# Libraries as Driving Access to Indigenous Knowledge (IK)

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**ABSTRACT**

*Indigenous knowledge (IK) is as old as man. Every knowledge learnt is a result of our interaction with our environment even as the western culture characterized by technology permeates every corner of peoples' ways of life in Nigeria: the way we greet, eat, dress and relate the issues of life. This paper analyzed the peculiar nature of IK which is akin to man and identified the viable roles the libraries can play in preserving IK for posterity as it tends to be distorted, lacking wholeness when been passed from one generation to another without proper documentation been put in place. Some challenges where identified as factors that hinders the library from optimally performing the functions of knowledge/information preservation and creating access for use. Also, the paper proffered some laudable guides that will assist the libraries in harnessing IK and make same available to the indigenous community and also make it a global knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Knowledge, technology, Libraries, Culture and Documentation.*

## INTRODUCTION TO INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IK)

When we say something is indigenous, then it is peculiar to the owner, originating where it is found. Language, religion, inherited oral tradition, norms and values, Medicare, marriage, communication, religion, pattern of conflict resolution, arts and crafts, and indeed culture are factors that differentiates a group of persons from the other, it is their heritage. People do not exist in vacuum; they are challenged daily with wide variety of issues, the make-up and perspectives of their ideology and the description of their language, inherited oral tradition, norms and values tells who they are: it is their indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge bothers on how a peoples' culture is codified for ease of access and retrieval; what determines the knowledge that can be termed "secret" or "sacred", as such, how this knowledge are utilized for the development of all. Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as a term refers to knowledge held by communities and peoples that are indigenous, that is, they share some things, especially culture, in common. Grenier (1998:6) had earlier defined IK as "the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area".

IK is seen by Ugboma (2014:2) as "traditional knowledge associated with African tradition or culture. It is largely inherent in man. It is not associated with any form of formal learning /training but transmitted or learnt orally. It is associated with oral tradition and highly rooted in African culture." This knowledge is derived from our folktales, proverbs, rites, poems and festivals and traditional politics amongst others.

There are some traditional provocative poetic invocations, poetic expressions that are highly philosophical and some thoughtful praise poems that can be categorized as forming indigenous knowledge of the people of the given location where they are generated.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO (2017:1) also defined IK as knowledge that "refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life".

In buttressing the IK concept, Iseke (2013:2) identified "Indigenous Elders" as "the educators, storytellers, historians, language keepers, and healers of our communities". She explains further that "they sustain knowledge; cultural practices and spiritual beliefs held collectively

within Indigenous communities and pass it on to the next generations".

Succinctly, WIPO (2001:26) gave a comprehensive analogy of IK as they explained the relationship between traditional knowledge, folklore and indigenous knowledge that "traditional knowledge is created, originated, developed and practiced by traditional knowledge holders. From WIPO's perspective, expressions of folklore are a subset of and included within the notion of traditional knowledge". WIPO (2001:26) further explained that while "traditional knowledge is in turn, a subset of the broader concept of heritage. Indigenous knowledge being the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples' is also a subset of traditional knowledge". In analysis and usage of some folklores however, there exists some visible intertwining of the idea as both the folklores and IK are expressions of traditional knowledge. In our traditional settings, especially in Africa we remember vividly how local folklore teaches the tenets of the principles of truthfulness, communal peaceful coexistence, the virtues in hard work, traditional medicine and local technology (like basket making, pottery and cloth weaving).

## Benefits of Creating Access to IK

The following are the benefits of creating a viable access to IK in our societies:

- Access to IK will enhance the effectiveness of the use of local language in teaching at the grassroots levels.
- Primary healthcare provision will be highly accelerated thus reducing child and maternal mortality.
- Such norms has female genital mutilation will be totally eradicated through empowering women by providing relevant information to correlate traditional believes and orthodox methods.
- Available natural resources will be harnessed and managed for the good of all.
- Traditional medicinal plants for treating such ailments as malaria will be highly accessed, processed and delivered to members of the community in good packaging form.
- Complementing modern knowledge such as in weather forecasting.

