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Challenges confronting libraries in documentation and communication of indigenous knowledge in Nigeria

Caroline N. Okorafor*

The Library, Federal University Of Technology, PMB 1526, Owerri, Nigeria

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Abstract Indigenous knowledge (IK) and practices are usually unwritten, relying on oral transmission and on memory. This reliance often led to distortions. IK is relevant for development especially in arts, music, language, agriculture, medicine, crafts, theatre and natural resources management. It then becomes imperative that indigenous knowledge be documented and communicated as necessary to obtain its benefit where applicable. Nigeria needs to participate fully in the global exchange and dissemination of information to develop socially and economically. The paper reviews the documentation of IK for communication in print, audiovisual and electronic forms and highlights the challenges confronting libraries in documentation and communication of IK in Nigeria. It is suggested that libraries should coordinate their activities in this area and co-operate with other stakeholders, government and other funding agencies in tackling these challenges.

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Introduction

Generally speaking, indigenous or native knowledge may be defined as knowledge or survival methods that are peculiar to a given society, culture or community. It embraces the local 'technologies' and cultural practices of the people who have lived in a community for generations. By [World Bank \(2005\)](#) definition, indigenous knowledge (IK) is local knowledge. It is the basis for local level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, music, arts, crafts, natural resource management and a host of other activities in communities ([Mabawonku, 2005](#)).

Indigenous knowledge provides a basis for problem-solving strategies for communities. It is difficult to codify because it is tacit knowledge. It is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. Indigenous knowledge is not owned by any individual. It is family or community held. It is dynamic and not static. It is the totality of the knowledge and skills of the people in a particular geographic location which often reflects their adaptation to their ecosystems and environment ([Sithole, 2007](#); [Warren, Slikkerveer, & Brokensha, 1995](#)).

The culture of a people is often a reflection of the environmental factors like music, arts, medicine, agriculture, economic and political systems, food, crafts, and education. Consequently, indigenous practices could evolve into a system when it embodies the inter-relationships or inter-dependence of the various practices. In any case, unlike "modern" knowledge, IK is neither documented nor written.

* Tel.: + 234 803 796 8728.

E-mail address: carokay2008@yahoo.com

As a result, very little literature is available. However, IK is transmitted systematically, orally, from generation to generation. It is here that oral tradition is intertwined with IK systems because much of what is known about the knowledge systems, traditions and history of society or community is transmitted orally. The major channels for transmitting indigenous knowledge include songs, music, folklores, proverbs, rituals, arts, crafts and idioms.

Emeagwali (2002) states that the most significant information gathering exercise for IK is oral tradition, namely the collective testimonies and recollections of the past, inherited from earlier generations and transmitted in various forms of verbal testimonies. On the other hand Vasina (1961) defined oral tradition as testimonies of the past, which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth. Oral testimony is an essential ingredient of oral tradition studies, and studies in oral tradition and indigenous knowledge would cover rites, ceremonies, religion, traditional medicine, textiles, agriculture, proverbs, music and other aspects of culture of the community (Mabawonku, 2002).

Orally transmitted information or IK inherited from past generations may be shared in both structured and unstructured contexts. In this way, IK constitutes a major resource for educational opportunities (in research and course works), business development (in arts, crafts, and music), product market processes (locally made items), and national development. A number of strategies about the documentation and communication of IK for developmental purposes have been described in the literature. In Nigeria, there is a need to highlight the challenges and suggest solutions, as the case may be.

Creating indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is predominantly tacit, embedded in the practices and experiences of its holders. It is commonly exchanged through personal communication and demonstration from the teacher to the apprentice, from parents to children, from neighbor to neighbor. Indigenous knowledge is disseminated and preserved through various family histories, taboos, symbols, myths or legends, rituals, sounds or dances, festivals, proverbs, poetry (praise poetry or akuko ndi dike), drama, theatre, role plays, folklore (folk tales or akuko ifo), and other systems (Anafulu, 2005; Sithole, 2007).

Indigenous knowledge is vulnerable to attrition if it is not recorded for storage and wider transmission. In traditional societies there were assigned gatekeepers of specialist knowledge. Vasina (1961) identified four methods adopted by indigenous societies in this regard:

- Training of special groups such as griots in West African culture (custodians of oral tradition) and imbongi (custodians of genealogies) among the Zulu and Ndebele people.
- Exercising control over the recital of traditions by limiting the occasions for their performance.
- Constituting tradition and their use into the exclusive domain of designated groups.
- Using mnemonic devices such as rhymes and repetitions to aid the human memory.

It must be noted, however, that the traditions which lend themselves to this sort of transmission are historical, literary, social and, to some extent, religious. Some others such as arts and crafts, theatre and dance, and medicine have to be transmitted through a learning process generally involving a period of apprenticeship and tutelage. In many societies these aspects of the culture are restricted to families or groups. In Igbo societies, for example, the priests come from certain lineages, like the Levites in Israel. Only they can serve the deities. Sometimes, the priests double as village heads and succession goes to the oldest living member of the lineage (Anafulu, 2005).

The following are the tools or means used to create indigenous knowledge and communication: Tape recorder (for documentation); telephones; radio; television; newspapers; computers; video cameras; information and communication technologies, such as email; fax; CD-ROM; printed materials and documents; diskettes; social gatherings in communities; brochures; and posters.

Indigenous knowledge is usually created by documentalists and researchers through interaction with local communities. They seek possible tangible sources for collection and preservation from individuals, families or others who have custody of particular IK. According to Anafulu (2005), some of the possible sources for creating IK include:

- Oral literacy forms:
 - Legends
 - Praise songs
 - Incantations, for example Ululation (oro—onu) in parts of Igbo land and Ewi incantations in Yoruba culture
 - Moon-light tales, such as Igwo—Onwa in Nguru South East Iboland
 - Proverbs and alliterations
 - Religious chants and divinations
- Theatre and dance
 - Festivals
 - Masquerades, for example Umunoha masquerades in Imo State, Ekpo masquerade in Akwa Ibom State, and Engungu Eyo masquerade in Lagos
 - Rites of passage, such as marriage, funeral and birth rites
 - Initiation of titles, for example Ozo, Ikenga, Duru, Eze-ji in parts of the South East Ibo
- Visual arts and crafts
 - Masks and carvings
 - Painting and sculpture
 - Weaving, for example Akwaete weaving center in Akwaete Abia State
 - Dying, such as Adire in Abeokuta
 - Textile, for example Aso—oke
 - Pottery, such as The Ladi Kwale fame in Niger State and Lokpanta Pottery in Abia State
 - Smithing and brass making, such as found in Adamawa and Bornu States in the North East of Nigeria
 - Leather works in Sokoto
- Trade and Commerce
 - Market Days in Orië, Afor, Eke, Nkwo (The Ibos)
 - Inter-community relationships, such as yearly road maintenance linking two communities of different

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