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Trends and Dynamics in the Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems among the Maasai Community of Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous knowledge systems constitute an important component of cultural identity, environmental stewardship, livelihood security, and intergenerational learning among pastoralist communities in Africa. Among the Maasai of Kenya, knowledge is embedded in pastoral production, livestock health, ethnobotany, weather interpretation, rangeland management, wildlife conservation, social organization, oral traditions, ritual practices, and customary institutions. Historically, much of this knowledge has been transmitted orally and experientially through family relations, age-set institutions, herding practices, ceremonies, observation, and participation. However, socioeconomic transformation, formal schooling, land-tenure change, sedentarization, technological change, environmental pressures, and generational shifts have altered the contexts in which knowledge is produced, transmitted, and preserved. At the same time, documentation has expanded from externally produced ethnographic and scientific records toward community-based audiovisual documentation, digital archives, inventories, databases, and legally recognized repositories. This paper examines the trends and dynamics shaping the documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) among the Maasai community of Kenya. It adopts a qualitative integrative review and documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy instruments, legal frameworks, and institutional documentation initiatives. The analysis identifies several interconnected trends: movement from outsider-driven documentation toward community participation; transition from predominantly textual records toward multimodal and digital documentation; increasing documentation of ecological, ethnobotanical, and ethno-veterinary knowledge; renewed attention to endangered cultural practices and intergenerational transmission; growing integration of Indigenous and scientific knowledge; increasing concern with intellectual property and prior informed consent; and the emergence of Indigenous data-governance principles. The paper argues that documentation should not be understood simply as recording knowledge before it disappears. Rather, a political, cultural, and epistemological process can either strengthen or weaken community authority over knowledge. The paper proposes a community-centred documentation framework based on five principles: community authority, contextual integrity, intergenerational transmission, controlled accessibility, and reciprocal benefit. It concludes that the future of Maasai knowledge documentation depends less on the volume of information digitized than on who defines what should be documented, who controls access, how knowledge is contextualized, and whether documentation strengthens living systems of knowledge transmission.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems; Maasai; traditional knowledge; documentation; Indigenous data governance; oral knowledge; cultural heritage; pastoralism; Kenya; digital archives

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems constitute accumulated bodies of understanding, skills, practices, values, and institutions developed through long-term relationships between communities and their social, cultural, and ecological environments. They are not simply collections of facts about plants, animals, weather, or landscapes. Rather, they constitute complex epistemological systems through which communities interpret the world, organize social relations, manage resources, educate younger generations, and reproduce cultural identity. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes knowledge and practices concerning nature, oral traditions, rituals, social practices, and craftsmanship as dimensions of living heritage that are continuously recreated by communities in response to environmental and historical circumstances (UNESCO 2003).

Among the Maasai of Kenya, knowledge has historically been closely associated with pastoralism and a social system in which learning occurs through participation in everyday activities. Knowledge on livestock breeds, grazing conditions, water sources, medicinal plants, animal diseases, weather patterns, wildlife, landscapes, and social obligations among the maa community is embedded in practice rather than confined to formal institutions. Research on Maasai ethno-veterinary knowledge, for instance, demonstrates that livestock disease diagnosis can involve interpretation of symptoms, disease vectors, seasons, and affected animal species (Ole-Miaron 2003).

Similarly, research on tree-fodder knowledge among Maasai pastoralists demonstrates that documentation of Indigenous knowledge cannot be reduced to merely a single survey instrument. Kiptot employed household surveys, semi-structured interviews, ecological inventories, and group-consensus approaches, illustrating the methodological complexity involved in eliciting knowledge that is distributed among individuals, households, and the wider

community (Kiptot 2007). The documentation of Maasai Indigenous knowledge has consequently developed within a tension between preservation and transformation. On the one hand, documentation is increasingly viewed as necessary because some knowledge practices face disruption through formal education, changing livelihoods, environmental pressures, land-use transformation, and declining opportunities for experiential learning. On the other hand, documentation can itself create risks. Once knowledge is recorded, digitized, or placed in an institutional repository, it may become accessible to researchers, commercial interests, or other users without adequate community control.

