Oral Literature in the Digital Age
Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities
Edited by Mark Turin, Claire Wheeler and Eleanor Wilkinson

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Indigenous languages in Ecuador: survival and change

Ecuador is the smallest of the Andean countries but is linguistically diverse. Indigenous languages have not successfully entered literacy through educational programmes and are now critically endangered. Eleven indigenous languages from six different language families, including two unclassified ones, are spoken in Ecuador (Gómez Rendón 2009: 7). Kichwa is the most popular indigenous language: it is spoken in the Andean highlands and the Amazon lowlands, and nowadays also in several coastal cities and some towns of the Galapagos Islands as a result of labour migration. While the indigenous population in the highlands is the largest in the country, the indigenous population in the Amazon lowlands is the most diverse in linguistic terms. The Amazon lowlands are home to nine of Ecuador’s eleven indigenous languages. The linguistic diversity of the lowlands mirrors the sociocultural and biological diversity characteristic of the country as a whole and of the Amazon basin in particular.  

1 In the Andean highlands: Highland Kichwa (Quechua); Tsa’fiki (Barbacoan); Awapit (Barbacoan). In the Pacific lowlands: Sia Pejee (Chocoano); Cha’palaa (Barbacoan). In the Amazon lowlands: Amazonian Kichwa (Quechua); A’ingae (unclassified); Paikoka-Baicoca (Western Tukanoan); Wao tevedo (unclassified); Kayap (Zaparoan); Achuar chicham (Jivaroan); Shuar-Shiwiar chicham (Jivaroan).

2 Ecuador is considered one of the richest countries in terms of biodiversity and endemic species. Ten percent of the world’s animal and vegetal species live in a small area of 256,370 square kilometers corresponding to 0.17% of the Earth’s surface (Mittermeier 1988).
There is no agreement on the specific number of speakers of indigenous languages in Ecuador. This is due to the lack of transparent and updated sociolinguistic data. The size of Ecuador's indigenous population is clearly a political issue both for the government and indigenous peoples. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the largest indigenous organisation in the country, states that indigenous people represented one third (4,052,150) of the country's population (12,156,608) registered in 2001. In turn, the Council of Development of the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (CONDENPE), the governmental agency of Indian affairs, maintains that Ecuador's indigenous people represent only 11 percent (1,103,957) of the national population (López & García 2009: 590). Moreover, the last census (2010) established that only 7 percent (1,018,176) of Ecuador's population is of indigenous descent (INEC 2010). However, the way in which censuses have been conducted so far is less than clear and the resulting data is often biased when it comes to indigenous peoples and communities. Today, an indigenous population of 2,000,000 is a reasonable estimate. Still, caution is needed because ethnic population—i.e. people self-claiming to be indigenous—is not equivalent to speaking population—i.e. people speaking one of the eleven indigenous languages. In such a case, the ratio between both populations depends on the ethnic group. Thus, the Cofán ethnic population is rather close to the population of speakers of A’ingae, the Cofán ethnic language, even if the rate of bilingualism among them is high; on the contrary, speakers of Kayapo, the Zapara ethnic language, count only 5 elders, representing scarcely 4% of the ethnic population (115), all of which speaks Amazonian Kichwa (Andrade 2001: 7).

The widespread use of Spanish in urban and rural areas, the labour migration of indigenous people to the cities and the partial success of bilingual education programmes have been determining factors in the decreasing vitality of indigenous languages. According to the UNESCO classification of endangerment (Moseley 2010), all of Ecuador’s indigenous languages are in one way or another endangered and two have become extinct since the mid-seventies, Andoa and Tetete.³

