



## **The Challenges and Opportunities of preparing LIS Students for Orally based communities**

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**Meeting:**

**152. LIS Education in Developing Countries SIG**

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WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY

10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden

<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

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### **Abstract:**

*African nations are going through many changes. With these changes many of their traditions are being lost. Lack of preservation and access to traditional knowledge are causing cultural gaps between many generations and denying the continent the power and knowledge that it has developed for many years. This paper identifies the importance of traditional knowledge for the development of the continent and urges LIS educators to include in LIS curricula the training and education of future LIS students to work with and have skills needed to organize and integrate the oral and written knowledge for the benefit of the society. Using modern technological tools, libraries would not only organize and preserve the oral literature, but they will be able to provide and reach a wider audience.*

**Keywords:** LIS education, Oral literature, Indigenous knowledge, Curriculum, Walking librarian

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## **Introduction**

The history of Libraries in Africa is anchored on colonialism when foreign powers introduced libraries during and after colonization to serve for their educational, recreational and entertainment needs. Nyana (2010) notes that colonial libraries were developed in line with the Eurocentric model of libraries and librarianship whereby knowledge and culture are encapsulated and transmitted through the print and electronic media. Amadi (1981) notes that colonial hangover or vestiges are manifested in current patterns of information organisation educational and information policies, the curriculum and education systems, which emphasizes print resources at the expense of oral traditions, which are viewed as unreliable and unscientific. Dennis Ocholla (2000) also observed that since time immemorial oral traditions have always have been the major medium of knowledge acquisition, storage, dissemination and sharing before, during and in the post colonial era amongst African people.

## **Conceptual framework of oral traditions**

The oral traditions of Africa are culturally rich and varied, as their development is synonymous with African culture and traditions and they have helped to sustain or leverage African culture even though Library and Information Science Training has not taken this cultural capital serious because of the prevalence of the written culture. Oral tradition denotes the ultimate primacy of speech as the genesis of all human knowledge as reflected by the famous saying “... In the beginning was the word...”

McGarry (1993) argued that the human voice is the most information –rich medium in the universe of communications that speech is the link with other minds and that the human voice will remain the prime mover in the human scheme of things. This confirms why oral traditions are so powerful in creating new social realities in a complex modern society. LIS educators in oral based or shaped society should strategies on how to repackage cultural encyclopedia because the production of the great Greek epics “*The Iliad and The Odyssey* ‘is a clear testimony to the immense potential of using oral traditions as instruments for cultural transmission.

Taban Lo Liyong (1989) notes that Zirimu invented the term ‘oral literature’ as a reference for the way in which people use spoken words in an artistic way for entertainment, enlightenment and pedagogy. There are many forms of orature driving from the art of conversation, which includes speech, laughter, gesture, diction, puns, tongue twisters riddles, and conundrums among others. These can be incorporated into the LIS Training and help in adding value to LIS services and programs in oral based societies. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1990) argues that there is a wealth of knowledge that is encapsulated in oral traditions of indigenous people and what is needed is to strategies on how best to utilise these resources for the benefit of society. This calls for a paradigm shift with regards to LIS training so that it embraces story telling as an integral aspect of the curriculum. Achebe (1987) in *Anthills of the Savannah* notes that story telling is a critical component of African culture because stories have a didactic, pedantic, and moral lesson to impart and without them the world would be a dead stone cold world.

“The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us...”Vansina (1979) notes that oral traditions consists of all verbal testimonies that are either sung or spoken and concern the past. Oral traditions are transmitted through the spoken word. The writer further

observed that there are various means of transmitting oral traditions, for example, instruction, mnemonic devices and control over recital of traditions. It has been observed that in traditional societies schools were set up for the purpose of giving systematic teaching of classical traditions, for example the schools of Bono-Mansu in Rwanda and among the Incas and Aztecs. It also is noted that apart from instruction given by a specialist there also was instruction by “the walking librarian”. .” As Mugambi (2000) says, “in West Africa a griot, along with elders of a community, epitomizes oral tradition. He is a professional storyteller, a teacher, and a precursor to the contemporary literary artist. A master of oral communication, the griot is a historian, a “walking library,” a praise singer, an advisor to the kings, a tutor to the princes and intermediary between families, among other roles. For these reason, he functions as a pillar in traditional society.”

