

TOWN-GOWN RELATIONSHIP: THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT IN PRESERVING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

By

BLESSING N. AMANZE-UNAGHA, Ph.D
AMANZE O. UNAGHA, Ph.D

Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationship between town-gown by exploring the academic engagement in preserving indigenous knowledge. It identifies key strategies for academic libraries to support indigenous knowledge preservation, including community-led, inclusive collections, and culturally responsive programming. The paper adopted the thematic approach that identifies and analyzes themes and patterns in a study. The privatization of the academic libraries for the interest of their staff and students but excluding their neighbours who live on the other side of the academic institutions' boundaries calls to question the interaction and harmonious co-existence of the Town and the Gown. The implications of this nexus between the town and the gown were discussed. The findings of the study amongst others are that strong town-gown relationship preservation is crucial for successful preservation of indigenous knowledge; academic libraries' engagement in preserving indigenous knowledge enhances their relevance and value to both the town and the gown, and continuous preservation and improvement of town-gown relationship and preservation of indigenous knowledge are necessary for long-term collaborative success. The challenges faced by these libraries in their preservation of indigenous knowledge and supporting town-gown relationship include limited understanding of indigenous knowledge systems, mistrust and hindered access to indigenous knowledge by local communities, intellectual property rights and access. Based on the findings and challenges, recommendations were made.

Keywords: Town-Gown, Academic Library, Engagement, Indigenous Knowledge, Nigeria

Introduction

Initially, the relationship between the Town and Gown was adversarial; the gown's growing autonomy and independence from local control led to increasing tensions with host communities. Also, the steady encroachment of the Gown upon neighbouring towns created a point of contention between the Town and the Gown. This has continued to the present day. The Case in point is the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) and Ihiagwa in Owerri

West LGA, Imo State, Nigeria. Even the staff of the Gown see themselves as better placed both economically and socially; the town people see the gown staff as those reaping from their endowment and denying them access to the proceeds of their landed property. Therefore, there is a matter of arrogance and resentment. In order to understand the importance of Town and Gown relationship, it is necessary to understand the unique characteristics of town and gown. Especially with the federal government policy of not providing accommodation for students within the campus, the overflow of students into the host community has increased tremendously. What this means is that, *ab initio* the Gown has naturally been extended into the Town. Even the staff live in the Town as most Gowns do not provide accommodation for them. This has implications for the students, the staff and the host communities.

It is no secret that the Town-Gown needs to become better development partners. According to Chenoweth (2017), the linkage between the Gown that creates knowledge and the town that develops it and creates incubators to find markets for creative ideas is getting closer, and towns that do not tap into the synergy are at the competitive disadvantage. Having a gown located in the town is a draw for diversity and talent, with young innovators drawn towards the vibrant opportunities and offerings unique to the town. The concept of Town-Gown links the business sector with higher institutions and cultural values to be growing. A strong town-gown relationship happens as a result of intentional, ongoing efforts and a commitment to view success collectively.

The people in the gown pursue the development and dissemination of ideas arising out of their own particular disciplines, while the town goes about their own trades and businesses. The

two occupations are so different that it is no wonder the history of town-gown relations is so troubled (Ibiam, 2014). The gown is inhabited by individuals who are bold, courageous, assertive, adventurous, inquisitive and devoted to research for development. It comprises a mixed multitude –the mature, the immature, cultural diversity, etc. On the other hand, the town is composed of a ‘homogeneous race.’ Following from his, there is need for harmony and doing things together.

Town and Gown relationship is very beneficial to both groups. Cordial relationship of the gown and its town results in peace, stability, security and progress. The town provides the environment within which the gown can thrive. The Gown also provides opportunities for economic and social growth of the Town. Hence, any strained relationship between the town and the Gown will definitely be detrimental to the healthy growth and development of both parties. The Town and gown have of recent become increasingly connected in common use of facilities such as electricity, transport and road networks. The Town is blessed with the creation of indigenous knowledge needed by the Gown. With the increasing tendency toward urbanization and the influence of western civilization on our culture, some of our aspects of the indigenous knowledge may disappear in a few decades unless librarians do their best to record and preserve them for future analysis and study. The Gown is expected to empower the academic library to perform this function. Academic library involvement in community engagement includes providing resources and instruction for members of the host community. Academic library’s own community projects involve partnerships with community schools, public lectures, organizing events and exhibits. The onerous function of the academic library in

providing resources and services is to cater for the information needs of the faculty, staff and students and other members of the institution, and by extension, the host community (the town).

