

Bibliographic control of Nigerian indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage by information agencies

David Aju

Department of Library and Information Science

Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper discusses the need for bibliographic control of indigenous knowledge system by information agencies in Nigeria. There are profound evidence to the fact that indigenous knowledge is local knowledge and it's been with Nigerian people for ages. Indigenous knowledge is a thing, institution, and a process which is transferable through practice, observation and use. Indigenous knowledge is communicated by word of mouth from generation to generation and it is housed in individual and community memories. The relevance of it to the beholders is not in doubt and it is on the basis of its relevance that it is recognized and accepted. Though indigenous knowledge is in different knowledge forms in different societies, the value is not undermined in spite of threats by westernization and other internal factors such as death of custodians, nonuse and abandonment of various aspect of the knowledge system. To guide against these threats, the paper proffers management strategies such as: selection, acquisition, organization control and proper dissemination of the knowledge system by information agencies for posterity. It is only by realignment of these management approaches to indigenous knowledge that it's value will be sustained hence the bibliographic control of it.

Keyword: Bibliographic control, indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, information agencies, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria has an estimated figure of 445 ethnic nationalities across the 36 states split into 774 local government areas (Onwuejeogwu, 2005). With this, there are profound evidence in literature that the people of Nigeria have unique way of life which transcends their cultural beliefs and values. As a people, irrespective of their ethnicities, Nigerians are knowledgeable of their culture, traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledge and use same. This paper is a response to the misrepresentation or insinuation by western ideologies, imperialism and some local elites that African culture, beliefs, value system and indeed the so called indigenous knowledge is not modern. This misrepresentation is evident in codified status and is read widely. If decisive steps are not taken to confute, debunk and address this seemingly poof, the chances of indigenous knowledge and our cultural heritage is at stake. It is against this background that the paper invites information agencies such as the libraries, archives, museums and cultural organizations responsible for information dissemination and lovers of our culture and tradition to wake-up to the challenges. The paper is intended to:

1. consider the need for bibliographic control of indigenous knowledge;
2. investigate the relevance of indigenous knowledge to the Nigerian society;
3. ascertain the forms of indigenous knowledge;
4. best approach towards management of indigenous knowledge;
5. investigate/determine threats to indigenous knowledge; and
6. ascertain the utilization of indigenous knowledge among Nigerians.

It is the opinion of this paper that modernization is a threat and is causing anxiety toward indigenous knowledge, and the need to carefully collect, collate, organize, validate, disseminate and protect it from extinction and abuse is imperative. Indigenous knowledge, according to Nwaka (2015), connotes undocumented body of knowledge, wisdom, skills and expertise that a given community has developed overtime, and continues to develop as it grapples with the challenges of its environment, with outside ideas, and with constantly changing conditions. This means that indigenous knowledge is the tacit knowledge in people or collective human memories which is disseminated or transferred through oral means of communication by word of mouth or through observation.

Other scholars such as Jain (2008), Camble and Aliyu (2008), Nnadozie and Nnadozie, Ogugua, Egwim and Ossai-Onah, (2015), Kawonya (2006) have attempted defining indigenous knowledge in various ways all the same, these scholars in their definitions at different point in time have consistently maintained that indigenous knowledge relates to a particular place and people rather than “that” coming into it from outside or somewhere else. The various definitions have also hinted that “indigenous” has to do with natural setting which a thing is produced, formed or created while “knowledge”, generally refer to information and understanding gained overtime as a result of learning outcome or experiences.

In spite of all the definitions of indigenous knowledge found in literature, that of DasGupta and Saha (2009) is more appealing as the working definition of this paper. They described indigenous knowledge as “unwritten knowledge that is scarcely unique to a given society or people which has been transferred to that society or people through cultural practices”.

However, Iorngurum (2017) held that indigenous knowledge is the art, performance, creations, belief system nurtured on African soil and which have not been tempered with by European civilization over the years in which case, it is a total way of expressing experiences, aspirations, fears, belief system, morals and societal ethics which this writer believes it’s a symbolic to people of a particular place or society.

