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**Preservation and Conservation of Indigenous knowledge of the
Igbo people in South East Nigeria: Roles for Libraries.**

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Abstract

Indigenous knowledge is very important for sustainable development both locally and internationally, therefore it needs to be preserved. The paper discusses the role of libraries in preservation of indigenous knowledge of the Igbo people of South East Nigeria. Aspects of Igbo indigenous knowledge were listed and their importance highlighted. The problems militating against effective management and preservation of Igbo indigenous knowledge were enumerated. The paper recommends that Librarians especially in public, medical and academic libraries should build a strong *Africana* section for Igbo cultural and language resources.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Igbo, Cultural continuity, Preservation and conservation.

Introduction

A people's culture is the set of values and norms that is unique to them. It identifies the people and shapes acceptable behaviours and ethics. Indigenous knowledge is derived from these norms and behaviours

Indigenous knowledge is the local or traditional knowledge that is generated and used in a specific community. This knowledge is unique to a particular cultural society and is used in that community for local decision making in all aspects of life

practices such as agriculture, healthcare, food production and preparations skill development, education, social relationship, natural resources management (Mundy, 1991). This is further buttressed by Gbenga (2014) when he included in his own list of traditional knowledge, leadership, medicine, healing rituals, indigenous library system where knowledge relating to sacred objects and materials of historic significance are kept in memory of the traditions and custodians, architecture, clothing, weaving, soap making, blacksmithing, divination and carving.

Indigenous knowledge is unique to a community. For example, knowledge about methods of preparation of some local foods differs from one community to another and unless it is transferred to another community, it remains and dies in that community because according to Nwokoma (2012), it is seldom documented.

Aspects of Indigenous knowledge in Igbo land

The Igbo people are inhabitants of the South-Eastern states of Nigeria which include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. They also live in many parts of South-South of Delta, Rivers, Cross River and Akwa-Ibom States. They have much Indigenous practices that is unique to the people sustained by indigenous knowledge. These include:

Traditional Agriculture

The Igbo people are traditionally farmers. There is little mechanized farming in Igbo land. There are many indigenous crops and trees such as yam, cocoyam, local beans – *okwe*, better kola, breadfruit, palm tree etc with various cropping, planting, processing and preservation knowledge and practices.

Indigenous agricultural practices have sustained food production and are still being practiced in Igbo land today. Cropping and animal husbandry practices mostly in rural areas are passed down from generation to generation.

Food Preparations

The Igbo have indigenous foods and delicacies that are unique to their culture and tradition. Such foods include *Abacha and Ugba, Achicha, Ukwa, Nkwobi, Ona, Akpu, soup preparations such ofe onugbu, ofe ogbono, ofe achara* and many others. There are staple foods that are eaten on daily basis. Igbo food and delicacies are important part of celebrations, occasions and festivals in the communities. Indigenous knowledge of how to prepare these foods have been passed down from generation to generation

Indigenous Igbo Language - *Asụsụ Igbo*

The language of a people is their most important heritage on which the survival of their culture and their continuous existence on earth as a group largely depend. Language is the key element towards cultural transmission, maintenance and revival. The Igbo language *Asụsụ Igbo* is spoken in several African countries including Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea and Congo among others. It belongs to the 'Benue-Congo' family of languages, which is a subgroup of the major 'Niger-Congo' family of languages. The Igbo language has to its credit in a number of dialects, distinguished by accent or orthography but almost universally mutually intelligible (Oyelami, 2008).

Traditional Medicine and Healing

Before the advent of western medicine, the Igbo people had their own knowledge of using traditional plants and herbs to produce

medicine that were used to cure most of the prevailing ailments like malaria, insect or snake bites etc. Many of these traditional knowledge and herbs are used in modern medicine to produce modern drugs. This is confirmed by Pence and Schafer (2006) who opined that the indigenous knowledge of botany served western medicine and pharmacology.

Arts, Handicrafts and Festivals

Igbo songs and dances are one of the highest forms of art in Igbo land. They have different songs and dances performed on different occasions to depict the celebration, ceremony or the mood of the period. There are songs and dances performed at the birth of a new child, at burial ceremonies, and at festivals like new yam festival. There was also storytelling done during moonlight games. A lot of knowledge and information were passed to young people during the nights of storytelling.

Indigenous art and crafts have been used to propel and sustain agriculture and other industrial processes in Igbo land for ages. Such is the case of blacksmithing of the Awka people of Anambra state, the fishing industry of the riverine areas of Anambra and Delta states.

Problems of Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge in Igbo Land

It is noted that documentation is the main method of preserving knowledge (Anyaoku, Nwafor-Orizu & Eneh, 2015). Knowledge is documented in various media and formats such as print, audio, audiovisual and recently digital media. Indigenous knowledge were domiciled with people and passed down orally from generation to generation. Poor documentation and urbanization have led to loss of vital indigenous knowledge of Igbo people. The

loss of indigenous knowledge in Igbo land is quite profound. Many aspects of agricultural knowledge, arts, culture are undocumented and not captured for preservation and posterity. Consequently a lot of vital knowledge has been lost with the demise of older generation who were the human knowledge repositories.

Equally, globally, Indigenous knowledge system is facing the problem of extinction due to modern developments and prevailing factors. People now prefer modern knowledge, practices and technology over indigenous knowledge and tools. To accentuate this problem, there is a gross neglect of indigenous practices and culture by younger generations. Attitude of modern generation towards all aspects of indigenous knowledge and practices is quite negative leading to a high neglect of almost all aspects of indigenous knowledge by the younger generation. According to Agrawal, (1995) indigenous knowledge is considered old, outdated, parochial, and primitive. Hence IK is seen as a way of life that is backward, which is being possessed by people in low and middle income countries. Even in those low income countries, IK is regarded as knowledge of primitive, and less privileged poor rural citizens. These negative opinions are resulting to great loss of Ik with implication that vital knowledge that might lead to the future survival of humans are being lost. This loss might negatively affect humans, the environment and the society.

