

The Role of Libraries in Promoting the Documentation and Dissemination of African Traditional Religion in South Western Nigeria

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Introduction

When exploring Africa's considerable pre-colonial achievements, focus is rarely on the Traditional Religion of the Africans. Whenever references are made to the people's religion, conflicting and often negative allusions are often made about the people and their religion. These are the functions of one or more of the variables of prejudice, ignorance, missionary zeal, or deliberate academic falsification of fact about the people by the colonialists and other professionals. The phrase, "how can the untutored African conceive God?" is a famous statement credited to Emil Ludwig (Idowu, 1972:88). Yet the Africans are incredibly and notoriously religious. Religion is central to the people of south western Nigeria. According to Idowu, (1962: 44), the Africans, are incurably religious. This statement is supported by Mbiti (1992: 26) when he refers to the Africans, to which the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria form a part, as a people devoted to their religion.

Ekeke (1994: 15), in his own opinion, about the religiosity of the people believes that various people of Africa own a religious system and a set of beliefs and practices which bind them together to their Ultimate. The foregoing has highlighted two varying opinions about the Africans and their traditional religion. It is against this backdrop that this paper aims at determining the roles of the libraries in the promotion of the documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion. The study therefore seeks to investigate the role of libraries in promoting the documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion in South West Nigeria by looking at the following objectives:

- Determine the current state of libraries in promoting the documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion in south west Nigeria.
- find out the shortfall in libraries for not promoting documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion in south west Nigeria
- Seeks to recommend to libraries in promoting documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion in south west Nigeria

The historical research method was employed for this study describing religious activities, roles of the libraries, archives and museum in relation to the life of south western Nigerians. As such, the researchers visited these centres (libraries, archives, museums and places of worship of the African Traditional Religion) to observe in reflection of their experiences from historical perspectives.

Problem Statement

According to Nakata and Langton (2005), the Library and Information profession has a great deal to learn if they are to effectively meet the indigenous knowledge in an appropriate way. Africa is a vast continent embracing various and variegated climate, ethnic groups, languages, culture, traditions and even religious inclinations. It therefore becomes necessary to situate the subject matter in a particular culture and ethnic group for effective appraisal. It is on this basis that the South Western area of Nigeria is chosen for this study. The choice of this place is informed by a few reasons. The primary occupants of this area are the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria (Oladipo, Olabiyi, Oremosu and Noronha, 2007:20), The history of their religion spanned centuries has actually produced and influenced religions outside Africa (Adogame, 2007: 18).

The religions of Santeria or regal lucumi as practiced in Cuba; Oyotunji as practiced in the United States of America and those of Candomble, Umbanda and Batuque that are practiced in Brazil exhibit evidence of influence of the Yoruba religion as a fallout of the Atlantic slave trade. The Yoruba cities of Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ondo Oshogbo, and Ile-Ife to mention only a few became areas of colonial interests and investments. These have produced an emerging urban, yet cosmopolitan population enabling most of these cities and towns to be centres where libraries are situated. The authors of this paper, being members of the Yoruba ethnic group, are familiar with the terrain of the area of focus hence their interest in carrying out this research.

African Traditional Religion: Misconstrued and Misrepresented

One of the common features of colonialism is the outright denigration of Africans and their religion. However, the basis for this denigration predates the coming of the Europeans to the African shores. It actually began with an intellectual pride and error of interpreting the meaning of religion from the perspective of the Europeans. According to Beyers (2010), majority of the definitions of and theories on religion have originated from a Western background giving room to the perception that religion can be understood only from their viewpoint. Hence, their definition of religion derives from Western philosophy. Christianity, being the dominant religion in the Western world became the yardstick used in measuring other religions, and any religion that do not fall into the Western mode is not regarded as religion. In fact they define African Religion from the viewpoint of the Europeans. Any practice that does not fall into their definitional mode cannot be a religion.