This concern is particularly important because documentation is not synonymous with protection. The World Intellectual Property Organization cautions that documenting traditional knowledge does not automatically provide legal protection and may, if poorly designed, expose knowledge to misappropriation, loss of confidentiality, or loss of community control (World Intellectual Property Organization 2017). Kenya has responded to these challenges through important constitutional, legislative, and policy developments. Article 11 of the Constitution of Kenya recognizes culture as a foundation of the nation, provides for recognition of Indigenous technologies, and requires protection of cultural intellectual property (Kenya 2010). The Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act of 2016 subsequently established a framework for protecting and promoting traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. The Act recognizes knowledge generated, preserved, and transmitted within communities and provides for community rights, prior informed consent, community rules, documentation, registration, and benefit sharing (Kenya 2016).

The Maasai case is particularly significant because Kenya has also received international recognition for safeguarding specific elements of Maasai intangible cultural heritage. In 2018, *Enkipaata*, *Eunoto* and *Oling'esherr*, three male rites of passage, were inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. UNESCO's safeguarding programme has emphasized documentation, youth involvement, mapping of cultural spaces, community participation, and information repositories, while stressing the importance of free, prior, sustained, and informed consent concerning documentation, storage, and dissemination (UNESCO 2018; UNESCO 2023).

It is against this backdrop that the paper examines the trends and dynamics in the documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems among the Maasai community of Kenya. The central argument is that the documentation landscape is moving through a significant epistemological transition ranging from documentation *about* Maasai knowledge toward documentation that is increasingly undertaken *with* and, ideally, *by* Maasai knowledge holders. As much as this transition is incomplete and contested, it offers opportunities for strengthening community authority over cultural knowledge.

Methodology and Conceptual Perspective

This paper employs a qualitative integrative-review and documentary-analysis approach. It does not present original household surveys or interviews. Instead, it synthesizes evidence from peer-reviewed studies, scholarly books, institutional publications, Kenyan legal and policy documents, UNESCO materials, World Intellectual Property Organization resources, and documentation initiatives concerned with Maasai cultural heritage. The integrative approach is appropriate because scholarship on Maasai knowledge is dispersed across anthropology, ethnobotany, pastoralism, environmental studies, veterinary science, cultural heritage, information science, and intellectual-property research. The literature was examined thematically around knowledge domains, knowledge holders and transmission, documentation methods, technological transformation, institutional and legal frameworks, ethical and intellectual-property issues, and community control.

The conceptual approach adopted in this paper treats Indigenous knowledge as dynamic rather than static. Berkes defines traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief that evolves through adaptive processes and is transmitted culturally across generations (Berkes 2012). This understanding is particularly applicable for the Maasai context because it recognizes both continuity and change. Indigenous knowledge is inherited, but it is not frozen in the past.

Agrawal's critique of a rigid division between Indigenous and scientific knowledge is also useful. He argues that treating the two as entirely separate systems can obscure the ways in which knowledge systems interact and change (Agrawal 1995). Contemporary Maasai communities interact with veterinary science, meteorological services, formal education, mobile communication technologies, conservation institutions, and markets. Documentation should therefore capture processes of knowledge interaction rather than attempt to preserve an imagined "pure" traditional system.

UNESCO's concept of intangible cultural heritage reinforces this dynamic understanding. Cultural heritage is not simply an object inherited from the past but something continually recreated by communities (UNESCO 2003). This distinction is fundamental to documentation because the objective should not be to freeze Maasai knowledge in an unchanging historical form. Instead, documentation should capture how knowledge persists, adapts, disappears, re-emerges, and interacts with other systems of knowledge.

Historical and Contemporary Trends in Maasai Knowledge Documentation

The documentation of Maasai knowledge has a long history. Colonial administrators, missionaries, anthropologists, linguists, ethnographers, and development researchers produced written records concerning Maasai social organization, age systems, pastoral practices, rituals, oral traditions, and material culture. These records remain important historical sources, but unequal relations of knowledge production frequently characterized the conditions under which they were produced. Early documentation often positioned researchers as observers and communities as informants. Researchers determined what constituted significant knowledge, translated Indigenous concepts into external categories, and frequently removed knowledge from the social contexts that gave it meaning. Anthropological documentation of the Maasai age-set system, for example, made important contributions to understanding Maasai political and social organization but also illustrates the broader history of external interpretation of Indigenous institutions (Bernardi 1955).