Concepts Clarification

Town-Gown

Town-gown is a term simply used to refer to relationship between the host community and the higher institution located within it. Town is used in its geographical sense and refers to the general public who inhabit the surrounding areas of academic institutions. According to Dunne (2009), Town can refer to external local community or wider communities or constituent communities surrounding a higher institution. Town-gown relationship helps to ensure conscious interaction, harmonious co-existence and foster good citizenship. However, the current thinking is to highlight the need for, and benefits of libraries, stepping beyond the traditional boundaries of the academic institution walls and engaging with host communities that surround these learning environments. Academic institutions' strategies on the town discuss business and corporate engagements such as admissions, job recruitment and rural development but library's strategies set objectives around services to the town and their access to libraries. As stakeholders, residents of the town have a right of free access to library use. Even though academic libraries are publicly funded spaces but the privatization for the interest of their staff and students is excluding their neighbours who live on the other side of the academic institution's boundary.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is a collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a

context of partnership and reciprocity (Gruber, 2017). Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with community members to address issues for the betterment of the town. As champions of lifelong learning, libraries, particularly academic libraries are places to quench curiosity, access technology, and explore new ideas, hobbies and careers. Increasingly, libraries also offer members of the town welcoming spaces to meet their neighbours to discuss and resolve important issues. In so doing, academic libraries are supporting the gown in transforming their host communities and building strong town-gown relationship through the following:

- i. Hosting of civic engagement discussion forum.
- ii. Using library as a space for deliberative dialogue amongst their communities.
- iii. Inspiring the members of the town by involving them in the documentation of their cultural heritage and history.
- iv. Providing central location for gathering diverse individuals who have the unifying goal of serving the town.
- v. Providing a positive experience for senior secondary students in the wide communities by presenting the library as a welcoming, accessible environment.
- vi. Raising the standard of literacy skills among schools in the town which will impact on entry into higher institutions.

However, the concern of this lecture is the library's engagement in preserving indigenous knowledge of host communities, thereby maintaining the ideal town-gown relationship.

Indigenous Knowledge

Libraries and Librarians are uniquely positioned to play a vital role in supporting indigenous communities. Recognizing that fact, librarians all over the world are undertaking interactive activities with indigenous communities that bring rural dwellers on board as equal partners in knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and utilization to enrich their lives. So libraries are identifying and documenting indigenous knowledge and giving support in ensuring that the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities are not exploited. Librarians require an informed understanding of indigenous concerns as well as the purposes for which indigenous people seek access to and appropriate management of their cultural materials and how this impacts on service provision for indigenous Nigerians to avoid intergenerational loss.

UNESCO (n.d) provided a working definition for indigenous knowledge (IK) as:

A complete body of knowledge, know-how and practices maintained and developed by people, generally in rural areas, who have extended histories of interaction with the natural environment. These sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classification systems, practice for using resources, ritual and spirituality and worldview. It provides for local level decision-making about many fundamental aspects of day-to-day life.

Anyira, Onoriode and Nwabueze (2010) in their study found out that IK can play the role of sustainable agriculture, pest and disease control, conflict/dispute resolution, medical care, cultural identification, trade development, educational and skill acquisition, environmental conservation and security and protection.

According to Parangu and Salim (2018), indigenous knowledge is knowledge that people usually have in their environment, that is, what is around them. It is related to specific environmental knowledge and rooted in particular places. IK is fundamentally tacit and embedded in practice and experience and exchanged in the community through oral communication and demonstrations. It is essentially empirical knowledge, based on the experience of people who are directly involved with the natural world. International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2003) acknowledges the intrinsic value of IK and notes the need to

- i. recognize the significance, relevance and value of IK in providing solutions to some of the most difficult modern issues and encourages its use in project planning and implementation.
- ii. protect IK for the benefit of indigenous peoples as well as for the benefit of the rest of the world.

IFLA also recognizes that the character of IK does not lend itself to print, electronic or audio-visual means of recording. But in order to ensure its continued preservation, access and dissemination IFLA recommends that libraries and archives should (Sarkhel, 2016):

- i. Implement programmes to collect, preserve, disseminate indigenous knowledge resources,
- ii. Make available and promote information resources which support research and learning about indigenous knowledge, its importance and use in modern society;
- iii. Publicize the value, contribution, and importance of indigenous knowledge to both non indigenous and indigenous peoples.
- iv. Involve elders and communities in the production of resources and teach children to understand and appreciate the indigenous knowledge background and sense identity that is associated with indigenous knowledge system.
- v. Urge governments to ensure the exemption from value added taxes of books and other recording media on indigenous and local traditional knowledge; and
- vi. Encourage the recognition of principles of intellectual property to ensure the proper protection and use of indigenous products derived from it.

