



Indigenous Knowledge Preservation: Challenges and Opportunities in African Libraries

Abstract

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) represents the collective wisdom, values, and practices developed by local communities through generations of interaction with their environment. Across Africa, this knowledge is increasingly at risk due to globalization, technological dependency, and the marginalization of traditional systems within formal information structures. This paper argues that African libraries must transition from being passive custodians of knowledge to active collaborators in indigenous knowledge preservation - through participatory, policy-driven, and community-led frameworks. Drawing upon examples from South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, the paper critically examines the challenges of funding, policy gaps, and ethical issues while identifying opportunities for innovation through digitisation, partnerships, and decolonial knowledge management practices. The central position of this paper is that the preservation of indigenous knowledge should be approached as a shared cultural responsibility — where libraries serve as facilitators, communities as custodians, and governments as enablers.

Keywords: African libraries, indigenous knowledge, indigenous knowledge challenges, indigenous knowledge preservation, opportunities

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1.0. Introduction

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) encompasses the traditional practices, cultural expressions, oral histories, and ecological wisdom developed and sustained by local communities over centuries. This knowledge not only contributes to cultural identity but also provides valuable insights into sustainable living, agriculture, medicine, and conflict resolution. However, in many parts of Africa, Indigenous Knowledge is rapidly declining due to urbanization, language loss, and the dominance of Western information systems that undervalue non-written traditions.

This paper adopts a conceptual and literature-based analytical approach, drawing on existing scholarly works, policy documents, and illustrative case studies from selected African countries. It does not involve primary empirical data collection; rather, it synthesizes existing knowledge to provide a critical perspective on the role of libraries in Indigenous Knowledge (IK) preservation. By combining conceptual analysis with practical examples, the paper seeks to bridge theory and practice while advancing a policy-relevant discourse on sustainable and ethical IK management in Africa.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper seeks to:

1. examine the current state of indigenous knowledge preservation efforts in African libraries;
2. identify major challenges impeding sustainable preservation of indigenous knowledge;
3. explore opportunities for participatory and technologically supported indigenous knowledge preservation practices; and
4. present a clear position advocating for community-driven, policy-supported, and ethically grounded indigenous knowledge preservation in African libraries.

Through this position, the paper emphasises that the survival of indigenous knowledge is contingent upon shared stewardship — where libraries act as bridges between modern information systems and living cultural traditions.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Global and Regional Policy Context

International bodies have foregrounded indigenous knowledge preservation within cultural safeguarding and climate adaptation agendas. UNESCO (2020) programs on Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) and related expert meetings have emphasized:

- a) The contributions of IK to biodiversity and climate resilience.
- b) The need for locally-led preservation strategies that respect customary protocols.

These instruments recommend participatory documentation, capacity-building, and policy coherence between cultural institutions and indigenous communities.

2.2 Efforts by African Libraries, Archives, and Cultural Institutions

In recent years, several African libraries and cultural institutions have initiated targeted programs to safeguard Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as part of national and regional information heritage strategies. In Nigeria, the National Library of Nigeria and several university libraries—such as those at the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University—have embarked on projects to record proverbs, traditional songs, and local craft processes. These projects often operate through student fieldwork, oral history recordings, and community engagement workshops, as noted in studies on participatory Indigenous Knowledge documentation in African libraries (Oyelude, 2023; Msuya, 2021). However, scholars note that many of these efforts remain fragmented due to inadequate funding and limited national coordination (Chigwada, 2024).

Furthermore, the National Library of South Africa (NLSA), through its Indigenous Knowledge Systems Documentation Programme, has been digitising oral histories, traditional medicinal plant records, and folklore materials in collaboration with community custodians (Masenya, 2023). This initiative aligns with the South African Department of Science and Innovation's Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy Framework (revised 2021), which mandates partnerships between knowledge holders and public information institutions for ethical documentation and controlled ACCESS. (Tinashe, 2025)

At the regional level, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the African Regional Centre for Information Science (ARCIS) have organized workshops to train librarians and archivists in documenting and managing IK

using open-source digital tools. While these examples illustrate commendable progress, studies indicate that significant disparities persist between policy ambitions and operational realities in Indigenous Knowledge preservation across African institutions (Msuya, 2021; Mokgosi, 2022). However, the growing awareness and institutionalization of IK preservation across African libraries and archives indicate a transformative cultural shift toward inclusive, community-driven heritage management. (Msuya, 2021)

2.3 Scholarly Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge Management

Contemporary scholarship has placed growing emphasis on the fact that indigenous knowledge management extends far beyond documentation, encompassing critical concerns around power relations, ownership, and epistemological (or epistemic) justice. According to Msuya (2021), African libraries have historically operated within Western knowledge frameworks, often marginalizing oral and community-based knowledge systems. This has resulted in what scholars describe as “epistemic exclusion,” where IK is either underrepresented or misrepresented within formal information systems.

