CHALLENGES TO DIGITIZING THE AFRICAN HERITAGE:
SOME REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) tools has enabled possibilities for the digitization of the African heritage. Digitization of the African heritage makes it easier to share and access digital information across the world using different ICT tools. In as much as digitization has enabled the African Heritage to be converted from text, audio and images into digital format leading to improved preservation of cultural and historical materials, this is not without challenges. The critical challenge emanates from whether it is the ICT or the people who have to determine the material which qualifies to be the African heritage. Another equally important challenge is whether digitizing the African heritage will not be seen as intrusive into places which have been seen and revered as sacred. There is then the challenge of overcoming a hurdle which develops when ICT is expected to take over and to replace traditional practices of preserving and providing access to African heritage. The prospect of introducing new technology into a traditionalist environment may pose a problem if the traditionalists view the technology as trying to change the way they have been relaying their history and traditional practices. For example, the oral tradition of telling stories around the fire will now lose the setting and ambience that this tradition created. Here the medium of communication is changed; the connection with the audience is also modified as well as immediate feedback. The last challenge relates to the authenticity of digitized heritage. This paper seeks to discuss the above challenges. It does so with conviction that digitizing the African heritage is not just about

converting material from analogue into digital format but encompasses its acceptance and use. The acceptance and use will be achievable only when the above challenges are appreciated and ways found to address them.

Keywords: Digitization, Heritage custodian, Oral traditions, ICT tools, Sharing, Access

Introduction

Digitization can come across as having many faces depending on which side of digitization one is speaking from. This is so because as a new technology tool, digitization it is still received with both excitement and caution. Digitization as a technology that tries to capture and preserve the African heritage can be viewed as a monster that is out to steal, manipulate, extort and exploit the heritage which is held close by its custodians. This is the cultural heritage that defines that particular community and therefore would feel uncomfortable exposing it to outsiders who might misinterpret it. It can be deemed invasive by the traditionalist while the information manager may see it as a tool to capture and share African culture with others across the globe. Digitization can also be seen as a tool that can be used to explore and capture African heritage for purposes of preservation so that generations that come after the present custodians may learn and appreciate their cultural norms and practices. This view can be aligned with those who are abreast with developments in the world of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which allow curious minds to investigate or even to research into the history and culture of their forefathers. Digitization therefore has concerns that should be handled with caution especially when dealing with custodians of the African heritage.

The challenges to digitizing of the African heritage are immense and need not a mind that is too proud to appreciate that the custodian's concerns are genuine and that flashing technology before them without proper consultation can prove to be too damning to the whole process even if it is for a good cause. Dialogue between the information managers and heritage custodians is very vital, so that the custodian comes to appreciate that the new technology is trying to help rather than steal or exploit the heritage. Of course there are

those who want to digitize with negative intentions of ridicule and for commercial gains without considering the impact this would have on the custodians and the captured material itself. It is with this in mind that this paper tries to reflect on some of the challenges that are facing digitization of the African heritage. Even though there are many challenges, this paper will only focus on a few so as to discuss how they are affecting the processes of digitization. The challenges that will be covered in this paper include the question of who determines which material qualifies to be regarded as African heritage because any person can claim to be a custodian of such information. This leads to another challenge of invasion of spaces that are considered sacred by custodians and thus brings in the question of how far digitization should go as far as protecting privacy is concerned. The paper will also look at how the use of ICT tools can be seen as an intrusion in a traditional setup that has worked for generations and now is being changed through digitization. Oral traditions will also be looked at because they play a big role in the digitization and preservation of the African heritage. This includes the challenges of authenticity and trustworthiness of oral tradition sources and the material itself. Another challenge that will be looked at is the acceptance and use of the digitized material. The digitized material is not just created but it has to be in a form that satisfies both the information manager and the heritage custodians which eventually will result in it being useful information that does not compromise the standards of either party and really portrays the information as how the custodians would relay it.