³ Those critically endangered include Sia Pedee (Chocoan) and Zaparo (Zaparoan); the group of severely endangered languages is comprised of Paikoka-Baicoca (Western Tukanoan), Shiwiar (Jivaroan), Awapit (Barbacoan) as well as the highland varieties of Kichwa spoken in the provinces of Cañar, Azuay and Loja. Languages with a lesser degree of endangerment are A’ingae (unclassified), Achuar (Jivaroan), Shuar (Jivaroan), Tsa’fiki (Barbacoan), Cha’palaa (Barbacoan), and other highland and lowland varieties of
The classification of indigenous languages should be taken with caution because it is based mostly on estimates from census data. Only recently sociolinguistic surveys are being conducted among speakers of indigenous languages in order to determine their population with accuracy. Two of these languages are Tsa’fiki and Awapit. In both cases the data show tendencies different from those presented above (Gómez Rendón 2010a and 2011). Thus, Tsa’fiki should be considered a severely endangered language instead of a definitely endangered one, while Awapit is best classified as a critically endangered language rather than a severely endangered one in UNESCO’s terms. Indeed, not even the indigenous languages with the largest population of speakers (Kichwa and Shuar) can be considered safe. On the other hand, one of these languages, Kichwa, has become so widespread in the Amazon lowlands that an increasing number of speakers of other minority languages are shifting to Kichwa. Similarly, Wao tededo, considered only vulnerable by UNESCO, is at present the most potentially endangered of all indigenous languages in the eastern lowlands because of labour migration and oil extraction activities within Wao ethnic territory. Moreover, this territory, which is part of an important wildlife reserve, Yasuní National Park, is home to the uncontacted peoples Taromenani and Tagaeri (Cabodevilla 2009).

Indigenous languages have become visible to the Ecuadorian Spanish-speaking society only in the last few decades thanks to the successful positioning of the indigenous movement since the mid 1980s and the principles of plurinationality and interculturality established by the 2008 Constitution. And yet, their use in public domains and education and their inter-generational transmission have not improved correspondingly. Ecuador remains a largely monolingual state and policy makers are more concerned with how to assimilate indigenous minorities into mainstream society and less with how to promote cultural and linguistic diversity as part of the country’s ethnic composition.

The Constitution passed in 2008 establishes Spanish as the official language of the country while recognising Kichwa and Shuar as official languages of intercultural communication and the other indigenous languages as official in their respective ethnic territories. The Constitution requires that the State promote intercultural communication in indigenous languages and give indigenous peoples all the means necessary to develop

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Kichwa. Wao tededo, the ethnic language of the Waorani group, is considered vulnerable, i.e. the least endangered of all.
an education system in their own language and with their own cultural contents. There has been some progress in intercultural bilingual education in the last two decades but there is still a long way to go. The appropriateness of the intercultural bilingual approach to indigenous education is now under discussion because a large portion of the ethnic population is still illiterate and the reading and writing of indigenous languages outside schools is minimal.

**Indigenous languages and literacy: a tenuous relationship**

Nowadays, each of Ecuador’s indigenous languages has its own alphabet and orthography (Haboud 2009: 354). Of course, these alphabets are not used by speakers of indigenous languages on an everyday basis. Except for Kichwa and Shuar, all other indigenous languages are written only in schools of the intercultural bilingual education system. Accordingly, textbooks and official documents in indigenous languages have very reduced readerships. This is explained firstly by the small number of indigenous speakers who can read and write in their native languages, and secondly by the type of language used in writing, full of coined expressions and neologisms that obscure the message.

The entry of Ecuador’s indigenous languages into literacy is rather late as it took place only in the second half of the twentieth century. The only exception is Kichwa, a native language with a writing tradition dating back to the first missionaries who made use of it for evangelisation purposes in the early colonial period. They prepared grammars, dictionaries and religious texts including collections of prayers and catechisms. Of course, all these texts were mainly intended for Spanish-speaking students of the language and not for the formal learning of grammar by Kichwa native speakers. These native speakers learnt to read and write in their language

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4 This holds true even for the now extinct language Shimigae (Zaparoan), the ethnic language of the Andoa people, which was documented with its last speaker by the author in 2009. The outcome was a basic bilingual dictionary and a grammar for use in the re-introduction of the native language in Andoa schools (Gómez Rendón 2010b).

