STOREHOUSES OF KNOWLEDGE? THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PRESERVING AND PROMOTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

Librarians are generally more comfortable dealing with publications than with unrecorded and unpublished knowledge, and library theories and systems are geared mainly to dealing with published documents. Compared with many other developing countries, South Africa has an extensive network of libraries. This article poses the question whether South Africa’s libraries have a role to play in preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge. It focuses on three categories of libraries: research libraries (including academic and specialist libraries), public libraries (including community libraries) and the national library (the National Library of South Africa). It considers not only the traditional library functions of collecting, organizing, preserving and providing access (making recorded indigenous knowledge available), but also possible roles in identifying, locating and recording indigenous knowledge, raising awareness about it and promoting it. Some implications of these roles are identified and some practical measures suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are widely regarded as storehouses of knowledge, where recorded knowledge is collected, organized for retrieval, preserved and made available for use. One of the uses to which recorded knowledge is put is the production of new knowledge. Do these statements also apply to indigenous knowledge (IK)?

Librarians have highly developed theories, systems and techniques for the collection, organization, preservation and making available of recorded knowledge, or documents. It has to be admitted, however, that they are not very good at creating new documents (recording knowledge that has not yet been recorded) or at organizing knowledge that has not yet been recorded. Librarians are specialized in dealing with artifacts such as books, videos, computer diskettes, files and folders. Today the documents may be virtual, held on one or more servers somewhere on the worldwide web. Librarians take this in their stride, but the fact remains that their focus is on existing documents, albeit that the term ‘document’ is used to refer to the full range of information carriers, including audiovisual and electronic material as well as printed books, journals and newspapers.

Furthermore, libraries are mainly concerned with published documents. If the full range of modern media is considered, it is not easy to define what is meant by ‘published’. South Africa’s Legal Deposit Act (Act No. 54 of 1997) defines this very broadly to cover documents that have been produced to be made generally available in multiple copies or locations, whether by purchase, subscription, hire, membership or licence, or even free of charge.
This still excludes the greater proportion of IK, which is not recorded, but resides in the minds of the knowledge holders and is transferred by word of mouth (Ulluwishewa 1993). Even in cases where IK is documented, it is not necessarily published. This places a question mark over the role of libraries in respect of IK.

Compared with many other developing countries, South Africa has a large number of libraries. In 1992, the Library and Information Services Research Group of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) stated that South Africa’s formal library and information services (LIS) sector comprised 1570 ‘administrative units’ and 3065 ‘service points’ (Library and Information Services 1992: 7). These figures were not very up-to-date or accurate at that time, and by now they will be less so. Nevertheless, they quite reliably indicate an order of magnitude. As the NEPI report indicates, the libraries were unevenly distributed, and in many cases their funding, location, accommodation, staffing, collections and services left much scope for improvement. Considered from the perspective of what was then an emerging non-racial democracy, there was a glaring need for transformation. In the mean time, some transformation has taken place. Much more is needed, but this should not blind us to the fact that South Africa’s libraries constitute a valuable national asset, with great potential for supporting national development. Significantly, most of the libraries are linked in one or more systems or networks, including provincial and metropolitan public library systems, regional higher educational consortia, the Southern African Interlending Scheme and Sabinet Online, the national bibliographic and resource sharing utility. Together they form an extensive network of agencies dedicated to organizing and disseminating knowledge. Can this network be of use in the preservation and promotion of IK?

This article considers the potential role of three categories of libraries in South Africa in respect of IK. The three categories are research libraries (including academic and specialist libraries), public libraries (including community libraries) and the national library (the National Library of South Africa, created in 1999 through the merging of the South African Library, Cape Town, and the State Library, Pretoria). It considers not only the traditional library functions of collecting, organizing, preserving and providing access (making recorded IK available), but also possible roles in identifying, locating, recording, raising awareness and promoting IK. Of course, this begs the question of whether IK should be recorded at all. For the purpose of this article, it is assumed that any collecting or recording of IK will be done with the informed prior consent of the relevant communities and in accordance with relevant principles of social justice (Lor & Britz in press), including respect for intellectual property rights (Seadle 2002) and, more fundamentally, the rights of these communities to self-determination (International Indigenous Peoples Summit on Sustainable Development 2002).