Contemporary documentation is increasingly challenging this model. A significant trend is the movement toward participatory and community-based documentation. The Library of Congress records a cultural-documentation training programme for Indigenous communities in Kenya in 2009 that involved the Maasai community, reflecting an emerging emphasis on strengthening community capacity to document and preserve its own cultural heritage (Library of Congress 2009). Maasai Cultural Heritage provides another example. The organization reports documentation of traditional knowledge from elders, particularly concerning traditional medicine and plants, through audio recording, photography, and written testimonies, with digital preservation intended to support community education (UNESCO 2023). This represents a significant conceptual change because the community becomes an active participant in deciding what is recorded and how it is subsequently used.

A second major trend is the transition from predominantly textual documentation to multimodal documentation. Digital technologies now permit the preservation of oral histories, songs, rituals, landscapes, demonstrations, and performances through audio, photography, video, geographic information systems, digital mapping, and electronic databases. Such technologies are especially important for Maasai knowledge because much of the knowledge is oral, performative, practical, and spatial.

The development of institutional digital repositories also represents an important change. Kenya's Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act provides for documentation and repositories for traditional knowledge and cultural expressions and assigns responsibilities to national and county institutions (Kenya 2016). The Kenya Copyright Board has also identified development of a traditional knowledge digital repository as an important strategic activity (Kenya Copyright Board 2023). Nevertheless, digitalization introduces a paradox. The same technology that makes knowledge easier to preserve can make it easier to disseminate beyond the control of the community. A recording created for cultural preservation can subsequently be copied, uploaded, downloaded, or commercially reused. Digital documentation therefore requires governance mechanisms capable of distinguishing between preservation and unrestricted access.

Another important trend is the increasing documentation of specific domains of Maasai ecological and livelihood knowledge. Ethnoveterinary knowledge has attracted substantial attention. Ole-Miaron's study of Ilkisonko Maasai demonstrated that livestock disease diagnosis involves sophisticated interpretation of symptoms, disease vectors, seasons, and affected species and documented medicinal plant use in livestock health (Ole-Miaron 2003). Jacob, Farah, and Ekaya similarly described Maasai ethnoveterinary diagnostic knowledge as a substantial body of Indigenous expertise while drawing attention to possible erosion associated with the expansion of modern veterinary services (Jacob, Farah, and Ekaya 2004). Ethnobotanical knowledge has also been extensively studied. Kimondo and colleagues documented food and medicinal plants used by the Ilkisonko Maasai, identifying thirty species across twenty-one families (Kimondo et al. 2015). A broader review of Maasai medicinal plants identified hundreds of medicinal species reported across the literature and emphasized the uneven geographical and thematic coverage of existing research (Njoroge et al. 2020). These studies demonstrate that documentation has shifted from general descriptions of "Maasai culture" toward specialized studies of particular knowledge domains.

Pastoral and rangeland knowledge is another important field. Maasai pastoralism depends upon detailed knowledge of livestock, vegetation, water, disease, weather, landscapes, and seasonal mobility. Kiptot's study of tree-fodder knowledge illustrates the complexity of this expertise and demonstrates the usefulness of combining household interviews, ecological observation, and group consensus in knowledge documentation (Kiptot 2007). Recent work on the *Alalili* silvopastoral system similarly demonstrates the value of documenting customary ecological practices in relation to biodiversity conservation, vegetation management, and livelihoods (Hezron, Ngondya, and Munishi 2024). This represents a broader shift from viewing Indigenous practices merely as cultural traditions toward understanding them as potentially important systems of environmental governance.

