

ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE DIGITIZATION OF INDIGENOUS COLLECTIONS: THE CASE OF VÄRLDSKULTURMUSEET

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ABSTRACT

The Swedish National Museums of World Culture (Världskulturmuseet) have recently published a report explaining the situation of the museum collection currently available on Carlotta, along with some actions they have been taking as part of decolonizing practices to enhance access to the Latin American indigenous collections. As part of these actions, the museum decided to migrate the Brazilian indigenous collections of the *WaiWai* to a new platform called *Tainacan*, a Brazilian platform created in 2014 to consider the indigenous perspective and involve their participation in describing the objects (Muñoz et al., 2022) (Martins et al. 2021). The project “Digital Repatriation of Amazonian Cultural Heritage” conducted by Lana (2022) also demonstrates the gaps in the museum’s digitization project. Through collaboration with indigenous groups, the project has been working on digital repatriation. This allows these groups to have digital access to their objects and describe them according to their own perspectives.

However, materials from *WaiWais* and many other communities remain available on Carlotta, showing misrepresentation, problems with accessibility, and other metadata issues (Sundström, 2023) (Muñoz et al., 2022). Among these numerous problems, the presence of digitized collections itself presents a point to be analyzed, considering that different indigenous communities have different ways of representing and conserving their knowledge. In many cases, access is restricted or even completely prohibited, depending on the community's point of view (Morphy, 1991).

When considering cultural particularities, it is essential to understand the regulations Brazilian indigenous communities have concerning their intellectual properties regarding their own material. *The Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* (National Indigenous Peoples Foundation) is responsible for protecting the interests of indigenous people in Brazil. The organization ensures respect related to the access, reproduction, and display of indigenous artifacts in different institutions.

In Sweden, the National Strategy for Digital Cultural Heritage aims to connect cultural heritage with today’s and future users, emphasizing democracy. The document highlights several benefits of digitization, such as online access and the security of materials. It also outlines guidelines that direct the digitization process. Although these documents are not the primary focus of our investigation, they offer possibilities for further analysis.

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The goal of this seed project is to engage in theoretical discussion and document analysis aimed at identifying the ethical conflicts, based on Brazilian policy statements, of displaying Brazilian indigenous material in a Swedish cultural heritage online institution. Consequently, this highlights the issues of digitization that prioritizes metadata and documents available online, while ignoring cultural specificities and ethical concerns in displaying objects from different cultures. Our central questions are: What ethical issues can be raised in digitizing indigenous material? What conflicts can be found between Swedish digitization practices and Brazilian indigenous policies?

The method used was document analysis and interviews. The documents analyzed were from the *Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* (National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples), specifically focusing on the PORTARIA n. 177/PRES, dated February 16, 2006. This document outlines rules about how “to respect indigenous peoples, the protection of their material and immaterial heritage related to image, artistic, and cultural creations.” An analysis was conducted on Carlotta to identify what the digitization rules guide regarding materials from other cultures. The interviews were semi-structured and gathered information about the ongoing decolonization project, Carlotta management, and future projects related to the collections.

The main findings indicate that the *Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* also has a database of images, which display all the pictures authorized for exhibition in other institutions. To be part of the database, the images must meet all the requirements, including a set of signed contracts and regulations, as mentioned above. Regarding public information, an institution can use the images as long as they “respect the limits of privacy, honor, and intimacy of those portrayed” (PORTARIA, p. 4, translated from Portuguese). This is not the case with Carlotta, as their webpage has a warning sign informing users that they will maintain information online, even if it does not meet the requirements of the people portrayed, as they prioritize access to materials.

“When searching our database, it is worth knowing that some people regard the information and pictures of objects and ceremonies available as sacred and hence, do not want these in the public domain. Nevertheless, it is our decision to make these available on the public domain as we feel it is important for individuals and groups to know what collections the Museums of World Culture manage” (SMVK, 2023, Carlotta. Sundström, 2023).

There is a conflict between what Brazilian regulations say and how Carlotta represents Brazilian indigenous information. However, as previously stated, it is also necessary to analyze the existing digitization policies in Sweden, to understand the origins of such practices applied in the museum. It is essential to highlight that Membrilla (2024) analyzed the guidelines for digitization and found nothing that specified indigenous materials. In the document “*Världskulturmuseerna i en digital tid*,” the institution’s strategy for digitization is explained; however, no specific points related to image rights or information on conflicts of interest in different countries were identified. The interviewer stated that even after contact with the indigenous group, when they shared their worldview, the museum’s documentation practices remained the same due to some administrative

challenges reported, also addressed in Sundström (2023). Membrilla (2024) also discussed this issue and referred to such practices as a colonial footprint. Based on these outdated practices in museum documentation and the lack of significant changes surrounding them, the interviewer believes that the only solution is to continue migrating to *Tainacan*.

In conclusion, we assert that access to documents through massive digitization, even when based on democratic principles, should not take precedence over the rights of minority groups, specially those from other countries with different languages, culture, and regulations. The formation of such collections carries a colonial past, and making this past available online without the necessary cultural restrictions may harm these groups by reinforcing stereotypes, which may not be a democratic decision for the portrayed groups.

The consequences of mass digitization and the colonial past can also be observed when assessing the metadata available on Carlotta. Including an assessment of terms, descriptors, and all metadata that describe the images may represent a high cost for the museum, often remaining in the background within digitization projects. However, not changing the metadata may result in many other ethical conflicts that must be investigated. For that reason, the metadata used to describe Brazilian indigenous collections will be the next step in this research, as the metadata used to represent indigenous collections needs to be created considering the particularities of a community, as the literature review showed Sundström (2023).

Keywords: Digitization, Brazilian indigenous collections, Swedish National Museums of World Culture

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