

Sowing the future: The vision of community libraries at Amawtay Wasi University, Ecuador¹

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Abstract

The Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi has established an innovative community library management model based on ancestral wisdom and intercultural dialogue. This model adopts the Andean *Chakana* as a conceptual framework to guide library services, emphasising cultural preservation, equitable access to resources and sustainable development. These libraries transcend traditional roles and become centres of cultural preservation, intercultural dialogue and community empowerment. Through initiatives such as the digitisation of resources, education in indigenous languages and sustainable projects, they contribute to the revitalisation of indigenous identities and knowledge while promoting social cohesion and economic opportunities. The Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi's libraries serve as a compelling example of a transformative approach to higher education that combines ancestral knowledge with modern methodologies.

Keywords

community libraries, interculturality, ancestral knowledge, Ecuador, indigenous communities, cultural preservation, Andean *Chakana*

Development

The Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi (UINPIAW, by its Spanish acronym), which focuses on ancestral wisdom and intercultural dialogue, has established a library management model that reflects the needs and values of Ecuador's indigenous communities. Founded as part of the struggle for the recognition of indigenous peoples' cultural and educational rights, the university has become a beacon of educational innovation that integrates ancestral perspectives with contemporary academic methodologies.

Latin American community libraries emerged as self-managed spaces that are shaped by local realities. In Ecuador, these libraries are still in the early stages of development. The UINPIAW seeks to integrate intercultural educational practices into a model based on the Andean world view. Popular and community libraries in the region are rooted in social movements and collective efforts aimed at democratising access to information and preserving local cultural identities.

Ecuador is rich in cultural diversity, comprising numerous nationalities and indigenous peoples, such as the Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Tsáchilas and Cañaris, among others. This diversity requires a library approach that not only recognises but also celebrates and preserves the cultures and languages of these communities. In this context, the UINPIAW plays a key role as a guardian of cultural heritage and facilitator of intercultural learning.

To begin with, it is important to understand that a management model is a conceptual framework that defines how the activities of an organisation are planned, executed and

monitored in order to achieve its objectives. It focuses on efficiency, continuous improvement and user satisfaction throughout the entire lifecycle of the process. The proposed management model for the UINPIAW library includes various elements – namely, the *Abya-Yala* paradigm; the *Chakana* as a synthesis of the Andean world view; the pedagogical model and statutes of the UINPIAW; the library regulations; and the founding principles of the management model.

The UINPIAW conceives of the *Abya-Yala* paradigm as 'the link', the highest expression of which is the community, understood in its broadest sense – that is, as a cosmic community of living beings, a human–natural community guided by the Andean cross, the *Chakana* (Intercultural University, 2020: 9).

The *Chakana* is proposed as a pedagogical framework based on collaborative learning and the Andean world view to promote holistic teaching. For this reason, the proposed library management model for the UINPIAW is structured using the diagrammatic representation of a *Chakana*.

The *Chakana*, also known as the Andean Cross, is a fundamental ancestral symbol in the world view of the indigenous

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Figure 1. Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas.

peoples of the Andes, especially the Kichwa. Its geometric structure represents a synthesis of the universe, combining the physical, spiritual and cosmic dimensions of existence. The *Chakana* consists of a stepped cross with a centre that symbolises the axis of the cosmos, the point where the energies of the earth (*Pachamama*) and the sky (*Hanan Pacha*) converge. Each of its sides and steps holds deep meaning, representing principles such as duality, balance and the complementarity of opposites.

Structurally, the *Chakana* is divided into four quadrants representing the cardinal points (north, south, east and west) and the four elements (water, earth, fire and air). The centre means harmony and the connection among the various aspects of life. These principles can be applied to the library context to guide administrative processes, services and the design of user experiences. For instance, the centre of the *Chakana* symbolises the core of knowledge – where ancestral wisdom and modern academic learning converge – while each branch of the cross can be associated with the four key pillars of the library management model: processes, services, users and indicators.