Therefore, African Traditional Religion which does not qualify by their indices cannot be called a religion. Momen, (1999: 69) while critiquing this myopic perception, came to the conclusion that this view led Western scholars to arrange religions in a hierarchical structure implying that some religions were inferior to the others. Other reasons for denigration abound: these include factors related to prejudice by Western scholars who invariably delineated African Traditional Religion with Christianity. The twin factors of ignorance and lack of in depth study of the people's religion by armchair scholars who depended on the data of ethnographers, explorers and missionaries led to faulty conclusions.

The cumulative effect of these misrepresentations ensured that the religion of the Africans was misconstrued. Apart from this, many of the Yoruba themselves came to see the religion of their forefathers as idolatry, polytheism and fetishism. This type of understanding has unfortunately convinced many Africans who will never see anything good in whatever is indigenous to Africa (Abioje, 2001: 61). Any good thing found in Africa, whether a material object or an idea must have according to such Africans come from the Western world. This misunderstanding continued until indigenous African scholars like John S. Mbiti (1970:15) and E. Bolaji Idowu (1962: 44) in 1970s and 1980s, set out to refute some of the erroneous claims about African religion. They echoed the fact that "Africans have known God before the advent of the missionaries (Ekeke and Ekeopara, n.d. www.scihub.org/AJSMS). This position allowed the Africans and their religion to have a different perception.

What then is the traditional religion of the people of south western Nigeria? The religion as practiced by the Yoruba like other people of Africa is a religion that was handed over from generations to generations with the medium of transmission being oral. This indigenous religion is one without a founder, a reformer or a revivalist like other traditional and indigenous religions all over the world. Quite unlike the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, the religion has no sacred writings like the Bible or the Quran.

Although worthy of note is the Ifa corpus often referred to as the odu Ifa existing among the Yoruba. This body of literature is still undergoing research and a lot of its component is yet to be unveiled.

The medium of information transmission is largely through oral traditions in form of myths, ritual, festival, arts, and symbols and lately through modern formats of audio video, compact disks and various other ICTs components. Evidence abounds today, both from the whites and indigenes to establish the fact that African Traditional Religion existence is not related or dependent on foreign religions. The several works of foreigners like Parrinder (1976), Bascom (1969) have attested to this fact, while it is a known fact that Susan Wenger lived and died in Oshogbo, an ardent believer in the Osun goddess. These are but a few examples of those dedicated to the refutation of allegations that seek to misrepresent the religion of the people. In addition, indigenous scholars of the African Traditional Religion who have worked assiduously to expose the religion as it is to the whole world are too numerous to mention but few scholars of south western Nigeria extraction includes Idowu (1996), Awolalu, Dopamu (1979) and Abimbola (1977). Their extensive submissions about the religion of their forefathers have corroborated other works on the people's religion from other parts of the world.

A close scrutiny of traditional religion of the Africans in South western Nigeria exhibits a few characteristic features that consists of five cardinal belief pillars ranging from the belief in God, who is variously referred to as Olodumare, Olorun, and Eleda. He is supernatural, divine, the creator and sustainer of the world. After Him comes the divinities who are often referred to as gods or deities. These divinities are the objective phenomena of the people's religion as they are easily accessible and functions as intermediaries between Olodumare and the worshippers. These divinities are called orisa, they number over four hundred. Closely following the belief in orisa, is the people's belief in the ancestors.

This is the belief in the living dead who sometimes serve as intermediaries and custodians of the heritages of the people. At other times, they also help to maintain social order within the confines of the living and dead members of the family. Then this is followed by the belief in the spirits which pervade natural phenomenon. The people's belief in magic and medicine is the fifth cardinal belief of the people. The flora and fauna of the forest region of the South western Nigeria has been used to produce several health portions that have assisted the people in the amelioration of their various challenges. These are the fundamental beliefs of the Yoruba of South western Nigeria on which anchors their faith, such as myths, destiny, salvation, taboos, ethics and philosophy.

