

THE NATURE OF DOCUMENTARY MATERIALS IN AFRICA AND THE CHALLENGES TO PRESERVING THEM

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Abstract

Africa has a rich and diverse culture that has been documented in many different ways, some of which are not as conventional as the western ways. Documentation methods in Africa range from word of mouth (oral history) to the modern electronic systems. Leaves, skins, tree bark, stones, clay, rocks, string are some of the traditional ways in which information was documented. The notion that Africa is a continent of song and dance must be revisited and corrected. The discovery of the Islamic manuscripts going back to the 12th Century AD in North and West Africa is a clear proof that scholarly work has been going on for centuries in Africa. The challenge to us is how to preserve these diverse materials considering that the world is advancing at a very fast rate with worrying issues such as the depletion of the ozone layer and ravaging poverty. Governments are faced with different challenges that tend to push heritage preservation to the bottom of the list of priorities for justifiable reasons.

Introduction

Traditional documentation methods in Africa

As a little boy I used to hang around my grandfather who was never tired of answering the many questions I asked him. I learned a lot from him by observing and by attempting some of the things when he was not around. My grandfather was a very skilful man such that there was no need to pay someone else to fix our roof or mend the fence and, we never used to buy vegetables as we had the best vegetable garden, thanks to my grandfather. He was really a man of many talents.

One day my curious mind was troubled as I was approaching my birthday. I started wondering how old my grandfather was and how he could remember that for so many years. He told me a fascinating story of how the old people used to keep track of time. The sun, the moon, the stars, the change of seasons and teeth in a child's mouth were used to determine age. My grandfather told me that sometimes people would tie knots on a string every year to keep count of how many years have passed since they were born. This process would start with the mother who started with the first few knots and as the person grew older they were given the string and they will continue with the knotting. What a simple but fascinating way of keeping records.

Apart from tying knots and counting teeth and following the seasons and positions of the moon and sun, other ways of keeping records were used. These were such things as rock painting, marking of the tree by removing part of its bark, piling stones, woodcarving, bracelets, necklaces and garments. These mentioned methods were used to either make a point (for example, when a woman has lost a husband

she had to wear a black garment – this tradition is still practiced even today). Some of these were to demarcate land or territory (e.g. marking of trees or piling of stones).

There were so many ways in which documentation was kept in Africa and some of these ways are still being practiced today. It's very easy to notice someone from West Africa by the way they dress and by the way their garments are printed. Although some of the dressing methods are now becoming universal we can still identify a Tuareg from the Sahara Desert, a San from Southern Africa or a Massai from East Africa. This is due not only to their physical appearance but the tattoos, earrings, dressing and language.

Emerging discoveries of ancient writings in Africa

In December 2001 I was requested to participate on a project to assist with the preservation of some manuscripts in Timbuktu, Mali. I was part of a team that subsequently visited Mali to assess the preservation needs of these valuable manuscripts. It was interesting for the group to see these very old manuscripts that comprised of scientific, medical, astronomical, religious and other journals of varying subjects going back to the ninth century.

These unknown treasures within our continent have become an attraction to various people with varying intentions. Manuscripts of this nature and age are what Africa needs to prove to the world that there is a wide range of documentary records of varying nature and proportions. Some of these Malian manuscripts are written on paper and some are on parchment and most of these are uniquely bound in leather. It is important to note that these medieval manuscripts are as immaculately written as their counterparts in Europe and other parts of the world. These fascinating discoveries of such treasures of great value are not only isolated in Mali but stretch all the way from Morocco down to Zanzibar. For Africa to finally be in position to boast such intellectual treasures has not come at a better time when our leaders are now trying to re-unite the continent and re-build it. The idea of Africa being just a continent of music and dance must be modified to "the continent of strength, love and wisdom."

Nature of documentary material in Africa

As indicated earlier, Africa has a wide range of documentary material. The traditional forms range from clay tablets, stone carvings, stone drawings, leather, parchment and vellum, paper, straw, cloth and tree bark and even leaves. There are also the modern formats such as micro-graphics in the form of microfilm, microfiche, photographic film and we also have video, audiocassettes, movie film and the new electronic media. Let's not forget the oral history where the people are the moving documents in themselves. Stories have been passed from generation to generation and before the movie "The Lion King" we knew these stories from grandparents. A lot of the African tales are being made into movies now and they appeal to the whole world. Hieroglyphics on clay tablets were used in Egypt and the invention of so many machines (that have been so far modified) was done in Egypt. So the range of material that documents African history is so huge that it requires a lot of research

without bias.

Preservation Challenges

Climatic Conditions

Africa has some of the extreme climatic conditions that are very destructive to organic matter. Extreme heat, dry hot winds (such as the Hamattans), high humidity, and sand storms are just but a few of the extremes. Most materials used as carriers of information are vulnerable to changes of climatic conditions. Due to some climatic conditions there is also the problem of pests that also tend to feed on some of the materials. The difficulties in controlling things such as dust sound simple to anyone who has not been near the desert and realised that dust has been accepted not as dirt but as part of the environment. In hot humid areas, mould is almost an everyday occurrence and because the people are so used to seeing it everyday they do not see it as a threat anymore.

Economic challenges

Good preservation plans cost money. Africa's economy has suffered the delayed effects of colonialism. As much as we have the resources, these are not properly utilised and are still being exploited not to benefit the ordinary man on the street. In many countries education has not received the priority attention it deserves due to the fact that there are more important priorities for governments such as to feed the people or to stop wars.

Political environment

The political environment has resulted in the loss of so many valuable materials. Archives have been bombed or burned and in some instances the records have been used for firewood. Lack of awareness among leaders as to the importance of record keeping has resulted in records either suffering from benign neglect or being lost completely as no one has been tasked with the job of keeping them. In other instances the colonial governments have only looked after records that relate to one sector of the population and when a new government comes in lots of debate goes into why money should be spent to preserve these records, as they are not reflective of the whole population.

