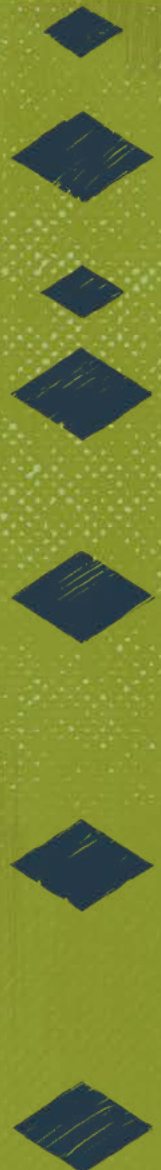
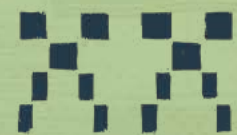
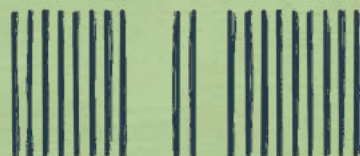
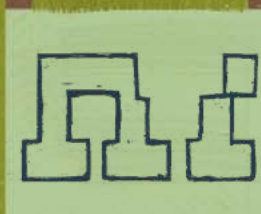
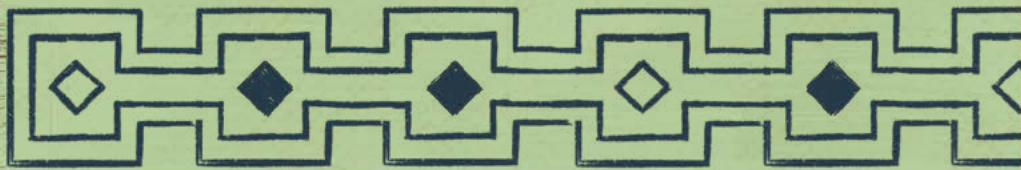


GUARDIANS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous Documentary Heritage and the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme





INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the Memory of the World Programme in 1992. The work of this programme has been guided by the 2015 UNESCO *Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form*. Along the same lines as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, this Recommendation provides a framework for the national and international registers to formally recognize outstanding examples of documentary heritage that inform our knowledge of our shared humanity.

In 2017 the Canadian Commission for UNESCO established a national advisory committee for the Memory of the World Programme, as well as a Canadian register.

The 2015 Recommendation that guides Memory of the World has formally integrated both the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1993). In response, the Canadian Advisory Committee has actively developed a framework that recognizes these two Declarations and the specific ways of knowing that inform how Indigenous communities preserve and disseminate their knowledge.

This paper will present an overview of the Canadian Advisory Committee, the Memory of the World guidelines that inform its work, and case studies relating to recognition of Indigenous documentary heritage.

Formulated by the UNESCO General Conference, “Recommendations” establish international principles and norms. Though not legally binding, recommendations carry moral authority and are intended to influence the development of national laws and practices.



IMPLEMENTING THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD PROGRAMME IN CANADA

The Canadian Advisory Committee for Memory of the World operates under CCUNESCO, which was established in 1957 to coordinate government and non-governmental bodies in education, science, culture, and communication with the work of UNESCO at the international and domestic levels. The Memory of the World programme falls under the auspices of the Communication and Information Sector at CCUNESCO, which began, as early as 2001, to actively encourage the National Archives of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada) and the Department of Canadian Heritage to establish a Canadian Memory of the World Register. CCUNESCO further advocated for the establishment of a Canadian Advisory Committee composed of experts who could recommend collections for recognition by the International Memory of the World Register.

Canada had been involved in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme since its inception in 1992 through the leadership of Jean-Pierre Wallot, the National Archivist of Canada from 1985 until 1997. Wallot served as the first Chairman of the International Memory of the World Advisory Committee from 1993 to 1998, well before the establishment of a Canadian counterpart in 2017. Several factors influenced this delay in creating a Canadian advisory committee, including debate within the Canadian archival community about the elevation of specific collections based on their national significance. It was argued that every aspect of documentary heritage was valuable based on the distinct narratives that were contained within these collections.

Encouragement to develop a Canadian Advisory Committee came when the Musée de la civilisation du Québec approached CCUNESCO for their support to nominate the Quebec Seminary Collection for inclusion on the International Memory of the World Register. Shortly afterwards, the Archives of Manitoba approached the Commission requesting support for the nomination of the *Hudson's Bay Company Archives*. Ian Wilson, who had succeeded Wallot as National Archivist of Canada, was familiar with these collections and agreed it was the appropriate time for a Canadian Memory of the World Advisory Committee to support their international recognition.

