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GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN: QUESTIONING THE ROLE OF ARCHIVISTS AND LIBRARIANS IN THE DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Recently, archivists and librarians have been advocating for and re-affirming their role in the documentation and preservation of indigenous knowledge (IK). Whilst literature on this position abounds, we argue in this article that archivists and librarians are running the risk of imposing themselves on a system that "naturally" preserves itself. In face of the challenges that these collecting professionals encounter in trying to document IK, coupled with the nature of IK itself, we argue that IK should be left to "preserve" itself as it has always done. We argue that IK is a complex subject matter that can be equated to an ecosystem and has natural means of preserving and multiplying itself. We further argue that IK is naturally resilient to forces of extinction and efforts by librarians and archivists, which employ scientific methods of documentation and preservation, are actually detrimental to IK. Although such efforts may appear to be the talk of the day, they are actually incompatible with IK and archivists and librarians may be wasting efforts by preserving something that otherwise "naturally" documents and preserves itself in a variety of means, including language, traditional ceremonies, books (novels) and other "natural" means. We therefore conclude that IK is an ethnographical issue that should otherwise be left to take care of itself in local indigenous knowledge systems (IKS).

Keywords:
Indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge, documentation, preservation

Introduction

The subject of local indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) has attracted a lot of attention from various scholars. As observed by Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) "…the growing interest in traditional knowledge since the 1980s is indicative of the need to gain further insights into indigenous and/or local practices…". The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented growth in literature on the role of librarians and archivists the documentation of indigenous knowledge (IK). Excluding the field of museum, these information professionals have the basis of their practices based on "collecting" and providing access to information.

The impetus behind this participation of these collecting professionals is the so called much popularised depletion of this type of knowledge at the height of a plethora of factors, chief among them being globalisation and death of the "possessors" of such knowledge (Ngulube 2002). As Brodt (2001:100) stated, a number of scholars are concerned that globalisation and "scientisation" of local management systems threaten the survival of valuable indigenous knowledge. This has prompted a lot of research and debates on the subject matter. Indeed, Cicin-Sain and Knectht (1995) as cited in Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:198) observed that the

documentation as well as use of IKS have become a part of international policy, starting from as early as 1992 when the Earth Summit took place, where a strong step to help legitimise IK was taken.

This interest in IK has spilt to the territory of archivists and librarians who, of late, have become very active in IKS, especially in its documentation and preservation, amid the controversies surrounding the whole concept of IKS, let alone its preservation, from an information science perspective. As highlighted by Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:198), the documentation of IK has taken place "yet some of the central issues concerning indigenous knowledge have remained elusive, not only for policy makers, but also for scholars engaged in such research". Librarians and archivists, with their information science background, are in a dilemma of making efforts to define their niche in IKS.

This article therefore, examines and questions the role that librarians and archivists play in the documentation and preservation of this knowledge. Whilst traditional knowledge "…can be viewed as a library of information on how to cope with complex systems" (Berkes, Colding and Folke 2000:1260), the major question that this article seeks to address is: do archivists and librarians really have a role to play in the documentation and preservation of IK? The article is based on an understanding that collecting or information science practitioners, "…skilfully catalog, digitise and display information so that the public can access it" (Burtis n. d), and archivists should collect, arrange, describe, communicate IK (Ngulube, Masuku and Sigauke 2011:267), the very basis on which we question the role of librarians and archivists in documenting and preserving IK.

Defining IK

A number of definitions have been coined to define IK, with some terming it local knowledge, traditional knowledge (Ngulube and Onyancha 2011). IK, according to Burtis (n. d), is the knowledge, innovations as well as practices of indigenous groups of people concerning matters of agriculture and environmental management, medicine and health, art and language. Hunter (2006:94) characterised IK as that knowledge which encompasses a number of forms, including cultural heritage in the form of traditional stories, dances, and ceremonies that reflect beliefs related to spirituality, family, land and social justice. To Brodt (2001:100):

> …the term indigenous knowledge implies any knowledge produced by and/or distinctive to a particular culture group or any loosely defined group of resource users in a given area. Such knowledge is usually produced informally by people actually practicing a craft or working directly with a resource, as opposed to paid knowledge professionals such as scientists. As such, the term is synonymous with "folk knowledge" and also "local knowledge.

Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:199) explained that indigenous knowledge is a broad term that extends beyond ecological knowledge to cover other knowledge and skills related to making a livelihood. Thus, IK, includes "…knowledge about people, places, plants, animals, and historical events associated with a particular community" (Hunter 2006:94). Although other scholars have had reservations concerning the use of the term 'traditional knowledge" synonymously with "indigenous knowledge", this article does not dwell on the semantics of these terms and the two are considered to mean one and the same thing. As Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1251) observed, for ages, the term "tradition" was a problematic one for researchers in fields such as anthropology and development, mainly because Warren (1995), associated the term with the 19th century attitudes of simple, savage and static societies, resulting in some scholars preferring the

less value-laden term "indigenous knowledge". In this article, we adopt the stance that Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) took where they stated that:

> Whether a practice is traditional or contemporary is not the key issue. The important aspect is whether or not there exists local knowledge that helps monitor, interpret, and respond to dynamic changes in ecosystems and resources and services that they generate.

According to Burtis (n. d), traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) also constitute IK, and have been passed from one generation to the next orally or traditionally and are an integral part of a culture's identity as well as heritage. The expression of these happens, although not limited to music and songs, stories, symbols, dances, rituals, architecture, arts, and craft (Franklin 2008 in Burtis n. d). Thus, in this article, IK is viewed in its broadest sense.

The nature of IK, its generation and acquisition

IK is a complex subject matter, with some authors stating that it runs parallel to Western knowledge. Whilst many scholars question the differences that are said to exist between these two types of knowledge, others insist that these are indeed different, and are less compatible. For example, Barnhardt (2002) cited in Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005:13) wrote:

> The complexities that come into play when two fundamentally different views converge present a formidable challenge. The specialisation, standardisation, compartmentalisation, and systematisation that are inherent features of most Western bureaucratic forms of organisation often are in direct conflict with social structures and practices in indigenous societies, which tend toward collective decision-making, extended kinship structures, ascribed authority vested in elders, flexible notions of time, and traditions of informality in everyday affairs.

Thus, IK accumulates over a long period of time, through practice as people and resources interact. It is peculiar to people of that community, hence the term indigenous or local knowledge. Put in the words of Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252):

> an analysis of many traditional ecological knowledge systems shows that there is a component of species and other environmental phenomena, a component of practice in the way people carry out their resource use activities". Furthermore, there is a component of belief regarding the way in which people fit into or relate to ecosystems.

Antweiler (1998:496) earlier on wrote: "as the term is defined, local knowledge and the respective knowledge systems are rooted in local or regional culture and ecology, the respective social contexts and their economies". Paul Feyerabend (1987), a philosopher, cited in Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1251) also explained that historical traditions [which are part of IK] include systems of knowledge that usually becomes encoded in rituals and in the cultural practices of people's everyday lives.

As stated by Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005:9), "indigenous societies, as a matter of survival, have long sought to understand the regularities in the world around them, recognising that nature is underlain with many unseen patterns of order". To Dixon (2005:308) "…each community potentially has a range of knowledge acquisition mechanism, networks and channels available, through which new ideas and innovations can be disseminated, adapted and applied".

Thus, a community can be seen as a complete system which interacts with its surrounding nature such that a state of "mutual agreement" (between the community and nature) is reached, resulting in co-existence between the two. This gives birth to knowledge that is unique to certain "local" geographical areas and this is IK. When such knowledge has been generated, it is communicated or spread in various ways that are characteristic of the

community. In explaining this, Wang (1982) cited in Dixon (2005:308) wrote "in rural areas of developing countries, IK tends to be communicated through events such as storytelling, village meetings and folk drama", as opposed to Western knowledge that is characterised more by tele-communication systems, mass media and government (Dixon 2005:308). Thus, Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) characterised traditional knowledge as a "knowledge-practice-belief complex".

Librarians, archivists and indigenous knowledge: a review of literature

Since the 1980s, the subject of IK has been a topical issue among scholars in disciplines such as anthropology, geology and disciplines that are related to development studies, and today this interest is broadening to include a variety of fields such as ecology, social science, health, medicine, botany, water resources management and many more, and the library and information science (LIS) field has recently taken note of this topic (Burtis n. d). Ngulube, Masuku and Sigauke (2011:267) also harped on the need for archivists to document and preserve IK by stating that "the archivists must play an active role in fostering a 'civilised society' by collecting, arranging, describing, communicating IK in the archive along with other knowledge" As it is, literature abounds on role of information professionals in documenting and preserving IK (Ngulube 2002). As also stated by Burtis (n. d) "IK and TCEs are represented in library and archival collections, but often LIS professionals make no attempt to put them into a cultural context". Both IK and TCEs, "…are found in libraries as original artefacts but are just as likely to take the form of audio and video recordings, photographs, and as textual descriptions of expressions" (Burtis n. d).

