Preservation of Endangered Indigenous Knowledge: The Role of Community Libraries in Kampala - Uganda

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Abstract: Preservation of indigenous knowledge (IK) is an issue of concern among nations today. IK is invaluable and serves as a gateway to understanding our past and should be preserved to remind us of who we are and where we have come from so as not to lose our cultural identity. However, IK is facing the possibility of total extinction in many countries including Uganda. The danger is that once lost, IK is lost forever. This study sought to closely examine ways in which endangered IK can be preserved to prevent possible extinction and ensure long-term use by future generations. Specifically, the role of community libraries was assessed to extend our understanding of how they engage with varied indigenous groups in Uganda to facilitate ongoing practices and preserve their knowledge for future generations. Data was obtained through unstructured interviews with nineteen librarians from all registered community libraries in Kampala District.

In one of the great tragedies of our age, indigenous traditions, stories, cultures and knowledge are winking out across the world. Whole languages and mythologies are vanishing, and in some cases even entire indigenous groups are falling into extinction
Hance (2015)

1. Introduction

Indigenous knowledge is increasingly being discussed and recognized on the global scene. In 2002 for instance, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) through a statement it made on indigenous knowledge, recognized "... the significance, relevance and value of integrating both indigenous traditional knowledge and local community knowledge in providing solutions to some of the most difficult modern issues and encourages its use in project planning and implementation" (IFLA, 2002). Consequently,

national libraries are mandated to document and preserve their countries' cultural heritage both tangible and intangible.

In 2013, the World Summit on the Information society (WSIS) declared in Article 15 that, "in the evolution of the Information Society, particular attention must be given to the special situation of Indigenous peoples, as well as to the preservation of their heritage and their cultural legacy" (WSIS, 2013). Ansari (2016) further acknowledges that over the past decade, IK has received increased attention internationally. This kind of recognition continues to open up more discussions in literature about contentious issues in the area of IK and even promote diversification of views on the nature and description of IK.

IK has been described distinctly by different authorities. It has been broadly defined as unique local knowledge to a given culture or society acquired informally by the local people through lived experiences (Warren, Slikkerveer, & Brokensha, 1995; World Bank, 2005; Okorafor; 2010). Additionally, IK has been described as people's ways of knowing, perceiving, doing and thinking about things that are deeply embedded in a community over time (Ebijuwa & Mabawonku, 2015). These definitions embody a constellation of crucial elements such as beliefs, practices, skills, technologies and experiences that are key to facilitating wholeness and the stability of livelihood in communities. As a result of an interesting mix of cultural elements, IK has been used interchangeably with other terms.

According to Nakashima, Prott and Bridgewater (2000), IK is sometimes referred to as local knowledge, folk knowledge, traditional knowledge, traditional wisdom, and traditional science and can broadly be grouped into different categories such as agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, and environmental conservation. Mabawonku (2002) expounds on these categories to include social cultural activities in communities and further notes that IK is a basis upon which local decisions are made in support of these categories. These categories of IK are indispensable in the composition of IK systems in communities. IK is collectively owned and passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth also known as oral tradition through songs, arts, crafts, idioms, rituals, folklore, music and proverbs (Mabawonku, 2002; Nakata & Langton, 2005; Okorafor, 2010). Sithole (2007) reiterates that "indigenous knowledge is predominantly tacit, embedded in the practices and experiences of its holders…commonly exchanged through personal communication and demonstrations from the teacher to the apprentice, from parents to children, from neighbour to neighbour" (p. 118). By its nature, oral tradition makes it very hard to systemize IK, which limits possibilities of its continued flow to future generations.

