

# Indigenous Librarianship

## Profile of an Indigenous Melanesian librarian

Mr Robbin Kemmo Aua

Mr Robbin Kemmo Aua was born on the 28th of March 1948 in Mariki village in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. Third in a family of twelve children, he started primary education at the London Missionary Society School in his province. His secondary education was completed at Koaru Mission High School in East Kerema. In a career that has spanned three decades, Robbin has taken on a diverse range of library roles and experiences; from Library Assistant in the Readers Services Department of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), to becoming the Librarian with the College of Distant Education Library in Port Moresby, before progressing to the position of Librarian in the College Library at the Papua New Guinea Education Institute, where he can be found today.



Robbin Kemmo Aua at work

Robbin lives in two different worlds: the world of the librarian who services the information needs of his clients, alongside the Melanesian culture that underpins his family and culture. Robbin is a very competent librarian and believes strongly in the power of knowledge to provide opportunities for both young and old people to grow and develop and seize opportunities for promotion and new directions in their work and lives. He lives in a world of print, surrounded by books, pictures audio and video tapes and discs. Western influence has led to an understanding of the importance of committing knowledge to concrete records.

Robbin's Mariki village culture is but one of over 820 different Melanesian language and cultural groups found in the great diversity of peoples found in Papua New Guinea. Common to all of these cultures is the unerring belief in the power of knowledge. A Melanesian clan's source of power lays in the knowledge and expertise its members possess for physical and metaphysical technology. Knowing how and when to plant and harvest crops, how to fashion weapons and implements, construct bridges, canoes and houses are all vital for survival. Knowledge and skill in the art of medicine and magic are also critical to survival. In Melanesian culture, the repository of this vital information is the collective memory of individual members of a clan. Melanesia is an oral culture supported by richly diverse forms of visual and performing art. Much to the traditional knowledge is represented and remembered through a rich repertoire of song, dance, verse, stories and sculpture.

There is a significant role conflict for the Indigenous Melanesian College Librarians who go to great lengths to give their clients access to information on one hand and on the other, is required to protect the intellectual property which is a key source of wealth and power for their clan. For Robbin, there is no dilemma. His job as a librarian is to make information available to clients and he is very proud of his record. As elder member of his Melanesian clan, Robbin

holds much of the clan's secret intellectual property. It is a right and a duty that is jealously guarded with great pride. This knowledge gives him a position of great status in his clan. He will only pass on this knowledge to selected and proven clan members when he is near the end of his life.

Robbin believes there is no conflict at all between his work as a Librarian and his position as clan elder. His role as a librarian is a technical function to access, catalogue and retrieve information systematically. His role as an elder in his clan, a significant repository of the intellectual property of his clan, is less systematic and requires great vigilance to maintain the integrity of the knowledge in his memory. The visual and performing arts of his culture provide an important stimulus to maintain this knowledge base. Robbin will gladly give his College Library clients information in his Library collection, but it will be a different story in regard to his clan's intellectual property. "Keep your head clear about what you are doing," he says, "and you will not have problems."

**Hiris Grace Birney**  
President of the PNG Library and Information Association  
[hiris.birney@aptc.edu.au](mailto:hiris.birney@aptc.edu.au)

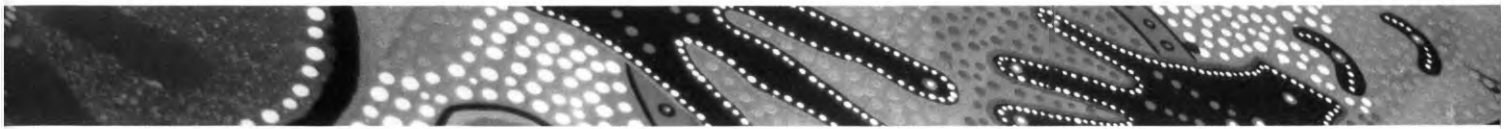
## Initiatives of the Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group

The Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group (IISIG) is one of ten special interest groups that are attached to the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA). The IISIG is made up of members from a diverse range of professions including a number of librarians. Amy O'Donoghue is a librarian with the Central Land Council in Alice Springs. Amy joined the IISIG executive committee in 2007 after attending the ASA national conference with some of her colleagues. Amy says she has always had an interest in both Libraries and Archives because she sees similarities in the work and areas of overlap. Some of the of the reference enquiries that Amy receives as a librarian at the Land Council are for records held in either the NT Archives or National Archives. Amy is impressed by the work done by the ASA and IISIG in promoting indigenous study and employment in the profession.

Two initiatives of the IISIG aimed at promoting study and employment in the profession include the Pathways brochure and the ASALW scholarship.