Several projects on IK and libraries and archives have been reported. Examples of current projects related to IK and TCEs, Burtis (n.d) reported, some of which make use of community-driven ontologies include:

1. Two multimedia projects (Village Voice and Tribal Diaspora) that was initiated by a professor in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California – Los Angeles (Burtis n.d). Both projects use a community-driven ontology for the knowledge architecture of the database which manages the narratives of various communities (i.e., Somali Americans and American Indians) (Srinivasan, 2004 in Burtis n. d).
2. Database software to support a program at the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian, that is, the Culturally Sensitive Collections Care Program (Burtis n. d). It allows for indigenous rights annotations and community-driven ontologies. The designers aim to use the software in collaborations between museums, archives and indigenous communities to facilitate cultural repatriation, Burtis (n. d) further reported. Software will be downloadable and freely available to indigenous communities (Hunter *et al*., 2004 in Burtis n. d).
3. Ara Irititja Project - a project supported by the South Australian Museum. The project partners with local Aboriginal organizations to collect and preserve both traditional and current Anangu material and stories (Burtis n. d). Through an interactive multi-media archive database, the materials are then "given back to the community" (Ara Irititja Project 2009 in Burtis n. d).
4. The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America which is a joint project of the Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics and the Digital Library Services Division of the University Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin (Burtis n. d). The archive preserves and makes accessible narratives, ceremonies, oratory, conversations, and songs in the indigenous languages of Latin America and is especially concerned with making the collection accessible to indigenous communities and asks for users to register

> and agree to terms and conditions concerned with intellectual property rights (Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America 2009 in Burtis n. d).

More projects in countries such as the United States of America and Australia have been reported. For example, the Galiwi'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre (GIKC) (Anderson 2006:78). Nakata *et al.*, (2006:12) also gave more examples, including the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (TS-CRC), whose projects include the development of various methodologies for recording ecological knowledge, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DK-CRC) whose aim is to develop formal and informal knowledge and research to increase social, economic and cultural capital in desert areas (Nakata *et al.*, 2006:12). More examples include the Centre for Arid Zone Research (CAZR), all in Australia (Nakata, *et al.*, 2006:12).

It is acknowledged that all these studies strongly advocate a re-visit of the role that librarians and archivists play in such projects. Russell (2006:142) had reservations about the "indigenous nature" of the so called indigenous knowledge that libraries and archives claim are in possession of. Russell (2006:142) wrote:

> Indeed, I am interested in any information, textual or other, that is housed within public, private or state archives, libraries or other institutions, which observes, and records Indigenous activities, and or people. This is not immediately or obviously Indigenous knowledge as it is knowledge not by, but rather about Indigenous people. As most historians would agree these archival records are at least as informative for what they reveal about the record makers as they are for any 'knowledge' contained within them.

On the same point, Anderson (2006:74) quoted Anderson and Koch (2004) lamenting the same problem, stating that because recordings of indigenous knowledge and information has predominantly been conducted by non-indigenous, people, the very making of the material into tangible form, including photographs, sound recordings, films and other forms, implies that ownership tends to lie with the non-indigenous researchers or creators of the work. This, on its own, is a serious challenge which requires a critical examination of the whole concept of IK documentation and preservation by information scientists such as librarians and archivists. Thus, although there are such cases of documentation of IK by libraries and archives, all in the name of preservation and patenting, many a time, communities will lose grip of such knowledge.

For example, although advocating for the documentation of IK, Anderson (2006:78) acknowledged that even if these libraries, archives and IK centres claim to be repatriating this IK to communities from which it was documented, the very concept of repatriation is elusive and questionable. Anderson (2006:78) wrote "although these IK centres claim to be returning the IK and cultural centres to the communities, the thing is 'returned material' is still not owned by the community". Using the Galiwi'ku Indigenous Knowledge Centre (GIKC) which has hundreds and hundreds of photographs depicting IK, as an example, Anderson (2006:79) lamented the problems that are linked to issues of funding, training and the actual purpose, as some of the serious challenges in documenting and preserving IK in libraries and archives. Thus, she noted that questions arise as to "how are you allowed to reproduce, for example, a particular photograph, how do you put it into a computer, who then owns it, how do you document these processes, who do you contact if you would like to use it later on, or could you get a transfer of ownership of the photograph?" (Anderson 2006:78).