As earlier mentioned, prior to westernization, indigenous knowledge was seen as an institute under which members of a community were schooled. This is evident in the people’s exposure to agriculture, human health services etc. People were also engaged in practical farming, fishing, knitting, weaving and other activities. Technologically, people were trained in blacksmithing for the fabrication of farming tools and weapons of war should there be conflict.

Not just that, recreational subjects such as dancing, drumming, racing were as well, taught to youths and the children. Under indigenous knowledge too, intellectual lessons on plant taxonomy, local history, legend reasoning, proverbs, poetry, storytelling and story-relays were very much taught and practiced. Given the credence of indigenous knowledge among Nigerians from time immemorial, it is proper to ensure that the tradition handed over from generations to generations is not extinct in our time. It is on these bases that this author feels a need for bibliographic control of our indigenous knowledge for posterity of our cultural heritage. The paper opines that, many of the conflict, mishaps, deaths, tragedies and other strange incidences in local and urban areas in Nigeria can be attributed to the abandonment of indigenous belief system and tradition.

In order to maintain and practice indigenous knowledge handed over to our generation, there is need to consider the option for control of indigenous knowledge. As the phenomena is been threatened by internal and external factors such as western education, western technological wave, and foreign religions, internally, indigenous knowledge is challenged by over interaction with other cultures, death of custodians, non-use, abandonment of traditional values and ethic of the local communities.

Bibliographic control of indigenous knowledge

Bibliographic control in generic sense, as described by Verner Clapp in Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), is the pattern of effective arrangements which results from the systematic listing of the records of human achievement called bibliographies. In order ways, bibliographic control entails gaining mastery over human knowledge and communication systems so designed that it can meet the needs of many users or a limited number of users as the case may be. In the context of this paper, information agencies are required to design bibliographic systems or mechanisms to enable various communities tap indigenous knowledge for their individual or community development. In that light, for any realistic control mechanism to be designed, it must be able to provide access to indigenous knowledge of the people which must depend upon the prior ascertainment of the needs of the users and social epistemology – the way in which society as a whole achieves a perspective relative to its environment. This in effect, implies that the various information agencies preoccupation will be to have mastery over the means of accessing indigenous knowledge required, a deep comprehension of the nature of indigenous knowledge and the appreciation of its societal roles. From this point, it will be possible to create and sustain bibliographic systems that can conform to the realities of indigenous knowledge in the Nigerian society. Indigenous knowledge has served for many centuries; this reveals that certain mechanisms were in place to capture, preserve and disseminate it from generation to generation, that is why we still do what we do in the way we do it.

Intellectually, indigenous knowledge is enshrined in songs, proverbs, parables, incantations and other spoken expressions. The utilization of these verbal expressions guarantees that the knowledge in the expressions are not stemmed down or extinct. It is in this regard that Nnadozie et al (2015) opined that when knowledge is converted to verbal expressions, it helps to preserve and control it for posterity. For instance, art works and craft helps in preservation and control of indigenous knowledge, the art or craft is a physical manifestation of people's knowledge, it showcases, to what extent, such a people or community is able to put their imagination to creative use; these needs to be captured and preserved in a format for onward use in the future.

Another control measure was to ensure that indigenous knowledge was appropriately used or applied. Information agencies such as public libraries under adult literacy programme must ensure regular utilization of indigenous knowledge of the communities with the assurances that it survives. If positive action is not taken in this regard, the likelihood of use will not be there. It is like a house not lived in does not desire its respect. That apart, recording and documentation of indigenous knowledge is very rewarding as a bibliographic control mechanism; this was about in the past, therefore, the basic aim of recording and documentation should be to ensure control and preservation of the indigenous knowledge for generations unborn. This approach requires that the various information agencies need to contact purveyors of indigenous knowledge to interview and document or record their views. The recording could be audio or visual or a combination of the two. Since we are in the digital age, if the purveyors are disposed to release items of their knowledge, such can be digitalized and preserved to ensure that information about such items does not die with the custodians who are, in most cases, elders. The medium of preservation and transfer of indigenous knowledge is through verbal means, indigenous form of recording and keeping of indigenous knowledge cannot be completely ignored. For example, artistic forms of indigenous knowledge are kept and protected by elders; information agencies such as the public library or museum can lullaby or lure the purveyors for them. Then, the library or museum can take appropriate protective measures to preserve the knowledge form.

