Returning Native Title Materials

RRKAC workshop summary

Project Summary

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is investigating how research material from native title claims is being returned to community. Substantial quantities of data, field notes, audio and video recordings, photographs, maps, and genealogy information were generated over the decades in pursuit of native title. With the majority of claims now determined, this information should come home to the native title holders, so that it can be secured and used to enrich cultural and historical knowledge.

The return of material from Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (YMAC) to the PBC Robe River Kuruma Aboriginal Corporation (RRKAC) (previously Kuruma Marthudunera Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC) is one of a number of case studies AIATSIS will use to create a research paper on this topic, and provide advice to other PBCs and communities on how to manage this process.

Photo 1: The Robe-River Kuruma Aboriginal Corporation head office in Karratha, WA.

On the 14th May 2019 AIATSIS visited YMAC to discuss the process from their perspective. This summary concerns the second field trip, to the RRKAC office for the receiving parties' point of view. Over three days from 28th-30th October 2019 AIATSIS researchers conducted interviews with RRKAC staff and members, culminating in a

workshop with the Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC) and RRKAC staff on the final day. At the time that AIATSIS visited RRKAC office, little progress had been made since May and the material had not yet been handed back. It was concluded that an additional trip to Karratha might be required once the material has been returned and valuable insight into access protocols, archiving and management can be researched.

'...we build on what we know, and we are forever being taught...what our old people had, what we learned from that...and information that's passed down we just basically keep building, and building and building and we expand. We expand on what they have given to us...' Josie Alec

Researchers:

Christiane Keller

Jeffrey Paul

Participants:

Josie Alec, RRKAC member

Sally Atkinson, RRKAC staff

Arnold Bobby, RRKAC and HAC member

Marshall Bobby, RRKAC and HAC member

Yvette Bradley, RRKAC staff

Leilani Evans, RRKAC member and staff

Daniel Farmer, RRKAC Member, Chair of Youth Council

Neil Finlay, RRKAC and HAC member

Gloria Lockyer, RRKAC and HAC member

Mark Lockyer, RRKAC and HAC member

Ostiane Massiani, RRKAC staff

Zoe Ramsden, RRKAC staff

Daniel Roy, RRKAC staff

Brooke St James, RRKAC staff

Alma Tumbler, RRKAC and HAC member

Sara Slattery, RRKAC member and Chairperson

The Return Process

In July and September of 2018, two workshops were held between YMAC and RRKAC to discuss the return of native title materials. Since then RRKAC have engaged The Keeping Place Project (Keeping Place), an online platform operating in Western Australia's Pilbara region, to build a customised database to hold and manage the returned materials.

The returns process started well, but a year later frustration is palpable and the project has lost momentum. All the participants we spoke to are excited that this material is being returned, but the process has been negatively affected by a number of issues:

- lack of clarity around what is being returned,

- the fact that some materials, including the original copies, are not being returned,

- the time it has taken for the material to be returned,

- conditions set by YMAC that are seen as excessive, and

- a perceived lack of trust in the PBC and community members to manage materials.

Participants would like the process streamlined with primacy given to the community's wishes. There is a need for clear governance, access, and management protocols to be created by RRKAC, but that task is made difficult by a lack of resources and clarity on what is being returned. Furthermore, 'The Keeping Place' online database is not ready to receive the material until the first quarter of 2020.

PBC aspirations for data management

The Keeping Place is an online relational database with GIS mapping technology that was developed by the three mining giants operating in Western Australia. It is capable of storing and presenting a range of formats including audio, video, photos, PDFs, environmental data sets, and cadastral land information. Access is controlled with customisable access protocols. Individuals or groups acting as moderators can change access settings for materials according to cultural or family restrictions.

The database has additional functionality such as, management of mining leases; track payments and other commitments under land use agreements; desktop heritage surveys; manage PBC membership and stakeholders including personal information, correspondence, training and certificates; and ranger data collection.

This additional functionality was a major drawcard for RRKAC's decision to make a significant investment in in this system. RRKAC's aspiration for the Keeping Place

besides holding and managing the returned native title materials, is tracking and managing various PBC and agreement compliance, along with corporation and membership management as well as making it a living archive with information produced through the ranger program and additions and comments from RRKAC members.

Photo 2: Researchers Christiane Keller and Jeffrey Paul working with Robe River Kuruma elder and Heritage Advisory Committee member Neil Finlay.

'I want them [the materials] to come back here and show it to the younger people...my mob...my family.' Neil Finlay

Governance

Participants agree that being able to demonstrate good governance and capacity should be necessary for handing back materials to a PBC, but if that is demonstrated there should be no obstacles to the return. An initial guideline has been developed between YMAC and RRKAC regarding the materials, however this requires further development by RRKAC once the material is returned and understood to ensure the wishes of the families and individuals regarding access and management are fulfilled.