The Pathways brochure 'Pathways to your future and our past: careers for Indigenous peoples in archives and records' was first produced in 2004 with the support of the Records Management Association of Australasia. Aimed at encouraging Indigenous Australians to get involved in the Archives and records profession, the brochure describes the work of archivists and records managers, the value that Indigenous people bring to the profession and advice on and how to get involved and where to get support. [http://www.archivists.org.au/files/Branch\\_and\\_SIG\\_pubs/IISIG/Pathways\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.archivists.org.au/files/Branch_and_SIG_pubs/IISIG/Pathways_brochure.pdf)

One area of support provided by the IISIG is the ASALW Scholarship. The scholarship was established in 2007 in response to recommendations in the Bringing Them Home Report that it was important to train Aboriginal and Torres



Strait Islander people as archivists as they are uniquely qualified to determine how records about Indigenous people should be created, kept and made accessible.

Named in memory of Loris Williams, the first Indigenous Queenslander and only the second Australian Indigenous person to qualify as an archivist, the scholarship aims at supporting Indigenous people to undertake study in Archives/Recordkeeping by providing financial assistance and mentoring.

Two scholarships have been awarded for 2008, one to Monica Hardie to study a Certificate III in Recordkeeping at TAFE South Australia and one to Lee Lazarevic to study a Graduate Diploma of Science (Information Services) specializing in Archives and Records at Edith Cowan University. Lee gained a Diploma of Library and Information Studies while working as a library technician and last year graduated with First Class Honours from the Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle. Monica has been working in recordkeeping roles in government and private organizations for a number of years.

Details about applications for next year's scholarship will be available on the ASA website in September. <http://www.archivists.org.au/scholarships-available-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-train-archivists>

Another initiative of the IISIG is the Loris Williams lecture, which is given at the annual ASA conference. The lecture aims to stimulate discussion and debate and inform the archives and records community about Indigenous issues that affect the profession. At the 2007 conference in Alice Springs, Alana Garwood-Houng, a librarian with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, presented a lecture on the ATSIILRN Protocols. The Loris Williams Annual Lecture will be held this year in Perth, Western Australia.

Many IISIG members have also been ATSIILRN members and IISIG is always keen to build links with allied professionals.

**Caroline Homer**  
Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group  
Australian Society of Archivists  
[jchomer@activ8.net.au](mailto:jchomer@activ8.net.au)

## A 'both-ways' library and information service in the Top End

Batchelor Institute is Australia's only Indigenous dual sector tertiary education provider and fulfils a vital role in the education of Indigenous people across Australia.

As with other dual sector tertiary providers, the Institute's VET program is funded by the NT Government and the Higher Education program is funded by the Australian Government. Courses range from vocational skills training to Higher Education programs including a Masters, and from 2008 a PhD program in Indigenous Knowledge.

The Institute is based in the Northern Territory (NT) and although students come from both urban, regional and remote centres Australia-wide there is a special focus on remote NT communities. The main residential campus is at Batchelor, 100km south of Darwin, and there is a second residential campus in Alice Springs. From 2008 the Alice Springs campus is relocating into an exciting new facility currently under construction on the southern outskirts of Alice Springs. The new Desert People's Centre – the outcome of a partnership between the institute and the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) – will provide a world class facility for Indigenous learning and knowledge.

Batchelor Institute also has annexes in Darwin, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Nhulunbuy, and purpose-built study centres in seven remote NT communities.

The Institute's 'both-ways' learning philosophy is based on respect and brings together traditional Indigenous knowledge systems with western academic disciplines to provide students with pathways to a successful learning journey. Courses are delivered in a mixed mode of short intensive residential workshops, workplace training and home based study with the support of dedicated tutors and visiting lecturers.

The Institute's Library and Information Service is an integral support facility for the teaching and learning programs and maintains collections at the Batchelor and Central Australian Campus along with small collections in the Institute Annexes and Study Centres. An ever-expanding range of range of online databases assists in information delivery to remote locations. One of the collection strengths is in Australian Aboriginal languages and linguistics and a special collection of 'own language' works (Centre for Australian Languages & Linguistics, or CALL Collection) includes original work by students in Australian languages and linguistics courses. Items in this collection are gradually being catalogued, digitised and added to an online database.

The Library runs information literacy programs at the request of teaching staff and sessions are tailored to the specific needs and abilities of the student group.

There are a total of eleven staff in the two library locations. Margaret Agnew is one of three Indigenous staff employed in the Institute Library and she works on the Batchelor campus.

Batchelor Institute is a site of national significance in Indigenous education – strengthening identity, achieving success and transforming lives.

**Jayshree Mamtora**  
ALIA NT Local Liaison Officer  
[jayshree.mamtora@alia.org.au](mailto:jayshree.mamtora@alia.org.au)