**RESEARCH LIBRARIES**

Research libraries include the libraries of universities and the former technikons as well as libraries serving government departments and research and heritage institutions such as research councils and museums. There are also many private sector special libraries,
but many of these are small and entirely restricted to serving company staff, so they are not taken into account here. By no means all the libraries in the above categories could be regarded as substantial research libraries, which the author conservatively estimates at between one and two hundred.

**Collecting**

The research libraries under discussion primarily serve researchers, teachers, students, professional practitioners, managers and decision-makers. In so far as IK falls within the scope of the organizations they serve, they must provide resources and facilities to enable the organizations’ IK researchers to carry out their research – collecting, organizing and making available not only the historical, geographical, theoretical and methodological texts and articles that these researchers need to develop their insights and skills, but also published documents (in all media) in which IK has been recorded. In doing so, these libraries are essentially playing the traditional role of a research library, exercised here in respect of IK researchers.

**Organizing**

Is this all? It is suggested here that research libraries can go further, for example by assisting the IK researchers attached to their institutions in the processes of organizing, preserving and making available unpublished documents (sound recordings, video recordings, transcripts, etc.) in which IK has been recorded. Librarians have special expertise in information storage and retrieval systems, for example in the compilation of thesauruses and bibliographies. They are also skilled in the preservation of documents in a range of media (Ngulube 2002). It should not be necessary for the research departments or institutes to reinvent this wheel. Of course, it is important that the information storage and retrieval systems and the preservation procedures should be developed and operated in close collaboration with the IK researchers who have collected the material.

**Providing access**

Universities and research institutions also have a responsibility to serve the wider community. Their libraries should serve as a community resource. Increasingly, this is being recognized in South Africa (e.g. Wyley 1993). Equity demands that communities that have contributed their knowledge to research institutions should not be denied access to the libraries in which their recorded IK is preserved. Instead, the library collection of IK should be seen as an information and educational resource for the community outside the institution, and its use by the community should be promoted (Chisenga 2002). It should be possible for members of the community to regain or refresh IK that is gradually being lost as a result of the various socio-economic processes that impact on traditional communities. The research library should also open its doors to the youth, so that they can learn about their IK and develop pride in their heritage. It is important that this exposure should not take place in a vacuum. The IK and cultural artifacts of a community are not curiosities to be gaped at. They should be treated with respect. This requires that when access is provided to recorded IK, it needs to be contextualized and interpreted by competent persons.
PUBLIC LIBRARIES

South Africa has about 1250 public and community libraries. They include city libraries and their branches and the libraries affiliated to the nine provincial library services, with their branches. These libraries are distributed throughout the country, although they are disproportionately clustered in urban areas and in the more affluent suburbs (Van Helden & Lor 2002). In spite of limited resources and much current uncertainty as to who is responsible for their funding – provincial or local authorities (Dominy 2003) – most of the provincial and city library authorities are making serious efforts to redress the inequalities and extend library services to the entire population, some with funding from foreign donors (Powell 2002). It is not merely a matter of providing more library facilities where they are most needed. For some time, it has been recognized that public libraries must become true community resource centres (Bekker & Lategan 1988), providing access to all media (including the Internet), providing learning resources for learners of all ages, and serving as access points for resources for and of the community. The latter point is particularly relevant here. Today progressive librarians recognize that the community itself has many untapped resources, including community leaders and elders who are custodians of traditional culture and indigenous knowledge. In some public libraries, databases of community information and registers of local expertise are maintained so that these resources can be mobilized.

At a less technical and more fundamental level, the public library “must be open to the ideas, world views and knowledge of those disregarded by the mainstream or the dominant culture or power groups” (Brammage 1992: 6).

This implies that public librarians must recognize the wealth of experience, creativity and talent in the community and that they have a duty to facilitate “two-way exchange of information” (Brammage 1992: 5).