## Features of Indigenous Knowledge (IK)

The following features have been identified in IK and they have distanced it from boldly from other types of knowledge. IK is:

- **Local:** it is a set of experiences generated by people living within a particular community. Therefore, it stands the risk of distortion while been transferred as raw data from one person to the other.
- **Tacit:** tacit knowledge is usually implied or interpreted from actions and therefore, because it is based on individual interpretation, it cannot be easily codified.
- **Crude transmission media:** IK is usually transmitted orally, or by imitation and demonstration thus giving room for codifying error, loss of some or all of its properties. For example, some of our cultures are relayed in folktales and as folklore.
- **Experiential rather than theoretical knowledge:** The experience of an individual informs his information and knowledge base; also applications of trial and error instead of a true test in the rigorous laboratory that would have reinforced IK.
- **Learned through repetition:** this is a defining characteristic of tradition even when new knowledge is added it might not be easily added to the existing one. Repetition however aids in the retention and reinforcement of IK.
- **Constantly changing:** Change is constant even in the concept of indigenous knowledge. IK has the "ability of being produced as well as reproduced, discovered as well as lost; though it is often perceived by external observers as being somewhat static" (Ellen and Harris, 1996).

Interestingly, these traditions, customs and habits as seen, are recorded and documented in photographs, films, tapes and disks, tree bark paintings and works of art, books and manuscripts, natural history specimens and all manner of large and small objects relating to great events as well as everyday lives. Indigenous knowledge is holistic rather than diverse and inclusive of all aspects of life, yet many Indigenous peoples see the need for access to Western knowledge without a balance of access to IK. For Indigenous people, education needs to balance culture and diversity with development. For non-Indigenous students, looking at Indigenous knowledge can enhance their understanding of Indigenous peoples and ways of looking at the world, as well as valuing traditional ecological knowledge.

The collection and documentation of local practices and knowledge of a given people has been in existence for as long as people have

been in existence, traveling the globe and recording their observations. By the middle of the 20th century, arguments in favour of recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge range from those based on philosophical principles to those derived from more utilitarian, pragmatic rationales. Hyde and Kabiru (2003) and Pence and McCallum (1994) argue that interventions are more successful when built on local knowledge.

Many development agencies are now articulating the importance of understanding local knowledge and practices and, consequently, of designing culturally appropriate interventions as IK systems are at risk of being destroyed, there is a need therefore to capture, store and disseminate IK in order to ensure its preservation for posterity.

## The Role of Libraries in Creating Access to Indigenous Knowledge

The basis of cultural heritage preservation is a desire to save the past while making the past accessible and usable. Little-Bear (2000:78) observed that Indigenous peoples are involved in the "renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and re-singing of the songs, [which] are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation".

The Library's role in these activities becomes imperative. It is necessary that modern scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge should be brought closer together in interdisciplinary projects dealing with the links between culture, environment and development in such areas as the conservation of biological diversity, management of natural resources, understanding of natural hazards and mitigation of their impact. Information storage and sharing is the hub of library services, and as IK affects most aspects peoples', then libraries should be better burdened with this responsibility for IK and make the resources free and grant universal access to the information contained in order to ensure a society's posterity in all ramification.

The nature of indigenous knowledge resources presupposes that there should be protection on these resources and according to Akabogu (2002), the legal obligation to protect the intellectual property rights is addressed in paragraph 38 of the Declaration of UNESCO's document, 1999a, and it states inter alia:

*there is also a need to further develop appropriate national legal frameworks to accommodate the specific requirements of developing countries and traditional knowledge, sources and products, to ensure their recognition and adequate protection on the basis of the informed consent of the customary or traditional owners of this knowledge*

Thus, libraries are charged with the responsibility to identify, preserve and make accessible the oral, written and tangible documentary heritage of her host community; assist in the assessment of significance, identification, preservation, presentation and accessibility of heritage collections of the people; recognize, preserve and disseminate folk life and other intangible aspects of heritage as an integral part of Nigeria's multicultural life that reflects and represents the beliefs, practices and traditions of every strata and section of the society; Assist and participate in the development of appropriate criteria of significance, methodologies and a community user-guide for the nomination of places of significance to be preserved and also work towards community education and interpretation; Promote and assist in the identification, preservation and continuation of language heritage of Nigeria.

## Challenges of IK for Nigeria Library System

Librarianship is affirmed the science and process charged to identify or create, acquire, process, organize and preserve knowledge and its carriers for immediate or future dissemination in a more effective and efficient capacity for the benefit of man. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have permeated all areas of library functions, and these days the Internet - the world wide network, has the ability to facilitate resource sharing and access to current information available in our libraries covering every field of knowledge, IK inclusive. The mode of access is significantly widening with the evolution of ICTs have brought with it a different set of challenges. These challenges are notably seen at the information gathering stage through to its utilization by the end users, bothering on ways of dismantling of barriers posed in accessing existing information and the moral obligation involved in viewing or accessing this type of knowledge and information (IK).

