

Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Sustainability in Northern Nigeria: The Role of Private Libraries

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Abstract

Much of our cultural heritage owes a large debt of thanks to private collectors of manuscripts, incunabula and printed material; to those individuals who were interested in the accumulation of knowledge and the preservation of our literary history, and who saw fit to pass on their acquisitions for the foundation of libraries. Across Africa, libraries are contributing to development in their countries. However, this work remains largely unrecognized by contemporary library users. To bridge this gap, this paper examines the unique role of private libraries in preserving the cultural heritage and the sustenance of indigenous knowledge in Nigeria. It further discussed the importance of cultural and knowledge sustainability, which has become a growing priority in sustainable development agendas, being depicted as a fourth pillar, equal to social, economic, and environmental concerns. It argues that more explicit coverage of cultural and knowledge sustainability is required to not only improve the contributions of private libraries to culture and knowledge sustainability, but also to provide an increased understanding and appreciation of the value of private libraries.

Keywords: *Private Libraries, Cultural Sustainability, Knowledge Sustainability, Northern Nigeria*

Introduction

Developed nations of the world preserve their cultural and intellectual heritage for their coming generations. History of human civilization showed that only those nations who preserve their cultural heritage are among the most developed and prosperous nations today. Libraries always played a nucleus role in the preservation of this heritage. Much of our cultural heritage owes a large debt of thanks to private collectors of manuscripts, incunabula and printed material; to those individuals who were interested in the accumulation of knowledge and the preservation of our literary history, and who saw fit to pass on their acquisitions for the foundation of libraries (Hauff, 2017). The libraries owned by private individuals are as varied in their range of interest as the individuals who collected them, and so they do not lend themselves to generalized treatment. The phrase *private library* is anyway unfortunate because it gives little idea of the public importance

such libraries may have. Private collectors are often able to collect in depth on a subject to a degree usually impossible for a public institution; being known to booksellers and other collectors, they are likely to be given early information about books of interest to them; they can also give close attention to the condition of the books they buy. In these ways they add greatly to the sum of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge.

Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the role of private libraries in sustaining the indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage of the Northern Nigeria and Kano State in particular.

The Concept of Private Libraries

Private libraries are the earliest types of libraries. Private libraries served as prestige items in the ancient times. Today, private libraries are operated by individuals who have high value for information. The collections of the private library reflect the subject interest of the owners (Igun, 2006).

A private library is a library under the care of private ownership, in contrast to that of a public institution, and is usually only established for the use of a limited number of people, or even a single person. As with public libraries, stamps, stickers, or embossing are used to show ownership of the items. Some people donate or sell their private libraries to established institutions such as the Library of Congress, or, as is often the case, bequeath them thereto after death through a will. From antiquity, the private libraries owned by rulers/kings served as archives for the documents of royal families, genealogical charts, private medical records, military histories, and other personal records of their owners. Not only in the past, but in the present era, there exist many renowned private libraries that are playing their vital role in the preservation of intellectual heritage. In Pakistan, the Masood Jhandeer Research Library is the largest private library, which has the richest collection of manuscripts and rare books. It is owned and managed by a dedicated team of book lovers, who are working hard without any external funds and resources for the development of the library. The management is enthusiastically pursuing various plans to raise the standard of the library to make it an up-to-date research library (Wikipedia, 2018).

Libraries, particularly through their special collections, maintain important knowledge and cultural artifacts that represent a significant part of the heritage of the communities that they serve. Indeed, not only in their collections, the libraries themselves are using their history and buildings, as cultural assets to enrich local communities and, alongside other heritage attractions to contribute to tourism associated with a city or region. One of the primary aims of libraries is to hold the cultural assets in trust for their communities, yet a series of challenges in recent years have put the long-term survival of the institutions at risk, with implications for the sustainability of the cultural assets within their care. Today, libraries face an ongoing battle to justify their existence and secure their futures (Campolmi, 2013).

However, there is increasing recognition that culture is of equal importance as social, economic, and environmental concerns for a sustainable society. The inclusion of the concern for culture within sustainable development agendas was a central focus of the United Nations' post 2015 sustainability goals (IFACCA, 2013). With the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of cultural vitality was identified as key to enhancing cultural sustainability (Soini, & Birkeland, 2014). This would seem to be a prime opportunity for libraries to demonstrate the true value of their existence. Yet to date, there has been limited acknowledgment of cultural sustainability as an equal concern within sustainability policies for libraries, and as a result, their work to sustain culture continues to be considered not vital to the promotion of social, economic, and environmental growth of any society.