Okorafor (2010) notes that unlike modern knowledge, IK is problematic in terms of codification and thus remains undocumented and unwritten since it resides in the heads of specific individuals. IK is therefore largely embedded in

people's practices, and is exchanged verbally from person to person, or through demonstrations from teacher to apprentice, parent to child, or between members of the community (Okorafor, 2010). It is this embedded nature and oral transmission that render IK potentially endangered putting it at a risk of being forgotten or being extinct in various communities where practices of passing on this knowledge are not clearly defined. Further still, IK has suffered effects from negative influence of western cultures and inadequate documentation in many communities around the world (Tabuti and Van Damme, 2012). Uganda is one of the countries where IK is undergoing rapid changes and requires strategies to preserve it.

2. Indigenous knowledge in Uganda's context

Uganda is a land-locked country located in East Africa; it shares a border with Sudan in the North, Democratic Republic of Congo in the West, Rwanda on the South-Western part, Tanzania in the South and Kenya in the East (Internet World Stats, 2011). In Uganda, there is existence of more than sixty-five indigenous communities (Tabuti, 2006) each with its own distinct IK as part of their identity. This means that there is cultural diversity and community variations that represent unique knowledge of each indigenous group. The country boasts of a wealth of IK cutting across domains of agriculture, animal and human medicine, education, food processing, iron smelting, soil and water management, technology building, natural resources management and other activities (Tabuti, Van Damme, 2012). IK plays a vital role in each of the domains mentioned above for instance, in agriculture, the local communities use IK to predict weather changes, produce food, conserve plant species, classify soil types and control pests (Gradé et al., 2009).

In the medical sector, more than 60% of Uganda's population is heavily reliant on traditional medicine, which has long been used to treat a wide range of health conditions such as HIV/AIDS, digestive and respiratory complications, malaria, skin diseases, tooth problems, and child birth related complications (World Health Organization WHO, n.d; The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, 2008; African Technology Policy Studies Network, 2013). Practitioners of traditional medicine vastly out number allopathic doctors in Uganda (WHO, 2017), moreover there are cures that are considered sacred and can only be treated by traditional medicine. Other forms of IK related to conservation of natural resources and environment are crucial for ecological sustenance and restoration of degraded areas (Tabuti, 2006).

Uganda being a developing country is characterized by income disparities and poverty. IK greatly contributes to poverty alleviation in Uganda (Tabuti & Van Damme, 2012) and this is done through creation of employment opportunities such as traditional medicine practice, making crafts, performance of traditional dances, iron smelting, food processing, fishing, basket making, cultural tourism, and many others. All the above is a clear indication that IK is an invaluable resource in fostering socio-economic development in Ugandan communities and

society as a whole. Due to its valuable nature, IK should be documented and preserved to ensure its continued flow among community members and even those outside the community.

The purpose of this study therefore, was to assess the role of community libraries in Kampala District – Uganda in preserving IK for posterity by answering the following research questions:

a. What attitudes do community librarians have regarding IK preservation?
b. What IK preservation practices exist among community librarians?
c. What challenges do community librarians face in the transmission, documentation, and preservation of IK in Uganda?

3. Community libraries in Uganda

Community libraries in Uganda are registered under the Uganda Community Libraries Association (UgCLA). Established in 2007 as a national nongovernmental organization (NGO), UgCLA serves as a networking organization for community libraries (UgCLA, 2017). UgCLA's mission is "to complement the education system of Uganda and promote the development of productive literacy practices by encouraging and supporting the growth of community libraries" (UgCLA, 2017). It is within UgCLA's mandate to cooperate with other national organizations with similar interests to promote the work of community libraries (UgCLA, 2017). As such, UgCLA has over 120 partners worldwide that support community libraries through funding, book donations and capacity building.

The establishment of UgCLA has seen a steady increase in the number of community libraries. As of May 2018, UgCLA has registered over 134 community libraries nationwide. Of the 134 community libraries, 19 are registered and spread out in Kampala District, the capital city of Uganda while the rest are spread out through the country's 120 districts.