Climate knowledge is also receiving increasing attention. Research on Maasai pastoralism has combined Indigenous perceptions of drought with climatic records, demonstrating the value of comparing local environmental knowledge with scientific climate information (Mwangi 2016). This approach is especially relevant in an era of climate change because pastoralists must interpret increasingly variable environmental conditions. Documentation of wildlife and conservation knowledge has similarly expanded. Research in Maasai communities has examined awareness of traditional knowledge and attitudes toward wildlife conservation, indicating the potential significance of customary conservation practices (Ochieng et al. 2021). Such work challenges conservation models that treat local communities simply as beneficiaries or threats and instead recognizes them as holders of ecological knowledge and governance institutions.

A further trend concerns documentation of oral traditions, rituals, and cultural expressions. UNESCO's safeguarding of *Enkipaata*, *Eunoto* and *Olng'esherr* illustrates growing international recognition of Maasai cultural heritage. The safeguarding measures have included documentation, youth participation, mapping of cultural spaces, and information repositories (UNESCO 2018; UNESCO 2023). Such documentation is important, but it is also ethically sensitive because certain ritual knowledge may be restricted according to age, gender, status, or customary authority.

The increasing attention to intergenerational transmission constitutes another major trend. Documentation is increasingly understood as a means of supporting knowledge transmission rather than merely creating an archive. Research among neighbouring pastoral communities in northern Kenya demonstrates that young herders who remain engaged in pastoral activities may possess substantially greater plant knowledge than students who have moved more fully into formal education (Bruyere, Trimarco, and Lemungesi 2016). While this evidence concerns the Samburu rather than the Maasai, it is relevant to understanding the broader pastoral context in which formal education can reduce opportunities for experiential learning.

The implication for Maasai documentation is that elders should not simply be recorded as repositories of knowledge. Documentation should also capture the processes through which young people learn: observation, participation, questioning, apprenticeship, correction, storytelling, and practice. A successful archive should therefore document not only knowledge content but also knowledge transmission.

Gender is another important dimension. Documentation can unintentionally privilege publicly visible male knowledge holders because pastoralism and public decision-making have often been associated with men. Yet women possess important bodies of knowledge relating to food, household health, medicinal plants, childcare, material culture, milk processing, social relationships, and domestic production. Documentation that does not deliberately include women risks reproducing existing inequalities in cultural visibility.

Language is equally important. Much Maasai knowledge is encoded in Maa terminology, categories, metaphors, songs, narratives, and expressions. Documentation conducted only in English or Kiswahili can preserve information while losing culturally specific meanings. A more appropriate approach is multilingual documentation in which the Maa original is retained alongside translations and contextual explanations. Audio should accompany written transcriptions where possible so that pronunciation, terminology, and performance characteristics are preserved.

Legal, Ethical, and Intellectual-Property Dynamics

The contemporary documentation of Maasai knowledge is increasingly shaped by legal and ethical considerations. Kenya's Constitution recognizes culture as a foundation of national identity and requires recognition of Indigenous technologies and protection of cultural intellectual property (Kenya 2010). The Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act of 2016 represents an especially important development because it provides legal recognition for community rights relating to traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.

The legislation recognizes traditional knowledge as knowledge, skills, innovations, and practices embedded in community lifestyles, including knowledge associated with agriculture, environmental management, medicine, and genetic resources (Kenya 2016). It also recognizes community rights to authorize exploitation and prevent unauthorized exploitation through mechanisms including prior informed consent and benefit sharing. These provisions fundamentally change the ethical context of documentation. A researcher who records knowledge is not necessarily acquiring ownership of that knowledge. A university that stores an interview does not automatically own the underlying cultural knowledge. A database that indexes traditional medicine is not automatically entitled to commercialize it.

Documentation must therefore distinguish between the physical or digital recording, copyright in that recording, the underlying traditional knowledge, community custodianship, and any intellectual-property rights arising from subsequent adaptations. Prior informed consent is central to this process. Meaningful consent requires more than obtaining a signature. Knowledge holders should understand the purpose of the project, intended audiences, storage arrangements, future uses, possible commercial applications, attribution arrangements, access restrictions, and the possibility of future reuse. UNESCO's recommendations concerning Maasai rites of passage specifically emphasize free, prior, sustained, and informed consent in relation to documentation, storage, and dissemination (UNESCO 2023).