These factors like lack of proper documentation, global marginalization and modern technology, are affecting the continual existence the spectrum of Igbo Indigenous knowledge. Of much concern is that in recent time, there is general decline in the use of the indigenous language of the Igbo people. Communication in Igbo

language is seriously discouraged at home, and schools in the communities. Various school managements in primary and secondary schools in urban area in South East Nigeria consider Igbo language as primitive and uncultured. Equally the new age parents prefer to communicate with their children in English language thereby breaking a link of language transfer to the younger generation. This has raised a strong concern of possible extinction of the Igbo language. It is one of the languages projected by UNESCO to be at the danger of extinction in the next 50 years if nothing is done to revive the language. Odinye and Odinye (nd) classified Igbo language as “Definitely Endangered” and ‘Unsafe’. They commented that it is frightening to note that about 50 percent Igbo children cannot speak Igbo language. Every parent is making effort to see his child speak English language and none encourages his child to speak Igbo language.

Loss of IK such as language might also mean that a cohesive factor that binds and identifies a group of people has disintegrated leading to possible collapse of familial ties in the community.

The IK of the Igbo people is also being threatened by modern technology i.e. radio, or television and more currently the evolution of the Internet. This media have the advantage of giving seamless and immediate, access to knowledge and are therefore more preferable than oral information. Information from these modern gadgets is well documented and can be retrieved with ease. Modernization and industrialization has lead to great deforestation in Igbo communities. Certain medicinal plants are being destroyed, and many have become extinct. Therefore there is a serious loss of knowledge or culture associated with these plants. Libraries have

important roles to play to prevent the total loss of IK of the Igbo people.

Library’s Roles in the Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge of Igbo People.

Librarians as information managers have some roles to play in contributing to preservation of indigenous knowledge of communities. Several writers have discussed the roles of libraries in preservation of indigenous knowledge. IFLA (2008) recommends libraries to collect, preserve, and disseminate Indigenous knowledge, publicize the value, contribution, and importance of IK to both non-indigenous and indigenous people, involving elders and communities in the production of IK and encourage the recognition of intellectual property laws to ensure the proper protection and use of IK. Ngurube (2002) wrote that IK should be gathered, organized and disseminated in the same way as the western knowledge in order to see to the sustainable development.

Libraries and information managers should therefore design collection development policies for indigenous knowledge. Warren et al (1995) recommends *ex situ* conservation strategies, i.e. isolation, documentation and storage in international, regional and national archives. The important thing in this argument is that IK is a worthwhile knowledge that should be preserved and integrated into the existing knowledge management systems for the benefit of society.

The issue at hand is how this can be effectively done. According to Amanda (2008) libraries can play a very important role in assisting indigenous communities with the management and preservation of indigenous language through providing resources and expertise in collection,

organization, storage and retrieval. IK can be collected in many forms such as folk media, which can come as audiovisual resources. Chisita (2011) opined that it is not enough to catalogue, abstract, classify, index, and digitize materials to facilitate access but what is needed is for Libraries and Information professionals to put indigenous knowledge into a cultural context. They need to collaborate with the indigenous community to devise a means of collecting, preserving and making IK accessible to society. By so doing, they tend to 'reduce poverty, enhance equity, reduce environmental degradation and lead to sustainable development, as well as increase local participation in the development process (Warren and McKiernan, 1995). They should find ways of converting the IK in whatever form it is collected into documentary form which can be easily preserved and accessed.

To contribute to preserving Igbo IK, public, medical and academic libraries in Igbo land should focus on identification, acquisition, organization, and dissemination of IK resources by building a strong *Africana* section for Igbo culture and language materials whether written in English or Igbo. Apart from publications on cultural heritage, the novels of notable early Igbo writers, though fictions are very good chronicles of Igbo culture and indigenous knowledge; for instance novels of Chinua Achebe, Ogbalu, Joseph Maduekwe, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa and many others are rich sources of Igbo practices, wisdom, philosophy, and proverbs. Heads of Medical libraries should develop library policies that incorporate sub-disciplines of traditional medicine into the mainstream collection development. This includes Physiotherapy,

Ethnomedicine, Ethnobotany, Pharmacognosy, Herbal medicine.

In addition to the collection development of print media, audiovisual and digital materials on Igbo culture and indigenous knowledge should be collected and preserved by librarians. UNESCO recognizes the importance of media in preservation of indigenous knowledge. According to the agency, audiovisual documents, such as films, radio and television programmes are our common heritage and contain the primary records of the history of the 20th and 21st centuries. The General Conference of UNESCO approved the commemoration of a World Day for Audiovisual Heritage in 2005 as a mechanism to raise general awareness of the need to preserve and safeguard important audiovisual material for future generations, and for urgent measures to be taken to conserve this heritage and ensure it remains accessible to the public now, and to future generations. Therefore audio – visual recordings of Igbo cultural events, practices and language should be persevered and disseminated by libraries.

Conclusion

There is great need to preserve indigenous knowledge as indigenous communities around the world are facing ongoing threats to the survival of their traditional language and culture. Preserving indigenous knowledge of the Igbo people of South East Nigeria is imperative for cultural continuity. These include indigenous agriculture knowledge, food production, medicinal herbs and healing practices, arts and handcrafts. Libraries in Igbo land can contribute to preserving IK through organized collection development processes.

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