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Making libraries more relevant to communities, the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in library information services-the potential benefits and challenges: *An Afro centric librarian's perspective*

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Abstract

Libraries are the cultural pillars of any given society and community as they transmit culture from generation to generation. However, the role of the African librarian has been limited in scope leaving librarians to be passive enquirers of already codified knowledge and information neglecting the rich indigenous knowledge (IK) of the communities in which they operate. The collection of foreign knowledge serves very little purpose to the African librarian and the communities they intend to serve as they find most of the information to be alien to their livelihood and daily needs. The role of the librarian has to mutate from a passive enquirer and keeper of already codified knowledge to an information gatherer and documentalist of the culturally grounded IK which is relevant to the library's clientele. The paper highlights the importance attached to indigenous knowledge and the strategic role that the library and the librarian may play in promoting this cultural knowledge. The potential role ICTs could play in promoting IK and as well as how the negative characteristics of IK maybe overcome to enable its documentation, preservation and dissemination. The discussion reviews the centrality of the Afro centric librarianship discourse to the survival and promotion of IK.

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Introduction

Libraries are the cultural pillars of any given society and community as they transmit culture from generation to generation. Libraries are thus regarded as oases of all information. Sadly the role of the African librarian has been limited in scope leaving librarians to be passive enquirers of already codified knowledge and information neglecting the rich indigenous knowledge (IK) of the communities in which they operate. This has resulted in libraries being underutilized especially in rural African communities as library collections lack information on IK which provides the basis for problem-solving strategies for local communities, especially for the poor more so for those in marginalized rural communities of the developing world. IK in all its various forms of preservation and conservation techniques and indigenous medicines represents an important component of global knowledge on development issues though it remains to a large

extent an underutilized resource in the development process. The libraries as custodians of culture must take a leading in the promotion of IK thereby making libraries more relevant to communities in Africa.

Definition of key terms

Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is knowledge that is unique to a given culture, community or society. It is contrasted and differentiated from the knowledge gained at formal institutions. Indigenous knowledge systems encompass all aspects of life, such as the management of natural environment. It forms the basis of survival for the people who own the knowledge. Indigenous knowledge may be part of an on-going experiment or maybe even be an established local tradition (Slum, 2006). Indigenous knowledge is a result of many generations and is cultivated over pro longed years encompassing experiences, careful observations and trial and error experiments evolving over centuries (Martin, 1995). Thus over centuries,

indigenous people of various localities would have developed their own specific knowledge on plant resource use, management and conservation (Cotton, 1996).

According to Alcorn (1984), indigenous knowledge develops and evolves with time and space. Hence such knowledge includes time-tested practice that is developed in the process of interaction by humans with their physical environment. In many countries including Zimbabwe, this knowledge is passed from one generation to the other generation orally and it is usually shrouded in great secrecy. Such secrecy and verbal transfer makes the indigenous more susceptible to distortion and in many instances some of its lore is lost at each point of transfer (Amare, 1976), hence the need for systematic documentation of such a useful knowledge now-a-days.

Knowledge

The question of defining knowledge has occupied the minds of philosophers since time immemorial dating back to the classical Greek era and this culminated into many epistemological debates (Alavi and Leidner, 2001: 109). Knowledge is processed in the mind of an individual and can be described as internalised information relating to facts, concepts, ideas and observations. However, it is essential to note that knowledge building is a social process that occurs in all local communities. Nonaka (1994) explicated two dimensions of knowledge: that is explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge which is articulated, codified, expressed and communicated in symbolic form and in natural languages; and Tacit knowledge which is highly subjective and personal, making it difficult to formalise and encode and is susceptible to change. IK, as an example of tacit knowledge, is generally stored and embedded in people's minds and passed on through generations by word-of-mouth rather than in written form and it is very vulnerable to rapid change (Sithole, 2006).