Today, the concept of a private library is broadly applied to any individual's personal collection regardless of its size. In contrast to public libraries, private libraries include one's own personal works, letters, diaries, photos, blogs, and other personal materials (Ferington, 2002; Private Libraries Association, 2007). Famous private libraries of the world include; Queen Elizabeth II's Library in Windsor Castle; Tianyi Pavilion – the oldest private library in Asia (located in Zhejiang, China); Library of Sir Thomas Browne; Bibliotheca Lindesiana, The Folger Shakespeare Library, The Huntington Library, The John Carter Brown Library, Hakim Zillur Rahman Library, Masood Jhandeer Research Library: The largest private library of Pakistan etc. (Wikipedia, 2010).

History of Private Libraries: The Global Perspectives

In 600 BC, library and archival collections in ancient Greece flourished. Within the next three centuries the culture of the written word rose to a pinnacle there. Although public libraries available to all citizens were established in some cities, such as Athens, most citizens could not read. However, private book collections owned by the elite and leading citizens were growing along with the glorious homes and structures used to store them. Private libraries were not only built by the wealthy, but also by professionals who needed information nearby, including doctors and scholars. Notable scholarly figures like Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, and even Plato had their own private libraries with large collections. One of the most notable figures in ancient Greece with his own private library was Aristotle (Murray-Stuart, 2009).

Mesopotamia was home to a great number of private libraries, many with extensive collections of over 400 tablets. The nucleus of these private libraries were primarily texts which had been transcribed by the proprietors themselves from the time they acquired their education in the art of the scribe. As insignificant as these libraries may seem, they established the basis for the Library of Ashurbanipal collection (Simo, 2016).

There were numerous private libraries in Ancient China. These institutions were called "book collection house" in Chinese, which was widely accepted from Song Dynasty (Jiang, 2011). Under the influence of petty-farmer consciousness, the patriarchal system, lack of books, and other factors, "hiding book" thinking was dominant then (Huang, 2011). Not all private libraries in ancient China were unavailable to the public. Some owners made their collection open to the public (Ma, 2011).

The Renaissance brought with it a renewed interest in conserving the new ideas being put forth by the great thinkers of the day. Kings throughout European countries created libraries, some of which have become the national libraries of today. In addition, wealthy individuals began establishing and developing their own private libraries (Simo, 2016). The National Library of France (French: *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*) in Paris was started in 1367 as the Royal Library of King Charles V. In Florence, Italy, Cosimo de Medici had a private library which formed the basis of the Laurentian Library. The Vatican library was also established in the 15th century. Pope Nicholas V helped to renew the Vatican Library by donating hundreds of personal manuscripts to the collection (Simo, 2016).

From antiquity, rulers have controlled knowledge in order to establish social, religious, cultural, and political power. Their private libraries served as archives that held documents of royal families, genealogical charts, private medical records, military histories, and other personal records of the king/ruler. Thus, almost all libraries until the nineteenth century were private libraries owned by kings, temples, and other individuals/institutions, and were usually restricted to the nobility, aristocracy, scholars, or priests. Examples of the earliest known private libraries include one found in Ugarit (dated to around 1200 B.C.E.) and the Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (near modern

Mosul, Iraq- dating back to the seventh century B.C.E). Private libraries for citizens became possible after the invention of the printing press, which allowed individuals to develop personal collections.

Relevance of Private Libraries to Society

Regardless of any differences in specific missions or aims in maintaining these collections, a diverse range of cultural assets resides within the core of many of the communities and societies. Taking the private libraries as an example, the focus of collections can vary from archaeology, anthropology and natural history owned by a particular community or society. Private library collections, especially, those attached to traditional institutions are often housed within historic buildings that can be considered cultural assets in their own right. Such buildings are iconic landmarks within the city, and have strong links to the community in which they are based. Private libraries, especially those in traditional institutions make significant contributions to the cultural landscape, and maintain a vast array of cultural heritage of their communities. The role that private libraries play is however far more complex than simply preserving cultural heritage for posterity. Indeed, the private libraries, in particular, has long recognized that organizations have a greater responsibility to society than simply preserving and interpreting cultural artifacts, and should play an active role in improving society by working to address contemporary issues and using their expertise to make a positive difference to their communities. To be more candid, the following are some of the benefits of private libraries in northern Nigeria and other parts of the world:

➤ ***Preserving Cultural Heritage***

Recognizing the cultural importance of sharing, Mahatma Gandhi said that, “no culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive”. The stimulus to share and reuse information and knowledge comes in many guises. Perhaps the most deep-rooted of our human instincts is the desire to preserve our culture for future generations. This is one of the most important functions of private libraries.