Why librarians and archivists should not document and preserve IK

According to Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:198), "almost all researchers refer to the great store of knowledge held by indigenous elders and its impending loss". Even if this is so, efforts to document and preserve IK in libraries and archives is not called for. We say so because of the following reasons: first, the oral and constantly changing nature of IK implies that this knowledge is capable of taking care of itself in the form of a system.

Second, we argue that IK is preserved through practice. In other words, IK taken away from its people, community or practitioners is no longer IK. Thus, IK is an ethnographical issue that is preserved through practice. Therefore, any effort by librarians and archivists in trying to document and preserve IK is sheer waste of time and resources. The question is: why try to document something that is not documentable? Is this not a waste of time and efforts? Although others may argue that IK is likely to be extinct if not documented, for example, as the bearers of this knowledge die, we believe that, because IK is non-static in nature, that which is necessary for the community or people to know, and is relevant to their lives, at that particular time, will always stand the test of time.

In other words, IK takes care of itself, and is capable of taking into consideration the dynamism of the day in a certain community. Thus, only that knowledge which is relevant will maintain itself through practice, implying that the system allows that which is no longer useful to be lost, naturally, just like an ecosystem takes care of itself, and no librarians and archivists need to bother themselves about that IK which gets lost through the system, for it will be due for loss as it would have lost its relevance to the practices of the day. It is the society, not externals such as librarians and archivists who should attach value to this kind of knowledge, thereby determining its value, resulting in its preservation naturally through practice.

In records management terms, this can be equated to the Jenkinsonian approach to appraisal whereby the creator is seen as the best appraiser, implying that as the community allows certain practices or cultures to be lost or changed, they are acknowledging the irrelevance of such a practice, and thus, no one, let alone librarians and archivists, should express concern about that "natural loss" of certain practices that are indigenous to a certain community. To use the words of Brosius (1997:66) "to save something, or to mobilise an audience to want to save something, requires that it be made beautiful or profound or have some transcendent value". In the context of this article, we take this to mean that the society or community within which this IK resides is the one that should actually be worried about the conservation and preservation of its traditions through practicing its culture.

In other words, that which is relevant to the society or community in the form of IK will always be there, despite certain forces and disturbances, thereby demonstrating the resilience of IK. In brief, IK is resilient to forces of extinction. To quote Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) "resilience [of IKS] refers to the capacity to recover after disturbance, absorb stress, internalise it, and transcend it". Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005:9) wrote:

> Indigenous peoples throughout the world have sustained their unique worldviews and associated knowledge systems for millennia, even while undergoing major social upheavals as a result of transformative forces beyond their control. Many of the core values, beliefs, and practices associated with those worldviews have survived and are beginning to be recognised as being just as valid for today's generations as they were for generations past.

In another example which demonstrates the resilient nature of IK, Case, Pauli and Soejarto (2005) conducted a study whose aim was to analyse the amount of knowledge that the

indigenous population of Manus Island, Papua New Guinea possessed, and compare the levels of knowledge of local flora to physical, geographical, and social valuable. In their study, they cited Minol (2000) who found out that the inhabitants of this area had a resilient cultural heritage that has persisted despite extensive exposure to developed societies, including German colonisation, anthropological study, and armed infiltration during World War II. During this time, the Manus were flooded with Japanese and American forces which even resulted in the Americans establishing an airfield on the Los Negros Island (Minol 2000 cited in Case, Pauli and Soejarto 2005:357). Due to this, the Manus were inundated by the American lifestyle as it was estimated that over a million soldiers passed through the place during the time of the war (Minol 2000 in Case, Pauli and Soejarto 2005:357).

Despite this overwhelming exposure to the American world, Minol (2000) in Case, Pauli and Soejarto (2005:357) further observed "the Manus maintained many of their cultural practices, including their indigenous languages, of which more than 30 survive today". Thus, IK is indeed resilient to forces of extinction and anything that is lost will actually be due for loss, and probably the system would have developed new ways of functioning, given the dynamic nature of IK. Such resilience, Holling *et al.,* (1997) in Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) "…is thought to conserve options and opportunity for renewal and novelty".