The art of story telling appear to be professionalised because the most accomplished story tellers are the griots, who are special people who have masters complex verbal, musical, and memory skills after going through training in the form of socialization. This training has a strong spiritual and ethical dimension required to control the Special Forces believed to be unleashed by the spoken or sung word in an oral performance. The spoken word is a tapestry that weaves through the dreams and culture and aspirations of oral people whether in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe.

This type of a specialist educator is common in African history of the great empires like Mewne-Mutapa, Rosin, Zulu, Xhosa, Bunyoro, Buganda, Asante, Fulani, and Mandingo among others. Westermann (1952) notes that in East African history, genealogists, memorialists, and rhapsodists were responsible for the faithful preservation of various categories of cultural traditions. The genealogists’ role would be to remember the list of kings and queen mothers, while that of the memorialist was to capture the most important historical event of the reigns then the rhapsodist would preserve the panegyrics of the King and the secrets of the dynasty. Traditional societies elevated “walking libraries” as a way to ensure that their legacies would endure by chronicling and remembering every minor and major event within that society. Again, Mugambi (2000) eloquently describes her own experience about her heritage in saying, “Like many Africans raised simultaneously in an indigenous and colonial world, I live (and) breathe the heritage offered to me through folklore. I can trace my moral formation to the values transmitted through the verbal arts.” She continues, “When I began field research in African folklore at Makerere University, I realized that despite the effects of colonialism, verbal arts continue to survive ... ideas are transmitted orally, that is through words, spoken, sung, or drummed.”

However some traditions are a matter of esoteric knowledge whereby people attached to a certain institution or to a particular cultural group transmit the traditions through recital, for example, clan and family histories fall under the banner of esoteric traditions. The training of Library and Information Science also follows esoteric traditions because it is carried out in esoteric buildings whereby knowledge and skills in the subject are a preserve of those who have acquired the body of knowledge and certified the examiners and therefore are entitled to the professional privileges that emanate from that.

Ocholla (2000) notes that oral traditions have not been fully exploited in order to make public libraries relevant and vibrant to the socially excluded or marginalized communities in Africa for example the geographically and physically and mentally challenged. Amadi (1981) notes that through repackaging information librarians can help to revitalize education and training by adding value to the collection development of culturally relevant materials. The

writer notes that if The Iliad had not been written as a transcript of Homer's memory posterity would not have benefited from this great Greek epic prose. These tales were narrated orally in the same way African griots and troubadours narrate African epics by using oral communication to bring audience and narrator together so that storytelling becomes a cultural encyclopedia whose main purpose is didactic even though a satirical.

### **Transmission of oral culture through oral traditions.**

Hankins notes that the transmission of oral culture has been the basis for sustaining, perpetuating and disseminating information in various cultures throughout the world especially Africa. African people highly value oral traditions because they have helped to sustain the collective cultural memory of the society from one generation to the other. Taban Lo Liyong (1991) notes that oral traditions always have been revered and utilised as the media for the preservation of history and cultural traditions, and genealogical traditions of communities. Generally Western scholarship has tended to look down upon oral traditions on the basis that they lack validity but there has been a paradigm shift as emphasis now shifts towards the integration of oral traditions in the educational curriculum. Mugambi (2000) argues that orature is still central to Africa life, a dynamic living art embracing the totality of the various cultures. This is due to the recognition that oral tradition through spoken word is embedded into the life cycles of African people through songs, poetry, proverbs, and celebration of various events that helped the African society continue to survive and thrive throughout the ages.

Garry (1993:59) observed that the history of what the modern world now refers to as information storage and retrieval is anchored on culture and the transmission process of the sum total of people's ways of life. Giddens (1999) defines culture as the total lifestyle of a group of people, which encompasses ideas, values, knowledge, behaviors and the material objects that the group shares. Generally culture is divided into the material and non-material with the former dealing with physical objects while the latter deals with the possession of unique ethical, moral or artistic systems and patterns of social organisation.

MacGarry (1993)) notes that permanence and conservation are critical for the continuation of culture and hence the importance of oral traditions. The writer further observed that in order for knowledge to be shared and used there must be "a storage system" to transmit cultural benefits over –time. The nomenclature for the storage systems include a plethora of terms, for example" cultural memory" "social transcript" "cultural books" " cultural records" " living and moving libraries" "moving encyclopedia" and "mobile 'wikis" among other terms.