5 The first grammar of Kichwa was written by Domingo de Santo Tomás and published in Valladolid in 1564. The grammar was used for the teaching of the Inca language to priests and novices but also to Spanish-speaking civil servants who would deal with Kichwa communities (Cerrón-Palomino 1995: VII–LXVI).
only in the last decades of the twentieth century through bilingual education programmes. As for the other indigenous languages, their use in written form is even more recent. The first dictionary of Shuar (Jivaroan) appeared only in 1929 (Peñaherrera de Costales and Costales 2006: 181) and was prepared only for priests working in the Apostolic Vicariate of Mendez to learn the language for evangelisation ends.

The arrival of missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in 1948 became a landmark in the literacy of Ecuador's indigenous languages. Based on the teaching of the Bible, their missionary work required a translation in the indigenous languages of the peoples they wanted to convert. Thus, their first efforts were devoted to carefully studying indigenous languages and giving them a writing system that could be easily used for reading and writing by missionaries and native speakers. SIL missionaries used the same Roman alphabet of the official language, with several diacritical marks to convey phonetic specificities. With some amendments introduced in the 1990s and 2000s, these alphabets are still used today in the intercultural bilingual education system.

The normativisation introduced by SIL missionaries had positive effects on creating a literacy tradition that survives in Ecuador to date. Literacy in indigenous languages was envisioned mainly for native speakers compared to the literacy tradition introduced by priests. But the work of SIL missionaries was not exempt from criticism: for one thing, the indoctrination in Western values and concepts destroyed native systems of beliefs and social interaction; for another, the use of literacy in indigenous languages was too often limited to religious contents and disregarded culturally significant material. Also, with a view to producing ready-made alphabets in order to begin with their evangelisation work, SIL missionaries set aside important dialectal differences that later on became a matter of contention among indigenous peoples, particularly once they became politically and culturally empowered in the last decades of the twentieth century (Stoll 2002).

Many other important advances in the literacy of indigenous languages took place during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly among the Kichwa-speaking communities. A model of literacy development was designed and self-managed by speech communities. In the early 1940s Dolores Cacuango, a female Kichwa activist, created a network of schools with the support of several urban women and local indigenous leaders; the schools were run by indigenous teachers who used the native
language and promoted the indigenous culture and the defense of the ethnic territory. This experience is considered seminal for the development of today’s intercultural bilingual education model. Similar literacy projects were carried out in the sixties and seventies in Bolívar (Simiatug) and Cotopaxi (Zumbahua and Chucchilán) with self-management or support from religious orders (Conejo 2008: 66–67). Other innovative experiences included the so-called radio schools (Escuelas Radiofónicas Populares) which broadcast for Kichwa speakers in the central highlands and for Shuar speakers in the eastern slopes. The remaining indigenous languages did not have literacy programs until the late 1980s.

The eighties was a decade of progress in the self-organisation of indigenous peoples in Ecuador. They strengthened their political stance and became visible and influential in the political arena (Sánchez-Parga 2010: 86). At that time, CONAIE, the largest indigenous organisation grouping representatives from all native peoples of the country, submitted an education proposal to the government which resulted in the creation of the National Director’s Office of Intercultural Bilingual Education (DINEIB) in November 1988. Also, by an agreement between the Ministry of Education and DINEIB, the latter began to work on indigenous languages in order to conduct linguistic and pedagogic research for the preparation of teaching materials and training of bilingual teachers. Until February 2009, a few months after its twentieth anniversary, DINEIB operated as a financially and politically autonomous educational agency. At present, its status within the reformed educational system is still unclear. While nobody questions the importance of bilingual education as a mechanism for enforcing interculturality and plurinationality, the effectiveness of its administrative and organisational aspects has been criticised.