So the question is: Why should a librarian or archivist bother trying to document and preserve something that can preserve itself? Although as early as 1994, scholars such as Pinkerton (1994) in Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:198), were already lamenting the lack of documentation of IK as well as challenges associated with the same by writing "the challenge…is first to foster the documentation of the precious and fast-disappearing traditional knowledge of First Nations", we urge librarians and archivists of today to ask themselves the question: Who has always preserved and documented IK before the emergence of their professions, given the fact that IK is said to be as old as human kind, yet these professions are less than a pair of centuries old? Even scholars such as Case, Pauli and Soejarto (2005:354) agree that "many difficulties arise when attempting to assess and quantify the loss of indigenous knowledge".

Moreover, whilst librarians and archives are making noise about the depletion of IK, it is clear that they are worried about that knowledge which is being possessed by our forefathers. How about that which used to be possessed by the forefathers of our forefathers? Who bothered himself or herself with that? Who can quantify the amount of IK that communities have lost from the time these communities were established? How about the consequences of losing such knowledge? Answers to this chain of questions will certainly ring a bell on the minds of librarians and archivists, and they will agree that certainly IK is a natural system that takes care of itself.

Actually, we further argue, trying to document and preserve IK by librarians and archivists is an unjustified interference with IK systems. We strongly feel that these collecting professions are trying to impose themselves on IK systems. Thus, these professionals are actually running away from their real duties as librarians and archivist all in the name of IK. We urge librarians to concentrate on librarianship and archivists to concentrate on archiving. Thus, instead of librarians focusing on furthering their librarianship, and archivists concentrating on archiving-which are their professional calling, they are busy pre-occupying themselves with IK, a domain that is so far-fetched.

We further argue that IK is peculiar to a certain community, and is therefore, ethnographical in nature. This implies that if one wants to know IK of a certain community, one has to go to that particular community and be part of it rather than claiming to know IK of that community from the library or archive. There is no one who can claim to have knowledge of IK of various

communities, which unfortunately librarians and archivists seem to be doing by claiming that they document and preserve IK for the public and future generations to access. The broad, geographically bound, contextual and complex nature of IK makes it impossible for librarians and archivists to effectively and successfully document it. We argue that going to a certain community with a camera and recorder, which is what librarians and archivists do, is actually doing injustice to IK. For this, we give an example in the form of a question: Can one narrate their life-time history, not only as an individual, but as a community, including their interaction with nature, in a matter of hours or minutes in front of a camera? In answering this question we should bear in mind that IK is so complex and is something that is better understood through practice rather than reading it in a library or archive.

Actually, local people prefer their own knowledge transmission methods which are contextual and specific to the community. For example, a study that was conducted by McCorkle and McClure on the Sahelian farmers in Niger (1995) indicated that farmers placed a higher degree of credibility or trust on the information that they received from fellow farmers than from extension agents, particularly that knowledge which has been well tested and adopted (Dixon 2005:308).

Thus, whilst librarians and archivists might have been, and are likely to continue telling themselves that they are documenting and preserving IK, what they are actually doing is detrimental to IK, and is too limited in scope to be considered IK. That is the case because IK is a chain of interdependent experiences and practices. It is impossible for it to be documented in a way that librarians and archivists think. On several occasions, we have read about projects on digitisation of IK, the question is: How can one digitise something that is as oral and as complex as IK? For example, one asks: What and which practices does one digitise and how? What criterion is being used to select practices that are worth documenting and not documenting? To use the words of Burton (n. d):

> For indigenous communities, IK and TCEs are not 'things' that exist separately from their culture. The discord with LIS systems lies in the orientation of the field toward a scientific logic of information retrieval and information access.

IK, as complex and diverse as it is, is best preserved through practice. As one takes away IK from the community by documenting it and storing it in the form of a recording in a library or archives, that person is interfering with the very nature of IK. In other words, IK that is taken away from its people loses its intrinsic value as IK. IK draws its intrinsic value from practice. Looking at this situation, one is forced to pose the following questions: Are librarians and archivists really relevant in the preservation of IK? Are the very methods of documentation and preservation of IK by librarians and archivists (recording) not interfering with the intrinsic nature of IK? Does documenting and preserving IK not have the effect of freezing and compartmentalising dynamic and complex knowledge as Ngulube (2003) asked? The answers are implied in the questions and your guess is as good as ours. In light of the view that IK is best preserved through practice, one further asks the question: Why should librarians and archivists invest their time trying to document something that can only best be preserved through practice? In the words of Pyati (2006) cited in Burtis (n. d) "in this discourse [of documenting IK, using LIS and records and archives management (RAM) approaches which are scientific], knowledge becomes information, divorced from the context in which it was created".