Library Access to Indigenous Knowledge and Information

A library is a centre for the collection of sources, resources, and services. (Olanlokun and Salisu 1993) concur that a library refers to the structure in which the collections are accommodated; libraries are usually organized for the use of the public and maintained by either by a public body, an institution, government or a private individual. The word library refers to the institution that is devoted to the collection, preservation and transmission of human experiences, culture and religion. They (libraries) are custodians of information for people to access. According to Bamigboye in his description of library, is of the opinion that:

Modern libraries maintain resources that include not only printed materials such as books, periodicals, newspapers, and magazines, but also art reproductions, films, sound and video recordings, maps, photographs, microfiches, microfilms, CD-ROMs, computers software, online databases, and other media resources. In addition to managing resources in library buildings, modern libraries often feature telecommunications links that provide users with access to information at remote sites (Bamigboye and Alawiye, 2012: 3).

Regardless of the cultural information contained in the libraries, it is the responsibility of information institutions to ensure that the records obtained is managed, preserved and made available for later use (Clayton and Gorman, 2005: 46-56). The fundamental aim of libraries is to provide timely, accurate, pertinent, and reliable information to meet users' information needs (Ebiwolate, 2010).

Apart from libraries, there are other institutions devoted to the collection of similar information materials for the consumption of the public and for generations unborn who will eventually consume these products at a later date. One these information institutions are the archives. These are the centres devoted to the housing of historical records and collection of these records. The records that are usually contained in archives, unlike the libraries are primary source documents that have accumulated over a

period of time. The records or documents in an archive is usually not on display and cannot be seen as an exposition. They are less accessed by readers than the library because their contents are purely primary transactions. Libraries and archives are similar to one another in that they contain information materials that are accessible to the general public.

Another institution devoted to the preservation of information is the museum. A museum is a place or institution that houses and caters for the collection of artefacts and other artistic objects of historical importance and makes them available for public viewing through exhibits that may be permanent or temporary. From the foregoing, there is actually very little difference between the three resource centres of information. While it is the responsibilities of the libraries to have in their custody published materials in various formats like books, newspapers, periodicals, compact discs, films and a host of other digitalize formats, archives hold only primary sources which are the original documents themselves. An archive holds collections of items or "records" that often have meaning only in the context of the larger collection of a historical record. While library documents are easily replaceable, archival materials are not. This is the reason for the access restrictions into archives.

The issues of preservation are more imperative for archives than most libraries. However libraries do sometime hold archival materials. Museums, on the other hand are collections and custodians of artefacts, artistic objects which are usually placed in their building for the public to access. Much has been said about the professional differences between the three but for the purpose of this paper, they will be seen as one entity that they are devoted to the promotion of preservation and discharging of information. This opinion finds support by Gibson, Morris and Cleeve (2007: 53-64) who see a collaborative effort between libraries, archive on one part and museums on the other hand.

The libraries, archives and museum of South western Nigeria has been the major thrust of this present effort. The territorial space covers six states among which are: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti and Ondo states. Several higher institutions of learning are spread across the length and breadth of the place, an indication of the profusion of libraries. Apart from this, there abound several federal and state libraries owned and maintained by the federal and state governments. These libraries mark the major cities of south western Nigeria.

Additionally, there exist information centres in all the private tertiary institutions springing up in the area. As for the archives in the area, Abioye records that the Ilorin national archives office opened in 1982 while that of Abeokuta was opened in 1989 (www.emeraldinsight.com/0956-5698.htm) Other archives include that of the Lagos state government in Lagos and the one of the University of Ibadan. The museums in south western Nigeria are six in number among which are: Esie in Kwara State, Owo in Ondo State and the Uli Beier museum in Oshogbo, in Osun state, national Gallery of Modern Art and that of the Nigerian National museum both in Lagos and a virtual museum established in Lagos in the year 2011.

The Role of Libraries

Assessing libraries of developing African countries, Ogundipe (2005: 15-16) speaks of the significance of the role of libraries.