Wallot was invited to establish an ad hoc Canadian Advisory Committee, as CCUNESCO did not believe it necessary to create a permanent standing committee at that time. Wallot was responsible for conceiving a national framework and application process to evaluate Canadian collections for their inclusion on the International Memory of the World Register. The committee formed by Wallot did not have clearly established membership. Instead, select individuals would consider expert testimony about specific archival collections that were being considered for international recognition. This testimony would then determine Canadian submissions to the international register. Through this process, both the *Quebec Seminary Collection* and the *Hudson's Bay Company Archives* were added to the International Memory of the World Register in 2007.

The Memory of the World Registers

National and regional Memory of the World Advisory Committees support UNESCO's work on the preservation and promotion of documentary heritage through their national registers and submissions to the international Memory of the World Register.

With the input of the Canadian Advisory Committee, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO supports those interested in submitting documentary heritage to the Canadian and international registers. Entries in both registers will ultimately reflect the diversity of Canada's documentary heritage and the realities of our country, Indigenous peoples, regions, communities, and individuals.





CREATING A NATIONAL REGISTER AND A PERMANENT COMMITTEE

Some collections that were endorsed by the ad hoc Canadian Advisory Committee were deferred by the international community as it was felt that they were only nationally significant. One example of this was the Vancouver Island Treaties, proposed for inclusion on the International Memory of the World Register by the Royal British Columbia Museum. The international deferral of the Vancouver Island Treaties finally encouraged the establishment of a national Memory of the World Register and a formal Canadian Advisory Committee at CCUNESCO.

Established in 2017, the committee included ex officio representation from both Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BanQ). Since the inception of the Canadian Memory of the World Register, several significant collections have been added, including The Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection at the University of British Columbia, The Scrapbook Debates at the Library of Parliament, and the Viola Desmond Court Case Papers at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

Following the development of the Canadian Memory of the World Register, the advisory committee began to question how Indigenous forms of documentary heritage would be considered by the International Memory of the World Advisory Committee, especially forms that were materially distinct from paper-based archival collections, such as wampum belts, oral histories, birch bark scrolls (wiigwaasabak), or petroglyphs. The International Advisory Committee had already recognized diverse forms of documentary heritage such as The Hittite Cuneiform Tablets from Bogazköy (Turkey) and the Radio Broadcast of the Philippines People Power Revolution. Noting this, the Canadian committee approached its international counterpart regarding the commemoration of wampum belts, specifically.

The International Advisory Committee affirmed that wampum belts, wiigwaasabak, and other forms of documentary heritage were applicable for recognition. It further affirmed that Indigenous forms of documentary heritage required flexibility in the nomination process as a result of specific cultural contexts. Conventionally, an institution is responsible for preparing a written document that articulates the significance of a collection. For some Indigenous communities, the knowledge associated with certain aspects of documentary heritage can only be understood through oral narratives spoken in their own language. Both the International and Canadian Advisory Committees support the idea of an oral submission if these are pre-recorded, and if an English and French translation can be made accessible to the committee members to assist in their deliberation. So far, this approach has not been put into practice through a Canadian submission.

CCUNESCO and the Canadian Advisory Committee for Memory of the World acknowledge that the national recognition of Indigenous documentary heritage may not be a priority for Indigenous peoples. With this in mind, it is very clear this programme can nonetheless provide us all with a better understanding of the diverse ways of comprehending the world around us. The Memory of the World Programme was established within a westernized framework that tries to quantify 'significance,' but it is recognized that Indigenous documentary heritage can only be truly understood through its own nation-specific cultural contexts. It is imperative that national and international advisory committees review how they evaluate Indigenous documentary heritage in order to respect Indigenous cultural contexts and ensure that we can comprehend the realities of our shared global narrative. Fortunately, steps have been taken to equip advisory committees for this challenge.





MEMORY OF THE WORLD, THE MATAATUA DECLARATION, AND UNDRIP

The Memory of the World Programme is not regulated through an international UNESCO treaty such as the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) or the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003). Alternatively, as of 2015, the Memory of the World Programme has been guided by the UNESCO [Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form](#) (2015). Recommendations are less formal agreements that set out overarching principles for the international community. The 2015 Recommendation recognizes that Indigenous peoples have unique cultural guidelines that regulate access to their documentary heritage. Noting this, both the [Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (1993) and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP, 2007) were unanimously integrated into the 2015 Recommendation.

