

The Role of Public Libraries in the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Nigeria: Challenges and Strategies.

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Abstract

Purpose: The study investigated the role of public libraries in the preservation of cultural heritage in Nigeria. The challenges being encountered as well as the strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Design/Methodology/Approach: the exploratory approach was adopted in the study. First a conceptual framework was developed to link culture and people's identity and need for the preservation of cultural identity. The next approach was the identification of the critical role of public libraries in this preservation of culture, challenges and how to overcome these challenges.

Findings: The paper found out that knowledge and understanding of a people's past can help present inhabitants to develop and sustain national identity and to appreciate the value of their own culture and heritage.

Practical Implications: A community is endangered if it loses its identity as a result of loss of its cultural heritage. Preservation of cultural heritage of communities it serves for posterity is a must for public libraries as cultural heritage contains the strength and weaknesses of the community served.

Originality/Value: A fundamental study that showcased the need to preserve and document cultural heritage in Nigeria and the role of public libraries. Its challenges and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Keywords: Public Libraries, preservation, Cultural heritage, intellectual property right.

Paper Type – Conceptual

Introduction

Cultural heritage refers to the legacies of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present for the benefit of future generation. Prott. & O'keefe (1984) in their definition enumerated the components that make up cultural heritage. In their opinion, cultural heritage includes moveable objects (works of arts)-, immovable cultural objects (monuments and sites), expressive activities (language, music, dance and drama) as well as intangible customs and traditions such as proverbs, rituals and intellectual norms. Most cultural heritage are mainly inspired by expressions of religious faith and practices (Otagburuagu and Omena, 2009).

Society as we know it has been built up over generations, each generation adding its knowledge and experiences to the store already amassed by earlier generations. Much of this

knowledge and experience has been written down or published or expressed in other ways through our culture in music and paintings, for example and is kept today in the open collections and archives of our public libraries.

Cultural heritage is a primary source of understanding strategies of human adoption to and use of the environment in which one finds himself. Goodland and Web (1992) adduced that knowledge and understanding of a people's past can help present inhabitants to develop and sustain national identity and to appreciate the value of their own culture and heritage. This knowledge and understanding enrich the lives of nations citizens and enable them to manage contemporary problems more successfully. Cultural heritage is more than the work of Art or craft. It also includes non-moveable artifacts as well as socially constructed knowledge found in craft or technological processes which includes, traditional and modern technologies which would help to enhance the living standard of the

people. According to Taboraff(1992) conservation and understanding African cultural heritage are part of the quest for a sense of African identity. Kawunda(1987) as cited by Taboraff, (1992) at the inauguration of the Railway museum in Livingstone stated: it is important that national identity is preserved. This can only be achieved through the preservation of those aspect of our society that are dear to us as a people our monuments and relics since they are witnesses of our history and of our past achievement. It is important to know the past because it gives room for adjustment and continuity so that the modern man would be given a sense of good morals, spirituals regeneration that would help him develop his attitudes, aptitudes, and a sense of belonging.

Okpoko and Okpoko (2002) stated that culture is a way of life, acquired within the society and transmitted through generations .He opined that culture consists of both material and non-material aspects. He referred to material culture as all the concrete realities made and utilized by man in society. This includes the products of industry, technology, arts etc. Non-material culture he opined deals with aesthetics of all nature, belief systems, cultural expressions appropriate to roles, rules and norms. On his own part, Nwaezeigwe (2009) sees culture as a body of norms and practices that defines a people way of life and uniqueness in relation to other people. Every group of people has certain norms and practices that govern them. Though the culture of one ethnic group may be similar to that of another, they cannot be exactly the same.

A people's culture or cultural heritage helps to preserve their identity. Cultural practices are not in-borne in people but learned mostly through informal education. Knowledge and understanding of peoples past can help present inhabitants to develop and sustain national identity and to appreciate the role of their own culture and heritage. This knowledge and understanding enriches the lives of nation's citizens and enables them to manage contemporary problems more successfully. The problem with industrialization in sub-Saharan African countries today is more as a result of imposition of alien culture on their cultural heritage-the indigenous technology. Cultural heritage helps to achieve a sense of identity. The everyday beliefs and ways of doing things of a particular group become more understandable when the past is taken into account. It provides a

time dimension of the understanding of the changes taking place in the everyday lives of a people.

Preserving the cultural; historical and scientific heritage of various world nations; and their thorough presentation has been a long term commitment of library and information centers. Their major task has been collecting; documenting and disseminating information on the cultural heritage of its community. Good well run library system is a prerequisite for offering everyone a genuine opportunity to learn about their society and its background, to improve themselves and grow personally and from there, to take an active part in a democratic society (Lone; 1995).In most communities; the public library is the only neutral public territory accessible on equal basis to everyone in a society divided along religious and sectarian lines. They serve multiple functions; collecting all materials relating to its community or written in the communities dialect, and acts as a gateway to the community in this information technology age.

Why the need to Preserve and Document Cultural Heritage.

The library is a public institution Central to the life of the country (Kom; 1996)It has been involved in documenting and preserving of cultural heritage in the following ways:

1. Cultural heritage is fundamental to any society. It is the accumulated learning which is built upon to create new knowledge (Lone, 1995).
2. Cultural heritage plays an important role in promoting self respect and pride. It helps to motivate people to maintain social standards in front of other groups.
3. The consequence of inability to preserve one's heritage materials will be a loss of identity and influence in the global community (Ezeani and Ezema, 2009).
4. Documentation and preservation of cultural heritage help to have an idea of its numerical strength.
5. The effects of globalization pose challenges for the preservation and maintenance of cultural heritage and identities worldwide. Documenting and preserving it with the help of new Information and communication technologies will make it possible for

other people to view our cultural heritage electronically, thereby giving out collection a global outreach for research.