It is worth mentioning that UgCLA, organizes conferences and workshops for librarians to exchange ideas, solicits donations, and manages library volunteer programs at a national level. Some of the popular library activities supported by the association include sewing club, recording songs, school outreaches, cultural galas, cooking club, health education and reading camps, youth clubs, drawing workshops, music clubs, sports clubs, clean water supply, chess, community inclusion and others. Some of these activities show that the association and community libraries are directly involved with managing IK.

4. Community libraries and preservation of IK

There is not much existing literature on the role of community libraries in documenting and preserving IK. However, there is an international effort to recognize the role of libraries in enhancing access to indigenous materials. IFLA

has in place an Indigenous Matters Section, which aims "to support the provision of culturally responsive and effective services to indigenous communities throughout the world. Its main objectives are to promote international cooperation in the fields of library, culture, knowledge and information services to indigenous communities that meet their intergenerational, community, cultural and language needs, and to encourage indigenous leadership within the sector, exchange of experience, education and training and research in all aspects of this subject" (IFLA, 2018). Such international recognition promotes a global voice for librarians to come together and work together towards saving IK and communities from becoming irrelevant through erosion of knowledge.

According to Okore, et al. (2009), libraries have made progress in preserving traditional knowledge in both paper and digital format. Okore, et al. (2009) further assert that libraries provide strong platforms to promote access to IK through creation of conducive environments that permit face to face interactions and networking forums for community members to discuss pertinent cultural issues. Sithole (2007) proposes documentation of IK in languages that are understood by other communities when it loses local specificity. This is something that many community libraries can hold in high regard and promote robust IK preservation strategies.

Further still, libraries are well known for promoting the rights of users and creators of IK as well as negotiating copyright issues in local communities specially to do with individual and communal rights (Owiny, Mehta & Maretzki, 2014). In addition, Lor (2004) notes that libraries should play a leading role in the discovery, recording of IK, organization and promotion of its use as well as providing materials and recognition of local communities that produce it. In this sense, community libraries should play a significant part in preservation of IK and maintain the momentum for future generations.

In some African countries, there are IK preservation strategies by public libraries to preserve IK. In countries like Botswana and Nigeria, there are efforts seen in implementing community projects where libraries engage community members in sewing projects, basket weaving and plant conservation (Okorafor, 2010; Jain and Jibri, 2016). This shows that some public libraries are keen on preserving IK for posterity.

Other community libraries are embracing technology mostly adopting Web 2.0 technologies (Owiny, Mehta & Maretzki, 2014). In South Africa for instance, there is the Ulwazi Programme, an initiative of the eThekwini Municipal Library that makes use of social media to share and preserve the online indigenous knowledge and local histories of the Durban area. This kind of initiative promotes access to IK through the community library's social media awareness about availability of IK.

However, some libraries in Africa are still foreign based following the effects of colonialism. For instance, Nigerian libraries have largely maintained a western approach to collection development, as many tend to ignore the indigenous practices, which are seen as inferior thus playing a small part in promoting documentation and preservation of IK (Okorafor, 2010). This can be said for other African countries that are still embedded in colonial tendencies that continue to influence education and library services. Okorafor (2010) advises that librarians should be instrumental in supporting local researchers and authors as they collect data, write about IK and publish in the area of IK.

It is noted that there are few experienced and qualified documentalists in the field of IK and thus a challenge for IK continuity. Okorafor (2010) observes there are few people in Nigeria interested in working as documentarists and that "if a qualified scientist is employed to do this job, he needs to be given additional training as a documentarist." This passes as a challenge for libraries and other cultural heritage institutions that take part in documentation and preservation practices for IK. Building human capacity in this area is inevitable to ensure smooth IK flow and continuity.