RRKAC planned a two-tiered approach for populating the Keeping Place. Access to this information requires a login process managed by the Cultural Heritage Manager. Initially, staff will set up the openly available information about tenements, registered sites etc. Then the more sensitive material including the returned native title materials

or RRKAC business related materials will be uploaded with firm access protocols via the login page. These protocols will determine the levels of access to material (what can be viewed) and what can be done with the material (view only; view and comment; view comment and edit). Until then staff will workshop these protocols with the HAC.

Additions to existing materials such as tagging people and comments or uploads from community members will be filtered through an administrator of the Keeping Place before they go live. The intention is to implement a two level administrator system with the oversight by the Cultural Heritage Manager who is responsible for the correct allocation of materials and the determination of access levels. The day-to-day administration is to be executed by the two Heritage Officers (male and female) including instructing members how to use the system.

'This is really exciting….in the first instance we are going to do a bulk input with a lot of information. We need to work through quite slowly to begin with, but once everything is in there it is the manager's job to ensure everything is allocated the right way.' Zoe Ramsden

Managing the materials

From our discussions with participants, added resources may be required to adequately manage the volume of information. For instance, training will be necessary for staff in order to manage the database along with archiving expertise, particularly around metadata and storage. Although intending to use interns for data upload and tagging, extra staff will likely be needed to input the data and maintain it and assist members to access it. There are also significant unanswered questions about the nature and format of this data, with regard to how it will be uploaded, stored, transferred and transformed into useable formats for the public and members.

Currently YMAC is proposing to return materials in a digital format and all originals (i.e. photographs, maps, video and audio tapes) remain with YMAC. Nevertheless, participants were asked about the future of the original materials, if they should be returned to RRKAC or the families directly. The opinion of participants differed on this point with some wanting to keep originals relating to their families in their possession, while others were open to RRKAC holding the original but the general tenor was that originals should be returned to Karratha.

'It would be nice to be with the organisation up here (the PBC). It would be nice to see what people were thinking back in the day, like in the video. Having the physical copy would be good to hold. Because when you look at that map properly, you see it close up. You can see the stuff properly yourself. This was my daddy or this was by somebody else. It's easier to read and it's interesting to look at.' Leilani Evans

Furthermore, some participants thought YMAC should relinquish their copies of material, while others did not mind them keeping a copy.

There is also a request for training in conducting difficult conversations and maybe trauma counselling, as Zoe Ramsden pointed out:

'The conversation that might happen…Some of this material is very sad and it was really emotional when it has been captured from a white perspective… how you feel about reading those statements about your family, it would be really tough.'

Enquiring how originals would be cared for by RRKAC triggered debate in the workshop with aspirations to create a physical 'Keeping Place' within the organisation. Ideas on how that could be achieved were briefly discussed but RRKAC members and the organisation will come to more concrete solutions if and when hard copies arrive.

Security and Access

In general, participants feel that access protocols need to be in the hands of the community and the families of the people that the access concerns. However, from our discussions there appear to be three categories of material:

- personal/family,

- member/communal,

- public/wider community.

Sensitive personal information should go to the direct descendants, but questions remain over material that is more collective in nature (e.g. maps, group or event photographs, songs, genealogies). Cultural protocol will likely apply here (i.e. gender and age/initiation restrictions). Some materials should also be free for public access so that non-members and non-Aboriginal people can learn more about Robe River Kuruma people and culture. How to parse these three categories cleanly so that they can be appropriately accessed, will be another difficult process to be dealt with once the material is returned.

'This is my family. It doesn't belong to the government, it doesn't belong to anybody. That sort of dialogue needs to change...I'm just the same as everybody else. I'm not this poor black person over here that you need to go and hold stuff for, no. No, I'm the maker of my own destiny. And so are my children.' Josie Alec

Plans for the material

Participants in this case study are all enthusiastic about the possibilities this material presents. First and foremost, RRKAC members simply want the material back in their family's control so it can be secured in its rightful place. Some of the information

presents opportunities for knowledge transfer, education, and cultural revitalisation, particularly for young people. Simply having access to the digital archive will allow constructive engagement with culture and history. Further development of secondary materials such as books, videos, presentations, educational materials, and performances are also possibilities participants were keen to explore. There are opportunities to rebuild lost knowledge databases such as genealogies and develop public content that can be used to showcase Robe River Kuruma culture to non-Aboriginal people and counter negative perceptions in the community.

'It would be nice so your kids know, where your bit of the country, your land is, because it's not straight lines...if you've got recordings of the old ones that have gone now, how they used to speak about the country and how they grew up and stuff, if they have recordings of that as well. That would be nice.' Leilani Evans.

Photo 3**: Workshop with the Heritage Advisory Committee and RRKAC staff.**

'It's really important. I think it's also like closure in a way, like it's a circle. The process started however long ago, going through native title, and all the family losses and community losses, and people that have gone through that and haven't been able to see the day that native title was handed back, and then the return of the research materials and information, I think is going to be quite significant, and some closure for some people.' Sally Atkinson