The outcomes of twenty years of intercultural education are not unimportant. By 2007, DINEIB ran 2,833 educational centres including primary and secondary schools as well as pedagogical and technical colleges, with 130,348 students and 8,355 bilingual teachers working in the highlands, the Pacific and Amazon lowlands and the Galapagos Islands (Conejo 2008: 79). Since 1993, all educational centers run by DINEIB have followed the Model of Intercultural Bilingual Education System (Conejo 2010) amended according to the last developments in curriculum planning and design by the Ministry of Education. Numerous teaching materials in book and digital formats have been produced since 1989, although the number of these materials is much larger for Kichwa and
Shuar than for the other languages, for some of which there are no updated teaching aids available, except those produced by private initiative. Also, there has been substantial progress in the normatisation of indigenous languages through a consensus-based definition of spelling in order to facilitate the teaching and learning of indigenous languages without the interference of the official language. Still, the changes in the spelling of indigenous languages continue to be a matter of contention, especially for those languages with an important dialectal variation such as Kichwa. In this respect, the process of identity politics led by indigenous peoples since the 1990s has in turn strengthened the linguistic identity of speech communities. In this context, the recent changes in the spelling system of Kichwa in 2008 have been strongly criticised by many highland communities, with the resulting rejection of teaching aids printed with the new spelling and the migration of school children to Spanish-speaking schools.

But these are not the biggest problems of intercultural bilingual education. The most serious obstacle to overcome is threefold: first, increasing retention and dropout rates in primary schools; second, the lack of a sound methodology and the poor training of bilingual teachers; and last but not least, the widely attested facts that literacy in indigenous languages occurs only in bilingual schools and “bilingual” students do not make any practical use of their native languages in writing beyond the classroom.

In sum, two decades of intercultural bilingual education have not resulted in a prolific and productive use of indigenous languages, neither in community contexts nor in public domains. Moreover, indigenous languages continue to be predominantly oral because their written use is limited and this limitation is most probably caused by the difficulties involved in writing due to changing spellings and the overuse of neologisms far from everyday natural speech. And yet, this failure is, in my opinion, not imputable to intercultural bilingual education but to the unsatisfactory implementation of the model. Such implementation has disregarded the century-long oral tradition of indigenous languages and cultures and made all the efforts to bring them into literacy without any

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6 Recent research supervised by the author found that writing in Spanish too is a problem for children attending intercultural bilingual schools. They cannot coordinate sentences properly and make themselves understood in Spanish. This means that the model of intercultural bilingual education as implemented so far has not succeeded in attaining proficiency in the official language (Contreras 2010).
consideration of their functionality. From this perspective, the fact that indigenous languages in Ecuador remain predominantly oral and alien to literacy should not be seen pessimistically. Orality must be integrated to intercultural bilingual education as a point of departure for literacy and the most important source of traditional culture and everyday knowledge.

Bringing orality to the foreground: new approaches in indigenous education and culture

Every human language has its roots in speech, and orality is speech by definition. Literacy is only a byproduct of culture and a medium for representing speech visually for recording and archiving purposes. Children learn languages first by listening while their first output is almost always oral. Literacy becomes part of their language only through formal schooling. Too often we forget this truism, perhaps because our visual culture leads us to assume that written signs are the essence of language. However, if literacy seems for us connatural to language, it is not the case for other societies, especially if they have been only lately exposed to written language. If such is the case of Ecuador’s indigenous languages, then any educational model that makes use of them must bring orality to the foreground.

The above statement should not, however, be interpreted as if indigenous languages are not capable of becoming literate; the living proof of it are the hundreds of indigenous languages in the five continents which lacked a writing system before the twentieth century and now are widely used in written form. And yet, orality continues to be their main mode of communication and the most natural context in which their cultural heritage is passed on to new generations. It is therefore misleading to assume that the gap between orality and literacy in indigenous languages can be bridged in any successful way in only a few decades.