Thus, as librarians continue trying to document IK, they run the risk of documenting and preserving something that is "post-IK" - something whose name is yet to be discovered or propounded - all in the name of IK. For example, Janke (2006:85) wrote "when Indigenous knowledge is removed from an indigenous community, the community loses control over the

way in which it is represented and used". So our question is: Why the fuss about the documentation of this knowledge whose fatal effects on IK are obvious?

Actually, we advocate for a re-examination of what these collecting professionals have been laying claim to preserving and documenting IK. For example, supposedly, by chance or default, these professionals successfully document and preserve IK that is no longer being practised, which is likely to be the case, given the ever-changing nature of IK, one asks the question: Is that still IK? In what way does it still qualify as IK when it is no longer being practised? Does this mean that the people of that community from which such IK was documented will go back to those practices that they have practically abandoned simply because they have been documented and preserved in a library or archive? Or are librarians and archivists preserving such knowledge so that future generations revert back to the old practices that their forefathers once adopted to cope with certain challenges in their community? These questions are important to ask in light of the fact that the main concern of these professionals is that IK is being lost as adults or people who poses it die. Answers to these questions again will indicate that IK is best left as a natural system that takes care of itself.

Actually, archivists and librarians are running the risk of being driven to believe that they are preserving IK whilst they are preserving something that is no longer useful to the communities from which it was extracted, given the dynamic nature of IK. Again, suppose by chance librarians and archivists successfully document and preserve this knowledge, the question is: For how long? We all know of weeding in libraries, and appraisal in archives, but what should be done to this so called IK in a library or archive in relation to collection development practices? How is IK weeded or appraised? How will librarians and archivists know that this knowledge is still relevant and useful to its creators? As we all know, librarians and archivists preserve for future use, but given that IK changes with time, these professionals are likely to hang onto something that is no longer relevant or useful to the communities from which it was extracted, thereby further prompting us to ask: Will that still be IK? Thus, certainly, these collecting professionals really need to re-examine their role and stake in IK and pinpoint the value of what they are doing, or else their role will remain abstract and elusive. In fact, librarians and archivists are likely to force indigenous communities to continue preserving something that has lost relevance to these communities, simply because it has been documented and preserved in a library or archive!

IK is also intermingled and intertwined with the culture of a community. In fact, it may even be difficult for one to draw a clear line between IK and culture. Chapin (1991) as cited in Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1258) argued that where traditions remain strong, people see no need to make special efforts to preserve knowledge. They simply practice their culture. Transmission of this kind of knowledge depends on the practice. If knowledge about IK is demonstrated through mastery of the skill, then how do librarians and archivists tell that the IK that they claim be documenting and preserving is indeed being used? In other words, how does one as a librarian or archivist ensure that the users have really put such knowledge into use when they cannot make such users practice what they have been documenting and preserving as the so called "useful" IK? This further prompts us to take a swipe at the curricula of LIS and RAM that have elements of IK. Here, one asks the question: what tangible benefits accrue to LIS and RAM students who have taken a course or courses in IKS?

For example, how do teachers or lecturers of such courses, with an information science background, assess the skills that their students would have gained from these courses? Thus, the mode of teaching IK in information science schools, which employs a western approach is actually incompatible with IK and is likely to yield limited benefits, if any. Put in the words of

Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005:13) "it is with little wonder, then, that formal education structures, which often epitomise western bureaucratic forms, have been found wanting in addressing the educational needs of traditional societies". As explained by Ohmagari and Berkes (1997:199) "whether a given cultural item has been transmitted effectively depends on the level of mastery of the skill. Hence, transmission is not considered to be independent of the mastery of a particular item".

Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) citing Ohmagari and Berkes (1997) further stated that IK "often accumulates incrementally, tested by trial-and-error and transmitted to future generations orally or by shared practical experiences". Given the fact that IK requires one to practise it as a way of demonstrating the mastery of the skill, how do information science schools evaluate and assess their students regarding IK? How do information science lecturers and teachers tell that their students have actually mastered IK when mastery of this IK is through practice, which is impossible to do at schools and universities? In seeking answers to these questions, one can tell that IK is something that is beyond the discipline of information science, and these professionals are unnecessarily overburdening themselves with something that is far beyond their calling.