6. It can serve as part of the technology through which the unique attributes of each cultural view, beliefs and interaction systems could be communicated and transmitted.
7. It contributes to sustainable local and national development e.g. the use of modern Agricultural implements in Agriculture, use of herbs in making drugs etc.
8. Increases realization of the commercial value of culture e.g. Film show talent.
9. It would encourage the artist both armature and experts to develop their talents, skills by seeking patronage with the library as organizer, client and executor of cultural activities.
10. It helps to create awareness of the existence of tourist attractions in a locality e.g. Mambilla plateau in the North, Obudu Cattle ranch in the south, Nike lake in Nike, Enugu State.

The Role of Public Library in the Preservation of Cultural Heritage.

For centuries-every generation has aimed at keeping records about its labor so that it could be revised and studied by succeeding generations. Public libraries have been central in collecting and documenting these heritages through the following ways;

1. Provision of cultural materials for all sections of the host community; not only the largest or most powerful, hence the provision of cultural products from various ethnic minority groups.
2. Provision of space for cultural works for all both rich and poor.
3. Sustaining local cultural activities e.g. organizing and hosting story telling.
4. Presentation of lectures and seminars to disseminate information on political economic and cultural events in the society.
5. Ensuring that library collections and services help people to understand their local environment. The homogeneity of the society or its diverse culture.

6. Take records of the cultural heritage of the community it serves. The recording should include valuable collections of the local history, tales; riddles, traditional technologies and traditional pharmacopoeia which can be used by the public in collective listening sessions.

Problems facing the Preservation of Cultural heritage in Nigeria.

Funds: Funds remain one of the most difficult challenges facing libraries in Nigeria. Of all public institutions in Nigeria, the public library remains one of the most poorly funded institutions in the country. Funds are needed to carry out traditional library services as well as other services required of the library. More often than not, the fund is not available or when available, not accessible. For libraries to effectively perform its role it must be adequately funded. Adebayo (2004) asserted that libraries needed to be adequately funded to ensure continuous growth and development.

Lack of experienced or skilled manpower: Librarianship is still a new profession in Nigeria. Not many people are aware of it as a viable profession and as such do not encourage their children or wards to study it. The result is that most of the people that eventually study it are people without interest in the profession. Most of them joined librarianship as a last resort. Even at this, the number of professional librarians in Nigeria is still very small compared to the work before them. As a result most aspect of the work are left in the hands of clerical officers especially in the public libraries.

The library school curricula in Nigeria: The curriculum of the few library schools in Nigeria does not include studies in preservation of cultural heritage. It is until recently that the University of Nigeria, Nsukka included in its undergraduate and Post-Graduate degrees curriculum a course in the preservation of cultural heritage. This means that most graduates from Nigerian Universities do not know that preservation of the Cultural Heritage of their host communities is part of their responsibilities as librarians serving in those communities.

Protection of Intellectual Property Right (IPR): Protection of Intellectual property right has been a problem in most African countries especially Nigeria. In Nigeria, it is a common occurrence to see fake copies of peoples work on sale in the markets and nobody pays any serious

attention to it. As a result, most of our cultural heritage especially in area of traditional agricultural practices and medicine are guarded jealously by their owners to avoid losing them.

Taboos: A lot of taboos are guiding people's belief system in Nigeria. Most rural communities find it very difficult to divulge information to researchers for the fear that they might lack one taboo or the other or even offend the gods. Most of them believe that giving out their cultural heritage for preservation in the library will mean exposing it to the outside world which they believe will eventually leave them with nothing.

Ways of overcoming the problems associated with the preservation of cultural Heritage in the library.

- **Funds:** Most library activities in Nigeria are not progressive due to lack of funds-Almost all mobile library services run by Nigerian public libraries are now moribund. The government through the Ministry of Education, the controlling body of library services should ensure that libraries are well equipped financially. Librarians should also know that library services in the present day differ a lot from that of the previous years; as a result they should devise a way of generating revenue internally to sustain themselves.
- **Curriculum development for library schools should emanate more from everyday experiences of librarians in the library profession.** This will help to ensure that what is learnt in the classroom does not differ much from practical experience.
- Public libraries should liaise with traditional rulers, elders, women organizations and cultural organizations for appropriate information gathering through the use of modern technological equipments.
- **Most cultural Heritage materials are not patented.** The library should help the owners of such Heritage to patent them. There should be a cost also for the use of such materials. This will help buy the confidence of the owners of such materials.
- **Cultural diversity committee:** Libraries serving in places where there is cultural diversity should endeavor to maintain

cultural diversity committees to ensure that no culture in that area is relegated to the background and at the same time ensure that the interest of each culture is protected.

Conclusion

Public libraries, if well funded and managed contained all the strengths and weaknesses of the community it serves. It can serve as the mirror through which the reflection of the community can be seen. The cultural Heritage of a Nation/Community is not something to be toyed with. It needs to be preserved for posterity. Moreover, it is the hub around which all development efforts should emanate otherwise the community will run into the problem of loss of identity, culture erosion, technology transfer and its resultant effect of underdevelopment.

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Chibuzor, L. Dim & Ngozi, E. Osadebe

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