Likewise, Chigwada (2024) argues that librarians must move from custodial roles to active knowledge mediators, facilitating access while respecting indigenous intellectual property rights. This aligns with the decolonial perspective advanced by David (2024), who posits that IK should not merely be preserved but repositioned as a legitimate knowledge system capable of informing global challenges such as climate change. Masenya (2023) further highlights the role of digital technologies in revitalizing IK but cautions that digitization without cultural context risks “data extraction” rather than preservation. In contrast, Schellnack-Kelly (2024) focuses on metadata challenges, emphasizing that conventional cataloguing systems often fail to capture the contextual and performative nature of oral knowledge.

These studies collectively demonstrate that effective IK preservation requires a multidimensional approach—combining technology, policy, ethics, and community participation. However, gaps remain in translating these theoretical insights into sustainable institutional practices, particularly in resource-constrained African library environments.

3.0 Nature and Characteristics of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge IK is dynamic, situated, and often transmitted orally across generations. It is commonly encoded in local languages, songs, proverbs, ritual practice, and embodied craft knowledge. This multimodality makes preservation complex, as Indigenous Knowledge is not only textual but also performative and context-dependent, requiring specialized documentation approaches (Schellnack-Kelly, 2024). Language vitality is a central concern; with many African languages endangered, the loss of linguistic vehicles erodes IK transmission channels. Therefore, preservation approaches should capture audiovisual dimensions, contextual metadata, and community narratives alongside textual transcriptions. (Tinashe, 2025)

4.0 Challenges Facing African Libraries in Preserving Indigenous Knowledge

4.1 *Inadequate Funding and Resources*

Insufficient funding remains a structural barrier, with studies consistently identifying financial constraints as a major limitation to sustainable Indigenous Knowledge preservation initiatives in African libraries (Mokgosi, 2022; Msuya, 2021).

4.2 *Policy and Legal Gaps*

Many countries lack clear national policies governing IK documentation, access rights, and benefit-sharing. Without legal frameworks recognizing community ownership and protocols, libraries risk inadvertently enabling misuse or commercialization of sensitive knowledge. (Tinashe, 2025)

4.3 *Technological Barriers and Digital Decay*

Technical issues include inadequate digitization standards, poor metadata practices, poor generalized data structures, and the long-term problem of digital relevance (file-format decay, hardware failure). Libraries in regions with intermittent power supply and limited internet infrastructure face significant challenges in maintaining digital repositories, a problem widely documented in African digital preservation studies (Msuya, 2021).

4.4 Language and Metadata Challenges

IK materials are often in local languages and dialects for which there are limited grammatical standards or controlled vocabularies. Creating accurate, culturally sensitive metadata that preserves meaning while enabling discovery is a persistent challenge.

4.5 Ethical Concerns: Consent, Ownership, and Cultural Sensitivity

Recording and providing access to Indigenous Knowledge raises critical ethical questions, particularly regarding ownership, consent, and benefit-sharing, which have been extensively discussed in Indigenous Knowledge governance literature (Chigwada, 2024).

5.0 Opportunities for Preservation

Despite the numerous challenges confronting African libraries in the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge (IK), emerging initiatives, technologies, and collaborative frameworks present significant opportunities for sustainable and ethical preservation. These opportunities lie primarily in the areas of digitization, community engagement, and partnerships with traditional custodians, integration into education and research, and international institutional support (Tinashe, 2025)

5.1 Role of Digitization and Digital Repositories

Digitization is widely recognized in the literature as a transformative approach to Indigenous Knowledge preservation, particularly in enhancing accessibility and long-term storage (Masenya, 2023). By converting oral and physical records into digital formats, libraries can extend the lifespan and accessibility of cultural materials while minimizing physical deterioration. However, digitization must be guided by culturally sensitive metadata standards and ethical access controls to ensure that digital archives remain respectful of community ownership (Schellnack-Kelly, 2024).

5.2 Community Participation and Oral History Projects

The involvement of local communities in the documentation process remains central to the authenticity and sustainability of Indigenous Knowledge preservation. Organizing oral history projects empower communities to tell their stories in their own voices, ensuring cultural accuracy and contextual integrity. Libraries can play a facilitative role by providing

technical support and training allowing communities to retain custodianship over their narratives. Successful examples include Nigeria's community-based storytelling initiatives, which demonstrate that community-driven preservation fosters both trust and inclusiveness (Oyelude, 2023).