Thus, the learning or educational systems for indigenous people, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005:10) rightfully pointed out "…were carefully constructed around observing natural processes, adapting modes of survival, obtaining sustenance from the plant and animal world, and using natural materials to make their tools and implements" In fact, it is a matter of time before these information science practitioners realise that they have been wasting their time trying to document and preserve something that best takes care of itself naturally, just like an ecosystem in a jungle. To use the words of Durning, as cited in Brosius (1997:54), indigenous people:

> possess, in their ecological knowledge, an asset of incalculable value: a map to the biological diversity of the earth on which all life depends. Encoded in indigenous languages, customs, and practices may be as much understanding of nature as is stored in libraries of modern science.

We continue by examining the whole point of documenting IK. For this, we ask the question: Should IK really be documented, considering the fact that some of it is peculiar to a certain place or community? If yes, for what reason? We strongly feel that it should not be documented. We say so for the following reasons. Documenting IK defies the very "local" and "sacred" nature of IK. This is actually a threat to "indigenous people" of certain communities. This further violates the very "indigenous" nature of that particular knowledge and makes the community vulnerable. It is obvious that librarians and archivists are concerned with making information available to as many people as possible. In light of this, one is driven to believe that the documented IK is likely to be made accessible to the "outsiders", thereby weakening the social and cultural fabric of a certain community.

Although we appreciate that culture is non-static, trying to document IK, which is also rooted in the culture and language of a community, may actually cause undue erosion on the culture of a community. To explain this, we quote Agrawal (2006:64) who wrote:

> To illustrate what I have in mind…let me point to a seeming paradox writings on Indigenous knowledge. The necessity, urgency, and importance of research on the Indigenous derives from assumptions that such knowledge is disappearing, the rate of disappearance is fast and possibly accelerating, and that such knowledge is valuable. But the value one is talking about is quite specific: it is useful in improving scientific knowledge, it is development, and so forth. This is somewhat puzzling because it is development that to begin with threatens indigenous knowledge-it is the progressive

> spread of science and scientific knowledge that threatens the ways indigenous cosmologies and knowledge work.

Thus, documentation of this IK is necessitated by its value, not to its owners because the owners possess and preserve it through practice, but to the outsiders who then develop interest to document it, only to the detriment of such knowledge, let alone, manipulation of the generators and rightful preservers and users of such knowledge. We appear to be in a catch-22 situation (Agrawal 2006:64). Although some argue that documentation of such knowledge is important for the purposes of patenting, we argue that the, "… process allows indigenous cultural capital [and indeed IK], to be commodified in the name of intellectual freedom" (Burtis n d).

Thus, documentation of IK serves to fuel the exploitation of the possessors and generators, let alone, rightful users of this knowledge. In light of this, it is only logical to let IK as a system to take care of itself as documentation it is without its detrimental implications. In explaining the natural preservation of IK as a system, Janke (2006:84) wrote: "Indigenous people view the world they live in as an integrated whole. Their traditional knowledge, beliefs, arts, and other forms of cultural expressions have been handed down through the generations". Thus, it is only the outsiders, the librarians and archivists who are worried about the documentation and patenting of IK, only to the detriment of this knowledge. As also hinted by Janke (2006:84):

> In fact, intellectual property laws 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.

Janke (2006:84) gave an example in the following words that deserve serious consideration by librarians and archivists and other professionals who are advancing the whole idea of documenting IK:

> A communal song or story is not a commodity. Indigenous people view Indigenous knowledge as part of a continuing relationship between people and their heritage. Following this understanding, the definition of heritage of Indigenous people comprises traditional practices, knowledge and the ways of life that are unique to a particular people. Indigenous people are responsible for culture and the guardians of an indigenous culture and intellectual property. Their rights and obligations to their heritage are determined by the customs, laws and practices of the community and can be exercised by an individual, a clan or a people as a whole.

As Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1252) observed, this knowledge is:

> A cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive process and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.

Furthermore, by documenting and preserving IK in libraries and archives, which might later on need interpretation implies that the very concept of IK is disturbed. For example, certain practices that are meant to preserve certain species that are considered endangered by a community lose their meaning and essence when they are now documented. How? Simply because documentation requires local people or bearers of that particular IK to reveal the secret behind certain practices - something that has always been kept a secret for the benefit of the community in its entirety.