5. Findings and discussion

The study employed unstructured interviews to gain in-depth information and construct meaning from 19 community libraries in Kampala District. The study only involved community libraries registered with the Uganda Community Libraries Association. Nineteen librarians (one from each library) were interviewed to inform the study about the role community libraries play in preservation of IK. The libraries investigated included 1)

Kawempe Youth Centre, 2) Namuwongo Community Library, 3) Amka Foundation, 4) Adult Literacy and Basic Education Center, 5) Art of a Child Uganda, 6) ANABEL Resource Centre, 7) Friends Children's Library, 8) INFORALL Community Library, 9) Megabytes Ntinda, 10) Mummy Foundation, 11) M-LISADA Community Library, 12) Premier Community Library, 13) Techno- Aid Uganda, 14) The North Green School Library 15) Uganda Community Cultural Center, 16) Uganda Hands for Hope, 17) ULALA Resource Center, 18) Upstairs Café Community Library, and 19) YWCA Vocational Training Center. These libraries are all well spread out in the city suburbs and slums, strategically placed to reach different communities and cultures.

The findings of the study revealed that the categories of people who use community libraries include youths, school children, fishermen, farmers, teen mothers, elderly persons, students, refugees, street kids, craftsmen, and others. The study discovered that community libraries generally do not hold a lot of materials on IK but some of the materials identified included story books, song books, language books, books on farming, videos, photographs, and traditional cook books. This is in line with Okore et. al's (2009) assertion that libraries

have made progress in preserving local culture both in print and digital formats. However, even with such progress, the study revealed that not all community librarians in Kampala District understood the concept of IK preservation.

When asked about their stand on IK preservation, community librarians echoed that they are well placed to spearhead IK preservation efforts in their communities because they spend a lot of time with community members. They believe IK should be preserved in communities to help people carry on with their cultural norms Okorafor (2010) corroborates this fact by noting that IK enables communities to know their past and prevents loss of cultural identity. Notably, librarians revealed that community libraries can do a great deal in changing people's mindsets on IK and its significance.

It was discovered that all the community libraries are engaged in practical ways of IK preservation in one way or the other. Of the 19 libraries, six libraries have partnered with cultural centers in Kampala to take community members to visit cultural heritage sites to learn about their history on a monthly basis. On weekends, some librarians often schedule invitations for elderly community members to talk about various traditions and beliefs to the younger generation through storytelling. Since IK is largely held in people's heads (Mabawonku, 2002; Nakata & Langton, 2005; Okorafor, 2010), story telling is an effective and interesting way of passing it on to the younger generation. As a way of preservation, librarians record these sessions and capture them on DVDs that they make accessible to other community members.

Other ways community libraries are engaged in preserving IK include implementation of youth and women programs where by community members gather at their respective libraries to learn how to sew traditional attires, cook (food heritage), sing, dance, act in local languages, and make traditional crafts. The same IK preservation activities were noted by Okorafor (2010) and Jain and Jibril (2016) to be largely practiced by public libraries in Botswana and Nigeria. This shows that community libraries in Kampala are enthusiastic about adopting best practices in IK preservation from other parts of the world.

Being that IK is largely embedded in people's practices (Sithole, 2007), the activities above fit the embedded nature of IK and promote 'learning by doing.' Furthermore, community libraries make use of regular newspaper pullouts on culture and share with the community members. Some librarians use mobile libraries to get to 'hard to reach' community members who usually have no knowledge of existence of community libraries. In other words, they take the library to the community for members who do not come to the libraries. Through this, community libraries circulate materials on IK and teach people about the importance of culture and history.

In other endeavors to preserve IK, some community libraries in Kampala have started holding cultural galas for the communities. These take place at the

library premises, usually at the end of the month, and are in form of acting and exhibitions to showcase cultural talents. The community members themselves carryout these activities as a way of culturally entertaining other invited community teams. Consequently, some community libraries are trying to start inter-community library competitions involving things like singing, dancing, acting, handwork, etc. However, this is still proving to be a challenge because there is no proper coordination and cooperation between different libraries from different communities.