5.3 Collaboration with Elders, Traditional Leaders, and Cultural Custodians

Elders and traditional leaders are vital channel of Indigenous Knowledge and act as living archives of community wisdom. Collaborative partnerships between libraries and these cultural custodians will ensure that the process of documentation is ethical and culturally sensitive. Libraries can establish committees comprising elders and community representatives to guide the selection, interpretation, and contextualization of materials (Chigwada, 2024). Such partnerships will not only enhance the credibility of preservation projects but also strengthen community trust, encouraging continued participation and knowledge sharing. (Mokgosi, 2022)

5.4 Integration of Indigenous Knowledge into Curricula and Research

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into academic curricula, research programs and national educational frameworks presents another strategic opportunity for its preservation. Universities and library schools can include IK documentation, cataloguing, and ethics into coursework, thereby preparing future librarians while also promoting awareness, respect, and institutional support for Indigenous knowledge systems (David, 2024).

5.5 Support from International Organizations and NGOs

International bodies such as UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AFLIA), International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and various non-governmental organizations continue to play a critical role in supporting Indigenous Knowledge preservation efforts. Programs like UNESCO's Memory of the World and Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) provide technical training, policy guidance, and funding for digitization and documentation initiatives (UNESCO, 2020). Sustained international collaboration enhances capacity-building, and policy harmonization.

6.0 Case Studies

6.1 *Examples of Successful Indigenous Knowledge Preservation Projects in Africa*

Several African countries have embarked on commendable initiatives aimed at documenting, preserving, and disseminating Indigenous Knowledge (IK) through collaborative and technology-driven methods.

In Nigeria, the National Library of Nigeria and selected university libraries have initiated Indigenous Knowledge collection projects focusing on oral traditions, traditional medicine, and folklore (Oyelude, 2023). These initiatives are typically implemented through field-based data collection involving students and researchers who engage directly with community elders and custodians.

Outcomes from these projects include the creation of localized digital archives, increased awareness of cultural preservation, and the documentation of endangered languages and practices. However, challenges such as inconsistent funding, lack of standardized metadata frameworks, and weak institutional coordination have limited their scalability and long-term sustainability.

A key lesson from the Nigerian experience is that community trust and continuous engagement are essential for successful documentation, as communities are more willing to share knowledge when they perceive clear cultural and social benefits.

In South Africa, the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Documentation Centre established under the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) works with universities, libraries, and local communities to collect and digitize indigenous medicinal, agricultural, and cultural practices (Masenya, 2023). The National Recordal System (NRS)—a digital repository developed by the DSI serves as a centralized database where IK is catalogued and stored with controlled access to protect community ownership, these efforts have resulted in thousands of documented IK records across provinces.

These initiatives have resulted in structured national repositories and improved policy alignment, making South Africa one of the leading examples of institutionalized IK preservation in Africa. A critical success factor is the integration of IK policies within national research and innovation frameworks, ensuring long-term sustainability beyond individual projects.

In Kenya, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), in collaboration with the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNADS), has implemented the Oral Literature and Cultural Heritage Digitization Project. This initiative records oral traditions, songs, and folklore from various ethnic groups, preserving them in multilingual digital formats accessible to both scholars and community members. The University of Nairobi's Department of Anthropology also runs community-based ethnographic documentation projects that promote participatory methods and respect for cultural protocols (David, 2024).

In Kenya, a prominent model of success emerges from multi-institutional collaboration: academic institutions, government agencies, and cultural organizations partner synergistically to safeguard and sustain Indigenous Knowledge (IK). The project has improved accessibility to oral literature while promoting cultural education and research. However, issues of digital access inequality and language standardization remain ongoing challenges.

6.2 Lessons Learned and Best Practices

A critical review of these projects reveals several lessons and emerging best practices.

Firstly, community participation is essential for authenticity, as local custodians provide cultural context that external researchers often lack.

Secondly, digitization must be complemented by ethical frameworks—including consent forms, access restrictions, and benefit-sharing agreements—to prevent exploitation of community knowledge.

Thirdly, multilingual metadata systems enhance easy discoverability and inclusivity, ensuring that IK is accessible to both local and international audiences.

Finally, sustainability depends on institutional commitment and stable funding; projects anchored within national policies, such as South Africa's IKS Policy, demonstrate greater continuity than those reliant solely on donor support.