Consent should also be understood as an ongoing relationship rather than a single event. Communities may change their views about access or use as circumstances change. Documentation projects should therefore provide mechanisms for review and, where appropriate, modification of access conditions. Intellectual property is particularly important where ethnobotanical and ethnoveterinary knowledge is involved. Medicinal knowledge may attract commercial interest, while documentation of plants can facilitate bioprospecting. Recording such knowledge without community participation can unintentionally increase the risk of appropriation. WIPO therefore emphasizes that documentation should be accompanied by consideration of intellectual-property rights, confidentiality, access, and the interests of knowledge holders (World Intellectual Property Organization 2017).

The emergence of Indigenous data-governance principles provides an additional conceptual tool. The CARE Principles—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics—were developed to complement conventional data principles by centering Indigenous peoples in data governance (Carroll et al. 2020). Applied to Maasai documentation, the principles imply that digital cultural data should not be governed solely according to institutional norms of openness and accessibility.

Collective benefit requires documentation to produce meaningful value for the community. Authority to control requires Maasai communities to participate in determining representation, storage, access, and reuse. Responsibility requires researchers and institutions to remain accountable for the consequences of documentation. Ethics requires cultural values, dignity, rights, and wellbeing to guide the entire data lifecycle. This approach challenges the assumption that maximum openness is always desirable. Some knowledge should be public, some should be accessible only to community members, some should be restricted to authorized individuals, and some should not be digitally recorded at all.

Discussion

The trends examined in this paper demonstrate that documentation of Maasai Indigenous knowledge is undergoing an important transformation. The first transformation is epistemological. Indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognized as a legitimate and sophisticated knowledge system rather than merely folklore or anecdotal tradition. Studies of ethnoveterinary medicine, ethnobotany, pastoral ecology, climate interpretation, and customary conservation demonstrate complex bodies of knowledge developed through long-term interaction with livestock, landscapes, plants, and ecological processes. The second transformation is methodological. Documentation is moving from researcher-produced textual accounts toward participatory, audiovisual, ecological, and digital approaches. The multi-method approach used by Kiptot demonstrates why complex Indigenous knowledge cannot always be adequately captured through a single questionnaire or interview (Kiptot 2007). The third transformation is institutional. Kenya's legislation has created a stronger formal framework for documentation and protection, while universities, museums, NGOs, community organizations, and international cultural institutions increasingly participate in safeguarding Indigenous knowledge. The fourth transformation is ethical. Documentation is no longer

viewed solely as an academic exercise. It involves questions of consent, ownership, access, intellectual property, cultural authority, benefit sharing, and Indigenous data governance. The fifth transformation is technological. Digital technologies make it possible to preserve oral, visual, spatial, and performative knowledge in ways that conventional textual documentation could not. At the same time, they increase the risks of unauthorized dissemination. The sixth transformation concerns intergenerational transmission. Documentation is increasingly linked to youth engagement and education. This is critical because an archive cannot replace the social processes through which knowledge becomes meaningful. If young people do not learn how to use, interpret, and adapt knowledge, documentation may preserve information while the living knowledge system declines. These transformations support the central argument of this paper: documentation should be understood as a form of knowledge governance rather than simply information preservation.

The conventional documentation paradigm asks, "What knowledge can be recorded?" A community-centred paradigm asks, "Who has authority over this knowledge, how should it be represented, who may access it, under what conditions, and how will documentation support the community?" This shift has several implications. First, knowledge should be classified according to culturally appropriate access categories rather than automatically treated as public information. Second, metadata should include community concepts of ownership, attribution, restrictions, and permitted use. Third, elders and youth should be connected through documentation and education programmes. Fourth, researchers and institutions should establish reciprocal-benefit arrangements. Finally, documentation systems should remain adaptable because Indigenous knowledge itself is dynamic.

A useful framework for future Maasai documentation can therefore be organized around five principles: community authority, contextual integrity, intergenerational transmission, controlled accessibility, and reciprocal benefit. Community authority means that Maasai communities should participate in determining what is documented, who documents it, who provides the knowledge, how it is classified, where it is stored, and who can access it. Contextual integrity requires each record to retain sufficient information about its cultural, linguistic, ecological, and social context. Intergenerational transmission requires documentation to link elders and young people. Controlled accessibility recognizes that not all knowledge should be openly available. Reciprocal benefit requires research and documentation to generate educational, cultural, economic, or institutional benefits for participating communities.