The *Chakana* promotes a holistic paradigm that fosters the integration of ancestral knowledge into library practices. According to Quispe (2019), adopting the *Chakana* as a conceptual framework allows educational spaces to be reshaped in order to strengthen intercultural dialogue and collaborative teaching. Libraries thus become not only information repositories but also agents of cultural transformation. By incorporating the *Chakana* into its library management, the UINPIAW seeks to implement a functional, deeply symbolic and representative model of indigenous cultural values while also promoting a balance between tradition and innovation.

Two of the four key types of knowledge are taken from the UINPIAW's Pedagogical Model of Intercultural and Community Higher Education (Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi, 2020) and included in the management model: knowing to be, which 'guides the development of "self-awareness, that is, awareness of one's own existence and of one's relationships with the family, the broader community, society and

the cosmos"' (UINPIAW, 2020), and knowing to know, which

focuses on strengthening diverse, pluralistic and critical knowledge systems rooted in different ethos and epistemologies. This type of knowledge is largely specific to the learner's field of study (degrees or programmes, known in Kichwa as *nankuna*), but is also always considered from an intercultural perspective.

The UINPIAW's library management model is built around four key pillars. Three of these come from the library regulations approved by Resolution No. CG-129-2023 – specifically, Sections 2 and 3, which include a description and the mission of the library's head office: 'The UINPIAW library is a service aimed at supporting teaching, study and research' (UINPIAW, 2023a) and '[t]he Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi is a public, intercultural and community-oriented institution. The mission of its library is to contribute to the training of highly qualified professionals by supporting learning, teaching and scientific research' (UINPIAW, 2023b).

The fourth pillar – dialogue among different types of knowledge and ancestral languages – is based on the functions and responsibilities of the library's head office and documentation centres, as outlined in UINPIAW's statutes, which provide that the library must '[e]nsure the inclusion of ancestral languages in the management of the library's physical and digital tools' (Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas Amawtay Wasi, 2022). These four pillars underpin the library management model and are represented in the *Chakana*. The governance structure of the university is presented in Figure 1, which shows the authorities responsible for overseeing academic, administrative and intercultural functions within the institution.

Moreover, the library management model is reinforced by the broader administrative management structure, which includes the development of processes, the characterisation of users, service descriptions and indicator design systems, all of which are aligned with the university's pedagogical