Identifying

It follows that community orientated public libraries should be able to serve as antennae for identifying and locating IK resources in communities. Local librarians who have accepted the challenge of serving as community workers and who are immersed in, and engaged with, the communities they serve, are in a good position to gain the confidence of IK knowledge holders and to enter into partnerships with IK researchers, assisting them in liaising with the community and thus in the recording of IK.

Promoting awareness and appreciation

Public libraries also have a role in promoting awareness and appreciation of IK in their communities, thereby countering the devaluation of this knowledge and helping to restore its dignity. Raseroka (2002) has pointed out the phenomenon of neglect, low esteem or even denial of IK by elites and educated members of communities. Librarians, as part of the elite and as professionals, have a role to combat this. She recommends that LIS
professionals should empower local communities by “giving the IKS [indigenous knowledge systems] a voice”, and by “facilitating interactive activities that bring communities on board as equal partners in knowledge creation, sharing and use” (Raseroka 2002: 10).

Promoting awareness and appreciation can be done in a variety of ways. One of these is story-telling sessions in the children’s library during which older members of the community can enthral their young audience with folktales (Waungana 1984). One may add that the audience need not be restricted to children. Adults too can be enthralled by well-told stories. Exhibitions of books about IK, enlivened by appropriate artifacts and demonstrations of traditional arts and crafts, can also be considered. Such events should be interactive. Audiences should not be passive, but should be invited to participate and contribute their versions of stories and their understanding of IK as they have learned and used it in their families and neighbourhoods.

As Internet connectivity spreads throughout our communities, the worldwide web should not be neglected as a means of promoting awareness and appreciation of IK nationwide, and worldwide. More and more libraries have websites, but since the creation and maintenance of a website are labour-intensive and expensive exercises, the possibility of creating a web portal devoted to the promotion of IK among the general population should be considered. This could be a joint undertaking by one of our larger public library systems, in collaboration with the national library and one or more university departments or institutes with special expertise in IK, with funding from the National Research Foundation or other local or international funding agencies.

Providing access

A last role for the public library is that of a repository of recorded IK and point of access to it for nearby communities. Repositories of IK should not only be located in universities and institutes in distant cities, but also in community centres where IK can be both used and added to as a community resource. The comments made in the section on research libraries on access to IK, in a context that is conducive to respect, are equally applicable to IK in public libraries.

Implications

For public libraries to play the roles sketched here will require some shifts in attitudes and policies. Public librarians will have to accept what amounts to a paradigm shift away from the norm of recorded, published, Anglo-American dominated ‘non-fiction’ which ‘comes down’ to local branches from the formal publishing and bookselling sectors via library system headquarters, towards a broader and more diverse concept of the public library collection. In this concept, unpublished, and frequently unrecorded, sources of knowledge ‘coming up’ from the grassroots will be afforded the same dignity and appreciation as the more conventional library material. It is not only a matter of collections and attitudes in the local libraries. For the decision-makers at the headquarters of public library systems and their political heads, there are major policy issues to be thrashed out, for example, concerning the missions and priorities of public library services, the location, physical
accommodation, equipment and staffing of public libraries, and the accountability of the local public library to its community. All these have significant funding implications. There are also implications for the recruitment and education of public librarians.

NATIONAL LIBRARY

A country’s national library has a particular responsibility for collecting, organizing, preserving and making available the country’s recorded heritage, with special emphasis on the published portion thereof (Lor 1997). This responsibility starts with identifying the heritage to be collected, and the client needs that must be satisfied. From this should flow policies that give appropriate priority and emphasis to various components of this heritage, including IK. As major scholarly libraries and curators of national heritage, national libraries have long had responsibilities for relatively unconventional information carriers. The recording and preservation of oral history are also well-established practices in major libraries such as the United States Library of Congress (United States. Library of Congress 2004). Accepting a responsibility in respect of IK would not be a radical departure for a national library.