The integration of these declarations into the Recommendation presents some exciting opportunities when recognizing Indigenous documentary heritage through the Memory of the World Programme. This can be seen when considering the mandate of preserving documentary heritage and ensuring that collections are made publicly accessible.

The concept of preserving documentary heritage is certainly applicable for Indigenous communities. While Indigenous knowledge remains, the impacts of forced assimilation (including through the Indian Residential School System) are clearly evident. This can be seen when considering the loss of Indigenous languages, which were specifically targeted through the residential school system. A 2018 study found that 75% of Indigenous languages within Canada are considered to be ‘endangered’ and at risk of a break in their uninterrupted transmission to future generations.¹ Indigenous languages are not just a form of expression – each phrase contains complex cultural information about the relationship between a speaker and their traditional territory. This was noted through a United Nations Proclamation declaring 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, and the subsequent decision to declare the decade beginning in 2022 as the International Decade for Indigenous Languages.

Documentary heritage, including dictionaries, lexicons, and other resource books, plays a vital role within communities to maintain, revitalize, and preserve Indigenous languages. Recognizing this, the Canadian Advisory Committee made a public call for the nomination of collections relating to Indigenous languages. This was well-received, and some of the inscriptions that came from this call are discussed below.

Efforts to preserve Indigenous documentary heritage are also significant when considering how this knowledge relates to certain geological or ecological features. The information contained within these records may relate to specific plants or animals or may include oral narratives that can only be told in specific locations, relying upon geological features as mnemonic devices or memory aids. While it may seem difficult to comprehend how place-based documentary heritage can be integrated into a program such as Memory of the World, the case study of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute Fonds demonstrates that this can be accomplished while recognizing nation-specific cultural protocols.

The Memory of the World Programme requires that inscriptions are made publicly accessible, which may be problematic given that some aspects of Indigenous knowledge are governed by community protocols that require such knowledge to be maintained within specific nations or familial networks. This, of course, would be based upon a subjective or literal understanding of accessibility to documentary heritage that doesn't recognize the cultural specificity of the item or collection itself. The fact that both UNDRIP and the Mataatua Declaration are integrated into the recommendation guiding Memory of the World offers flexibility in regard to the accessibility of Indigenous documentary heritage.

¹McIvor, O. (2018). Indigenous languages in Canada: What you need to know. Ottawa, ON, Canada: CCUNESCO.

Article 2 of the Mataatua Declaration, for example, recognizes that “[...] Indigenous peoples are the guardians of their customary knowledge and have the right to protect and control the dissemination of that knowledge.” Article 31 of UNDRIP similarly states that “[...] Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions [...] they also have the right to maintain, control, protect, and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage [...]”

The Mataatua Declaration was adopted during the First International Conference on the Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 1993.

This conference was convened by the Nine Tribes of Mataatua in Aotearoa New Zealand. A wide range of subjects were addressed including Indigenous knowledge, customary environmental management, and Indigenous languages, cultures, and worldviews.

The National and International Advisory Committees therefore have the opportunity and obligation to assess the concept of ‘accessibility’ based on the distinct cultural contexts of the documentary heritage in question. This flexibility allows Indigenous documentary heritage to be fully integrated into an international program that might otherwise have been constrained by its pre-established cultural biases.

The Canadian Advisory Committee has fully integrated these principles into the nomination form and evaluation criteria for proposed additions to the Canadian Memory of the World Register. This is reflected within the evaluation criteria as follows:

The Canada Memory of the World Register recognizes that the Indigenous Peoples of Canada transfer, teach, understand, and share their histories and stories in unique ways. Indigenous Peoples own their histories and stories. They decide when, if, and how to submit items to the Canada Memory of the World Register. Cultural sensitivities, including Indigenous communities’ custodianship of their materials, and their guardianship of access, will be honoured. Inscription on the Register does not infringe on Indigenous peoples’ ownership, control, access, and possession of their histories and stories.²

The current nomination form used by the Canadian Advisory Committee also reflects an awareness that Indigenous communities may have cultural frameworks that govern access to their documentary heritage. In part, this is why the nomination form asks for the following information:

Cultural/Moral/Ethical/Spiritual Status (300 words max)

Describe any non-legal beliefs, customs, or relationships to the documentary heritage. Do any nations, communities, groups, or institutions have a cultural, moral, ethical, or spiritual relationship with the documentary heritage? This could include members of specific communities, or the families of people recorded or documented.