The study discovered that one of the common challenges of preserving IK includes difficulty in reaching mixed communities where librarians find it tasking to reach diverse populations in terms of meeting different cultural needs. Kampala is the "melting pot" of Uganda with heavy settlement of different cultural groups including refugees from neighboring countries. Community libraries tend to be limited when supplying materials on IK in a few languages and not others. More challenges identified included inadequate facilitation and funding from the government (support for community libraries is less of a priority), as well as lack of IK documentation tools and expertise. Existing literature alludes to the same concern about inadequate expertise as reported by Okorafor (2010) that there are few qualified IK documentarists in Nigeria.

The study further identified westernization and modernization as a big challenge eroding IK in communities around Kampala. Most librarians noted that a large cross-section of the youths would rather learn about western music, dance, food, fashion and ways of life than their own culture. Western education is slowly making some languages disappear since English is being taught to children at a tender age. This is a challenge facing other African countries like Nigeria as identified by Okorafor (2010) that Nigeria has been affected by the Western approach of doing things as a preference over traditional approaches.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

IK plays a vital role in all spheres of life for community dwellers in Kampala District. To mention but a few, IK is used in local decision making, enhancing the sources of livelihood, and promoting a sense of identity for communities. Preservation of IK generally provides a framework for maintaining traditional practices and self-identification of the local people in their respective communities. IK preservation, is therefore, a matter of national importance and should be given the most due attention. Community libraries in Kampala have a lot of potential to preserve IK because they are open to community engagement and participation. Librarians' effort in the IK preservation cause are commendable but enough to ensure continuity of national culture and identity.

The challenge remains that IK is generally transmitted orally from one generation to another and stands to be eroded with time leading to possible extinction. The following are the recommendations of the study:

- It is incumbent upon community libraries to work together and adopt best practices that are relevant in safeguarding IK and making it accessible to community members at present and in future. Such coordination efforts should provide a shared platform for collaborations and stronger base for preservation strategies through exchange of ideas. Some of the collaborations could include creating of simple shared IK databases between community libraries to foster access to communities.

- It is important for the National Library of Uganda (NLU) to work closely with community libraries and UgCLA to establish IK units, for which they can identify and employ IK experts to capture, document, organize and provide access to this knowledge in a systematic manner. Sustainable links between these IK units should be forged to ensure that preservation is a stronger cause among all community libraries and that it is done on a continuous basis. Beyond this, NLU and UgCLA should mobilize funds to boost the cultural activities of community libraries on a macro rather than micro scale. NLU and UgCLA should, therefore facilitate community libraries in terms of transportation and providing simple tools such as cameras, tape and video recorders, DVDs, and CDs for capturing and storing IK.

- In addition to the above, UgCLA should clearly include IK preservation in its mandate. IK preservation is silent in UgCLA's activities and is not well reflected on the organization's website. Given the international recognition of IK and its intrinsic value, it's high time for UgCLA to move its preservation efforts up a notch to match international practices and standards.

- It is critical for the government of Uganda to integrate IK subjects /courses into the education system right from the lowest level of education to institutions of higher learning. Library schools themselves should incorporate IK management courses in their programs for aspiring community librarians. This will arouse interest, understanding, and create wide spread awareness of the value of IK to our communities. In addition, community libraries should embed IK teachings as part of their instructional materials to create greater appreciation for IK in their communities. Community librarians ought to work closely with community local leaders to ensure that their work is recognized and appreciated. Community leaders in every sense should help in organizing community gatherings where librarians should be able to hold meaningful conversations and educate people about IK and instill a natural liking for local culture.

- There is need for community libraries to work with policy makers to design and implement IK preservation policies. These policies should cover effective ways to collect (techniques to capture including interviews with elders), preserve (including documentation for posterity) and disseminate (channels to use to reach wider audiences) IK to communities. The policies should further spell out how

communities should participate and the principles of intellectual property to ensure proper protection and use of IK.

- There is need for massive campaigns to create extensive awareness on the existence of community libraries and their work on IK preservation. All concerned stakeholders (community libraries, community leaders, government, NLU, UgCLA) should endeavor to use mass media platforms such as radios, televisions, newspapers and social media to inform communities about their libraries and whereabouts.

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