Digitization

Digitization is a process that is used to convert any kind of information from analogue to digital format (Cleveland 1998). The information may have been captured on paper, tape recordings, film and other kinds of media and through ICT tools, and the information can be converted to digital format using relevant equipment without losing much of its original format. In some cases the original formatting is lost or somewhat rearranged so as to fit into the new digital format but all caution is to be taken to prevent this from happening. According to Meyer (2004), digitization does not only convert analogue to digital to increase accessibility but it also helps leave the

original intact. This then means that in case of misunderstanding, one can always refer to the original copy for reference.

Digitizing the African heritage does not only refer to capturing oral traditions and cultural practices that are done through song and dance but it also involves large volumes of information captured on paper and other media. A thorough research therefore has to be undertaken so as to tackle the issue of how to handle those materials especially if the media they were captured in is in a fragile state. In this case, the expertise of an archivist would be helpful because they would be able to recommend ways of handling and also the right equipment to use so that the material is not caused further damage during digitization.

Digitization has of course brought excitement and anxiety among different people. There is excitement on the side of technologist who will be able to use technology for the public good of preserving their heritage through digitizing it. There is also excitement on the side of those information adventurers or opportunists who like to use technology to meddle in things that do not concern them for their own personal gain at the expense of the heritage custodians. The heritage custodians get excited by the fact that a true version of their heritage would be captured and shared with other people who have always had perceptions about their cultural practices and norms. Although the heritage custodians may be excited about getting their side of the story digitized, there may also be anxiety on their part because of the processes they may have to go through in order to share their information, and also anxiety on the part of information managers who have to face challenges of approaching the heritage custodians concerned and getting their permission to actually digitize their material without feeling intimidated. Limb (2005) points out that digitization has brought a new information gathering excitement about Africa which he terms "scramble for Africa". This is because studies about Africa have become so popular that everyone wants to get their hands on information about Africa, whether for the public good or for other ulterior motives.

Sharing and access

Sharing and access to digitized material has been made easier and quicker through the use of various ICT tools, more especially the internet. This means that people do not have to be in a physical place of custody to access information they want as long as it is available online. The physical restrictions of access have been narrowed by making information available through the ICT tools (Smith 1999). This is a welcome and exciting venture in communication and sharing of information across the globe. There are of course challenges that accompany this ease of communication and access to digitized material. Before the information even gets digitized, the information manager faces the initial challenges of actually getting permission to digitize information from the custodians of the heritage. This is because the custodians may feel apprehensive about letting an outsider into their world where they would have to let their guard down so that the information manager could capture their particular practices as they are. Lor and Britz (2006) agree that the heritage custodians may not want to open up for the digitization process for fear of their knowledge being "discovered, stolen and exploited by the North." The North here refers to developed countries. This is the reason why they might want to hold on to whatever information and knowledge they have and prefer to hide it and just share it within their community. The fear here is that the custodians may feel that the exposure is not good for the information they share and that is why the information manager has to build an understanding with the custodians so that they could appreciate that digitization is not done to exploit their cultural practices and norms but to capture it so that it is preserved and then shared with the generations that are yet to come and also with others around the world who might be interested in their practices. Unless this bridge is built and is stable enough to continue with the processes of digitization, the information managers might find themselves in a dilemma and therefore end up resorting to underhand means to get the information digitized.

The heritage custodians need to be aware that they also have a moral obligation to share their knowledge not only with their immediate community but also with humanity at large (Lor and Britz 2006). Sharing intimate details of one's cultural practices may not be easy and that is why this hurdle of sensitizing the heritage custodians

about the importance of sharing their knowledge with the rest of the world has to be overcome, keeping in mind all the procedures that have to be put in place to protect the custodians and their information from being used in an inappropriate manner. If there are lines that are not to be crossed during digitization, then these should be made clear and an agreement signed so that anyone who breaches that agreement could be held responsible in case of improper conduct during and after the digitization process.