Relevance of indigenous knowledge

The importance attached to indigenous knowledge is the reason for its existence and this explains the increased interest in research for it by scholars from various backgrounds. In the rural communities in Nigeria, it is difficult to distinguish between modern agriculture and indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge drives agricultural practices and commerce. This is evident where farmers in the rural communities rely on their native intelligence to ascertain the viability or suitability of land for a particular crop as well as the most suitable season to plant different crops. Such is the case with commerce (World Bank, 1998).

People living in a particular terrain gain mastery of that locality over a long period of time due to their constant and consistent interaction with the forces of nature; this is attributed to indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is evident in modern medical science for instance, many of the plant substances used in laboratories were actually identified by native hunters and medicine men, using local knowledge. So what we have in the medical sciences now is a buildup of indigenous knowledge from time past (McCall, 1995). Indigenous knowledge has overtime, generated scholarship and research, for instance, the study of indigenous performances in theatre is gradually taking shape within the realm of theatre and dramaturgy instead of anthropology and oral literature.

Studies on indigenous arts, culture, and performances started with collection and recording, followed by comments on performed activities and oral artistry of various African nationalities by foreign missionaries and western anthropologists in which performance of various nationalities were documented in novels. African scholars followed the same trend but added insights and interpretations to their various ethnic performing arts and activities thereby bringing out salient characteristic of people's performances such as drama, myths, folktales, and masquerades in their writings. These writings stimulated more researches and publications on what African arts are capable of doing, than what art has done to specific nationalities (Doki, 2006).

Forms of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge forms are as many as the nationalities of people. The forms of indigenous knowledge are the non-material culture through which communities express, preserve and propagate their knowledge. There are the belief systems, values, myths, taboos, superstition, ceremonies and ways of life. Values as a form of indigenous knowledge are not only standard for evaluation, they serve as guides in decision-making among the people of a particular community. Values as a form of indigenous knowledge entails what the people perceive as right or wrong thereby indicating what is important or otherwise to them (Das Gupta and Saha, 2009; Hornby in Nnadozie, 2015).

Under indigenous knowledge, taboos are seen as cultural or religious customs that prohibit community members from doing, using, seeing or talking about a particular thing (Hornby, 2010). For instance, dog is not an eatable pet in some tribes and it is, therefore, a taboo for a woman to sight a dead dog. The consequences of this taboo against women are miscarriages and concoction of a survived child and bad lock in the family. Superstition as a form of indigenous knowledge has to do with a belief of a society that certain magical powers or forces are behind natural phenomena. In some communities, it is superstition and a bad omen to sight certain creatures in the broad day light, example chameleon (Akide, 2008).

Management of indigenous knowledge

Management of indigenous knowledge involves the selection, acquisition, organization, control and proper dissemination of indigenous knowledge as it is the case with western based knowledge. Since indigenous knowledge is usually tacit in nature, stored in individual or collective memories, and often guarded jealously, hence it is said that each time an elder dies, it is as if a library had burned down. Easton, in World Bank (2002) explains the anxiety and the threat modernization poses to indigenous knowledge and so appropriate management initiative needs to be taken in order to safeguard the indigenous knowledge of various communities and nationalities in Nigeria.

Dissemination of indigenous knowledge is an aspect of its management, this aspect ensures that people are aware of aspects and components of the indigenous knowledge prevalent in an area, it therefore helps to promote the management of the knowledge forms for the fact that as more people are aware of the prevalent knowledge forms, the tendency to forget such knowledge becomes remote. Dissemination of indigenous knowledge could be in form of songs, dances, drama and ceremonies.

In many communities, indigenous knowledge forms are in form of artistic materials. These can be protected and managed through organized museums. This is particularly true of physical component of indigenous knowledge in such cases, the various arts and crafts like drawings, costumes, pottery etc. would be properly secured and kept for posterity. It, therefore, becomes the obvious responsibility of information agencies to key into this management approach; in order to pass information and knowledge about these artifacts to other generations.