Nakata, Byrne, Nakata and Gardiner (2005:8) reckoned that "with regard to the handling of materials containing Indigenous knowledge, the challenges to the LIS sector begin with the recognition of Indigenous knowledge as a

distinct system of knowledge with its own management regimes".

The librarians are to always remember that these knowledge' are held in high esteem without distortion from westernization and as such the owners of this knowledge "trust" their own ways of managing what belongs to them. For instance, in Oba community in Idemilli of Anambra State, pythons are not to be killed for any reason; the indigenous people still beliefs it is a god that protects the land. Where ever a visitor in the community finds this snake, he/she has to call on the locals to pick it out.

The interesting part is that these snakes are harmless. Also, in Issele-Mkpitime, Aniocha North Local Government area of Delta State, some few years back, an attempt was made to change the name from Issele-Mkpitime (Mkpitime's Issele; note Mkpitime is a goddess) to Issele-Chukwu (God's Issele) as the people felt they have embraced Christianity well enough to reflect in their identity and they ended up facing the wraths of the gods, evident in outrageous records of deaths of indigenes, various calamities and drought. It was not until the name was changed back that they experienced peace once again.

Adeniyi and Subair (2013:12) reported that "lukewarm attitude from library management and government towards IK, lack of cooperation from local communities, difficulty in providing access to IK due to copyright laws and cost of the project and the nature of IK itself" are the challenges facing libraries in the management of IK. Other challenges are:

- **Recording and documentation:** the mode of transmission of IK is from one person to another, usually from an elder to the younger one, and from parents or grandparents to children. These IK are saved in such media as tape, drawings, or maybe expressions of personal tacit views. These factors have tendencies to bring about distortions and make IK loss a bit or all of its information and usefulness.

- **Storage:** storage space and medium could be a challenge to IK. This could be in form of disaster on the information carrier or the size and /or medium of packaging. Retrievable mediums and depositories are encouraged for storing and documenting IK for ease of access.

- **E-resources:** using e-resources is paramount in research but there are more number of libraries that are not opportuned to acquire or maintain the computer systems and their accompanying paraphernalia in surfing the internet.

- **Government apathy:** For some time now, libraries are experiencing budget cuts in the different categories of libraries and these have grossly affected the discharge of the library functions. Government has not considered the development of libraries as their priorities seems to be other issues thus bring about poor state of infrastructures, limited qualified staff , irregular power supply that are needed in the information handling processes.

- **Lack of basic equipment:** The acquisition and documentation of Indigenous Knowledge requires basic and technologically inclined equipments like radio tapes, CD-ROM, video tapes, Videoing machine, Video cameras, Computers and internet as the case may be.

- **Staffing challenges:** Developing the staff strength in the management of IK is sometimes a challenge. People tend to feel irritated when dealing with illiterate persons. Sometimes they feel the job is not dignifying enough.

- **Language barriers:** IK is culture inclined; hence language barriers cannot be overruled. One needs to understand the language of the people in order to freely communicate with the people.

## Access Strategies to Indigenous Knowledge in Libraries

Indigenous peoples are seen to be so attached to their inherited culture and tend to guide it with so much jealousy. There are certain indigenous knowledge that have been passed from one generation to others shrouded in secrecy. For example, amongst the Onicha-Uku people of Delta State, it is believed that the indigenous masquerade has the potency to harm evil doers, hence you would see people been bound to tell the truth in the name of the masquerade, or you see such situations where people would keep their valuables in visible glares and only secures it with the fresh part of the palm frond. These items remain untouched by anyone other than the initial owner, as it is believed that whosoever removes it invites the wrath of the gods. In this same community, knowledge about the "masquerades" is only known to indigenes that belong to the confraternity of the masquerades. In a situation like this, how will the libraries gain access to such knowledge and more?

Bowrey and Anderson (2009:8) in their work reported that "a significant number of cultural and scientific institutions, nationally and internationally, maintain arguments that such repatriation to Indigenous peoples will deny the future possibilities for scientific access and inquiry" they further explained that "the insistence on keeping these materials taken from Indigenous peoples for future study in the 21st century demonstrates the relations of power that first, enabled such institutions to hold 'on trust', or own such materials, and second, the continuum of these power relations with the (re)articulated denial of access". The question now bothers on the available means the library should ensure that the indigenous people are catered for irrespective of prevailing challenges information wise. In achieving this, a holistic assessment will be best made of the library and its audience based on understanding of different world views. Then parameters would be easily established on IK identification, acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination to potential user group.