This wording was the result of open discussions about how a program of commemoration rooted in Western practices could appropriately conceptualize, respect, and integrate Indigenous perspectives. It is understood that this wording will inevitably change as best practices relating to the recognition of Indigenous documentary heritage are integrated. The best way to understand the future work of the Canadian Advisory Committee is by acknowledging the institutional past, which includes a look at specific case studies and how they have influenced the Canadian Register.

² This wording was influenced by OCAP principles developed in 1998 during a meeting of the National Steering Committee of the First Nations and Inuit Regional Longitudinal Health Survey. More on the OCAP principles can be found here: <https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training>.



CASE STUDY

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL RECORDS

Two collections relating to the Indian Residential School System have been added to the National Register.

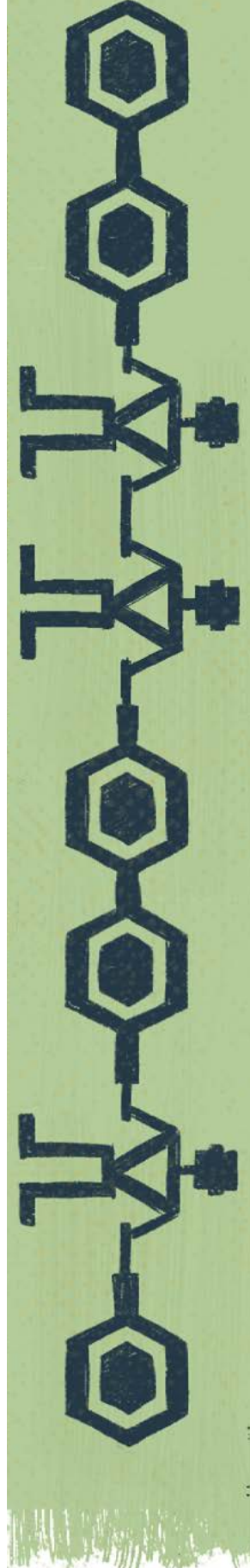
1. The *Archival Records of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation* stem from the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (2006), which created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). The TRC was responsible for investigating the Indian Residential School System through archival documents and oral testimony. Over five million documents were acquired from 150 government and church repositories and over 7 000 witness testimonies were recorded at public hearings.

Access to these records is based on the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, *Manitoba's National Research Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Act*, and cultural protocols determined by individuals who are mentioned in specific documents.

In 2017 the Supreme Court of Canada considered the matter of the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) records that are part of these collections. These include transcripts of survivor testimonies and adjudicated decisions relating to 38 000 claims for compensation, along with associated research reports. The Supreme Court decision was based on the question of confidentiality, ruling that IAP submissions must be destroyed by 2032 unless individual survivors explicitly state that their records may be kept. While this challenges the conventional understanding of archival preservation, it is recognized that this decision is ultimately based on the principles of consent that guide documents such as UNDRIP, added as an appendix to the international Memory of the World Register.

2. The *Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association and Shingwauk Reunion Fonds* presents a different perspective of the Indian Residential School System. This group was founded in 1981 as the first community-based residential school survivor association. The records document the history of the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association and its work to facilitate community healing. This collection is guided by Indigenous community members who assure that their culture, as opposed to conventional archival practices, defines the preservation and access to these records.

These collections, which are culturally and emotionally sensitive, also contain the personal information of living individuals. Because of this, the committee recognized that a uniform interpretation of public accessibility and preservation of documentary heritage could not be applied during the evaluation process. The Canadian Advisory Committee recognized not only the national significance of this collection, but also the significance of the practices that guide its day-to-day stewardship.



CASE STUDY

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Several collections associated with Indigenous languages were recognized on the Canada Memory of the World Register following the United Nations Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019. These include *The Ida Halpern Fonds* at the Royal British Columbia Museum and *Early Books in Aboriginal Languages* at the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BanQ).

1. The work of Dr. Ida Halpern includes 342 audio recordings of Kwakwa ka 'wakw, Nuuchahnulth, Tlingit, and Haida Elders. These were made between 1947 and 1980 when community members recognized that generational decline was impacting the transmission of knowledge contained within their languages. The recordings contain information associated with complex systems of societal governance that were specifically targeted by assimilationist policies. The collection also contains notes by Dr. Halpern outlining the cultural protocols associated with the transmission of this knowledge.

