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The Miiyupimatisiun Research Data Archives Project

Co-developing an Indigenous Data Repository

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Article abstract

The Miiyupimatisiun Research Data Archives Project (MRDAP) is a digitization and data transfer initiative between medical anthropologist Naomi Adelson and the Whapmagoostui First Nation (FN) in the territory of Eeyou Istchee (in northern Quebec). This report provides an overview of phase one of the MRDAP from three distinct perspectives: the researcher, the archivist, and the community. The authors discuss the history of the relationship between Adelson and the Whapmagoostui FN, the digitization process, and the work that is required to transfer the digitized materials to the community for access and safekeeping. The report also foregrounds how the project team is working to ensure that the community has full control over how the data is managed, stored, accessed, and preserved over the long term. The report provides a case study on how Indigenous data sovereignty is being negotiated in the context of one community.

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PROJECT REPORT

The *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives Project: Co-developing an Indigenous Data Repository

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The *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives Project (MRDAP) is a digitization and data transfer initiative between medical anthropologist Naomi Adelson and the Whapmagoostui First Nation (FN) in the territory of Eeyou Istchee (in northern Quebec). This report provides an overview of phase one of the MRDAP from three distinct perspectives: the researcher, the archivist, and the community. The authors discuss the history of the relationship between Adelson and the Whapmagoostui FN, the digitization process, and the work that is required to transfer the digitized materials to the community for access and safekeeping. The report also foregrounds how the project team is working to ensure that the community has full control over how the data is managed, stored, accessed, and preserved over the long term. The report provides a case study on how Indigenous data sovereignty is being negotiated in the context of one community.

Keywords: Indigenous archives; Indigenous data sovereignty; research data management; post-custodialism

Introduction

The *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives Project (MRDAP) is a digitization and data transfer initiative between researcher Naomi Adelson and the Whapmagoostui First Nation (FN) in the territory of Eeyou Istchee. The project team consists of medical anthropologist Naomi Adelson; Samuel Mickelson, an archivist of settler heritage who was hired to digitize the research data archives; and Joshua J Kawapit, the Information and Communications Officer for the Whapmagoostui FN and main point of contact for the community. The MRDAP is the result of a long-standing research partnership between Naomi and the Whapmagoostui FN that dates back to the late 1980s.

Miiyupimatisiun is a northern Cree word that roughly translates into English as “being alive well” and which is central to the identity of the people of Whapmagoostui (Adelson 2000). The *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives house a rich collection of stories about what it means to “be alive well” and, through that, what life was like for the people of the Whapmagoostui FN in the mid to late twentieth century and in previous generations. Since Naomi primarily interviewed unilingual Cree speakers who have now passed on, the archives are also a repository of a northern Cree dialect rooted in lives lived on the land.

Phase one of the project consisted of the digitization of the main corpus of research data that Naomi collected while living in Whapmagoostui during the late 1980s. This corpus consists of over sixty-one hours of audio recordings originally captured on audio cassettes and microcassettes; over 2,100 digitized colour photographs originally created as 35 mm transparencies; and over forty pages of genealogical data digitized from one of Naomi’s notebooks. Phase one also involved the digital migration of over fifty interview transcripts and related textual documents from 3½ inch floppy disks.

As we move into phase two, we turn to ensuring that the community has the means to exercise full control over how the archive is managed, accessed, and preserved. This report focuses on the results of phase one and the early work of phase two. The body of the report provides an overview of the project from three perspectives: the researcher, the archivist, and the community. We begin with the perspective of the researcher.

The Researcher

Whapmagoostui (Figure 1), accessible only by air or water, sits on a small spit of land on the southern border of Nunavik, where the Great Whale River flows into Hudson Bay. The *Iiyiyu'ch* (Cree) community is immediately adjacent to the Inuit community of Kuujjuarapik as well as a small enclave of non-Indigenous people. My first visit to the Whapmagoostui FN community was in 1988, a full year in advance of when I began my research. I flew up to introduce myself to the Whapmagoostui chief and council members and to ask if they would allow me to conduct my proposed research project. Upon receiving the council's and the Cree Board of Health and Social Services' permission to undertake the research, and with McGill University's Research Ethics Board approval, I returned to Whapmagoostui in 1989. I was initially invited to board with a young family and, when they left to upgrade their post-secondary education, I moved in with another family and into what became my home in Whapmagoostui for the remainder of the eighteen-month research period and for my return visits to the community for many years thereafter.