A variety of policies and guidelines for conducting consultations with indigenous people and communities will be established to determine the right access conditions, as well as the indigenous peoples agreement on IK been hosted in the library, for example, in some places, women are not permitted to look at certain materials, like masquerades, thus, directing attention to ethical issues that arises. Information seekers in indigenous knowledge can access codified resources in the library that are available in CD-ROMs, hard copy files, audio discs/ tapes, and video tapes and also view materials on display in the library, as the case may be.

The place of library orientation to the indigenous people on the need for freedom of information cannot be overemphasized. It is the duty of libraries to organize tours, videos, talks and exposition on the importance of circulating information and knowledge, the need for proper recording and documentation of what is left in their culture for posterity sake, and essence of freedom of information in an information age. This is also corroborated by Bowrey and Anderson (2009:8) as they opined that "the access movement is supportive of a more culturally inclusive notion of public".

Also Grenier (1998:5) advocates the need for integrating the indigenous people in the process of documenting their knowledge, as she has a vivid report of a certain study in an article on sustainability and technology transfer by Richard Wilk (1995), an American anthropologist that recognized failure of persons that intended to commercialize and foster the production of an indigenous palm-oil of the peoples of the Belizean rainforest, and she wondered whether "did anyone bother to ask local people the who, how, where, when, and why of their local palm-oil production system".

To Ilo (ND: 478), libraries "can organize talk shows involving traditional rulers, elderly people, and professionals in a bid to gather and record information on different subjects ranging from agriculture to medicare, marriage, communication, religion, conflict resolution, arts and crafts". When libraries advocates for access to indigenous knowledge, there should be adherence to relevant rules protecting ownership of such knowledge by the indigenous people and modes of access as stipulated in the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act as relates to particular countries.

The fact that indigenous knowledge is usually transmitted orally thus renders its protection difficult. Extant literature on intellectual property rights shows that the management of the indigenous peoples' intellectual property is not exclusively provided for as there is no room for communal ownership of intellectual contents. Anderson (2005:83) also affirm that "copyright law does not cover all the types of rights Indigenous people want to their ICIP. In fact, intellectual property laws actually allow for the plundering of Indigenous knowledge by providing monopoly property rights to those who record or write down knowledge in a material form, or patent it".

## RECOMMENDATION

An old African proverb says that "when a knowledgeable old person dies, a whole library disappears". The place of information cannot be overemphasized: either on global or indigenous level. Harnessing and managing information in different capacity is not a herculean task to librarianship it only requires taking the right step in the right direction. The indigenous people' values what they have, they hold tenaciously unto it, like indigenous medicine, the libraries are thus expected to:

- Organize library orientation, talks on the essence of documentation and the great benefit of knowledge sharing for the wellbeing of man. The knowledge of the use of herbs for drugs metamorphosed from indigenous medicine and technology has

been used to process and preserve same while keeping the documentation for future use.

- Develop policies and guidelines on access and acquisition strategies especially those bothering on ethical issue.

- Solicit for fund. If provided with adequate funding and facilities, libraries will excel in information repacking and dissemination.

- Liaise with governments. The need to develop the desire to aid library's development by the government is not out of place as there is need to build and develop adequate structures, fund, ICT hardware and software that can assist libraries in performing their functions to aid quick and easy dissemination of information. This will kill the apathy some have towards library services in this direction.

- The libraries should also let the indigenous people know that there are rules and protection guiding the art of information sharing, and recognition given to intellectual property holders by integrating the indigenous people in the process of documenting their knowledge – (Intellectual Property rights).

## CONCLUSION

This work has been able to define Indigenous Knowledge in a simple contest of being a knowledge held by a group of person in a given geographical location held by such culture as language, greetings, and beliefs. From preliminary studies and this research, it has been reiterated that the major factors limiting the promotion of IK is man as government, man as information manager and man as information user.

Man is controlled by: availability of fund to provide relevant resources needed to access, record and store IK; ego, trust (or lack of trust) to recognize the original intellectual property owner; relaying or utilizing information in the context it was provided without distortion respectively.

Faced with these challenges, it has been recommended that all stakeholders be involved in the preservation of IK to avoid dearth of knowledge in the future.

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