Bilingual education models should not forget the history of literacy behind their languages. In the case of bilingual education in Ecuador, the history of literacy in the official language (Spanish) boasts hundreds of years while the same history in indigenous languages is in its infancy. But, most importantly, bilingual education models should not disregard what is perhaps the most influential of all factors, i.e. diglossia. Indeed, the official language in Ecuador has a privileged sociopolitical position vis-à-vis indigenous languages, and while the official language is used in
private and public domains alike, indigenous languages are restricted to family and community. The pressure exerted by the official language on speakers of indigenous languages has led to Hispanicisation (speakers’ shift to Spanish by abandoning their mother tongue) or language mixing (speakers’ use of Spanish lexical and grammatical borrowings with structural changes in the native languages).

Against this backdrop of historical, political and social factors that influence literacy in indigenous languages, it is self-evident that orality is not a drawback in bilingual education, i.e. something that formal schooling must eradicate once and for all. On the contrary, orality should be the point of departure for literacy in indigenous languages, and the best way to show and perform orality is through ears and eyes and always in contexts of cultural significance.

**Language labs: a meeting point for orality and literacy**

While the idea of a language laboratory is not new for the teaching and learning of international languages such as English or French, the same idea brought to the field of indigenous languages becomes a challenge to the racist prejudice that views indigenous languages as “dialects” undeserving the investment of time and money. Behind this prejudice is the surviving romantic idea that indigenous languages are by definition “traditional”, something of the “past” that cannot be the object of “modern” technologies. Unfortunately, this view is held by most Spanish monolingual citizens in the cities. In this context, the concept of a language laboratory was launched as an innovative though risky proposal for intercultural bilingual education in 2008. Being an expensive project, it was designed first only for Kichwa, the largest language in terms of the number of speakers but also the one with enough digital material available.

The conditions in which the project was launched were particularly favourable as the language laboratory became, since then, part of the so-called “millennium schools”. Millennium schools are educational centres located in poor, mostly rural areas that so far have been neglected in education. Their facilities and architectonic design are related to an innovative pedagogical model which takes into account the local ethnographic characteristics; facilities include so-called “thematic” classrooms for the teaching of specific subjects and are equipped with
cutting-edge technologies. However, the most important and innovative characteristics of millennium schools have to do with their pedagogical model. Given their experimental nature, millennium schools follow a participative educational project that takes into consideration the cultural, social and economic elements of their areas of influence and seek to establish a democratic and equitable culture in economic, social, ethnic and gender terms. In sum, millennium schools make use of an innovative educational model alongside proper facilities, teaching aids, well-trained teachers, and the active participation of parents and community.

The Kichwa language laboratory implemented in millennium schools has four components as described in the following:

1) Linguistic software for interlinearised transcription of audiovisual files, lexical databases, morphological parsing and acoustic analysis; the software was intended mainly for the training of Kichwa language teachers in grammatical analysis and lexicography, but also for them to collect and edit pieces of oral tradition

2) Digital resources that include a multimedia dictionary for children, a touch screen board, thematic maps and different accessories in Kichwa; these resources were intended for school children as a first introduction to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

3) A library of digital books in Kichwa and footage of different size, from films to video clips about various aspects of Kichwa culture, including traditional music and songs in the language, a collection of myths and legends told by storytellers from different Kichwa communities, and several didactic videos for teaching specific skills such as weaving, sculpting, painting and carving

4) Digital teaching aids including interactive textbooks and workbooks as well as tests for evaluation of the learning progress

The language laboratory was designed as an interactive space for Kichwa-speaking children to use their native language orally and in writing. Children would be exposed to speech events in their own cultural contexts through the use of multimedia. The principle behind this design is that audiovisual material, if properly used, provides contextualised language learning in culturally significant situations through listening and watching.
The same principle is applied to the learning of grammar. In this case, children are not passive learners of rules but assimilate such rules from listening to examples of spontaneous speech that they can play once and again.