The other challenge of sharing and access comes after the material has been digitized and is ready for distribution. An initial agreement between the information manager and the heritage custodians will ensure proper sharing and access of the digitized material. This is because if the digitized material is freely distributed without any regulations that protect its use, then a problem could arise of people gaining access and then using the material for their own gain without giving the heritage custodians benefiting from that. Smith (1999) points out that digitized material can fall into the hands of "forgers and imposters." These are people who are out there to make a quick buck out anything they can get their hands on without considering the impact that that would have on the custodians of that digitized material. The challenge here for the information manager is to come up with a robust strategy of controlling access and use to digitized material once it leaves the hands of its custodians. The custodians should not feel in any way that they were taken for a ride by seeing their digitized heritage being inappropriately handled.

What qualifies as African heritage?

In order to avoid confusion as to what really qualifies as heritage that needs to be digitized; the information manager has to first do research about the community in which they want to do the digitization. From the research they will be able to identify the people who are trusted by the community to relay the cultural practices and norms of the community as they are. Heritage "encompasses the totality of cultural constructs that is available to all members of a society" (Carreira n. d: 8). In other words, this could be cultural practices and norms of a community that are passed from generation to another. These come in different formats and could be crafts, song and dance, written and word of mouth stories, language and day-to-

day activities that define that community and as such sets it apart from another community in the same country and in the world at large. All these practices are passed on to the new generation by the elderly so that they do not lose their sense of being, a culture which defines who and what makes them unique from other cultures or communities. It is therefore important for the information manager to engage in a dialogue with the locals so as to establish reliable resource persons who can give information that the whole community can qualify as their true heritage. As Lor and Britz (2006) point out, although this knowledge is passed on from person to person, the person who passes it on does not lose it. Therefore, this can also imply that the older generation in a community would be reliable people to qualify the heritage of their people because they have been around long enough to have learnt from their parents and have taught others themselves. This is because as Lor (2004) points out, there are too many authors or resource persons out there who are unpredictable which is why respected elderly in the community have to be identified as the resource persons in the processes of digitization so as to avoid confusion and inconsistencies in gathering information.

Intrusion in sacred spaces

Every culture has their own sacred spaces that are not open to everyone but just a privileged few even within their community. This is to guard against sensitive information or practices being spread to the wrong people or even to children who have to reach a certain age before they could be exposed to that kind of information. When the information manager wants to digitize such sensitive and sacred material of a community, it means they have to bypass all the procedures that everyone has to follow to gain right of entry to that information circle. Thus it is important to obtain approval and at all levels involve the custodians of those practices so that they would not feel that one is intruding in their space.

New technology in a traditional environment and oral traditions

Technology is good as long as it is in an environment in which it is appreciated for its ability of making accessing information easier. Digitizing heritage material means venturing into a traditional environ-

ment that has not been exposed to all the gadgets of technology. The truth of the matter is that these people are not used to expressing themselves to an audience other than that of their own people. Therefore, it would take them time to acclimatize to being recorded, photographed and many other things they may have to through during the digitization process. Some of the equipment used can be intimidating especially if the person has never been around one before. A good example is that of television cameras that seem to make people uncomfortable if they suddenly appear in their face; what more then of an elderly person who has never seen that before. This is a question of acquainting the people with all the instruments that shall be used so that they would feel free around them as that could ensure progress in the digitization process.

Oral traditions are practices that are passed on through song and dance, craft, stories, drama, and through many other formats that the older generation passes on to the younger generation. Ndiaye (1999: p1), sums up oral traditions as symbolizing "complete information deemed essential, retained and codified by a society, primarily in oral form, in order to facilitate its memorization ad ensure its dissemination to present and future generations." All these are performed in certain settings and those settings usually bring that particular act to life. For example, the telling of stories around a fire at night created an atmosphere that brought the storyteller and the audience together. When digitization comes into the picture, it means the setting is modified and the ambience that the story telling created around a fire is also modified. The storyteller could immediately get the reaction from the audience as they relate to the story and the audience also has the chance to interact with the storyteller. Although it would be nice to hear a recorded story being on a CD or on the internet, it is taken out of context of how it is originally done. This therefore might mean that the custodians of these oral traditions might feel that their way telling their stories is being changed which might reduce the impact that that particular practice is supposed to bring out of its audience. The question is how the information manager can get over this challenge that might seem trivial but is equally important. They may have to find a way forging the same setting in the digitized material so that the listener of the digitized story for example may also be drawn into the same ambience of the story as in the traditional setting.