The Royal British Columbia Museum openly discussed several issues associated with the ethnographical methods utilized to develop this collection. From the outset, they recognized the problematic nature of the name of the collection itself, which is based on the *Rules of Archival Description* that serve as the national standard for most institutions. By favouring the name of Dr. Halpern, they acknowledged, the names of Mungo Martin, Dan Cranmer, Billy Assu, and other Elders who shared their knowledge have been minimalized. The museum also specified that while Dr. Halpern was the owner of the physical recordings, knowledge contained within them was the intellectual property of specific families and communities. With this transparent recognition, along with letters of support from Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw Tribal Council, the collection was added to the National Register.



Ida Halpern fonds, Royal British Columbia Museum, Item J-00526.

2. The *Early Books in Aboriginal Languages* is a collection of 146 items held by the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. This extensive collection contains items in Kanyen'kehaka, Cree, Abenaki, Innu, Inuktitut, and several other Indigenous languages. This includes works that were written entirely in Indigenous languages and lexicons, grammars, or dictionaries that include French translations to advance the work of colonial missionaries. The collection ranges from 1556 to 1899 and includes both hand-written originals and mass-market publications. Each work that was recognized on the National Register has been digitized and made publicly accessible.

The nomination for this collection notes that the books express the social and spiritual values of Indigenous nations with the intention of better conveying the principles of Christianity. The nomination further noted that these books helped advance the work of cultural and ideological imperialism, but this complex association was not the subject of further analysis. This collection was added to the National Register as it is undoubtedly a significant aspect of the country's documentary heritage, but the Canadian Advisory Committee now recognizes that increased due diligence is required to fully vet collections that may be culturally contentious.

CASE STUDY

PLACE-BASED KNOWLEDGE

1. The *Gwich'in Tribal Council - Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute Fonds* was added to the Canada Memory of the World Register in 2021 after its nomination by the Gwich'in Tribal Council and the Northwest Territories Archives. This collection includes 59 metres of textual records, 13,400 photographs, 265 maps, 901 audio cassettes, 195 video recordings, and 3 terabytes of data.

These records document a relationship between the Gwich'in and their traditional territories that has been sustained since time immemorial. While noting this, the nomination also provided a concise time frame associated with the records that were submitted for the National Register. These were created between 1993 and 2016 following the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claims Agreement, which led to the development of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute. The institute, which is responsible for the cultural heritage provisions of the agreement, has as its mandate, to "document, preserve and promote Gwich'in culture, language, traditional knowledge and values." This was done through 120 research projects that gathered community knowledge, including oral histories associated with the landscape.

The nomination for this collection presents a clear link between the landscape and the knowledge that it holds. For example, specific oral histories relating to land use are tied to specific geological and ecological features. The nomination form highlights how the *Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute Fonds* includes maps and audio-video recordings that collectively situate the documentary heritage within its proper landscape. While recording these oral histories the Gwich'in utilized methodologies and practices that were developed within their own communities, ensuring that they were culturally appropriate. This was significant when recording oral histories that were cared for by Gwich'in Elders, some of whom have since passed away. Many of these Elders lived through a transitional period for their nation and were able to provide recollections about life on the land before the introduction of a global economy that altered their community practices.

As stated on the Canada Memory of the World Register, this collection "is the most rich, comprehensive, and meticulous documentation of Gwich'in knowledge in the world." It has undisputable national significance, and its recognition supports the work of the Gwich'in Tribal Council and the Northwest Territories Archives to "honour the intent of Gwich'in Elders who wished to safeguard, preserve, and provide access to this knowledge for future generations."



The Gwich'in Place Names and Story Atlas 2012 – audio recording place names in Fort McPherson.

Walter Alexie and Ingrid Kritsch record Gwich'in place names for the Atlas project in Teet'it Zehh (Fort McPherson). March 2012.

Photo: Alestine Andre, GSCI.

CONCLUSION

Since its establishment in 2017, the Canadian Advisory Committee for Memory of the World has proactively developed best practices for the recognition of Indigenous documentary heritage. While we know that the concept of quantifying significance associated with documentary heritage is often antithetical to Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, it is our belief that the integration of both UNDRIP and the Mataatua Declaration give the Memory of the World programme the flexibility that is required to respect the nation-specific cultural context of each item or collection that is nominated. Importantly, we recognize that our present understanding of Indigenous documentary heritage is based on what has been nominated so far. Our understanding will undoubtedly grow as the National Register continues to develop.

BIOGRAPHY

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