What is significant and makes librarianship interesting in the African setting or context of developing countries is the variety of roles that the library is expected to perform or fill in the absence of alternatives, and within which the librarian, there can find his or her own special interest and the opportunity for job satisfaction. The libraries are often expected to be educational centres, providing books, journals and materials for continuous education through formal examinations and informal education through independent self – study and general reading. Therefore, many of the libraries in spite of their category have to collect materials and develop collections that are open – ended to cater for all categories of users (Ogundipe, 2005: 15-16).

If the libraries, archives and museums are agencies with the responsibilities of collection, processing and disseminating recorded information in the various formats (printed and electronic) most convenient to its target users, then it becomes relevant to the preservation of African Traditional Religion. The Religion of the Africans and indeed the Africans, to which the South western Nigerian is an integral part, has been victims of abuse and misrepresentations. This has culminated into derogative terminologies of their religion and their persons, such obnoxious terminologies like heathenism, fetishism, and idolatry are a

few of words used in the description of the religion. The cumulative effect of this terminologies and obvious denigration of the religion of the Africans produce some complexes among the Africans. It is on this basis that the libraries have a major role in given the right picture about the people and their religion.

The libraries can contribute meaningfully in the documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion in South Western Nigeria in the following ways:

- Libraries and its other affiliates can promote the documentation and dissemination of the people's religion through the provision of adequate information, creating awareness and education of the religious traditional rites and knowledge about the community and its way of worship.
- Information on African Traditional Religion is available in larger quantity in Nigeria, while many are in the libraries, quite a number still exist outside the libraries. Libraries, must, as a matter of urgency identify and acquire materials through purchase and exchange which will aid researcher to access the materials objectively, in both negative and positive discuss on the religion.
- The easy access to religion of the people even when they do not share in the same religious concept will help to negate their cultural misconceptions.
- Following the educational role libraries play, relevant materials acquired by libraries are made accessible to the consumers at minimal convenience. Libraries have been structured to assist the reading interest of the readers. Wali (1991:116-123), opines that special exhibition of materials can serve as reading resources both in print and electronic format. The libraries, archives and museums serve as links between the people of south western Nigeria to the outside world with regards to the acquisition of knowledge and dissemination.
- Besides, libraries assist the institutions of higher learning in the continuous development of their curriculum.
- The research approach to the role of libraries and its affiliate institutions is another point of emphasis.

Hornby defines research as a careful study of a subject, especially in order to discover new facts or information about it (Hornby, 2010: 1255). It is the diligent and careful investigation and a systematic study of a phenomenon. Dorothy (1977: 24) asserts further that libraries facilitate scientific studies, teaching and self-learning process.

- As repository of knowledge and information, libraries provide platforms for researchers in African Traditional Religion. A lot of materials on oral tradition, religion rites and about the people's religion are being documented in libraries where researchers can have access to them.
- One major role that these information custodians of libraries do to assist in the promotion of the documentation of African Traditional Religion is in the area of management. The concept of management involves planning, organizing, control, coordinating and directing.
- Another role libraries play in the promotion of documentation and dissemination of African Traditional Religion is apparent more in the museums. This is in the area of artifacts, arts, crafts, sculptures, markings and dresses. These convey identity, fashion, status and spiritual information.

These objects speak eloquently of the people's belief in God, spirits and ancestors. They all inform researchers about the people's taboos, philosophy and worldview. However, it is worthy of note that the management of these resources found in libraries, archives and museums giving it a long life span can be kept in show glasses, cupboards, confines, regularly dusted with brushes, well guided from theft and abuse and so on.

Challenges for Libraries

The challenges accrued to libraries in the promotion of African Traditional Religion can be viewed from two perspectives. These include the challenges of libraries in general and the traditional religion of Yoruba of South western Nigeria.

