

Genealogies Workshop
Held at AIATSIS Canberra, 5-6 October 2002

Report by Patrick McConvell and Grace Koch, November 4 2002

Website and email list

As a result of the workshop an "Indigenous Genealogies" website (ATSIGEN) has been set up at www.ausanthrop.net/atsigen with an associated ATSIGEN email list which can be subscribed to by clicking on 'Moderator' on the website.

Background

There is a wide range of approaches to producing genealogies available including many software packages, mostly commercial for the mainstream market, and some specialist and research-oriented. A number of these approaches and programs are being used by researchers and organisations in Australia, for instance in Native Title and Family and Community History. There is also a widespread feeling that the products of such software are not meeting the needs of researchers and communities. Some fall down in one or more areas of technical performance. Some are culturally inappropriate, either because they do not recognise the different ways kinship and marriage work in Indigenous societies, or because they do not cater for the ways that Indigenous groups prefer to use genealogies and handle information. Some available products are also very expensive, and developing more customised programs can be even more expensive, beyond the means of most organisations, let alone individuals and families.

There is an urgent need for an evaluation of different methods available by those involved in the use of genealogies, and a charting of ways forward to better practical solutions, including cooperation between different people with an interest in this to provide better solutions at lower cost. In addition to, and intertwined with, the computational questions, are questions of the embedding of 'the genealogical method' in anthropology and other disciplines, the reasons behind the way genealogies are constructed and used, and a host of related ethical and legal questions such as how rights to view genealogies can be managed. These are problems encountered on an almost daily basis by Indigenous communities and applied researchers in Australia. The workshop was designed to facilitate the sharing of experience to explore such questions.

The Workshop

40 people attended the Genealogies Workshop which was held in the Mabo room of AIATSIS over one and a half days. The papers given were of very good quality, and the discussion stimulating. As many participants insisted, the workshop had as its goal practical outcomes, and the final session passed resolutions which will ensure that the momentum is kept up (see below). Representatives came from Aboriginal communities, land councils, Native Title representative organisations, universities, and Regional Authorities. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies contributed towards the airfare of 5 people, including two Indigenous participants.

Papers

The first day was spent on discussions of what software is available and the types of functionality that Native Title, Family Separation and Family History units and projects require in a computer package for working with genealogies. After an introductory paper by Patrick McConvell and Grace Koch the organisers stressing how these different areas can work together, Sarah Yu introduced her work with Link-Up and cited the paper in Australian Aboriginal Studies by Roger Cribb in 1993. This had laid out what is needed in the development of genealogy software for Indigenous use; while participants agreed with much of what had been recommended 9 years ago, they agreed that little had been achieved. The following paper by Julia Munster of the Central Land Council, read by Jessica Kemp and Theresa McCarthy, gave a detailed account of the uses of genealogies by Native Title Representative Bodies, and a ringing endorsement of the aim of the workshop to actively pursue best practice. The demonstration of the Progeny program used by CLC however raised a number of issues about cost structure, ease of use, graphic capability and editing functions. The Family History section of AIATSIS was represented by Rebecca Stubbs, who outlined its functions and its use of genealogies which is at this stage mainly limited to manual filling in of family tree forms. After a lively discussion, participants went away to prepare evaluations on the software that they use.

The second day brought two presentations that crystallised the thinking on functionality and that provided solutions to many of the problems raised the previous day. John Burton, from the Torres Strait Regional Authority, drew upon his experience in computer science and his work with large scale genealogies to list the requirements of genealogical databases, such as the ability to handle many entries, to offer security and to produce large printouts. He demonstrated the program he had developed over many years in New Guinea and Torres Strait, Community Express. Prof Shigenobu Sugito and Sachiko Kubota then demonstrated their program, ALLIANCE, -the development of which had been financed by the Japanese government. He produced genealogies tailored to the cultural needs of the Galiwin'ku community in Arnhem Land. Another perspective from Galiwin'ku came from Kaye Thurlow, accompanied by community member Elaine Guymun, who has been producing a database for the use of that community only. The importance of being able to trace variants of names was emphasised.

Two other papers of a more theoretical nature followed. Laurent Dousset drew upon his research to show how Aboriginal people, when they draw their own genealogies, depict them both by descent and spatially according to sites. Nic Peterson then read a paper for Michael Houseman showing how marriage patterns within an Aboriginal community as plotted with new types of genealogy program are potential evidence for Native Title claims. John Dallwitz then demonstrated the Ara Irititja project, where photographic, video and recorded sound materials are being put together for the use of the Pitjantjatjara communities of SA with special emphasis on local access and input mechanisms and interfaces tailored to local needs. They are aiming to add genealogical information to this database in due course.