### **Oral traditions as a tool for education**

Doctor Ali Mazrui (1985) observed that Eurocentrism has rejected the validity of oral sources on the basis that they are not scientific or empirical even though these are powerful tools that help to illustrate or illuminate the dynamism of raw human memory, which has enabled traditional societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America to maintain their unique collective identities. Alema (1996) notes that oral culture has not been given due consideration for example, African libraries have remained print oriented in total disregard of the value of oral traditions. There is a deliberate tendency to replace oral culture with reading culture rather than focusing on how to provide relevant knowledge and skills necessary for oral communities. Nyerere (1975) also echoed similar sentiments by demystifying the myths that

there was no education prior to colonial rule.“....The fact that pre-colonial Africa did not have ‘schools’...except for short periods of initiation in some tribes did not mean that the children were not educated. They learned by living and doing..... They were taught the skills of the society and the behavior expected of its members.....”

Robinson defines education and training as “**investment in human capital**” resulting in individual and societal gains. Education and training is critical for socioeconomic development because it is the starting point of human activity. It involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which will enable an individual to put his or her potential to maximum use. Through education and training, human beings are able to receive and give information to the external environment, minimize the impact of the environment on their lives and maximize their impact on the environment.

Ukeje (1998) defines education as a process by which people are prepared to live effectively and efficiently in their own environment. Nyerere (1975) noted that in order to make education and development meaningful there was a need to reshape and correct the attitudes that shape such initiatives and this would be possible through developing new conceptions of knowledge that take cognizance of both local and international concept to inform education practices. LIS Professionals would be the prime movers towards developing an education system that is non-discriminatory and offers local oral based communities an opportunity to “...learn to know, learn to do, learning to be and learning to live together as equals with others....”

The education of Library and Information professionals is no exception as it should adequately equip LIS professionals with the relevant skills and knowledge will help them to operate effectively and efficiently in oral shaped communities. Ukeje (1998) is of the opinion that even though there are universal standards to be maintained but every society should devise a system of education that is relevant to their own needs and circumstances.

LIS Professionals who will serve oral based societies should take a cue from Nyerere (1975) who asserts that education should be conceived as the transmission from one generation to the next of the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the society and the preparation of the young for the future membership of a society and effective participation in its maintenance and development. This means that the LIS curriculum should be structured in a manner that exposes the student to appreciate the value and complementarities of both international and indigenous knowledge.

### **Challenges and opportunities of training LIS Professionals in oral based communities Curriculum review**

The challenges of training LIS professionals in oral shaped societies rests on the need to change the curriculum so that it becomes a curriculum that has local relevance. This will involve the need to widen stakeholders in the design, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum so that students are equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge to be creative and innovative in designing programmes for local people who might not be able to read and write. These librarians to be deployed in oral based societies will have to disembark from the ivory towers of eclecticism and be able to play the philosophical Socratic midwifery role of using oral resources to empower people in oral based societies. The other challenge for LIS educators in oral shaped societies is the need to create mutual beneficial strategic partnerships between communities and libraries, as this will permit the locals to have an input into the type of services they need.

Nyana (1970) said that the revision of the LIS Curriculum should see the inclusion of oral traditions in the form of storytelling and a balance in terms of print and oral content. There is also a need for Librarians to move away from the archaic traditional model of service delivery whereby libraries wait for users to come to them and embrace the marketing oriented approach whereby they will take a pro-active step to engage the community through linkages and networking activities in the form of social advocacy, marketing and publicity. This also will require skills to conduct community profiles that will help to identify mentors and other important cultural icons in the community who can share their experiences through oral communication.

The Cultural Revolution in LIS Training should result in a curriculum that will produce Librarians who understand the library and development nexus, because the two concepts are indispensable. This initiative will see the development of LIS practitioners who will use their knowledge and skills to develop efficient and appropriate library systems rather than the “white elephants” that are an unnecessary burden to the taxpayer. This new curriculum also include a practicum whereby a student will do one year or a term or half a semester of an assessed on the job training in an oral shaped community. This will help the student to put into practice what he or she has learned with regards to working in such challenging environments. Currently many young LIS students in Africa scramble to secure industrial attachments and the in high technology driven non-governmental organisations non of them interested in serving the rural areas or public libraries whose mandate is to serve everyone including the populations who are unable to read and write.