Culture

Culture is essentially the sum total of socially inherited and acquired characteristics of a human group that comprises everything which one generation can tell, convey or hand down to the next; in other words, the non physically inherited traits we possess. Another view of culture we might take to simplify this abstract concept is to picture culture as the luggage that each of us carries around for our life time. It is the sum of beliefs, practices, habits, likes and dislikes, norms, customs and rituals that we learned from our families and societies during the years of socialization. In turn we transmit cultural

luggage to our children. Culture maybe defined in areas in relation to traditional health which is a "metacommunication system" where not only the spoken words have meaning but everything else as well. (Bohanaan, 1992)

Library

The word "Library" comes from the Latin word "Libri" which means books. In its current use the term Library can refer to three things: a collection of books for reading and borrowing, a room or building where books are kept, read or borrowed and a collection of records films and computer routines. Thus a library may be defined as an organized collection of general information and literature. In this definition "collection" equates with "storehouses" and "organized" (for use that is) equates with "dissemination" Thus the term library always refers to two aspects 1. The collection of books for reading and borrowing and 2.the room or building in which the books are kept. The library is the natural place for resort for information for instruction and for recreational reading. A librarian is a person in charge of or assisting in a library. The librarian's two main duties involves storage and dissemination of knowledge. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/library>)

The Status of African Librarianship

The concept of delivering library and information services to rural Africa is noble, but as it is based on a Western model, thus services do not meet the needs of African communities. Arguments about the state of libraries in Africa and calls for ways of improving existing libraries and their services are not novel. However, recommendations and solutions suggested by library scholars so far have been based on the Western model, emphasizing literacy and books, ignoring the importance of the IK and oral tradition in Africa. The UNESCO Seminar of 1954 on development of public libraries in Africa favored literacy and advocated for the need for public libraries, suggesting that throughout Africa people are being developed by mass education programmes to emerge from illiteracy and ignorance. Thus the library comes in to enable access to "suitable publications", stimulating reading interests and providing expert reading guidance to sharpen this new skill into an effective instrument of self education based on foreign literature and knowledge. Library science fundi's continue to share this view today regarding the Western model of librarianship. Several library scholars acknowledge the importance of IK to rural Africa and that information and knowledge can be transmitted orally; however, literacy is still seen as the final goal and western

knowledge remains the only knowledge being disseminated by libraries at the expense of IK. Totemeyer (1994:417) acknowledges the problem of reliance on literacy as a precondition of obtaining information, but then adds "Appropriate information for personal and societal growth will make the illiterate perceptive to new ideas and create the urge and climate for acquiring literacy to learn even more".

In today's global information society, non-literate people are at a permanent disadvantage – unsure of their rights, unable to fulfill their potential and unable to play a full part in society. They are disempowered. Literacy is a right and a capability that is fundamental to overcoming poverty. The low use of libraries especially in rural Africa were the majority of the populace lives can be attributed to the exclusive use of print in disseminating western knowledge and cultural values. Mchombu (1991) reported discoveries from several surveys in Botswana, Kenya, and Tanzania showing the overall percentage of library users to be below 7.5 percent. In Uganda, for instance, there were only 158,407 registered public library users out of a population of 21 million compared to 34,900,000 registered users in United Kingdom (UNESCO1999).

Abdulla (1998) states the constant demands for information by farmers in rural areas remain unfulfilled because of illiteracy and the solutions the sources in the library provide are alien and beyond the financial reach of such communities. Aboyade (1984) argues that national development and rural development are linked, and these rural populations are unable to read and write, but need access to IK which meets their needs. These services are traditionally not provided in Western oriented libraries. Alemna (1995) added that fulfilling these needs does not necessarily require databases or advanced technologies or in applicable foreign methods of doing these activities as espoused by western books and other information sources.

Problems with current status of Library & information services in Africa

Sturges and Neill (1990) argue that existing African libraries are foreign and were developed without adaptation or consultation with African communities. Library scholars and researchers owe the low use of libraries in Africa to high-levels of illiteracy, lack of awareness of information needs of rural communities, inappropriate collections and services, lack of surveys for specific needs of a particular community, lack of funding and cooperation between information related agencies, and lack of skilled librarians

(Mostert 2001; Nawe 1993; Afolabi 1998; Stillwell 1991; Matare 1998; and Issak 2000). Therefore, African libraries have failed to provide collections and services that meet the needs of rural communities as libraries have continued to perpetuate the colonial legacy through the selective dissemination of western knowledge which entwined with western values. This goes against the mandate of libraries of transmitting culture from generation to generation.

It is essential at this juncture to question which culture African libraries are transmitting to the young generation. The answer is readily clear and available, thus library sources are stock piled with a whole range of western knowledge ranging from social sciences to the arts. As a result libraries are shunned for a variety of reasons. First and foremost because the literature stored in them is alien and foreign instead of being indigenous and that the knowledge is in appropriately packed requiring literacy and unaffordable technologies and in addition the solutions provided in western knowledge is not in sync with the socio-economic standing of the majority of the African community members.