Differing standards and the imposition of western standards

One of the major challenges for archives and libraries in Africa is that of standards. Current standards have been developed according to western cultures and environments. The desire for Africa to preserve its heritage has subjected African States to knock on the doors of the rich developed countries for assistance and they are then usually encouraged to abide by standards developed by the donor country. This kind of pressure compels poor states to implement methods that may not apply to their specific requirements resulting in failure in most cases due to lack of commitment. A good example is the emergence of digital technology which is now seen as a way out for problems of access and storage. As attractive as digitisation

may be, many African States are not nearly as ready for this new advanced technology as they have not even gone through some of the technology from 20 years ago.

Another problem is the lack of resources and skills which has resulted in the employment of specialists with a different understanding of techniques; or sending the local people to be trained in western countries. The bottom line here is standards that work in Europe may not work in Zambia or some of the tropical African countries. A lot of the local people (from Africa) who have gone for training overseas have not been able to utilise the skills acquired as a result of lack of material, equipment and support. Training should be complemented with the other aspects such as materials, tools, equipment and management support. Most importantly, training should build in from the local cultures for it to be understood and be of any value to the heritage preservation programmes in Africa.

The solutions

Co-ordination of efforts

Preservation efforts must be properly co-ordinated whether nationally or regionally. Sharing of information and resources is the key to developing a coherent plan for the preservation of African Heritage. Competition for resources has resulted in these resources being wasted because there is a lot of duplication of efforts. Focused groups such as the Joint IFLA/ICA Committee on Preservation in Africa (JICPA), can play a major role at regional level whereas local national preservation groups such as the South Africa Preservation and Conservation Group (SAPCON) in South Africa can be used to channel not only training initiatives but also for assisting with grant applications. The Digital Imaging Project of South Africa (DISA), for instance, has become a well respected international player in terms of digital imaging and this group can be used to source funding and provide guidelines for imaging projects and thereby avoiding the costly exercise of investigating standards and guidelines for every new project.

Initiatives such as the New Economic Program for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU) have come as a response to a need for cooperation and can be used as a platform for heritage management and development for Africa. United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s Memory of the World Programme has proved to be a good initiative but will need to be guided to not only promote digital imaging as preservation strategy but also to participate in the physical preservation of the original records.

Resource allocation/prioritisation

In many instances across developing countries, the major constraint for preservation of documentary heritage is finances. Archives and libraries have been regarded as being of low priority and not much effort has gone into determining the benefits of having a well-funded archive or library. Placement of archives and libraries are always a problem as they are normally placed in government departments that have different priorities. It has been a battle for the libraries and archives to prove their

relevance as they compete with services such as education, arts and culture, health security and many more. Adjusting and adapting to budgetary constraints has been a daily struggle and this leads to streamlining of activities and usually preservation suffers most as compared to access.

Many national archives and libraries are required to preserve the documentary records and to make them available. It is evident that people whose priorities revolve around provision of information currently manage these institutions. Such people would of essence provide a bigger budget for access to information than the preservation of access and the use of sustainable media to manage many of these institutions. Therefore, preservation gets less attention than it deserves and this is usually reduced to a small section with very few resources to go by.

Training

One of the stumbling blocks for Africa in terms of heritage preservation is lack of training. Many of those who are practising preservation practitioners have been trained overseas. In South Africa for instance, there is no formal conservation training. The problem is that if tertiary institutions were to start a programme they may produce too many qualified students who may not get employment. Cultural institutions need to put resources together and draw up a programme that can be offered to those who are already employed. Programmes such as these have been used successfully in some parts of the world where it would have been very expensive to send a person to be trained abroad. On-the-job training is one of the possibilities to be considered but it has to be formalised to carry some weight.

Preventive and curative preservation

In the past decade a lot of money has been spent unwisely by trying to implement state of the art conservation laboratories that become too expensive to run. The cost of conservation material and equipment has become unaffordable for even the rich states of the world. The new way of thinking is along the lines of preventive conservation. The cost of preventive conservation comes down gradually over a period of time whereas the cost of curative conservation goes up all the time. The best chance that African heritage has for survival is only by introducing well-focused preventive strategies. Africa is very much behind financially and technologically from the rest of the world. We do not have to spend hardly available resources following the footsteps of the developed nations who after spending so many resources realised they could have saved a lot by implementing preventive strategies.

Summary

Africa has a rich and diverse culture that has been documented in many different ways, some of which are not as conventional as the western ways. Documentation methods in Africa range from word of mouth (oral history) to the modern electronic systems. Leaves, skins, tree bark, stones, clay, rocks, string are some of the traditional ways in which information was documented. The notion that Africa is a continent of song and dance must be revisited and corrected. The discovery of the Islamic manuscripts going back to the 12th Century AD in North and West Africa is a

clear proof that scholarly work has been going on for centuries in Africa. The challenge to us is how to preserve these diverse materials considering that the world is advancing at a very fast rate with worrying issues such as the depletion of the ozone layer and ravaging poverty. Governments are faced with different challenges that tend to push heritage preservation to the bottom of the list of priorities for justifiable reasons. The advent of computerisation has added to the challenges as it has given rise to confusing ideas on how this new technology can solve problems ranging from storage to making the material accessible easily. What has been forgotten is that some archives in poorer countries don't even have computers let alone being able to make informed decisions on use of technology they do not even understand. Preservation must be based on the principle of 'simple is safe'. Proper utilisation of resources, no matter how minimal, and the adoption of preventive strategies is the only way preservation can be kept simple, safe and affordable.

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