Authenticity of digitized material

Authenticity, according to Cullen (2000), must be determined at the time of creation. This therefore means that at the time of digitization, all facts should be verified so that the end product is a true reflection of the facts about that heritage. Mpe (2002) points out that the information manager needs to be cautious when dealing with who-ever they are getting information from because that person might be giving the information because they agreed to give that information but not necessarily because they want to give a true account of the facts or the full story. This is because they might also view them-selves as part of history making and therefore would want to manipu-late information that somehow suits their motives. The information manager therefore has the challenge of ensuring that the relationship they have with the custodians does not have any hidden agendas so as to get information which is verifiable and beneficial to the end-user and the people it originates from without causing any confusion about the facts of the digitized heritage material.

Acceptance and use

Acceptance and use of the digitized African heritage can be achieved only if the above challenges have been addressed and solutions found. This is because if the challenges can be overcome, then it would make it easier for the acceptance of the digitized material. Acceptance and use does not come easy, there are some issues that might get in the way and therefore make it difficult to accept or use the material. In the case of acceptance, there could be issues like incorrect representation of facts, censorship of sensitive information and other concerns that the custodians might have. The information manager or the heritage custodian may also feel compelled to censor some parts of the digitized material because of its sensitivity to the public. Doing so however could leave gaps in the facts of the heritage story and thus leaving the users to draw their own conclusions. Lor's (2004) view is that all the stakeholders in the processes of digitiza-tion, that is the publishers and owners of the intellectual property should have a clear agreement that will guarantee that the integrity of the digitized heritage is upheld.

The use of digitized material depends on the availability of equipment to access it, dependability of the equipment and also the level of familiarity with the use of the equipment by the users. Ngulube (2004) posits that the instability of ICTs tools can render it difficult for people to access digitized material. The main problem is that ICTs tools become obsolete very quickly and therefore would be very difficult for people in a remote community to access digitized material as they might need the latest ICTs tools which may be way too expensive for them to acquire. The other problem is that of familiarity with the use of ICT tools. These may be available but the community also needs to be able to operate them. This then calls for the digitization stakeholders to take it upon themselves to educate the community so that they would not be at loss when they want to access the digitized material.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digitization is a process that ensures that materials that are fast deteriorating can be preserved and that accessibility is increased. People from across the globe can learn about other cultures from the comfort of their homes, offices or even classrooms without having to make trips to those particular places. ICT tools are bringing the world together through networked databases that make it easier for people to share ideas and even cultures. If enough sensitization is done among the cultural communities about digitization, then the process will make headway and convert more material to digital format. Developed countries can do much more than just sponsoring digitization projects, they can also invest in educating locals so that they could also benefit from this process. Engaging locals in these projects means they can in turn empower others with the knowledge and experience they gathered and then end up heading these projects themselves. Digitization is an expensive process and therefore the sponsors of these projects may feel that they need to control everything including how the digitized material is going to be used. If that is the case, then the locals need to know from the beginning so that they do not feel exploited at a later stage when their heritage is misrepresented. The sponsors and the locals have to take ethical and moral responsibilities over the outcome of the digitization process because many people will be affected by the results whether good or bad.

In the excitement created by the use of ICT tools to digitize and to easily access information, one has to keep in mind that the digitized heritage for instance is about people and about what they have kept sacred for a long time and that sharing it with the whole world does not give people the liberty to exploit it for their own gain. People should use the material keeping in mind that they would not want people ridiculing or extorting the cultural practices that defines who they are. Of course there are always those who always have ulterior motives of distorting the truth and those should be the minority of the users. The digitized heritage's primary role is to educate and inform people about people's cultures and not alienate the locals because of the information that they access. Digitization should not be used as a tool that paints people's cultural heritage as archaic and uncivilized but should relay those practices as they are so that people who had misconceptions could begin to appreciate those cultural practices.

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