As a medical anthropologist, I was particularly interested in the concept of health from a Cree perspective. Beginning with the premise that health is never simply the absence of disease, I sought to learn a Cree/*Iiyiyu'ch* epistemology of health—that is, the meaning and valuations of health in cultural, social, and political contexts and in relation to what it means to be a Cree person (Adelson 2000). A seemingly straightforward question about health led me to the community elders in particular, who offered a wealth of stories and examples of the concept of health, or more accurately *miiyupimatisiun*.¹ The interviews, all conducted in Cree, were meticulously translated by two translation experts in the community. I spent many hours working with the translators, transcribing their words into text, learning more each day about the history and contemporary worlds of the northern *Iiyiyu'ch* (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Aerial view of Whapmagoostui (*foreground*) and Kuujjuarapik (*background*), c. 1989. Photo by Naomi Adelson.

¹I translate *miiyupimatisiun* into the somewhat awkward term “being alive well.” This translation distinguishes the multidimensional Cree concept of well-being as distinct from a health/illness binary.



Figure 2: Stretching beaver skins, winter camp near Whapmagoostui, c. 1993. Photo by Naomi Adelson.

The majority of the elders with whom I originally spoke have passed on. Their stories remain, however, and offer detailed knowledge of what life was like just a few short generations ago. Their language is also significant. All unilingual Cree speakers, the elders spoke with a vocabulary suffused with and richly nuanced by lives lived on the land.

A series of collaborative projects and a few decades later, my goal now is to ensure that the extraordinarily rich stories and language from that initial project with the Whapmagoostui FN are properly saved, housed, and preserved in situ. The original research agreement, standard in the late 1980s, ensured only that I retain and safely store the research data and that I share all publications arising from the research with the community. Ethnographic researchers working in Whapmagoostui in the 1950s had not sent back any of their findings or publications. Learning of this, on my early return trips to the community I brought copies of all the research publications about the community. It is important to note, however, that there was no single data storage or management capacity within the local government office and, tragically, any materials that were once housed in the Whapmagoostui government office were destroyed in a fire.

With the evolution of digital technologies and my commitment to data sovereignty, I initiated discussions with the Whapmagoostui leadership to physically and legally transfer the interviews and related materials to the property of the community through a transfer of the data and intellectual property rights.² The research materials were originally stored on microcassette tapes, 3½ inch floppy disks, 35 mm photographic transparencies, and paper. As much as I wanted to proceed with the data transfer and access process, the original materials required updating into an accessible format. I had to find a way to consolidate the research materials and create a database that would be readily accessible with contemporary technology. The data transfer project required a digital archivist.

The Archivist

I am a third-generation Canadian of settler heritage with professional training in library and archival science. I was brought onto the team in May 2019 to digitize the research data archives and work with the Whapmagoostui FN to develop a plan for community-led access to and preservation of the digitized materials.

²The intellectual property rights to research materials and related thesis normally and automatically fall to the graduate student. It is these property rights to the data that I will transfer to the Whapmagoostui FN.

As an archivist from outside of the community, I turned to established policy documents to ensure that I approached my work ethically and responsibly. In particular, the *OCAPI™ Principles* (2007) and *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (2007) provided me with ethical and practical guidance throughout the digitization process.³ The *OCAPI™ Principles* prodded me to consider the way in which every decision that I made during digitization would impact the ability of the community to access, preserve, and manage the data. This framework helped clarify my thinking in terms of my responsibilities to the community and especially the duty that I had to treat their knowledge with care.

The *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, the established guide for managing culturally sensitive materials, was particularly helpful in focusing my approach to metadata capture and data storage. Given that much of the research data archive includes Traditional Knowledge (TK) on the Cree concept of *miiyupimatisiun*, I followed the protocols for the management of culturally sensitive materials in how I chose which metadata to capture⁴ and where to store the data. I captured key information through metadata elements designed for the recording of intellectual property rights, access rights, and data storage. As for data storage, we collaboratively made the decision to preserve the digitized materials in confidential and secure online and offline locations. We have also had preliminary conversations with the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, one of the bodies that originally approved Naomi's research in 1989, regarding the development of a long-term digital preservation strategy that puts community needs first.⁵

The next step is to meet face-to-face with the community to develop context-specific protocols for the management of access to the research data archives. We will do this by formalizing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Naomi and the community that sets out each party's rights and responsibilities in relation to the research data archives. We are also exploring the implementation of an archival content management system in the community such as Mukurtu CMS. We are especially interested in Mukurtu as a content management system because of the way in which it allows Indigenous communities to develop customized protocols for access to culturally sensitive materials.