Mchombu (1991:30) summarizes problems facing African librarianship by acknowledging that African librarianship has failed to live up to the expectation of the intended users and government sponsors. At the early stage, there was belief that the information needs, and the information-seeking behavior of Africans was indistinguishable to those of library users in Europe and North America. It was also believed that the concept and philosophy of librarianship as practiced in the Anglo-American tradition with its organizational and bureaucratic structures, bibliographically-based foundation, and middle class outlook could all be imported strait jacketed to Africa. It was left to the African public to adapt themselves in the best possible way to this alien institution, for the institution was sacrosanct.

The incorporation of IK in library and information services is the only means by which libraries may begin to meet the needs of an expectant clientele which has been starved of the cultural enriching indigenous knowledge which meets socio-economic needs of the community at large. The quandary of inappropriate collections has also been aggravated by book donations from the West, whose content is foreign and does not reflect the culture or address the needs of rural African communities. Mostert noted that in a study by Alemna (in Stillwell 1991) which found that libraries in Ghana imported ninety percent of their materials from Britain and United States.

There has been a failure to recognize the importance of indigenous knowledge and oral culture, which has been used to transmit information and knowledge in Africa from generation to generation for centuries. Much of the literature on libraries in Africa focuses on changing oral culture to written culture (UNESCO 1954; Amadi 1981; Newke 1995). African libraries are still acquiring, organizing, and providing services based on printed materials, ignoring the oral tradition predominant in rural areas. Alemna (1996) notes that African libraries are trying to replace oral culture with reading culture, rather than focusing on providing relevant skills and information necessary for rural communities.

The lack of skilled librarians, especially those with the knowledge and willingness to incorporate IK in the provision of services to rural communities, further limits the reach of library services in rural Africa. Other challenges facing African librarianship include few local publishing facilities which limits the documentation of IK and the wide range of African languages poses a challenge into what language may best be used in the publishing of IK. According to Ikoja Odongo (2003), Uganda constitutionally recognizes 56 languages and this shows the challenge linguistic diversity posits for IK documentation.

The Controversies of Indigenous Knowledge - Challenges in documentation & transfer.

Despite the fact that IK provides the basis for problem-solving strategies for local communities and is the key towards poverty reduction and sustainable development. Some experts caution against any attempts to transfer IK because they believe: IK cannot or should not be exchanged across communities because it could be irrelevant or even harmful outside its original cultural context. This poses a challenge for library scholars who would attempt to disseminate IK as more often than not may find themselves dealing with patrons from other communities. It is also cited that attempts to record, document and transfer IK could lead to the dis-empowerment of indigenous people. The Afro centric Librarian would need to devise sensitive approaches to reduce the potential risk of dis-empowering local communities, without compromising the principle of global knowledge partnership for the benefit of all communities.

Many holders of IK are less cooperative in sharing their knowledge and skill in IK in various forms such as medicine, agriculture and rain making with others. The knowledge on IK is circulated mainly among practitioners and the beneficiaries of such practice

which are usually close family members. This makes knowledge and skill on IK more hidden but less available to the public which is a great challenge for the “barefoot librarian” to convince IK owners to share such knowledge even through the traditionally acceptable oral means of transmission. Often various forms of IK go into spiritual and metaphysical realms which make it difficult to document and share posing challenges on the librarian on how best to cascade IK to the larger community members who need such knowledge.

From by standers to active participants: Library and Information Services professionals involvement in IK

Librarians must first seek to understand the context in which IK and Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) came to be in their collections. In general, IK and cultures have been oppressed and exploited under colonial rule. Display of cultural expressions (i.e., language, traditional ceremonies) was often censored and punished by the ruling power. For this reason, libraries may have materials that would, for instance, be important to a group attempting to revitalize their IK, culture or language.

A rare recording of an endangered language may be of great value to a university library (by increasing research opportunities and the institution’s prestige), but the value of this “document” to the group who is in danger of losing their language would be much greater. When libraries shift from seeing themselves as the owners of these materials and instead as caretakers, a dialogue can begin between LIS professionals and indigenous communities. Part of this dialogue must also include a conversation about sensitive materials for instance sacred information related to spirituality or religion, or private information meant for a certain gender, age or social group within the culture. Providing public access could disrespect the values and norms associated with these types of materials.

The two main approaches libraries may take include working with indigenous communities to develop policies for preservation, access, and repatriation of materials (especially sensitive materials) and using indigenous community participation to inform the development of electronic information systems.