### **Fighting social exclusion and bridging the information divide**

Alemma (1995) noted that there are numerous opportunities for LIS professionals if they come up with strategies on how to reach out to the socially excluded oral communities. This calls for engaging in innovative ways to repackage information to meet the information needs of the local. . This will require librarians to revise and broaden their collection development policies and the translation of print to oral based formats, for example, group discussions, drama, song, story telling, poetry and dance. The challenge is on LIS professionals to come up with ways that will help to create the convergence of print and oral resources by exploiting the complimentary nature of the various formats of information.

### **Utilizing ICT's to promote oral traditions**

The other challenge in preparing LIS professionals for an oral based society relates to the knowledge and skills on how to utilize ICT's for development purposes, for example, the use of pod casts. These tools have been adopted as a medium to disseminate agricultural information amongst rural farmers in Zimbabwe. This is an innovative way of using ICT's to disseminating information to those areas that have limited road networks and poor communication infrastructure. Podcasting helps the local people to make an input into the development of content because the concept is dependent upon the integration of upon people, technology and content.

LIS professionals who will work in oral based communities should be able to use basic technology like podcasts. They will need to use tools to store and disseminate information covering a variety of themes on health, education, democracy, crop and livestock production and management. Clegg and Montgomery (2008) argue that the technology needed to

produce podcasts is relatively simple, for example, access to a conference call service that allows you to record the call and download the recording, meeting place or virtual recording venue and the fact that participants must be in a meeting place and have access to a landline or a VoIP and a microphone. The podcasts are played on MP3 players, which are powered by rechargeable batteries. It also is possible to use multilingual podcasts and Information professionals in oral based societies can experiment with these.

Clegg and Montgomery (2008) noted that the benefits of using podcasts are that they facilitate the capture of tacit knowledge “hot of the press..” through interviews. They also encourage collaboration since they can be delivered through RSS feeds. Podcasts also are portable and convenient and they are a novel way to present knowledge and they are liberated from the constraints of time and space. Widely dispersed people in rural communities can be interviewed irrespective of time and place. These tools also are relatively cheaper and convenient tools for generating knowledge pertaining to a community and they are ideal for capturing a fading memory. These podcasts are indispensable tools in disseminating knowledge on health, culture, and agriculture among other topics to orally based communities. This is an innovative and relatively cheaper or affordable alternative way to repackage information for developmental purposes. This means that the LIS curriculum should be able to train librarians in the use of rudimentary technology like radio, television, audio cassettes and podcasts to help local people in an oral shaped society produce content reflecting local needs.

Meyers (2005) notes that Information captured in a written or digital format is not accessible to people used to oral tradition and this brings in the need to repackage Information from print into word of mouth, drama, or song or face to face demonstrations. This means that LIS professionals should avoid the pitfalls of inappropriate media by falsely assuming that oral societies will accept on a particular topic when offered in a picture or even an audiovisual format, for example, television. To overcome the problem of media dependency LIS professionals in oral based societies should consider the use of people friendly media in the language and culture that local people understand.

### **Harnessing orature as a medium of communication**

Hove notes that libraries as cultural institutions can be agencies of social change in the educational process by ensuring that the student of today and tomorrow will be exposed to oral traditions and that this will help to increase their critical thinking skills and information literacy. Libraries need a fundamental rethink in order to make a paradigm shift from the traditional, anachronistic and elitist approach of being imprisoned in the grain silos of print and electronic communication. The people of Zimbabwe just like any other oral based society have local traditions that challenge the mass media through orature. These traditions have been the bedrock of indigenous communication by helping to relay cultural traditions from one generation to another.

These oral traditions exist in the form of oral stories like narrative proverbs, song-tales, myths, folktales, legends, animal fables, anecdotes, dirges, merges, song, drama and dance. The LIS professional should be able to harness this cultural capital as a complement to the print or electronic media in ensuring that oral traditions will develop to enrich universal human experiences and their creative expressions. Hove notes that oral traditions are the most effective carriers of meaning be it at a funeral or celebration the drum sounds rules. For example in Zimbabwe on both radio and television before the news the drum sound will be

heard. "... So the instrument persists to a point where today the national news in Zimbabwe is announced by a frenzied drummer practicing that ancient art of summoning all to court for important events....."