At the moment Kichwa language laboratories have been implemented in all millennium schools located in Kichwa-speaking areas and also in a few Spanish-speaking schools, as Kichwa is a language of intercultural communication and all Ecuadorian citizens ought to know it at least rudimentarily. While several problems have arisen in the experimental stage, which have to do with the insufficient training of teachers in the proper use of high-tech equipment and software, the project is still underway and is expected to extend to other indigenous languages.

Intangible cultural heritage: the coming of age of a concept and its use in identity politics and indigenous education

The concept of “intangible cultural heritage” is not as old as that of “cultural heritage”. However, in the early 1990s, discussions began about the so-called intangible aspects of culture, and UNESCO finally adopted a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 (UNESCO 2003). In Ecuador the implementation of the 2003 Convention has resulted in an official recognition of the heritage status of indigenous cultures, so far reduced to folklore in state policies.

Ecuador became a state party to UNESCO in 1975 through the acceptance of the World Heritage Convention. Since then, it has participated actively in the safeguarding of architectonic heritage. This resulted in the inscription of Quito’s historic centre in the world heritage list and the foundation of a specific agency devoted to safeguarding Ecuador’s cultural heritage (Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural). This heritage included two sets of elements: 1) architectonic pieces and sites in urban areas; and 2) archaeological monuments and sites, most of them associated with the Inca presence in Ecuador. Because indigenous peoples do not have monuments

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7 The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO 2003).
or sites of the same sort as those found in cities and archeological complexes, their material cultures, let alone other less “tangible” expressions, were never considered a form of cultural heritage.

The acceptance and ratification of the Convention by Ecuador in 2008 represented a dramatic turn in cultural politics, with great influence on the public management of cultures, those of the urban Spanish-speaking population and those of the indigenous peoples all over the country. Moreover, the acceptance of the Convention is a landmark in the recognition and promotion of cultural rights as it is congruent with the principles of interculturality and plurinationality claimed by the Ecuadorian state.

The instrumentality of intangible cultural heritage has been seriously considered by governmental agencies and is being evaluated by indigenous peoples as a mechanism to enforce their collective rights before the state. This is made possible because intangible cultural heritage is linked to other fields of public policy such as health care and education, and because the concept of cultural heritage includes a network of multifarious expressions and prescribes the understanding of cultures in their own specificities. In the case of Ecuador’s indigenous peoples, such specificities are necessarily determined by their languages and the oral character of their tradition.

Immediately after the acceptance by Ecuador of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, a nation-wide project was conducted for the identification of intangible heritage among indigenous peoples. Another nation-wide project was started in 2010 to produce a more detailed, ethnographic and multimedia inventory of intangible heritage in order to take specific measures of safeguarding. The outcomes of both projects so far have been significant and include 1) a database containing hundreds of intangible elements of Ecuador’s indigenous cultures, with their basic description, identification data and georeference; and 2) audiovisual material of different expressions of intangible heritage, including festivals, crafts, medicinal knowledge, oral tradition, and so forth. Together with the safeguarding of previously identified heritage in danger of extinction, one step towards the empowering of communities in the management of their own heritages is to mobilise the outcomes of inventory and documentation for educational purposes and the revitalisation of indigenous cultures. When it comes to this point, however, the State and the indigenous peoples have to come to terms with delicate issues concerning intellectual property rights, the return of outcomes to the communities, the practical accessibility of such outcomes, and the management of audiovisual material. This task
is not easy in the absence of a law on intellectual property rights, a code of conduct and a general framework that enables the direct participation of indigenous peoples in decision making about their own heritage.

**Ethical and legal issues in orality and literacy concerning indigenous peoples**

The folklorisation of indigenous cultures in Ecuador by governmental and non-governmental agencies has prevented their consideration as objects of legal protection. By considering intangible culture as people’s heritage, the 2003 Convention paves the way for their protection as property with all of the related rights.