Incorporating ICTs into IK work

Technology has allowed some indigenous groups the opportunity to create their own cultural narrative in the digital world but however, the digital divide is still wide enough that many do not have this opportunity. Furthermore, since technology has contributed to a large extent to the degradation of IK,

we should ask if it makes sense to use technology as a solution of IK management. Should indigenous communities be part of the process of designing, implementing, and evaluating information systems which provide access to IK and traditional cultural expressions (TCEs)? Can indigenous people trust the developers of these information systems?

The multi-media capabilities which encompass storage capacities and communication tools offered by ICTs provide new opportunities to preserve and revitalise indigenous cultures and languages. (Dyson *et al.*, 2007: xvi). Knowledge of ICT applications bears the challenge and potential to generate and share indigenous narratives, stories and experiences as a source of meaning that is “lived and made transparent in everyday relations, rituals and activities” (NAHO, 2001: 3). ICT applications can store such local content on Internet web pages. However, the potential of ICTs depends on how they are used and not merely in their presence – this remains a challenge for IK preservation especially for librarians as they attempt to document and preserve IK. Ranganathan (2005) indicates how ICTs may be used to facilitate a bottom-up process in which indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) “are placed at the heart of ... sustainable development”. This encompasses an implicit shift away from a technocratic top-down approach recognising that bottom-up approaches and solutions can emerge from within local communities.

While it seems sensible to utilise ICTs and online databases to store facts and knowledge, “there is a difference between how Westernized cultures and most Indigenous cultures view these concepts” of computers and online databases (Oppenheimer, 2010). This challenge may require further exploration to gauge how ICTs respond to the nature of IK digital preservation initiatives. While good at preserving tangible knowledge, ICTs have difficulty with treating tacit knowledge since the output, however well presented, is largely one-dimensional (Michael and Dunn, 2006: 173). It tends to disregard embedded concepts of creativity and the use of figurative speech and symbolism to articulate and share insights and intuitions in the recording of tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1998).

Semali and Kincheloe (1999) suggest that the design of ICTs does not accommodate IK since the nature in which it is cast is not in terms that are typically set with Western knowledge. Michael and Dunn (2006: 173) point out that cultural IK preservation cannot be achieved by ICT alone; it requires a spiritual element

entrenched in the community to ensure a long-lasting presence.

Pacheco and Abbagliati (2006) suggest that digital preservation and the promotion of local knowledge provides a means for isolated communities to become part of the global information society. IK faces possible extinction unless it is properly documented and disseminated (Nyumba, 2006). Depending on availability and access, some indigenous groups have taken advantage of new technologies, including ICTs; for example, by using digital video and audio recording devices and Internet technologies to capture, store and retrieve aspects of their arts, language and understanding (Oppenheimer, 2010).

A recent trend in the scientific community is to create IK databases. In reference to these databases, Gosart (2009:2) states that: “While composed with assistance and help from the indigenous peoples, these information resources often bore little relevance to the needs of the communities from whom the information was taken”. This observation points to the need for a better and clearer understanding of the needs of the community in question and the digital divide that may result in ICTs alienating indigenous people from IK. This is more apparent for developing communities with limited ICTs but more suitable for the management of IK for developing nations.

While ICTs may seem to answer some of the problems of ‘preserving’ forms of IK, it should be remembered that IK is situated within a local human community and is subject to change. The opposite is true for digital preservation which is in isolation for instance IK stored in an online database. Oppenheimer (2010) suggests that the nature of digital technology is antithetical to Indigenous ways of knowing. There is thus a need for IK to be further explored, from an appropriate knowledge perspective. There is also the challenge for future ICTs to be designed to cater for cultural assumptions about what knowledge is to indigenous groups and to local communities and thereby contribute to the social appropriation in local communities. The challenge with all the examples involving the use of ICTs in IK management all heavily rely on sophisticated technologies that African libraries do not have and cannot afford. Even if they are available Library personnel would need training in the advanced technologies and in addition because of the digital divide community members would not be able to access the IK limiting the impact of ICTs in disseminating IK in African libraries.

Recommendations

Retraining of African librarians

There is need to train and educate librarians in the provision of information to rural communities especially that which has to do with IK. A librarian knowledgeable in print and IK can make informed decisions about the needs of rural communities thereby making libraries relevant to the majority. Incorporating IK documentation and dissemination techniques in the library school curricula exposes new librarians to alternative methods in the provision of library services. African librarians can collaborate with or recruit volunteers from communities (elders, community leaders and/or government officials) to organize workshops, and meetings, where relevant IK and information can be passed orally. There are no shortages of teachers and mentors in IK and oral tradition.

