RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE STORAGE AND ACCESS FOR CULTURAL CONTINUITY: THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:
The paper examines indigenous knowledge storage and access for cultural continuity, the role of the library in Nigeria. Indigenous knowledge is the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area. Some examples of indigenous knowledge include horns, drums, stories among others; ways of preserving indigenous knowledge include documentation of stories by way of recording them into audio tapes or even videos, converting other indigenous knowledge to artifacts among others. Study further highlighted that libraries can be of assistance in transmitting indigenous knowledge by creating inventories, registers and bibliographies of indigenous knowledge; promoting awareness and appreciation of indigenous knowledge for communities, and through the provision of computers, internet, and digital cameras and so on to make indigenous knowledge accessible, libraries could also help communities with lack of social amenities like electricity by liaising with appropriate authorities for solution, mobile library services, good human relationship and adult education will all help the efficient service of the library as regards indigenous knowledge storage and access.

Key Words: Indigenous knowledge, Storage, Access, Culture, Library, Nigeria.

Introduction

Indigenous Knowledge and Culture quite share some similarity going by their definitions, while Culture is seen as the way of life of a people. Indigenous knowledge on its part refers to what indigenous people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations- practices that evolved through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change (Melchias, 2001); likewise, indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge-knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It contracts with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. It is the basis for local level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities. (Warren 1991).

Subsequently, Indigenous knowledge definitions may prove difficult most times as it varies along with the indigenous people of the world (Steven, 2008). Common features have been identified, to create a working definition, such as this one provided by UNESCO:

Indigenous knowledge refers to a complete body of knowledge, know- how and practices maintained and developed by people, generally in rural areas, who have extended histories of interaction with natural environment. These sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part of a cultural complex that encompasses, naming and classification systems, practices for using resources, ritual, and spirituality and world view. It provides the basis for local level decision making about many fundamental aspects of day to day life.

According to Flavier et al (1995), indigenous knowledge is the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems. Grenier (1998) defines indigenous knowledge as “the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area”.

59
Also, according to the World Bank Indigenous knowledge program (n.d.), indigenous knowledge refers to “the large body of knowledge and skills that has been developed outside the formal educational system. Indigenous knowledge is embedded in culture and is unique to a given location or society.” Indigenous knowledge is an important part of the lives of the poor. It is the basis for decision making of communities in food security, human and animal health, education and natural resource management.

Priti, J. (2008) asserts that Indigenous Knowledge is knowledge, which is culture specific, dynamic, constantly evolving and instigating from age-old beliefs, traditions, experiences and observations, indigenous to a specific area, non formal, orally transmitted and usually not documented, adaptive, and basis of survival in decision making for many people. Some of the examples of Indigenous knowledge are horn (short and long horn), imbati (stinging nettle-wild vegetables used by members of the Ezigeni community), lutulelo, shisiliba, drum, fire/smoke, whistling for communication and information; wailing for medicine; mukombero for fermenting and preserving porridge (in Western Kenya), Isukuti (bullfight in Africa in Western part of Kenya. This comes with Luhya Chants), omusala (a tree and also medicine), umremebe, shilili or Litungu for entertainment, narratives around bonfire in the evening for education (from the Luhya community of Kenya).

He was also of the view that Indigenous knowledge has several benefits, the major benefits he summarized as thus:

- Using Indigenous knowledge in research gives such research legitimacy and credibility from researchers and builds local capacity and empowerment.
- Indigenous people can provide valuable input in the local environment for the efficient use and management of local resources.
- Indigenous knowledge is readily available at little or no cost.
- Through indigenous knowledge, African cultures are getting known better to the global society.
- In the endeavour to manage indigenous knowledge some of the lost African traditions and information are being discovered.
- Indigenous knowledge is vital for ecological sensitive socio-economic activities.
- Indigenous knowledge can contribute to sustainable local and national development.
- Indigenous knowledge can contribute to economic development; this is evident by the explosion of herbal products unto the global market.

**Indigenous Knowledge Preservation and Access in the Library**

Priti, J. (2008) asserted that preservation of Indigenous Knowledge is critical for maintaining the identification of the specific culture, for economic development, for preserving artistic and cultural works, and for achieving political goals of self identification and self reliance of indigenous communities, and for helping them to appreciate their history. Indigenous knowledge can be preserved by:

- Recording indigenous knowledge into audios, videos and other modern ICT media formats.
- Making the communities aware of the value of indigenous knowledge through storytelling, dances, and plays.
- Assisting communities in documenting their local practices.
- Making indigenous knowledge available to the whole community.
- By protecting intellectual property rights so that indigenous knowledge is not misused and provides benefits to its originators.

According to (Gough, n.d), perhaps, the best way to preserve indigenous knowledge would be the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal education. This would reactivate inter-generational learning, this way local people would participate in curriculum development and would enable schools to act as agencies for transferring the culture of the society from one generation to the next.

The author states that over the years in Nigeria, especially in some notable community’s, indigenous knowledge have been transferred from one generation to the other through ancient drums, gongs, and storytelling among others. He further noted that the library can really be of help in preserving indigenous knowledge for more accessibility by:

- Documenting these stories by way of recording them into audio tapes or even videos.
- Indigenous knowledge within communities can be collected by the library and published into books or journals as the case may be.
- Materials that cannot be preserved by the library through documentation can be converted to artifacts as a way of preservation.
Libraries can provide a current awareness service by way of mass education whereby sons and daughters of a community can be taught knowledge of their forefathers indigenous to their community. Indigenous communities preserve and transmit knowledge using techniques like oral storytelling and experiential instruction. Battiste and Hendersen (2004) state that indigenous knowledge systems can only be understood through the methods of a particular community such as apprenticeships, ceremonies, and practice, and in the environment in which the system originates. Stevens (2008) asserts that the channels for communicating indigenous knowledge have become inaccessible to the indigenous people themselves, especially young people, because of the modern dependence on the written word and loss of facility with indigenous languages.