Collectively, these case studies underscore that successful IK preservation in Africa is achieved through a balance of technology, ethics, policy, and community partnership.

7.0 Recommendations

The findings of this paper affirm that sustainable Indigenous Knowledge (IK) preservation in Africa requires a shift from traditional custodianship to collaborative, community-centered, and policy-supported frameworks. To actualize this transformation, the following strategic recommendations are therefore proposed:

7.1 *Development of National and Institutional Indigenous Knowledge Preservation Policies*

Governments and cultural institutions should formulate comprehensive policies into national development and cultural heritage strategies, aligning with the African Union's Agenda 2063 vision of promoting indigenous systems for sustainable growth. These policies should define ethical standards for Indigenous Knowledge collection, access, and benefit-sharing. These frameworks must recognize communities as rightful owners and active partners rather than mere information sources. (UNESCO, 2020; Chigwada, 2024).

7.2 *Training Librarians in Ethnographic Research and Digital Tools*

To reposition libraries as facilitators of knowledge co-creation, librarians require specialized training in ethnographic research, oral history documentation, and digital preservation tools. These competencies enable professionals to ethically document and preserve Indigenous Knowledge while respecting its contextual and cultural meanings. Universities offering library and information science programs should therefore embed Indigenous Knowledge management and decolonial methodologies within their curricula (Masenya, 2023; Msuya, 2021).

7.3 *Building Community-Library Partnerships*

Libraries must establish sustained, trust-based partnerships with elders, traditional leaders, and local communities. This participatory approach aligns with the paper's position that knowledge preservation must begin and end with the people who own it. Joint advisory committees should guide project priorities, consent protocols, and metadata standards to ensure that preservation efforts remain community-driven and culturally sensitive (Oyelude, 2023; Tinashe, 2025).

7.4 Adoption of Open-Access Repositories with Multilingual and Multimedia Support

In line with the objective of improving access and inclusivity, institutions should develop open-access repositories that support indigenous languages and multimedia formats. Such platforms would allow users to access oral histories, songs, and rituals in culturally authentic forms. The inclusion of multilingual metadata enhances both local relevance and global visibility, helping libraries fulfill their facilitative role in cultural continuity (Schellnack-Kelly, 2024; Mokgosi, 2022).

7.5 Funding Strategies for Sustainable Preservation

The realization of effective IK preservation depends on consistent financial investment. Governments should establish dedicated funding streams and endowment schemes for Indigenous Knowledge projects. Additionally, partnerships with private organizations, NGOs, and international bodies such as UNESCO, WIPO, and IFLA can provide grants, training, and technological support. These collaborations will ensure that preservation initiatives are sustained beyond short-term donor cycles and are integrated into national information and development agendas (UNESCO, 2020; David, 2024).

Position Reinforcement Summary

The recommendations presented in this section are grounded in the paper's position that African libraries must evolve into dynamic agents of cultural preservation and collaboration. By implementing these strategies—rooted in policy reform, capacity building, community participation, and ethical innovation—libraries can safeguard Indigenous Knowledge as a living, evolving heritage essential for Africa's cultural resilience and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) within African libraries, identifying both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities. Through an analysis of policy gaps, technological limitations, and ethical considerations, it

has demonstrated that the survival of IK depends on the extent to which libraries can evolve from passive custodians to active facilitators and collaborators.

First, the paper explored the current state of Indigenous Knowledge preservation, showing that while digitization and documentation efforts exist, they often lack coherence and community integration. Second, it analyzed key challenges such as inadequate funding, absence of legal frameworks, and cultural insensitivity that hinder sustainable preservation.

Third, the paper identified new opportunities—ranging from digitization, oral history documentation, and community engagement to international collaboration—that can transform preservation efforts. Finally, it presented a clear position advocating for community-driven, policy-supported, and ethically grounded preservation frameworks that ensure Indigenous Knowledge remains a living, evolving part of Africa’s intellectual and cultural heritage.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Indigenous Knowledge management by providing a conceptual framework that integrates policy, community participation, and technological innovation. It also highlights the need for further empirical research to evaluate the effectiveness of existing IK preservation initiatives across diverse African contexts.

In conclusion, Preserving Indigenous Knowledge is not merely an academic exercise; it is an act of cultural justice and intergenerational responsibility. By embracing collaboration, innovation, and respect for indigenous epistemologies, African libraries can ensure that the continent’s knowledge systems continue to inform, guide, and empower future generations in a rapidly changing world. Governments must act as enablers, libraries as facilitators, and communities as rightful custodians.

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