The proposed framework can be expressed through four broad levels of access. Public cultural information can be openly accessible. Community educational materials can be available primarily to community members and approved educational institutions. Sensitive knowledge can require controlled authorization. Sacred or confidential knowledge may appropriately remain outside public digital repositories altogether. Such an approach would have important implications for libraries, museums, archives, universities, and government institutions. These institutions should move away from the assumption that they simply "preserve collections for communities." Instead, preservation should increasingly occur in partnership with communities under conditions defined jointly with knowledge holders.

Museum cataloguing, for example, should incorporate community terminology, interpretations, provenance information, and cultural restrictions. Digital repositories should permit community-defined access categories. Universities should return copies of recordings, photographs, transcripts, and research findings to participating communities. Research ethics committees should provide specific guidance on collective Indigenous knowledge rather than relying exclusively on individual-consent models.

Education offers another important opportunity. Schools in Maasai areas can create programmes involving elders, local landscapes, oral histories, Indigenous ecological knowledge, livestock practices, cultural mapping, and digital storytelling. Such initiatives should not simply turn Indigenous knowledge into decontextualized textbook facts. Instead, learning should remain connected to community practice.

Policy implementation is equally important. Kenya has developed a substantial legal framework, but legislation alone cannot preserve Indigenous knowledge. Effective implementation requires funding, institutional capacity, community awareness, local documentation infrastructure, digital preservation skills, and mechanisms through which communities can exercise meaningful authority.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems among the Maasai community of Kenya is undergoing a transition from predominantly external, textual, and extractive approaches toward increasingly participatory, multimodal, digital, legally informed, and community-oriented practices. This transition reflects broader changes in how Indigenous knowledge is understood and valued. Maasai knowledge encompasses ethnoveterinary medicine, ethnobotany, pastoralism, rangeland management, climate interpretation, wildlife conservation, oral traditions, ritual practices, and customary institutions. Existing research demonstrates that these domains contain sophisticated bodies of knowledge developed through long-term interaction between people, livestock, landscapes, plants, and ecological processes.

At the same time, socioeconomic change, formal education, land-use transformation, climate variability, changing livelihoods, and technological change have altered the circumstances under which knowledge is transmitted. Documentation has consequently become increasingly important. Yet documentation itself presents risks if it separates knowledge from context, weakens community authority, or facilitates unauthorized dissemination and commercialization. The central conclusion of this paper is therefore that primarily the number of documents, recordings, photographs, should not judge the future of Maasai knowledge preservation or database entries produced. It should be judged by whether documentation strengthens the capacity of Maasai communities to maintain, transmit, adapt, and govern their knowledge.

The following recommendations emerge from the analysis.

1. Community-controlled digital repositories should be established or strengthened in collaboration with Maasai cultural institutions, knowledge holders, universities, museums, libraries, and government agencies.
2. Documentation should preserve Maa terminology and include multilingual metadata and audiovisual records.
3. Elder–youth programmes should be developed so that documentation becomes part of intergenerational learning rather than simply an archival exercise.
4. Women should be deliberately included as knowledge holders, researchers, reviewers, and cultural decision-makers.
5. Community-specific ethical protocols should govern consent, recording, storage, publication, commercialization, attribution, and access.
6. Indigenous data-governance principles such as CARE should be incorporated into digital documentation.
7. Schools and other educational institutions should integrate locally appropriate Indigenous knowledge into culturally relevant learning programmes.
8. Implementation of Kenya's legal framework on traditional knowledge should be strengthened through adequate resources, institutional coordination, community awareness, and practical mechanisms for benefit sharing.

Ultimately, the most effective documentation system is not necessarily the largest or most technologically sophisticated. One remains connected to the people, places, languages, institutions, and practices from which knowledge originates. Documentation should therefore function not as a final repository of a disappearing past but as a living infrastructure through which Maasai knowledge can continue to be remembered, taught, practiced, adapted, and governed by its custodians.

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