Introduction

A lot has been written about the "book famine" as the other famine in Africa, the major famine being the hunger for food. Unfortunately, very little has been heard about another "famine" in African libraries which is the lack of oral documentation in these libraries. What is often forgotten is that Africans basically have an oral culture. The book, reading, libraries and formal education were all imported from the colonial masters.

The introduction of libraries, reading and a bookish system of formal education into Africa marked the historic transition from an oral pedagogy to a literary education. Because of its emphasis on literacy, this new system required that librarians and others stress "alphabetized information" as opposed to "information per se." According to Amada, "the absence of true libraries in Africa as well as the poor quality of both services and clientele, is to be better understood in terms of the hasty attempt to transform Africa from an oral to a written culture."

In more recent times there has been a tendency to view the people of Africa, particularly the majority who live in the rural areas, as ignorant, passive and stubbornly uncooperative recipients of "modern" information that somehow been legitimized by the printed word. The actual situation, though, is that the people probably have more ideas than most, for within Africa's oral medium, there exists a treasure-trove of knowledge which could contribute to the solution of many of the continent's persistent problems.

In the view of Ruth Finnegan, "the concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures which, like those of contemporary Europe, lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition. In the popular view it seems to convey on the one hand the idea of mystery, on the other that of crude and artistically undeveloped formulations." She goes on to stress that none of these assumptions is generally valid. Her position is that, despite difficulties of exact delimitation and presentation, it is misleading as well as unfruitful to attempt to draw a strict line between the verbal art of literate and non-literate cultural traditions.

Thus, it is clear that the difference between oral and written literature is that of degree and not of kind. Throughout much of antiquity even written works were normally read aloud rather than silently, and one means of transmitting and, as it were, "publishing" a literary composition was to deliver it aloud to a group of friends. In such cases the relationship of the performance and transmission of literary works to the content is not totally dissimilar from that in African oral literature. Even in a society apparently dominated by the printed word the oral aspect is not entirely lost. Perhaps because of the common idea that written literature is somehow the highest form of the arts, the current significance of oral elements often tends to be played down, if not overlooked completely. African oral literature has often been regarded as primitive and not to be studied by civilized communities.

Oral Documentation in Libraries

A number of scholars have stressed the importance of oral documentation in libraries. However, there has been, and still is, a considerable amount of repetition and overlap in this literature. This is not to suggest that the literature is not worthwhile. On the contrary, there are a number of articles which are of outstanding quality.

Enright has observed that librarians and documentalists tend to be reactive rather than proactive in their response to providing information to the changing needs of the society. Their reluctance to perceive the significance of emerging trends in information gathering and to develop service in anticipation of the need of users, has efficiently diminished their own position, and the centrality of their role to their user communities.

Heintze has expressed concern about the average scholar's disregard for any responsibility toward posterity's use of the oral
tradition materials gathered during personal research and investigation. He reports unsuccessful attempts in developed countries to encourage scholars to deposit their working materials in recognized oral data collections.

The reluctance of traditionalist librarians to recognize the significance of new media and their rapidly increasing importance to information users has led to the diversion of resources to alternative centers. As a consequence of their inaction, new centers have been set up to meet the growing demands of a generation of information users who no longer had the traditional background of reliance almost exclusively on printed literature.

But it is not African librarians alone who should be blamed for their lack of interest in oral documentation. In the words of Anyidoho, until recently, under the able misdirection of colonial education programs, few African scholars would consider the oral traditions of their people worth the attention of scholarly research. Ironically, many of them were at the same time very loud in condemnation of almost every foreign work on African culture.

Until about two decades ago, few African scholars would even dream of going into anthropology or folklore. Today, however, good judgement has overcome sentiment, and an African can stand up in the midst of other academics and announce that he or she is an anthropologist or a folklorist without losing respect among colleagues.

There are growing signs of a fuller appreciation of the extent and nature of African oral literature. There have been attempts to establish oral literature as a systematic and serious field of study which could coordinate the efforts of all of those working in relative isolation. These include students of culture, sociology, ideology, art, religion, and history. As librarianship cuts across all these subject areas, it becomes even more relevant for librarians to have a knowledge of the nature of oral traditions, various mechanisms available for testing their validity, authenticity, and reliability, and the uses to which they may be put by researchers.

Oral documentation has been hailed as part of the new librarian's ongoing policy of actively seeking information, rather than passively arranging it, and of dealing in a wide variety of media. In the scholarly analysis of Africa's oral tradition, tape and disc recordings are now widely used. Linguistics, folklore, history, anthropology and other fields continue to gather their primary data through the use of tape recordings.

Disc recordings are also being made of African traditional music and drumming. Materials of these types have been exported to other countries, especially those interested in African studies programs. A third way in which African tradition is being preserved is through the use of film. This has become very popular of late, and several indigenous film-making businesses have recently been established in several African countries. Many of these films reflect traditional ethnic behaviour and help to preserve African culture.

It is in the area of oral documentation in libraries that African countries have lagged behind. Amadi laments that "the grief arising from the devastation of a library by fire or similar causes in the western world is only comparable in intensity to the loss, through death, of an old man in Africa. The latter, like the former, is the veritable embodiment of an archive or a proto-library - a library without shelves." The situation is even much more devastating than Amadi's description. For whereas a published book has an independent existence and generates secondary materials like reviews, synopses, commentaries and so on, all of which could be replaced from multiple copies elsewhere, the destruction of an oral library through death occasions a total "vanishing into oblivion."

As Ndiaye suggests, "the librarian's job is to try to gain in-depth knowledge of orality in order to mark out the areas where there is conflict and those where orality and libraries are really compatible. The needs of both must be brought into harmony." The effectiveness of libraries is at stake in all the regions where books are today being introduced, and where the population is actually aware of their value and necessity.

Apart from the fact that the library inspires more confidence in a reading public than other official agencies, it is the only institution which distributes literature free of charge. And when one
considers that in almost all African countries, one of the major constraints of book buying is a low income, then the importance of libraries as vehicles of communication cannot be overemphasized.

This is not to underplay the fact that documentation and preservation of oral tradition in African libraries have various limitations such as manpower, funding, technology, as well as some practical difficulties. There is no doubt that the resources available for the librarian in Africa to exploit this medium of information provision are minimal. What is of major concern is that even in countries where these limitations can be overcome, no attempt is made at oral documentation in libraries.

As long ago as 1973, in a contribution to a conference on publishing in Africa, Oyeoku suggested that “the initial emphasis of African libraries need not be on the printed word. It is quite feasible and more meaningful to start a library in a rural community with miles of tapes of people’s folklore, music and culture.” He proposed experimentation with a new institution in a rural village, which would collect oral materials from the villages into a community library of tapes. The institution would gradually transcribe the materials for use in connection with literacy teaching, so that new readers were dealing with familiar and well-loved materials. It is now two decades since this proposal was made, and libraries in Africa have done very little to accomplish this very important task.

Conclusion

As Africa continues to modernize, the barriers between the old and the new are being torn down. The isolated village, which preserves the traditional ways, is searching out new methods of communication such as the radio and the printed word. The city dweller, too, often isolated for several generations from the traditional ways of life, is searching out new ways to reforge his links with the past. It is the blending of the two ways of life which challenges the modern African who can recognize the values of both life styles. It is also in this situation that the library is expected to play a major role.

NOTES


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