ While we have the benefit of learning from many other community archives projects, there will be unintended consequences for Rowasu'u as well.

Decision-Making Authority over Content Access

An additional dilemma is who, among A'uwẽ-Xavante villages, has authority to decide whether an image is shared with the public. A'uwẽ-Xavante villages split and multiply on a regular basis.

²⁷ Jan Bender Shetler, “The Mara Cultural Heritage Digital Library,” in *Searching for Sharing: Heritage and Multimedia in Africa*, ed. Daniela Merolla and Mark Turin, 1st ed., World Oral Literature Series, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Open Book, 2017), 35.

²⁸ Shetler, “Mara Cultural Heritage Digital Library,” 36.

Thus, for example, an image taken in 2005 in one village may include individuals now residing in three different villages, some of which may not be on good political terms with the others. Which village, then, can decide whether an image is appropriate for public consumption? Our preliminary solution is that all three must agree that the content can be made public. However, as we develop the structure of Rowasu'u, we are concerned that the site cannot reflect the dynamism of A'uwẽ-Xavante social life, and as village relationships change, the repository could become a source of conflict.²⁹ For example, a new village fission occurred during the writing of this article (late 2020), resulting in the creation of an additional stakeholder village that we have not yet been able to consult because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our intention is to open discussion with them when circumstances permit, which will multiply the number of voices bearing upon repository decisions. This dynamic will repeat each time a village splits in the future or when other existing villages join Rowasu'u.

A similar problem is presented when multiple descendants of a deceased photographed ancestor exist. In the event of disagreement as to whether an image may be presented to the public (which has yet to occur), it becomes unclear who has authority to decide. Alternatively, it is possible that each living descendant in this scenario claims exclusive rights to the image, creating a conflict as to who may give permission for its use. These kinds of dilemmas will be addressed through open dialogue, and potentially, decisions will be made conservatively as to what to include in the repository (excluding material with contested viewpoints regarding rights and access).

It will be important to cultivate close collaboration among the individuals who maintain the repository and those who traditionally hold decision-making authority in villages, since the two will rarely overlap. Those who maintain the repository will be younger people with Portuguese and computer literacy (usually men), while those who traditionally make decisions in villages are generally elder women and men, with familial or political seniority. Most public decisions are made in the men's council, held each morning and evening in most villages, where male elders lead the

²⁹ David Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts; Archives as Anthropological Surrogates," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2012): 474, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145721>.

rest of the male attendees in a process of managed consensus to arrive at important decisions. Although participation of A'uwẽ-Xavante individuals with literacy in Portuguese and computers will facilitate village autonomy in managing the repository, the individuals with these skills will likely have little autonomy within their villages to make decisions about who should have access to content. In other words, their work will be especially important logistically but will occur under the close conceptual supervision of elders with greater degrees of decision-making authority.

Creator Attribution and Cultural Heritage

Another major initial challenge has been identifying individuals in images and designating creator attribution. With a total population of approximately nine hundred individuals in the participating villages and a tendency for people from other villages to visit regularly, it is impossible for us as external researchers to accurately identify everyone in each image. This can be accomplished with the aid of village residents, but the amount of time required for each image is prohibitive. Similarly, the Mukurtu platform defines “creator” not as the photographer but as “a person or people; a clan, tribe, or cultural group; or an organization that is primarily responsible for providing the essential knowledge or labor that goes into making” an item.³⁰ This definition is based on the idea that cultural heritage is communal, and it is intended to provide a more flexible and culturally appropriate means of attribution. In practice for the nascent Rowasu'u, the breadth of this definition creates additional ambiguity. In many cases, especially images with more than one person, we have opted to identify the village as “creator” until we can work with our A'uwẽ-Xavante colleagues to refine this practice.

As several authors have discussed, the return of historical images and other content can create new possibilities for pursuing community goals around cultural heritage.³¹ However, as outside

³⁰ Mukurtu, “Digital Heritage Metadata Fields (2.1),” *Mukurtu CMS* (blog), 2020, <https://mukurtu.org/support/digital-heritage-metadata-fields-2-1/>.