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is significant in empowering a people, improving livelihoods and promoting sustainable development. The oldest human knowledge is the indigenous knowledge. It has been described by Sarkhel (2016) as knowledge developed, maintained and used by a particular community over a period of time. IK is about a people's cultural heritage. Lwoga and Ngulube (2008) cited in Lwoga, Ngulube and Stilwel (2010) argue that little IK has been recorded for preservation, hence access to valuable database in developing countries is limited. There is therefore need to continuously recognize, identify, validate, preserve and disseminate indigenous skills and practices to ensure their continual existence for future

generations. IK provides knowledge for learning trades such as beekeeping, craft-making, weaving, herbal medicine and general well being of the people. It can be applied to a wide range of human life such as agriculture, food preservation, food security, environmental management, health care, textile industry, etc.

Methods of Preserving Indigenous Knowledge by Academic Libraries

Academic libraries can emulate public libraries by strategizing for preserving IK using various traditional and modern methods. The use of oral tradition, folklore and apprenticeship are some traditional methods of IK preservation while coding, documentation and digitization are contemporary approaches of preserving IK. Ebijuwa (2015) found out the IK can be preserved through storytelling and experiential instruction. Libraries can equally use compilation of bibliographies of IK resources, story hours or repackaging to preserve IK. Libraries should maintain memory databases that allow collaborative writing and sharing of ideas, content, images, oral history and videos between members of the local community and libraries. This study also found out that IK can be preserved through recording interviews of IK resources, purchase of indigenous materials, duplicating existing indigenous knowledge, microfilming IK, capturing IK with videos and digitization. IK can be made accessible through outreach services, mobile library services, sale of repackaging IK to the public, lending of IK resources, online access of IK, film shows, exhibition and display and television /radio broadcast.

According to Okore, Ekere and Eke (2009) and Christopher (2005), academic libraries preserve and promote IK through the following methods:

- Documenting IK stories by recording into audio and visuals.
- Publish IK into books and journals.
- Materials that cannot be preserved through documentation can be converted into artifacts for preservation.
- Documentation through tacit knowledge sharing.
- Creation of an environment for face-to-face forum such as talk shows involving the elderly and traditional rulers who can tell the stories.
- Sponsor competitions on documentary of indigenous knowledge technology.

Libraries in higher institutions can establish indigenous knowledge centres in the town to make the work of collecting and preserving IK easier.

Challenges of Preserving Indigenous Knowledge

Adam (2007) and Okore, et al (2009) observe that not all aspects of IK are capturable. Anyira, Onoriode and Nwabueze (2010) list the challenges of managing IK as militancy, inadequate funding, lack of co-operation from communities, copyright protection/limitation, lack of basic equipment, inadequate manpower, language barrier and utter neglect by repositories, such as the library.

The increasing global recognition of IK as distinct, legitimate, valuable and vulnerable systems of knowledge raises a range of issues that pose challenges for the library and information services (LIS) sector. The challenge for the librarian begins with the imperative to recognize indigenous knowledge as a distinct system of knowledge that requires special handling

and management practices for its materials that are different from those applied by the Western system of knowledge management.

The difficulties in protecting indigenous people's intellectual property rights are associated with the oral nature of IK and concept of communal ownership. In the light of historical destruction of IK, its current fragile existence, and its threatened future, the preservation of IK and protection of indigenous intellectual property rights to ensure proper attribution and use of it now requires the documentation of such knowledge. Documented IK forms part of the documentary heritage of the nation and in this capacity intersects with the library and information sector. Legislation mandates libraries in Nigeria to preserve the documented heritage of the nation, which includes indigenous knowledge. IK is of interest and relevance to many indigenous Nigerians, and forms an important part of the information context that indigenous peoples of Nigeria require access to, if indigenous library and information service provision is to be relevant and have currency with the indigenous community (Nkata, Byrne, Nkata and Gardiner, 2015).

Where IK has disintegrated under the pressures of colonial intervention, which have overseen the destruction of knowledge, language, cultures and people, there remains nevertheless a strong indigenous desire to utilize libraries, archives and collections to recover as much IK that relates to ancestors and country as possible and to manage it with the respect it is deserves.

The challenge of preserving IK in Nigeria is also complicated by the retrospective implications of the presence of significant amounts of unidentified IK materials with historical

collection. Librarians, and indeed information professionals face challenges in finding time and resources to retrospectively examine collections for the existence of IK within them and to locate the relevant people to assist with identification, appropriate description and indexing, and with whom to negotiate any altered access conditions.