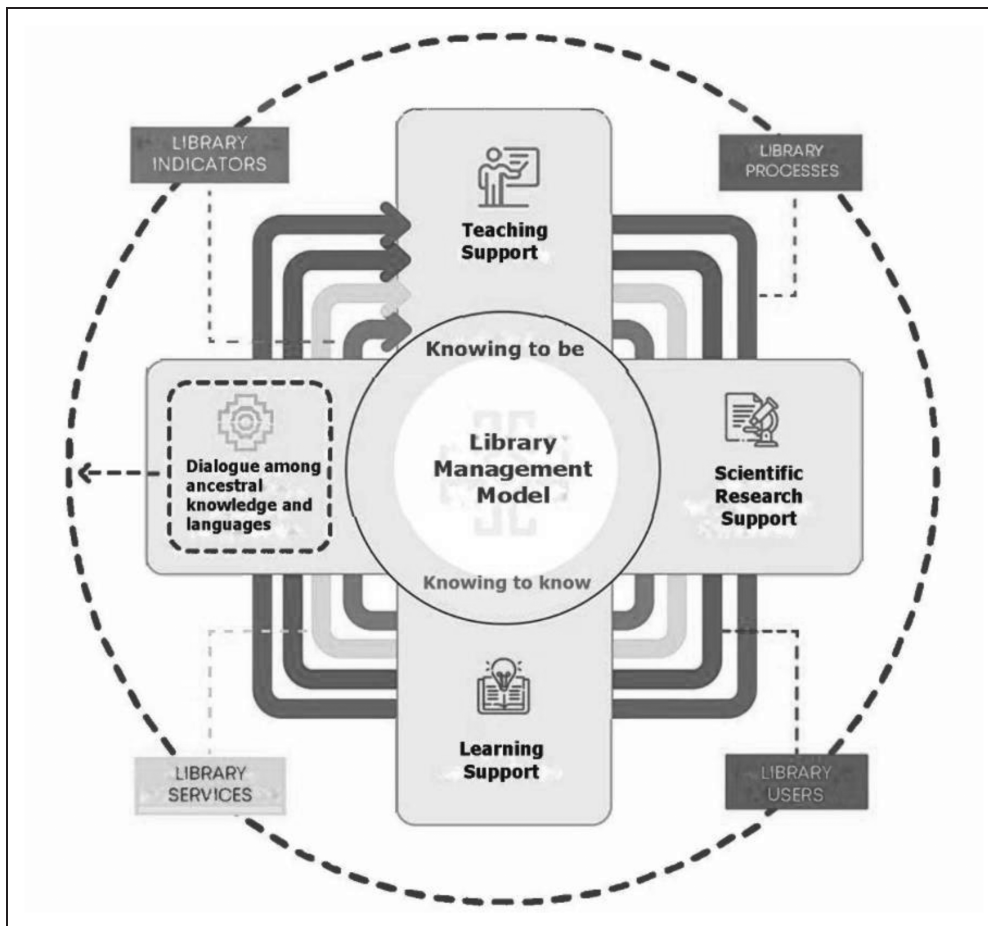


Figure 2. Library management model created by the author on the basis of the pedagogical model of the UINPIAW.

model and the *Chakana*. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the library management model based on the *Chakana*.

Drawing from the design of the *Chakana*, the core elements of the library's administrative management system are as follows:

- Library processes
- Library users
- Library services
- Library indicators

For library processes, the *Chakana* paradigm offers an integrative approach that fosters balance and connection among the various document management stages. The principles of complementarity and harmony that characterise the *Chakana* encourage a non-linear understanding of these processes, conceiving of them as a dynamic cycle in which the collection, organisation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge are interrelated. This perspective promotes the creation of bibliographic catalogues that incorporate both traditional and academic knowledge while respecting their origin and authenticity. It likewise supports inclusive processes that prioritise the active participation of communities in library decision-making.

With regard to library users, the *Chakana* places emphasis on respect for cultural diversity and dialogue among knowledge systems, which are fundamental values in a library conceived as an intercultural space. Inspired by this paradigm,

libraries can design interaction strategies that not only address users' information needs but also acknowledge and give visibility to their ancestral knowledge. For example, the organisation of knowledge circles – where community experts share their experiences with academics and students – strengthens the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, consolidating a space in which all voices are equally valid.

Regarding library services, the *Chakana* paradigm promotes the harmonious integration of ancestral practices and modern technologies. This combination enables the library not only to preserve oral traditions and local knowledge, but also to digitise them and make them available to wider communities. Innovative services such as platforms for accessing multilingual collections, training workshops on traditional knowledge, and collaborative digitisation projects are clear examples of how the *Chakana* inspires a library that balances the ancestral with the contemporary, while also promoting open access to knowledge.

Finally, library indicators are influenced by the *Chakana* through the incorporation of intercultural metrics that transcend traditional usage and consultation statistics. These indicators may include community involvement in library management, the number of cultural preservation activities that have been carried out, the quantity of digitised resources in ancestral languages, or the frequency of intercultural dialogue events. By emphasising balance and connection, the *Chakana* inspires an ongoing assessment of the library's

social and cultural impact, beyond purely quantitative parameters.

It is also important to consider the role of community libraries, which serve different purposes that go beyond the provision of information resources. These libraries become centres of cultural preservation, the promotion of intercultural dialogue and community empowerment. For example, they collect and archive stories, legends, myths and oral traditions, thus ensuring the transmission of knowledge to future generations. They also offer materials in indigenous languages and digital resources that enrich academic training and promote autonomous learning. Furthermore, they organise training workshops and programmes that strengthen practical and academic skills within communities. Community gatherings and cultural events are another key aspect, as they foster understanding and respect among different cultures, thereby reinforcing social cohesion. Finally, they bolster the use and appreciation of indigenous languages, promoting cultural pride and social cohesion.

The impact of community libraries extends beyond their immediate users. Through initiatives such as the digitisation of cultural resources and the creation of a Collective Memory Centre, these libraries help preserve cultural heritage while opening new educational and economic opportunities for local communities. They also foster community empowerment by providing access to critical information and promoting the involvement of members in the management and development of library services. This collaborative approach strengthens community bonds and encourages a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Moreover, the use of modern technologies, such as digital platforms for storing and sharing resources, makes it possible for materials to be available even in remote communities. Sustainable development projects, such as workshops on sustainable agricultural practices and natural resource management, highlight these libraries' commitment to environmental sustainability.

