

Colombian library goes beyond books to keep stories alive

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. What do you know about South America? Choose the best answer.

1. The capital city of Colombia is **Bogotá** / Caracas.
2. The official language of Brazil is **Portuguese** / Spanish.
3. There are **ten** / twelve countries in South America.
4. The currency of Colombia is the **bolívar** / peso.
5. The southernmost point of South America is in **Argentina** / Chile.

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

afloat
indigenous

assimilate
petroglyph

elder
sceptical

etch
tranquil

ground
trek

1. To _____ is to go on a long and difficult journey on foot.
2. A _____ is a rock carving.
3. If you _____ a hard surface, you make a picture or a pattern by cutting into it.
4. A _____ place is calm, still and quiet.
5. _____ people lived in a place for a very long time before other people came to live there.
6. An _____ is an older or more experienced member of a group or organization who gives advice and makes decisions.
7. A _____ person has doubts about something that other people think is true or right.
8. If people _____, they begin to consider themselves as part of the mainstream community or culture rather than being different.
9. If you keep a business or an institution _____, you find the money that enables it to continue to exist.
10. If you get something off the _____, you start it and make it successful.

'Legends are to be told': Colombian library goes beyond books to keep stories alive

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The award-winning Kankuaka Library opened with one box of books. Now it is reconnecting indigenous youth with their past through oral histories, gatherings with elders and workshops

Genevieve Glatky

21 March, 2022

- 1 As dawn creeps over the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia, a small group of children trek downhill carrying cameras and sketch pads. Each month, they come to an ancient site scattered with hundreds of petroglyphs – smooth stones etched with patterns – to create their own images of the art of their ancestors. The project is run by the public library in Atánquez, a tranquil mountainside town of 10,000 people in the Kankuamo Indigenous Reserve.
- 2 Atánquez's Kankuaka Library is more than just a space to house books; it is the centre of the indigenous people's initiatives to preserve their history and strengthen their identity. A pavilion and mud-brick round houses behind the main building host community gatherings. Youth activities include the petroglyph outings, photography workshops and gatherings with tribal elders. "The rock carvings are memories of the ancestors," says Mariham Martinez Daza, seven, who is part of the programme. "They're beautiful."
- 3 Sahian Maestre, 13, adds: "They show us as another part of who we are. They tell us about the past and explain how indigenous people saw things. It is also another way of seeing each other and how our ancestors believed each one of us is connected."
- 4 But her favourite trips are those to meet Kankuamo elders, to learn about traditional music, recipes and how people have changed over the years. One early project of the library had children collecting stories from their grandparents and adapting them into stop-motion videos.
- 5 "For us, it is essential that certain memories cannot be transmitted if it is not orally," says Souldes Maestre, the librarian and one of the library's founders. Legends are meant to be told, not just read in books, he says. "We want the children to begin to create an interest in knowing, in asking questions."
- 6 In February, 2013, Atánquez had just a box of unopened books sent by the National Network of Public Libraries. When a group of young people found out that a government official was due to come and remove them because of disuse, they decided to act. They peeled off the plastic wrappings and hastily arranged the books in an abandoned community building. The official was sceptical of this "library". But, Maestre says, they told her: "If we are capable of putting this together in one night, you cannot imagine what we are capable of in a year."
- 7 The official gave them a year, as well as tables and chairs, and new books arrived. In 2015, Atánquez was a finalist for Colombia's National Library Award, winning it in 2017.
- 8 Patrick Morales, Coordinator of Ethnic Affairs at the National Centre for Historical Memory in Colombia, says the Kankuamo story is symbolic of Latin America's indigenous people, many of whom attempted to assimilate in the 1950s and 1960s, and then returned to their roots. But the Kankuaka Library is unique in its focus on audio-visual narratives and intergenerational exchanges.
- 9 There are about 35,000 Kankuamo, 28,000 of whom live on the reserve, and they are one of the four indigenous groups of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Like many other indigenous people, their culture is threatened by modernization and conflict. Violence from guerrilla and paramilitary groups in the 1980s and 1990s killed, orphaned and displaced hundreds, separated families and targeted leaders and religious authorities.
- 10 For years, being Kankuamo was seen as shameful and many people tried to distance themselves from their culture, but the early 1990s saw a change. "Little by little, our people are beginning to value what they are as indigenous peoples," says Ener Crispin Cáceres, a Kankuamo elder.

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- 11 The national and international recognition the library has gained has brought in prize money to keep it afloat, but organizers are trying to raise funds to buy computers.
- 12 John Robert Torres Maestre, the former *cabildo*, or chief of Atánquez, helped get the library off the ground. He says that 40 years ago, a generation went off to university never to return, which is why it is so important to cultivate a love of learning alongside a love of heritage, so that those who pursue higher education come back.
- 13 This identity is increasingly important as the region faces threats from proposed coal, coltan and oil mining projects nearby that would damage land and poison rivers. For Maestre, there is a clear link between the library's work and the community's ability to defend itself.
- 14 "For us, the concept of memory is not like a museum, something that can be seen, but rather represents survival," says Maestre "If we do not have that memory, if we do not have those stories, we cannot continue to be Kankuamos."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Why do the children visit the ancient site each month?
2. What is the purpose of the Kankuaka Library?
3. What do the petroglyphs tell the children?
4. What do the children learn from the Kankuamo elders?
5. How many books did the Atánquez library have in February, 2013?
6. What did the Atánquez library win in 2017?
7. What did the Kankuamo people try to do in the 1950s and 1960s?
8. What percentage of the Kankuamo people live on the reserve?
9. What did the Kankuamos start to do in the early 1990s?
10. What threats does the region face?

4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------|
| 1. indigenous | a. exchange |
| 2. plastic | b. music |
| 3. intergenerational | c. money |
| 4. rock | d. wrapping |
| 5. traditional | e. groups |
| 6. paramilitary | f. education |
| 7. prize | g. people |
| 8. higher | h. carvings |

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Why bother to preserve minority cultures? It’s too expensive.”
- “Everyone can learn from the lessons of history.”
- “We don’t need libraries now that we have the internet.”

6 In your own words

a. There are indigenous peoples in all the countries of South America (i.e., people not descended from the Europeans who settled the continent). Use the internet to find more information about the indigenous peoples of South America.

Choose one of the South American countries and prepare a short report for the class.

Focus on:

- their geographical location
- the language(s) they speak
- to what extent their culture has been preserved