As the project progresses into phase two, we turn our focus toward making decisions that will ensure community control over data access and preservation. As an archivist of settler heritage, I must think critically about what my roles and responsibilities ought to be at this stage. Where is my professional knowledge required to help the rest of the team and the community make essential decisions regarding data management and access? What can I do to assist in building community knowledge and capacity in relation to digital archiving? And when do I need to step back?

The Community

What is most important from our perspective is to ensure that the research data archives are securely stored within the community and made accessible to community members in the long term. Achieving these priorities will require the implementation of proper security and access protocols based on community needs and traditions. This body of archival materials is significant for us because it contains the voices and stories of many of our community's elders. Having control over and access to the archives will help us connect more deeply to our traditional stories and ways of living on the land.

A few years ago, a fire destroyed our band office and the archival materials contained therein. This was a tremendous loss for our community. We lost not only our band office but also a unique repository of community knowledge. Our wish is to breathe new life into this communal knowledge by developing a usable digital archive for community members.

We envision a digital archive that is stored in Whapmagoostui and accessible to community members. To fulfill this vision, we are working to ensure that we have the proper knowledge and systems in place to manage a sustainable digital archive. This includes working to develop customized access protocols through an MOU and selecting a culturally relevant content management system that will enable us to implement these protocols.

The completion of an MOU between Naomi and the community will allow us to formalize the requirements for data storage, access, and preservation over the long term. As a living document, the MOU will help

³ For archival digitization standards I followed the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives' *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects* (IASA-TC 04) and the Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative's *Technical Guidelines for Digitizing Cultural Heritage Materials: Creation of Raster Image Files*.

⁴ I created a customized metadata application profile by drawing elements from several metadata schemas. Technical metadata elements were drawn from the *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects* (IASA-TC 04) and *Data Dictionary - Technical Metadata for Digital Still Images* (ANSI/NISO Z39.87-2006 [R2017]), while descriptive and preservation metadata elements were drawn from Dublin Core™ (DCMI Metadata Terms) and the *PREMIS Data Dictionary for Preservation Metadata*.

⁵ Separately, we have consulted with archivists from Library and Archives Canada regarding their recent program which assists Indigenous communities in the development of long-term digital preservation strategies.

us reach agreement on our shared roles and responsibilities for managing the *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives. While the MOU will not be legally binding according to Canadian law, we view the document as an extralegal instrument for the recognition of communal ownership rights. This will allow us to circumvent the current lack of provision for communal ownership rights in existing Canadian intellectual property legislation. In parallel with the MOU, we are exploring the legal transfer of intellectual ownership rights from Naomi to the community by means of a formal contract or transfer agreement. All this work is essential to ensure that we will be able to exercise full control over how the archival materials are managed, accessed, circulated, and preserved.

Conclusion

Developing a usable data repository is long and sometimes messy work. Digitizing the research data took place over a six-month period from May to October 2019 in Toronto, Ontario. With the data digitized and metadata captured, the work of building the community infrastructure for access and preservation has begun. These efforts entail the formalization of policies and protocols for data management and access and the selection of technological solutions that will make the archival materials accessible to community members. We also need to consider the hardware and software requirements that are necessary to house and access the data in the community. This work has been stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it impossible for the team members based in Toronto to travel to the community to discuss the transfer of the data rights and have the equally necessary conversations regarding access protocols and technology.

We remain optimistic that we will be able to meet face-to-face in Whapmagoostui, at which point the work of implementing and making accessible the *Miiyupimatisiun* Research Data Archives can fully begin. We are looking ahead to developing customized access protocols, formalizing the MOU, and selecting an archival content management system that suits the community's needs. We will also work to finalize a plan for the digital preservation of the archives over the long term. This plan might involve a partnership with an organization such as the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay or Ryerson University, where the research data were digitized. At every decision point, our priority will continue to be to ensure the collaboration between the Whapmagoostui FN and the researcher towards ensuring that the community ultimately has full authority and control over how the archives are managed, accessed, stored, and preserved.

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