The fact that intangible cultural heritage often lacks physical support and is mainly collective in nature makes it more sensitive to illegal appropriation by outsiders. Let us consider in this respect the case of oral tradition. Under the cover term “oral tradition” indigenous peoples include not only what we usually name as myths, legends, songs, and the like, but also other, perhaps “more practical” knowledge that is enacted and transmitted orally as the knowledge related to biodiversity, forest conservation or natural medicine. Now, to the extent that language is the main vehicle of intangible cultural heritage, any knowledge, practice or expression is coded in language and hence part of oral tradition. Therefore, protecting intangible cultural heritage as collective property implies protecting language firstly through revitalisation, in case it is being threatened by a dominant official language; secondly, through its active and creative use in the education of indigenous peoples; and thirdly, through the construction of a legal framework that enables speakers of indigenous languages and owners of intangible cultural heritage to control the dissemination of any linguistically coded element of their cultural heritage.

Three sensitive issues have been identified in relation to the management of orality and literacy of indigenous languages and intangible cultural heritage in Ecuador. The first issue addresses the tension between collective and individual rights in terms of property. While property in general may be owned by a person or by a group of people, intangible cultural heritage is always owned by a group even if it can be preserved and transmitted individually. Take, for example, the case of the last medicine-man of an indigenous Amazonian group: as an individual he possesses a rich knowledge about the use of plants and herbs, but his knowledge is
not his personal property but the product of the collective experience of his people in their century-long coexistence with the tropical forest; the fact that in principle the last medicine-man can transmit his medicinal knowledge through language practically to anybody poses a problem to the distribution of such knowledge and the property of it in relation to his people.

The second controversial issue has to do with the use of language as part of intangible cultural heritage. In recent years the video and audio recording of speech events has become the standard of language documentation (Himmelmann 2006: 9). Over a hundred documentation projects all over the world have been generously supported by research institutes and non-governmental organisations. Documenting linguistic diversity seeks to preserve languages for posterity in a context in which half of today's 6,500 languages will be extinct in the next hundred years (Crystal 1996; Bradley and Bradley 2002). The idea of preserving linguistic diversity as an expression of our species is certainly valuable, but it is less so when the great majority of documentation projects are focused on archiving only, i.e. without a view to mobilising outcomes for the survival of languages and cultures. The ethical question posed here is about the use of archiving when not accompanied by practical efforts to eradicate the threats of language extinction. The use of language documentation is clear when viewed from the perspective of linguists and anthropologists or even from that of governmental agencies concerned with positioning the nation-state in the multicultural market. However, when seen through the lens of speakers themselves, the relevance and practicality of language documentation becomes blurred by other more important matters concerning their physical and cultural survival. It is certain that obtaining informed consent of the speech community rather than individuals and sharing views of documentation with a larger audience can help to get the meaning through, but still it is not enough. Language detached from culture and culture detached from physical survival lack sense for speakers as human beings. In countries like Ecuador, the socioeconomic situation forces indigenous speakers to abandon their native language for Spanish and leave their cultural heritage behind. It is simply a matter of survival. From this perspective, the only way to carry out documentation as part of intangible cultural heritage and education is to assume an integral view of linguistic rights as part of economic, social and cultural rights.
The third issue involves the distribution of documentation outcomes. If documentation outcomes must serve the social, economic and cultural promotion of indigenous peoples, then indigenous peoples must be the first users of those outcomes. On these grounds, it is essential to discuss with speech communities more practical ways to make outcomes of documentation easily accessible to them. It is useless, for example, to simply return digital copies of audiovisual material to the communities if they do not have electricity or DVD players or personal computers. Similarly useless is the return of copies of scientific papers, books or dissertations in languages unknown to speakers or about topics of little use to the promotion of their languages in education. From this perspective, a valuable descriptive grammar about an endangered language written in English with all the linguistic jargon becomes useless for teachers of a bilingual education school who are in urgent need of a basic grammar in their own language. The same criterion is valid for any documentation of cultural heritage, which is supposed to serve the community first and foremost. The other side of the documentation outcomes involves outsiders, i.e. individuals or groups who are neither speakers of indigenous languages nor owners of their cultural heritage. In Ecuador, outsiders can be city dwellers who speak the dominant language or governmental agencies of culture, but also national and international scholars who make use of documentation outcomes for writing their papers and scientific reports. Here the question is not the level of accessibility for outsiders but rather who establishes those levels and if they are established jointly with the community. It is also a question of where the outcomes are deposited and what the privacy policy of the depository is. It has often been the case that products of language documentation are deposited with individuals instead of institutions. In other cases depository institutions are abroad and therefore not easily accessible to communities that want to make use of documentation outcomes. Moreover, accessibility levels have too often been determined without consultation with indigenous leaders, thereby disregarding the collective character of cultural heritage.