Final discussion

After lunch on Sunday, there was discussion evaluating existing methods and programs used by participants and pointing the way forward to better practices.:

Feasibility study A study should be undertaken to survey the field and prepare a guide and recommendations for how to proceed. This study should have input from a committee with mixed expertise, and build on an **Email Discussion List**, a **Website (ATSIGEN)** which should include a register of genealogy projects and sources of information, and **Documents** including papers from the present workshop. Such a study should do a **national audit** and start a **catalogue** – with national parameters (perhaps through the AIATSIS Family History Unit) to list the genealogies already in collections around the country

Leadership AIATSIS council should take a leadership role in this area and draft brief for a particular person to drive the process of a feasibility study and seek more **funding** to create consistency and therefore makes future links possible, to develop **policy and processes** to address ethical issues for the collection and preservation of, and access to genealogies

Funding It was mentioned that a call had been made for support work on genealogies in Australia and world-wide by Marcia Langton in a UNESCO conference in 2001. It was also suggested that ATSIC may support this kind of work as part of their Capacity Building program.

Ethics. Some recommended that guidelines would be useful, but others argued that communities should set their own guidelines. Different users have different protocols eg for Native Title. Ethical procedures and privacy protection can be incorporated into program design

Access by Aboriginal people should be a prime aim. CD's of personalised information (for family, claim groups) could be prepared with minimal software (web browser or PAF for genealogies)

Software The use of 'light' software is preferred because we want to have programs which will still be used in the future; web is also solid/long lasting. It was noted that GEDCOM, the interchange format for genealogies, is now adapting to XML
Computer programs for genealogies should have at least the following features:

- Ability to print the genealogies out in a number of formats- A4, A3 or larger, continuous print; customised printing eg. Print without deceased peoples' names.
- Linked to database
- Use colours
- Zoom in and out ability
- Quick drawing- easy to add texts and graphics
- Create own symbols, lines
- Filters
- Easy to add features
- Appearance on mother data
- screen to be designed so that people can follow it easily.
- Genealogy program should have capacity to reflect social organisation and variety of relationships of Indigenous groups in different parts of Australia
- flexible searching tools that will enable researchers to search the database not only according to name of person or persons ID number but also according to dob, dod, moiety, source of information, dreaming, geographical location, etc. (
- a system that protects restricted and culturally-sensitive information

- Works on Macs
- Anthro symbols- ie. Triangles, circles
- Able to represent multiple marriage partners
- Able to show charts in which people might appear more than once (eg. Descendant and spouse)
- Able to produce charts in a variety of 'descent types'
- SQL select- search function (compatible with other programs such as Mapinfo (GIS) [Dbase gear]
- Flexibility in display (ie- adoption and other things)
- User-friendly (not necessarily complex)
- Genealogical conventions of male/female/etc standard
- Dbase link to fields (personal profile information)- choice of display on chart- ie spreadsheet info.
- Adaptable to differing cultural circumstances
- Have security measures to protect the data and control access to information to ensure privacy
- Integrate genealogical data to other archival data such as photographs, documents, video etc
- Provide an interactive interface so that individuals can enter their own data – i.e. to create a living archive

There was also considerable input on advantages and disadvantages of particular programs eg Family Tree Maker. This information could be exchanged in future via the ATSIGEN list and web recommended. There was also discussion on the special needs and plans for genealogies by particular groups eg for stolen generation work.

Resolutions

.It was agreed that the following recommendations would come from the meeting.

1. That we commend the work of Prof. Sugito, Dr Sachiko Kubota and their team and look forward to further cooperation with him and to give him any written support that he may need to continue his work with genealogies.
2. To formulate a list-serve for delegates' use in contacting one another.
3. To explore the feasibility of creating a national catalogue of genealogies.
4. To recommend that AIATSIS take a leadership role in policy development in the area of genealogies.
5. To recognise the importance of the national role of the AIATSIS Family History Unit and their importance in the conservation and dissemination of genealogies and training in genealogical methods.
6. That AIATSIS create a position of at least six months duration to review current practices in genealogical research in Indigenous communities; to describe the needs for genealogical software, training personnel, ethics and to recommend measures to meet these needs.
7. To initiate discussions with ATSIC about the need for a national initiative on Indigenous genealogies as part of their program on capacity building (including IT), consisting of improving existing software and training in collection and collation of genealogical information.
8. That AIATSIS publish the papers as agreed by the delegates.