Preservation of oral tradition

African libraries' role in the preservation of IK and culture is critical with the advance of technology. Documentation of oral literature and IK (traditional medicines, farming, weaving, brewing, pottery, etc.) is necessary because most of the knowledge and skills are being lost through the death of traditional leaders, elders, and griots (West Africa). This can be achieved through the collaboration of existing African national libraries and museums, and national governments.

Incorporating IK in library services

Incorporating oral tradition in the transmission of IK in rural areas is necessary, since the majority of the population is illiterate and cannot use print-based materials. Alemna (1995) suggests repackaging information to meet the oral culture of the African communities. Ideally, the library system should include both oral and print-based modes of information transmission. Issak (2000) recommends that African librarians should think outside the Western model of librarianship (Afro centric librarianship) when designing services for rural communities. Consideration should be given to proper format of delivery and sustainable technology.

Borrow relevant technologies

African libraries can borrow technology from the West that enhances oral tradition. Wise (1985) challenged African libraries/librarians to stop thinking of the library as a building with books, and to try to borrow from the reading culture what is relevant for oral culture and the dissemination of IK. For instance, technologies like radio and audio-visual equipment can be used to produce materials that are sustainable and compatible with the IK and oral

traditions. Such materials could be used to provide relevant information on agriculture, traditional medicines or aquaculture, and related information and other skills relevant to rural communities where farming or fishing is a way of life.

Collaboration between information agencies

Collaboration between information agencies, local and national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Western donors are cost effective and sustainable. With few resources and non-existent library budgets, many African countries do not have the luxury of building academic, public, or community libraries in every rural community. A solution is to provide opportunities to rural communities to access relevant information and skills from existing libraries that are located nearby, whether public, school, or academic libraries. There is no need for new buildings in rural areas because there are existing schools, churches, and government buildings that can be used for rural meetings, workshops, or trainings. Existing libraries can use these facilities to facilitate the dissemination of IK. Also, librarians can tap into the knowledge base of local and national experts to provide monthly workshops on IK and impart skills that impact on a particular community.

Marketing of library services

African librarians need to address the problem of low use of library services. The role of libraries has not always been explained to rural communities in Africa. This has been exacerbated by the lack of culturally relevant materials that is IK. Existing African libraries operate in isolation and there is a need to market library services to rural communities through the media and in print for those who can read, or on radio and/or television programs. Marketing libraries could also be done through word of mouth, at meetings, or in workshops.

CONCLUSION

In Africa and most of the developing world, the LIS profession has been preoccupied with collecting, preserving, and providing access to mostly western knowledge materials which have been documented and published, and has done little to challenge the assumption that this approach is the most appropriate for all knowledge forms including indigenous knowledge. This has resulted in the under utilization of most African libraries as the rural majority cannot relate to the western knowledge that they disseminate. The profession should move from its traditional role as owners of collections, and accept the role of caretakers. It is only then that important steps can be taken towards the inclusion of IK in

library services and also the ethical management of IK and traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) including repatriation and the proper handling of sensitive materials. Collaboration with indigenous communities is fundamental to this process. Merely being a librarian or an archivist who manages indigenous materials does not suffice, the LIS profession must work to facilitate a process that involves indigenous communities in the planning and implementation of appropriate and useful knowledge management systems. Failure to see the link between libraries and development and the importance attached to IK in the development process has resulted in low library use. Both extreme positions that good things can only come from the West, and the alternative African-centric view that nothing from the West is good for Africa are roadblocks to development. What rural communities need is relevant information and knowledge in the most appropriate format and oral methods are one of the major ways in which IK may be disseminated by libraries. Print is now also part of the African culture, and African libraries and librarians must adapt it to fit the information needs of rural communities as well as to disseminate IK to urbanites who are largely literate. A cultural change in library school education and library philosophy is necessary to create an efficient and appropriate library system.

It is only through the holistic integration of IK and western modern knowledge that libraries can become relevant in Africa and play a pivotal role in the preservation and dissemination of IK. This facilitates the transfer of culture from generation to generation enabling the library to meet the needs of the majority. However, this requires the intelligence use of ICTs in ways that do not disempower and alienate local communities from their IK.

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