Obiechina, (1993) notes that African proverbs and stories draw upon the collective wisdom of oral people and express structures of meanings, feeling and thought thus serving a critical social and ethical purpose. This implies that the story becomes a primary form of the oral tradition and a vehicle to convey culture, experience and values as well as a means to transmit skills, knowledge and wisdom. Library and Information professionals need to take cognizance of the oral background of oral shaped societies so as to enable them to develop services and programmes that are in sync with the culture and expectations of the people. Universally every human culture creates narratives that help the members to make sense out of the world and this is why folktales are common in all cultures. Chinua Achebe (1987) In *Anthills of the Savanna* observes that in oral shaped societies like Africa the story outlives everything from dirge to mirge and that stories serve a didactic, therapeutic ethical purpose. "It is the story... that saves our progeny from blundering like Blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we our story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us.." Achebe (1987)

### **Creating synergies with barefooted librarians**

The '*walking librarian*' is the modern day's moving encyclopedia and LIS practitioners in public and community libraries should be able to identify such resourceful and important people so that they can be invited to share their knowledge and skills with library patrons. The public library in Zimbabwe, for example, the Bulawayo Public Library, National Museum and Harare City Libraries also have experimented on utilizing storytellers to attract young readers to the library. This confirms Amadi's assertion that there is need to "**deprofessionalise**" by incorporating people who have great experiences to come and share such experiences with users. It also requires LIS professionals who can use tact to debunk the myth that knowledge only exists only books or in brick and mortar edifices like modern libraries. While in pre-colonial Africa to some extent still at present day African society as Kwame Gyekye (1995) affirms, "A great deal of philosophical thought is embedded in the proverb, myths and folktales of the people." However the challenge is on how to broaden and sustain such important initiatives that add value to the cultural lives of people in oral based communities.

Goody and Watt (1982) observed that traditional people are more inclined to make sense of real life objects they are more familiar with or abstract things they can compare to physical objects they are familiar with, for example comparing a circle to the moon or rondel to a hut or a square to a house. Human beings tend to also operate in the iconic or symbolic mode because they understand issues better that are expressed in the form of symbols. Meyer (2005) notes that to overcome the problem of intangibility Library and Information Science Practitioners as communicators should exploit the mechanism of comparisons, metaphors or visual demonstrations that their target audience can easily relate to.

### **Indigenous Knowledge systems (IKS)**

LIS professionals need to be trained to develop an appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems, which are anchored on oral traditions. Atte (1992) defines IKS as local knowledge,

derived from interactions between people and their environment. This knowledge system encompasses the whole range of human experience and is encoded in the art of conversation, for example, proverbs, stories, riddles, music, song and dance and other verbal skills that make up the repository of knowledge for oral based communities .The greatest challenge and opportunity for LIS practitioners is to identify, organize and promote and protect this knowledge so that it is not excluded from developmental projects of the community. This also will require information professionals who are equipped with knowledge on such crucial issues as intellectual property rights, bio-piracy and fair dealing among other issues so that they will design programmes to orally engage oral communities in discussions on topical issues that affect their well being.

Mwanahewa notes (2009) that it is possible to link logic and oral traditions in a complementary and mutual relationship for example, oral literature makes use of emotional appeal as a weapon in delivering messages and in achieving objectives. However, authentic study and exploration into the depths of logic has shown that bad arguments--which can mislead society--can be made consciously or unconsciously made when one is using carefully selected content words. In this regard, the authenticity of logic should not be based on whether the approach is scientific or artistic, but on whether it convincingly serves the intended purpose or leads to the achievement of the set objective. The writer further notes that oral communities are replete with ‘ *living libraries*’ and nothing is done to capture the knowledge these people possess and he asks “..... However, the life span of these libraries is short because sooner or later the entire generation will die. Taking this fact into account, how many libraries does the world bury everyday?” As Amadou Hampate Ba (1992) reminded us, that in Africa, when an old man dies, a library disappears.”

The greatest challenges in training LIS professionals in oral based societies revolves around the need to integrate IKS and MKS so that the young graduates comprehend the complementary nature of the two as useful resources in tackling the problems of contemporary society. This calls for the redefinition of education so that Libraries through the use of community profiles can make or create room for experts in oral culture to come and share their experiences with readers. This will help to demystify the myth that professors are only found only in universities because oral communities also are also fertile grounds for philosophers. This is possible through a cultural devolution process and it calls for the deprogramming of the minds of the locals so that they view education and knowledge in a holistic manner. There is a greater opportunity for LIS professionals to explore IKS with regards to intellectual property rights and sustainable development among other topical issues. It is important for African librarians to press for the systematic organization of African oral traditions that contain a vast amount of cultural, historical, philosophical, traditions, religious, scientific, and library knowledge.

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