Collecting: legal deposit

The comprehensiveness of national library collecting activity depends to a large extent on legal deposit. In the UNESCO Guidelines for Legal Deposit Legislation, legal deposit has been defined as follows:

Legal deposit is a statutory obligation which requires that any organisation, commercial or public, and any individual producing any type of documentation in multiple copies, be obliged to deposit one or more copies with a recognised national institution (Larivière 2000: 3).

Legal deposit ensures that all published material from a country is brought together in the national library (and sometimes one or more other libraries) for the use of all the people of that country. It is the most effective means of ensuring that as much as possible of a country’s published output is collected, bibliographically recorded, preserved, and made available for use to serve education, scholarship, research, cultural and economic development, and sound administration, now and in the future.

In recent years, legal deposit has in many countries been extended to material other than print: sound recordings, films, videos, broadcast media and digital material. This is also the case in South Africa. Our Legal Deposit Act (Act No. 54 of 1997) is a progressive piece of legislation that covers a wide range of material, including material in formats and on information carriers that have not yet been invented. Any IK that is published, regardless of medium, falls within this definition and is therefore subject to legal deposit. However, legal deposit applies only to published material. As indicated earlier, much IK is unrecorded, let alone published. Can legal deposit be extended to unrecorded and unpublished IK? To extend legal deposit to unrecorded IK would stretch the definitional framework of the South African Legal Deposit Act, based as it is on the notion of a ‘document’, beyond its
limits. Can legal deposit be extended to *recorded* (albeit unpublished) IK, however? This would require a substantial amendment to the Act. Any new provisions added to the Act for the legal deposit of IK would have to be specific to IK, which would have to be very carefully defined. Other questions that would require attention if the Legal Deposit Act were to be amended to include IK are:

- How many copies are to be deposited, and in which places of legal deposit?
- Should compensation be paid in respect of expenses incurred in depositing IK?
- Since unpublished IK has no publisher, who is responsible for depositing it?
- What bibliographic information and/or meta-data should be submitted with the deposited material?

An amended Act would not necessarily alleviate the practical problems involved in extending legal deposit to IK. The research community, the holders of IK and other stakeholders in the field would need to be consulted before the legislation is amended. If this is not done, the amendment will be seen as an imposition, and compliance will be poor. Experience with legal deposit of published media has shown that the threat of penalties or other legal sanctions has little effect. Successful implementation depends on good relations with those who produce the material.

**Collecting: other mechanisms**

Legal deposit is not the only mechanism that could be used by a national library to collect recorded but unpublished IK. The following are some other possibilities:

- If specific legislation regarding IK is enacted, as is under consideration in South Africa, this legislation could include provisions for the deposit of recorded IK in the National Library.
- The National Library should form partnerships with government departments, research institutes and universities active in the field to participate in national programmes for the recording and preservation of IK. Agreements could be entered into with partner institutions, to ensure that copies of recorded IK are deposited in the National Library.
- Increasingly, IK (including transcripts and artifacts) will be recorded digitally. Collecting digital media does not necessarily imply that the National Library has to collect the physical media on which IK is recorded or download it from the web on to its own storage media. Agreements with trustworthy partners that will ensure that the National Library’s clients can obtain virtual access to IK may prove a satisfactory substitute as far as access is concerned. Long-term preservation is a different matter (see below).

**Organizing**

The National Library serves as South Africa’s National Bibliographic Agency and has the task of authoritatively describing the country’s total published output in all media. In the process, the National Library creates or contributes to various national databases, such
as the South African National Bibliography and its own catalogue, which is accessible on-line (National Library of South Africa 2004). This work is carried out using international bibliographic standards. The National Library therefore has considerable bibliographic expertise, which should be utilized in any national projects to record or inventorize IK. Specifically, the National Library has a role to play in the creation of a national worldwide web portal for access to IK.

**Preserving**

Earlier it was said that access agreements with trustworthy partners may prove a satisfactory substitute for legal deposit. This may be true for access, but not necessarily for long-term preservation of IK. ‘Trustworthy partners’ implies not only that the partners will be reliable and adhere to the agreements, but also that they will be able to ensure the integrity of the recorded material in the long term, and further that these partners themselves have good chances of long-term survival. To place this in perspective, it is noted that the collections of the National Library of South Africa go back more than two centuries. It follows that the National Library has to ensure that the national heritage that is created today will still be accessible to the people of South Africa at least two centuries from today. In agreements with the National Library’s IK partners, there should be clauses to ensure that their IK holdings will be transferred to the National Library if they should be dissolved, terminated or merged with foreign entities.