The UINPIAW has successfully developed a library management model that is deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom and intercultural dialogue. This model not only addresses the educational and cultural needs of Ecuador's indigenous communities, but also empowers them by integrating their world view and knowledge into the institution's administrative and pedagogical structure. The adoption of the *Chakana* as the core element of the model means that it is not merely a symbol but also a practical tool that guides the planning, implementation and assessment of library services in line with the principles of inclusion and sustainability.

The impact of the UINPIAW's community libraries goes beyond their traditional role of providing access to information. These libraries are living spaces of cultural preservation, where ancestral languages, traditions and knowledge are collected, digitised and shared. In doing so, they promote the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, strengthen cultural identity and contribute to revitalising native languages. Additionally, by incorporating technological tools and sustainable projects, they broaden their horizons and embrace an approach that not only preserves the past but also looks to the future, generating educational and economic opportunities for their communities.

Ultimately, the future community libraries of the UINPIAW embody a transformative paradigm that combines

innovation with tradition. This model not only proves effective in creating a more just and inclusive society but also serves as an inspiration for other institutions that seek to integrate ancestral knowledge into their educational and cultural processes. By mirroring the values and aspirations of indigenous communities, these libraries become guardians of heritage and catalysts for change, building bridges between the ancestral and the contemporary, and opening pathways towards an intercultural and sustainable future.

To conclude, the *Chakana* model fosters collaborative educational practices and intergenerational learning by conceiving knowledge as an ever-evolving handicraft to which each generation contributes its own vision and experience. Inspired by the principles of complementarity and balance, this model promotes educational activities that integrate both academic and ancestral knowledge. In the library context, this translates into spaces where young and older people, as well as community elders, can engage in dialogue and learn together, sharing traditional practices, oral storytelling and reflections on contemporary issues.

The integration of ancestral languages into library practices constitutes a key element of the *Chakana* model. The preservation and promotion of languages such as Kichwa, Shuar and other indigenous languages not only enriches the cultural heritage of libraries but also reinforces the cultural identity of their users. The inclusion of multilingual material – both physical and digital – as well as the organisation of activities in indigenous languages actively fosters the use of these languages, contributing to their revitalisation and ensuring their intergenerational transmission. In this way, libraries become agents of cultural and linguistic resistance.

In research practice, the *Chakana* paradigm promotes a participatory, inclusive and situated approach, in which communities are not merely the subjects of study but also active agents in the production of knowledge. This approach encourages collaborative methodologies in which researchers and community members work jointly to identify challenges, design solutions and document local knowledge. From this perspective, libraries become living research hubs for the collection, validation and dissemination of studies that hold not only scientific value but also social and cultural relevance.

In brief, the library management model based on the *Chakana* implemented by the UINPIAW represents a transformative proposal that integrates ancestral knowledge with contemporary approaches to education, learning and research. Its influence is materialised in the development of dynamic and participatory library processes, the recognition of cultural diversity among users, the combination of traditional practices with modern technologies, and the adoption of intercultural indicators. By fostering the coexistence of different types of knowledge, the preservation of ancestral languages and inclusive research, this model not only addresses the needs of indigenous communities but also establishes an innovative paradigm of library management that balances tradition and innovation while empowering communities as active guardians of their cultural heritage.

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Author biography

Adriana Guandinango holds a degree in Information Science and Librarianship and a Master's degree in Archival Science and Document Management Systems. She has more than 20 years of experience in the archival and library field, with extensive expertise in scientific databases, library and archival management systems, information technologies, catalogues, institutional repositories, and digitization processes. She has led work teams, provided comprehensive user services, and developed training and continuing education programs for students and professionals. She has represented Ecuador as a speaker at prominent international events in Panama, the United States, and Mexico. She currently serves as the Director of the Library at the Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples Amawtay Wasi and is the author of publications on libraries for Indigenous peoples and the preservation of ancestral knowledge.