Indigenous communities face a threat to the survival of their languages and cultures. Stevens (2008) states that, while libraries have not traditionally focused on these areas, they can help indigenous communities manage and preserve indigenous knowledge by providing resources and expertise in collection, organisation, storage and retrieval. Indigenous knowledge differs greatly from western knowledge, and must be managed in ways that may challenge conventional methods. Okore, et al. (2009) observes that libraries have made progress in the preservation of local culture in paper and digital format, and have promoted the exchange of information. According to IFLA (2008), libraries can help in:

- Collecting, preserving and disseminating indigenous knowledge.
- Publicizing the value, contribution, and importance of indigenous to both non-indigenous and indigenous people.
- Involving elders and communities in the production of indigenous knowledge.
- Encouraging the recognition of intellectual property laws to ensure the proper protection and use of indigenous knowledge.

Okore, et al (2009) states that though there is so much indigenous knowledge in different indigenous communities of the developing world, the availability of such knowledge does not mean its accessibility or use. Libraries can promote access to indigenous knowledge by creating an environment which permits face-to-face forums and network formation to discuss and debate on issues that might be useful to members of the communities. For example, libraries can organize talk shows involving traditional rulers, elderly people and professionals to gather and record information on various local vocations from different subject areas ranging from agriculture, ecosystem, medical care, and conflict resolution.

They go on to point out that, “libraries can work in partnership with library schools to create indigenous knowledge collections, which can be repackaged and made accessible”. Stevens (2008) believes that libraries and information professionals should partner with indigenous communities. There is therefore the need to provide ICTs such as computers, internet, digital cameras, camcorders, and so on, to allow libraries to make indigenous knowledge accessible (Okore, et al., 2009).

Moahi (2012:549) asserted that librarians must partner with other organizations and individuals in order to be able to document and promote indigenous knowledge. Librarians must work hand-in-hand with communities that they serve and interact with community leaders in order to be able to identify the indigenous knowledge and collect it. They must therefore be prepared to leave the comfort of their offices and become as one with communities they serve. Nevertheless, Academic, Public, and Research libraries should be able to serve as antennae for identifying and locating indigenous knowledge resources in communities. Ngulube (2002:92) averred that librarians need to create inventories, registers, and bibliographies of indigenous knowledge.

Librarians as professionals need to appreciate the need to promote their products and services to ensure awareness amongst the communities that they serve. They should therefore equally see their role also as being that of promotion of awareness and appreciation of indigenous knowledge for communities. This starts with the identification of sources of indigenous knowledge, capturing, storing, and disseminating indigenous knowledge by creating awareness and promoting access to indigenous knowledge. Once this is realized, interest in indigenous knowledge will be heightened.

Likewise, librarians can invite adults to tell stories to children about their community in the library since the library can serve as a documentation centre, the adults could also teach dance steps, enact plays and dramas that explain some form of indigenous knowledge common with a community. Librarians could also showcase indigenous knowledge products and processes and produce a systematic documentation of indigenous knowledge practices and artifacts, once documented; access to such knowledge must be facilitated for those who have interest or users.
Conclusion

The importance of indigenous knowledge especially in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized, some of which are it’s readily availability with little or no cost, it contributes to sustainable local and national development, and likewise it contributes to economic development through the explosion of herbal products into the global market.

Over the years, libraries and librarians have made laudable effort towards the preservation of indigenous knowledge and making it available to users; this has been made possible through documentation of indigenous knowledge on CD’s, VCD’s, even DVD’s; story telling by adults in a community to the younger ones as it affects the origin of the community among others.

Subsequently, more can still be done by the librarians with a bid to properly document indigenous knowledge for use and for posterity, information technology is really the order of the day, effort should be geared towards uploading these indigenous knowledge into the internet- a website can be opened by the library for a community with the help of community leaders, and valuable information loaded therein for posterity, likewise information saved on the internet is more secured as it cannot be attacked by virus compared to CD’s, VCD’s which do crack in the face over a long time.

Recommendations

The author asserts that the library over the years in Nigeria have been striving to improve on the preservation of indigenous knowledge for the communities, ensuring that they are properly transmitted from one generation to the other; however more can still be done by the library through the following:

- Most grassroots communities in Nigeria do not have basic amenities like electricity, water supply among others thereby discouraging librarians from exploring these communities.
- Public libraries should liaise with community leaders via local government chairmen under which such communities are, so that solution could be proffered for the lack of amenities ravaging such communities.
- Adult education is sincerely recommended as most of the grassroots community dwellers are illiterate; hence for the services of the library to have full impact on the community dwellers, the inhabitants need to be educated.
- Technology is really the order of the day in preservation of indigenous knowledge for communities; however an illiterate person cannot access technology facilities hence making education a priority for the dwellers to ease use of these facilities like computers or even the internet.
- Mobile library though not practiced much in Nigeria, in which case library services are taken to the doorsteps of users is a perfect way also of helping communities if it could be properly explored, coming on a regular basic by the library to share or hear stories indigenous to a community among other library services will stir up the interest of the community dwellers towards the library.
- Librarians attending to these community dwellers should imbibe the virtue of good human relationship because they should know that over seventy percent of the people they are dealing with are illiterates, such a lot of patience is needed for them to pass across their information or even receive information from the community dwellers.

References