**Access and awareness**

In the National Library of South Africa Act (Act No. 92 of 1998), the National Library has been given an explicit responsibility for promoting an awareness and appreciation of South Africa’s published documentary heritage. To the extent that the National Library becomes involved in it, this would apply to IK as well. The National Library already has a unit responsible for Heritage and Information Awareness and has accumulated considerable expertise in this field. It also has expertise in the digitization of heritage materials. This places it in a strong position to provide the necessary interpretation and contextualization when providing the general public with access to IK as mentioned under the section on research libraries.

As a national ‘knowletage’ (knowledge and heritage) institution, the National Library has some special opportunities to contribute to promoting IK. One possibility would be to honour highly regarded holders of IK by creating a rotating position of ‘IK Expert in Residence’ in the National Library, much as national libraries in other countries appoint poets laureate and scholars in residence (United States. Library of Congress 2003). The person so honoured would be provided with a stipend as well as office accommodation and facilities in the National Library for a year, during which he/she would give talks and demonstrations to the public, assist curators and exhibition staff in interpreting and contextualizing IK resources, record IK and undertake research. Such a position should ideally be created and filled in collaboration with national museums, archives and research institutions specializing in IK.
‘Knowletage mining’

A further opportunity for the National Library lies in what one might call ‘knowletage mining’. The well-known turmeric case in India illustrated the importance of early printed records in overturning an opportunistic American patent on a remedy already known and used in India for centuries (Ganguli 2000). The National Library of South Africa has large collections of books in which early travellers, missionaries, military men, naturalists, hunters and other colonists recorded what they observed here. Among the observations are descriptions of the medicinal uses of South African plants and various forms of indigenous technology. Whether we approve of their activities and attitudes or not, these descriptions could prove very useful in protecting South Africa’s IK. In opposing foreign patent applications, this material can be used to prove that the ‘invention’ being patented is not novel but a matter of common knowledge; therefore a patent should not be awarded. Treasures are locked away in our Africana collections. Lack of staff makes it difficult for the National Library to explore the riches in its collections. One way to do this would be to create scholarships for masters and doctoral students from appropriate disciplines who would be employed for periods of one to four semesters to do research based on the National Library’s collections, assisting library staff to develop an in-depth index to the contents, and producing, by the end of their scholarships, an exhibition, a public lecture and/or a scholarly publication on an IK topic of their choice based on what they have found in the collections.

Implications

Initiatives such as those suggested here have significant funding implications. The seriously under-resourced National Library of South Africa would have grave difficulties in playing the roles outlined here without additional funding. However, if the functions allocated to the National Library by the legislature are to be taken seriously, and if the National Library is indeed to be transformed into a world-class African knowledge institution, as its vision statement affirms4, then the nettle must be grasped.

CONCLUSION

Although librarians are generally more comfortable dealing with publications than with unrecorded and unpublished knowledge, their rapid and competent adoption of modern information and communications technologies and new media has demonstrated that they are creative and able to adapt their libraries in line with changes in their environment. One of the changes librarians have to get to grips with is a broader and more inclusive concept of science and scientific knowledge. This implies that IK should also take its rightful place in South Africa’s libraries. For this to happen, there will have to be some significant shifts in the attitudes of librarians and in government policies relating to library missions, priorities, staffing and facilities. These have funding implications.
This article has outlined a number of possible roles for libraries in preserving and promoting IK. It is hoped that this will stimulate library colleagues to engage with IK, while alerting IK practitioners and researchers to what they can expect from their librarians.

\[1\] Revised and expanded version of a contribution to a panel discussion on IK policy issues at the Indigenous Knowledge Indaba, National Research Foundation, Pretoria, South Africa, 26-27 January 2004.
REFERENCES