Threats to indigenous knowledge

There are series of threats to the survival of indigenous knowledge system. These threats stem from internal and external forces (Das Gupta and Saha 2009, Charyulu 2001). The major threats have to do with the difficulty in replicating indigenous knowledge and the uneasy nature to reproduce it and for the fact that indigenous knowledge is largely unrecorded, it is in the memory of the custodians who are elders and personalities chosen by the council of elders as the case may be. The most intimidating threat is the aggressive encroachment from the more sophisticated, more procedural science and technology. Nnadozie, (2013) explained that the recalcitrance on the part of custodians to transfer their acquired knowledge and experience to others is an issue of concern to indigenous knowledge transfer process. This has affected access and application of the knowledge system by outsiders. Internally, indigenous knowledge is threatened by it's cooperate being as most of the knowledge items are forbidden to non-accredited members of the society, for example, masquerade dancing. Some natives (custodians) are gradually denouncing indigenous knowledge and it's practices for foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam. This act is to the disadvantage of traditional norms or value system.

Apart from that, indigenous knowledge is threatened by sudden death of elders who are the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge. Those alive are not keen in traditional values and culture of their society and so the survival of indigenous knowledge is at stake. Another threat to indigenous knowledge is the fact that it is stored in people's memories, practices and activities which are expressed orally or by cultural designs. For now there is no effort by the people or government to identify, acquire preserve and control the knowledge forms for posterity. Jain in Camble and Aliyu (2008) observed that the documentation of indigenous knowledge in Africa is poor and if not properly documented, analyzed and disseminated, it may be lost forever.

Utilization of indigenous knowledge

As rightly observed by Anyebe (2010), indigenous knowledge is still utilized to a great extent by Nigerians in spite of western encroachment and foreign religions i.e. the natives are still guided by indigenous knowledge. This is evident in their marriage ceremonies, child circumcision by the local medicine men or healers.

Technologically, the natives are heavily involved in local craft industry an occupation that has changed the socio-economic situation of many in the rural communities. Farming tools and other implements are massively produced and sold for use. Farming equipment such as "go-to-hell", hoes, cutlasses and axes are produced locally using indigenous knowledge and technology.

Agriculture is the dominant occupation of most rural communities, many practice subsistent farming while others engage in extension farming system. In any of these farming systems, locally produced farm tools are used for weeding, harvesting and storage of farm products. For instance, clay pots are used for storage of grains, as observed by Davis and Ebbe (1995) in many places, locals use ashes for treating seeds in order to secure the seeds from insects attack without necessarily using modern preservatives such as perfect killer (insecticide).

In healthcare, herbalist, healers, bone-setters and traditional birth attendants are still the major healthcare providers using indigenous knowledge practices to treat patients in the communities. In some societies, these local health practitioners are encouraged to practice their skills side by side with western medical personnel in medical centres in Nigeria e.g. bone-setters and traditional birth attendants. In some cases, patients respond faster when they are treated by the native healers or herbalists. That is why till today, people still rely on herbalist and healers for treatment of common ailments such as measles and spiritual attacks.

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge is a very important component of culture and tradition of people in the African setting. Prior to western education, African people, Nigerians inclusive were schooled using their acquired indigenous knowledge which contributed significantly to sustainable development of many communities in Nigeria. Indigenous knowledge was in unwritten form, it was in memories of individuals not codified in status. It's dissemination was largely through traditional instruction methods, learning through observation, participation and apprenticeship. There were no structured frameworks for the dissemination of the knowledge system as compared to western education.

This situation created doubt in the minds of European anthropologists and sociologists who then misperceived and concluded that indigenous knowledge was primitive thoughts that failed to conform to modern knowledge system from the western world. Though indigenous knowledge was challenged by internal and external forces, the people still practice their knowledge system which is seen in their belief system, values, myth, superstitions, taboos among others. Management mechanisms were put in place to sustain the knowledge system for posterity. That is why indigenous knowledge still remains in the people's memories today. In spite of all threats and limitations of indigenous knowledge, if the natives are not discouraged by western, influence but continue to apply their knowledge in all activities, if the knowledge is properly documented in a medium by information agencies for transfer to generations in the future, then, the issue of extinction or threat to indigenous knowledge will be a thing of the past. This means that, there will be fulfillment and development by various nationalities in Nigerian.

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