³¹ E.g., Cushman, “Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story”; Mary Jane Cedar Face and Deborah Hollens, “A Digital Library to Serve a Region: The Bioregion and First Nations Collections of the Southern Oregon Digital Archives,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2004): 116–21; Kate Hennessy, Natasha Lyons, Stephen Loring, Charles Arnold, Mervin Joe, Albert Elias, and James Pokiak, “The Inuvialuit Living History Project: Digital Return as the Forging of Relationships between Institutions, People, and Data,” *Museum*

researchers, how do we understand and support this process given that images from A'uwẽ-Xavante villages also express the voices of researchers, government agencies, colonial agendas, and sometimes commercial interests? Elizabeth Edwards points out that images cannot be understood by their visual content alone; rather, meaning is generated through the social relations that converge in them.³² In other words, the photograph is not merely documentation of a moment in time but a manifestation of processes involving social networks, affect, and material practices. As we add images and other content to Rowasu'u, we are also adding ourselves to these social relations. It is our hope that the collaborative nature of the Rowasu'u team will help us productively navigate areas where communal ownership is problematic or unclear.³³

Conclusion

Although we undertake this project in collaboration with A'uwẽ-Xavante villages, our role in constructing the repository places us in the midst of local decision-making practices and politics. As outsiders and academics, we have greater economic power and mobility to access, digitize, and work with materials produced about our A'uwẽ collaborators' ancestors, family members, and villages. Inequity in access to technology and training means that for the project to be successful, we—the non-A'uwẽ team members—will have to be centrally involved in building the data infrastructure of the site. We find ourselves navigating from this disconcerting position and wondering how we might avoid replicating the structures of exclusion that we aim to subvert. Christen and Anderson discuss the necessity of contending with these complexities.³⁴ They advocate for a slow and deliberate approach to developing community archives that subverts capitalist ideals of efficiency and production. They emphasize reciprocity and collaborative curation as a means to resist neoliberal paradigms that value scale over context, meaning, and sustainability.

Anthropology Review 7, nos. 1/2 (2013): 44–73; Ramesh Srinivasan, "Indigenous, Ethnic and Cultural Articulations of New Media," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 2006): 497–518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877906069899>.

³² Elizabeth Edwards, "Objects of Affect: Photography beyond the Image," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2012): 221–34, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145708>.

³³ Leopold, "Articulating Culturally Sensitive Knowledge Online."

³⁴ Christen and Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives."

In this context, a critical approach to relationship building and reciprocity is essential. As Zoe Todd has explored, relational ontologies are and have historically been central to many Indigenous philosophies.³⁵ Indigenous methodologies articulated by North American scholars detail relational forms of accountability that extend beyond the direct interactions of individuals to include responsibilities to larger collectives, whether villages, communities, or even ecologies.³⁶ Part of our ongoing work involves learning how to be in good relation—personally and intellectually—with our collaborators, their villages, and their ancestors. The processes of the project are an investment of labor and trust building; as village leaders and elders requested support to access and work with the historical materials that will populate the digital archive, they also committed to helping us non-A'uwẽ collaborators learn the basic tenets of A'uwẽ knowledge-sharing practices. Thus, the conception and development of Rowasu'u is also a process of training us to understand and work with the materials until we can transfer administration primarily or completely to A'uwẽ members of the project.

Moving too swiftly to establish Rowasu'u as a community archive without careful engagement of the many stakeholders would certainly undermine its longevity and usefulness to the villages. The dilemmas discussed above, and other issues, do not have straightforward answers and will best be addressed in village meetings before we are confronted with them in practice. Perhaps some ground rules for mediating conflicts and resolving errors can be agreed upon before we are faced with a concrete example. We also intend to conduct additional ethnographic fieldwork on A'uwẽ-Xavante knowledge-sharing practices and hold village workshops in computer skills and repository management. In addition to furthering the development of Rowasu'u, this work will foster deeper engagement with A'uwẽ-Xavante villages and other stakeholders.

³⁵ Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

³⁶ Nicholas J. Reo, "Inawendiwin and Relational Accountability in Anishnaabeg Studies: The Crux of the Biscuit," *Journal of Ethnobiology* 39, no. 1 (2019): 65–75, <https://doi.org/10.2993/0278-0771-39.1.65>; see also Evelyn Steinhauer, "Thoughts on an Indigenous Research Methodology," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 26, no. 2 (2002): 69–81; Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2008).

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge our collaborators and other residents of Pimentel Barbosa, Etênhiritipá, and Paraíso, who allowed us to visit them in their villages and homes, and dedicated time to discussing this project with us. This work was supported by the Social Science Research Council with funds provided by the Mellon Foundation, a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at McGill University, the National Science Foundation, and a Faculty Seed Grant from New Jersey Institute of Technology. We also thank other researchers who have worked with A'uwẽ-Xavante and considered collaborating with us as we further develop the project, including Nancy Flowers, Laura R. Graham and Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr.

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