- The discourses of the writers' unveil that libraries, archives and museums spread all over South Western Nigeria need replacement of out-of-date document.
- A cursory examination of the documents on religion in most of the libraries of south western Nigeria, indicate that there are more documents on Christianity and Islam while those on African Traditional Religion are very few. This calls for urgent need to address paucity of its availability.
- Lack of funds is another major constraints of the libraries located within the South Western part of Nigeria.
- Many of the structures are dilapidating and in need of repairs. A group of newspaper journalists went round Nigeria to assess the state of the libraries in the country came up with the conclusion that most of the libraries are in bad shape (Awoyinfa 2012).
- Lack of infrastructure that will help in the documentation of these resources. Ajibero (2000) states the reason for this is the function of economic conditions, government attitude, and particularly information infrastructure. There are some documents that are in dire need of repair. Worthy of note, is unavailability of computers to facilitate the dissemination and documentation of the artefact. Mostert (2001: 16) support this view saying, some English speaking countries in Africa, are yet to acquire computers.
- The lack of sufficient libraries within the South Western Nigeria constitutes another challenge to the promotion of the documentation and dissemination of the traditional religion. Olanlokun (1993: 8) rightly observed that there was a substantial increase in the number of branches in some states of Nigeria. It must however, be pointed out that the number must be increased in order to meet contemporary challenges.
- Worthy of note, is the challenge posed by the technology of the e-libraries, which is still relatively new to the people of south western Nigeria. E-Library is an umbrella term covering library resources that are available online through computers and databases. These resources are different from the open internet, since they sometimes contain restricted access. Although the practice of Library Science profession is still growing and a lot of improvement and innovation are required, Nigeria is making efforts to make e-libraries most acceptable to the public (Oboh,2012).

The second part of the challenges has to do with African Traditional Religion of south western Nigeria:

- The attitude of most South Western Nigeria is naïve towards the art of religion. This made most Nigerians hold the view that the religion is a religion that must be discarded. This led to a function of the influence of the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, who in their evangelical zeal has denigrated the traditional religion. The resultant effect is that the religion is treated with disdain, making it difficult for librarians to document their work. In addition to this, the custodians of the people's religion are gradually dying and not impart their wealth of knowledge leaving a vacuum because generations coming after them are not ready to be trained to take their place.
- The inability of the faith custodians to reduce their knowledge into writing offers yet another challenge to the promotion of their enterprise.
- Apart from this, the vast expanse of land referred to as the south west, Nigeria is the traditional home to the Yoruba, but the innumerable dialects make communications difficult. The names of one item differ from one ethnic group to the other, thus making it almost impossible to know items that are intended.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The foregoing has been an attempt to examine the role that libraries play in the promotion of the documentation of African Traditional Religion in South western Nigeria. The people in geographical location are traditionally Yoruba speakers. Their religion is the one referred to as African Traditional Religion in this work as they form a part of the African populace. It has been discovered that the religion has been largely misunderstood and that the libraries play a great role in the promotion of the documentation and dissemination of the people's religion. It is assured that the role libraries play in the documentation and preservation of the people's indigenous knowledge of their religion can never be trivialized. Libraries have therefore important roles to play in ensuring the growth, and expansion of African Traditional Religion of South western Nigeria to facilitate all round development in institutions.

From the findings, the researchers recommend that:

- African Traditional Religion is made compulsory in the teaching as a module or curriculum in secondary schools so as to inculcate the values of African culture and tradition on the students.
- Parents of different families and citizen should imbibe into their children cultural heritage so that the ethos of African Tradition Religion is passed from to generation.
- Valuable information regarding knowledge of the use of herbs in health issues, historical background and the likes about the south western Nigerian should be sorted out and such information is documented before they pass on.
- Government of South Western Nigeria should be encouraged to fund the libraries, archives and the museums in view of the relative importance to development.
- Libraries should seek to acquire materials in these areas and send staff for more training on how to document and preserve the artefact, documents and archival materials.
- There is the urgent need to promote the reading habit of the people of south western Nigeria. While it is true that education is free from the primary school to secondary schools, the attitude of reading is very low. This is so because a large percentage of people can neither read nor write. This calls for urgent need to promote the reading habit of the people of south western Nigeria
- Libraries should seek to acquire materials in African Traditional Religion areas and send staff for more training on how to document and preserve the artifact, documents and archival materials.

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