For example, it is common practice for one to find out that certain animals and plant species are protected by declaring them "sacred" or making it taboo to temper with them. When this is done, there are no specific reasons that are given as the community generally considers it taboo to temper with those species, yet there is really no tangible reason behind that but just a way of preserving the endangered species. Thus, "taboos, are…one form of a larger set of social and religious sanctions, which may be used in conservation and resource management" (Berkes, Colding and Folke 2000:1258). In South India, for example, many wading birds are hunted in

heronries that offer year-round sanctuaries and that may be on trees in the middle of a village (Gadgil *et al*., 1993 cited in Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000:1254). Documenting that kind of knowledge implies that such people get to know that there is really no tangible reason for not tempering with such species. This will result in the community violating such traditional practices, knowing very well that nothing will happen to them. Thus, efforts to document IK actually serve to compound the situation rather than serving any good purpose. Brosius (1997:54) quoted Ausible (1994) as saying that:

> The extinction of biological diversity is inextricably linked with the destruction of cultural diversity. With the loss of native cultures, there is also disappearing the vital and important knowledge of a way of living in balance with the earth and the value system in which it is encoded. To approach the process of restoration, it is essential to learn to see the earth through native eyes.

Looking at the aforementioned statement, it can be deduced that what Ausible (1994) in Brosius (1997:54) described as "native eyes" further complicates the ability of librarians and archivists to document and preserve IK and favours that anthropologists and cultural experts to do the job. It is in light of this that we further argue that librarians and archivists really need to seriously question themselves before anyone else does, regarding their role in documenting IK. Thus, IK is best preserved through practice and trying to document it, especially by librarians and archivists, is actually a waste of effort and an unnecessary disturbance to the whole system of IK.

Closely linked to the "cultural" and sacred nature of IK is the aspect of making the society "narratable" as explained by Brosius (1997:64). To quote Brosius (1997:64), the following issue needs to be addressed: "first, how does one make a society narratable? That is, what must one do to be able to talk about it" [indigenous knowledge]. However, as one defines indigenous knowledge, it is not easily accessible (Brosius 1997:64). Thus, IK "is not something that can be picked up in a few short weeks, particularly for individuals lacking linguistic competence" (Brosius1997:64).

In any case, people who seem to be worried about documenting and patenting IK, which is a commercial activity, should ask themselves questions relating to the cultural integrity of the community that is loosened by such documentation, given the fact that indeed such documentation tempers with the cultural and social integrity of a community. As noted by Hunter (2006:95), a challenge that is usually underestimated is that of determining the optimum and most culturally appropriate approach to selecting, eliciting, recording, describing and disseminating this knowledge without insensitivity, intrusion, constraints, degradation or misrepresentation of the content.

Conclusion

Librarians and archivists should concentrate on their core duties and stop purporting to be the documentalists and preservers of IK. Let anthropologists, health specialists, cultural experts, agriculturalists be the ones conducting research on IK. This information will eventually land in the hands of librarians and archivists and this is where their role begins. Thus, we cannot have librarians and archivists spending years and years away from their institutions trying to document IK when there are professionals who can better do that, at absolutely no cost to the library or archive. Surely, should a librarian or an archivist abandon his or her profession of information provision and dissemination and be busy with the documentation of IK yet there, for example, are anthropologists and cultural experts who can better do this?

It is a matter of time before librarians and archivists realise that they are imposing themselves on a domain that is not theirs. We therefore urge these information professionals to re-examine

their stance regarding IK, or else what they are doing is further compounding the predicament that IK finds itself in. Let librarians be librarians in the real sense of the term and let an archivist be an archivist instead of claiming to be 'documentalists' of IK, or else we will have a situation whereby library and archival schools breed students who have forgotten about their professional calling, all in the name of IK, yet there are anthropologists and cultural experts who can better find ways of working with communities on IK. To allay the fear of the loss of IK, we equate IKS to an ecosystem that copes and adapts to everything and anything that happens to it. No wonder why we still have the knowledge that was passed on to our forefathers by their forefathers. Other powerful means of IK documentation and preservation is through novels, language and other natural means. Librarians and archivists should not be pro-active in the documentation and preservation of this IK as they are likely to interfere with the IK system. It is not surprising why it was called an Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) - it implies that this is a system that is fully independent of librarians and archivists and is capable of maintaining itself, as it has always done since time immemorial.

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