The above discussion does not cover all the issues concerning the management of documentation outcomes but suffices to give us an idea of how thorny the questions may be, in particular when customary practices involve property rights from a purely economic and individual perspective. Therefore, a legal framework is necessary which addresses these issues, in particular the individual/collective nature of rights in relation to intangible
cultural heritage and language, the accessibility of outcomes for insiders and the limits of accessibility for outsiders.

**Orality and literacy in indigenous cultures: perspectives and challenges**

It is often stated that the world’s linguistic diversity will disappear in the next centuries as a result of globalisation (Nettle and Romaine 2000; Mufwene 2002). This admonitory statement, however, disregards a fact widely attested in all continents: the ethnic resurgence of groups so far silent or invisible which now choose to speak up and claim their own identity and culture. This ethnic resurgence is supported in many cases by developments in national and international legislation. Today, cultural and linguistic diversity is as important as biological diversity because it is seen as the outcome of thousands of years of species adaptation. Cultural and linguistic diversity is therefore an asset for societies in the world’s multicultural market and explains why states that previously claimed cultural and linguistic homogeneity now promote cultural and linguistic rights. This is the case of Ecuador and of many other Latin American countries, in which the state has assumed a role of protector of rights and promoter of cultural diversity in a context of ethnic resurgence and along with a new politics of identity.

Because most ethnic groups have been excluded for centuries from the sociopolitical developments of nation-states, their cultures have remained influenced by the dominant culture and yet outside the formal schooling system. In this context, the entry of ethnic groups to literacy took place only in the second half of the twentieth century. In Ecuador, after twenty years of intercultural bilingual education, indigenous languages and cultures remain predominantly oral. But instead of being an obstacle to the revitalisation of indigenous languages and cultures, orality represents an unending source of knowledge that should be profited from. The question is two-fold: on the one hand, how to promote orality without denying indigenous speakers access to literacy; on the other, how to protect intangible cultural heritage of indigenous peoples in ways that prevent its folklorisation and commoditisation by outsiders. The answer to both questions lies in the proposals discussed here. One is a new model of intercultural bilingual education that takes orality as a point of departure for the development of literacy and makes extensive use of available ICTs
in order to provide students with socially relevant material and culturally contextualised learning. The other is the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as part of the enforcement of social, economic and cultural rights of ethnic groups, respecting their property rights from a collective rather than individual perspective, providing them with easy access to documentation outcomes, and consulting them throughout the process of identification, inventory and documentation of their languages and cultural heritages so as to avoid paternalistic practices. Policy makers, governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, research institutes and scholars must realise that talk about endangered languages and cultures goes beyond languages and cultures and involves human beings. Only this realisation shall lead us to recognise the multifaceted nature of endangered languages and cultures and to make effective contributions to their survival rather than remain silent witnesses of their extinction.

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