Anderson (2004) observes that when non-indigenous authors who collected and produced accounts of IK hold copyright, the original indigenous custodians of the knowledge (or their descendants) have no means of control over the way it is represented, attributed and used, unless this has been negotiated at the point of production – a rare occurrence until recent times. This is a major setback in the management of IK.

Implications of Town-Gown Relationship and Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge academic libraries for academic libraries

The preservation of indigenous knowledge has been of great difficulty for libraries, and I agree that libraries have not done marvelously well in this area. The implications of town-gown relation and academic libraries' engagement in the preservation of indigenous knowledge are that academic institutions and the local communities can work together to promote indigenous knowledge, cultural diversity, and inclusive town-gown relation in the following ways (Smith, 2012; Unesco, 2019):

1. Academic libraries should prioritize indigenous knowledge in their collections and services, engage in community-led initiatives and collaborations that support preservation of indigenous knowledge, ensure indigenous representation and ownership in decision-making

processes related to indigenous knowledge preservation, facilitate collaborative research and scholarship between local communities and their academic institutions, engage in community outreach to build trust and foster positive town-gown relationship, and continually evaluate and improve their indigenous knowledge preservation initiative and town-gown relationship.

2. Academic institutions should integrate indigenous knowledge into curricula and research agenda, establish indigenous studies programmes and departments, and develop inclusive policies and protocols for indigenous knowledge sharing.
3. Indigenous (local) communities should assert ownership and control over their knowledge sharing with academic institutions, develop initiatives for knowledge preservation and sharing, and foster inter-generational knowledge transmission.
4. The library in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, should be a cultural centre pulsating with community activities such as agricultural extension instructions on new ways of doing old things, generation of reading materials for new literates, art and cultural exhibitions and festivals, viewing of recorded cultural activities, meetings and workshops organized by various interest groups in the community, and a whole range of other activities aimed at enhancing the social craft of the people.

Recommendations

Following the implications and challenges identified in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. It is advocated the barefoot librarian, the librarian field-worker, who is a conventionally trained professional with adequate formal instruction on oral tradition and well able to manipulate information technology (photography and recording equipments) and who is ready to go out to targeted rural communities to take oral evidence from these repositories of traditional information should reactivated.
2. The indigenous local communities (the town) should develop cultural attitude for knowledge sharing and preservation, create an unhindered access to academic library's effort in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. And make available all the indigenous knowledge for inclusive collections in the library.
3. Academic libraries (the gown) should foster collaborative research initiatives with indigenous communities, support indigenous cultural heritage programmes, and create an environment that ensures local communities' involvement in decision-making processes.
4. Academic libraries should make sure that there is an inclusive collections that prioritize acquisition of indigenous knowledge, engage the local communities in their indigenous knowledge preservation effort by encouraging them to initiate indigenous knowledge organization systems, engage in community outreach and foster positive relationship, and support collaborative indigenous research

A library conceived and built along the requirements envisaged above will truly be a focal point in the community, attracting to itself a large number of users representative of the population. It will be an institution of the people, devoid of the elitism of the present book-house, and have an interdependent and direct relevance to the people because it satisfies their

informational, recreational, and cultural needs in a more or less informal dynamic and convivial atmosphere, which is the ideal condition for traditional African information exchange. In so doing, the academic library will also be contributing its relevance to the town-gown relationship preached in our tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

Indigenous Knowledge has a future. Communities and their various kinds of indigenous knowledge should be identified and preserved. For the sake of communal identify, people will not allow it to disappear or collapse. Indigenous knowledge generates income; it provides informal employment for the youth. However, for the Indigenous Knowledge industries to be vibrant, there is need for academic institutions to partner with libraries by funding them adequate for this preservation of indigenous knowledge generated by the town. It has become a necessity that higher institutions should direct their efforts to embed Town-Gown relationship as a mainstream action and facilitate the growth and preservation of indigenous knowledge through the library. Every effort should be made to salvage the situation by engaging the custodians of traditions, so that the dead of custodians of our culture should not lead to the forgetfulness of our traditional values.

In order for the relationship between the Town and Gown to grow stronger, the walls of the Ivory Tower which isolate and alienate the gown from the town must be broken down both physically and metaphorically, and replaced by the concept of community engagement which seeks to understand the complex problems of society through interaction, collaboration,

partnership, participation, and consultation with the view to preserving indigenous knowledge driven by the academic library.

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