Private libraries are rich repositories of historically and culturally significant collections, many of which are not available anywhere else in the world. Without an appropriate copyright exception, a library could not preserve or replace a damaged work while it is still covered by copyright. For example, it could not lawfully copy or digitize an old newspaper or a unique sound recording to preserve it. Without appropriate library exceptions, this cultural heritage would be lost to future generations.

Today, many works are only “born digital”, such as websites or electronic journals, and are unavailable in print format. Without the legal means to preserve and replace works in a variety of media and formats – including format shifting and migrating electronic content from obsolete storage formats – many of these works will inevitably be lost to future generations of historians. Many of these collections are very expensive and the bureaucratic nature of government makes it often difficult to be obtained by public libraries. This is not the case with private libraries.

➤ ***Private Libraries and Community Development***

The placement of a private library in a struggling or depressed neighborhood can help to revitalize the area – libraries are a great way to bring large numbers of people together and they also create economic opportunities for businesses and organizations. Libraries are not just about books and information; they can also provide special collections which have developed from specific community needs.

➤ *Private Libraries and Child Development*

Libraries offer a whole host of programmes from tutoring, help with homework and annual summer reading programmes for young children and teenagers to help them with their academic performance. Libraries can be valuable partners in helping parents with child development through their provision of collections, programmes and services which allow children to learn, explore and engage with the world and their peers.

Integration of Cultural Heritage Sustainability in Policy and Research for Private Libraries

The idea that culture should be considered as a distinct pillar within sustainable development agendas is now gaining widespread acceptance. Indeed, the need for greater consideration of cultural sustainability was a primary focus in the United Nation's post 2015 sustainability goals (IFACCA, 2013). Along with the growing consensus surrounding the idea that the protection of cultural heritage is crucial for cultural sustainability to be possible, this would seem to be a prime opportunity to demonstrate the value of the work of museums and libraries in sustaining culture beyond its impact on social, economic, and environmental concerns. Yet despite this, the focus of sustainability research within museums has tended to remain upon their relationship 'with primarily environmental and secondarily economic and social sustainability' (Stylianou-Lambert, Boukas, and Christodoulou-Yerali, 2014).

This would also appear to be the case within library research, with the majority of studies focusing on 'greening' initiatives (Jankowska and Marcum, 2010). Even research or initiatives focusing specifically on the maintenance of either physical or digital collections within libraries again tend to focus on the environmental, economic and social aspects of the sustainability of these collections (Hamilton, 2009). Little reference is made to cultural sustainability either as a way to guide the development of more sustainable practices or to provide an explanation for why this work is necessary, despite the fact that such projects are often dealing directly with the preservation of cultural artifacts.

It is arguable that cultural sustainability concerns are innate within the practices of private libraries, and as a result do not need further coverage in sustainability policy. Indeed, as the Museum Association's 'Museums Change Lives' report suggests, initiatives working towards 'improving lives, creating better places and helping to advance society' are built on 'the traditional role of preserving collections and connecting audiences with them' (Museums Association, 2013.) However, such an approach continues to value the role that private libraries play in sustaining culture according to wider 'social outcomes and impact' rather than according to its own merit. Sustaining cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge may be central to the work of private libraries, yet cultural heritage sustainability is rarely considered as a definitive outcome within sustainability research and policy within the sector. The role that museums and libraries play within sustainable development continues to be valued according to its social, economic, and environmental impact, perpetuating the notion that culture can only be valued according to its ancillary benefits. This denies organizations the opportunity to be valued according to their unique contributions to sustainable development that explicit recognition of cultural sustainability as an equal pillar would allow.

Encouraging steps have however been made within recent library research. It provides a theoretical model by which the sustainable development of libraries and museums can be assessed according to all four areas of sustainability, with a particular focus on identifying gaps in the 'parameters of

cultural sustainability. These parameters are ‘constructed on the basis of the broad discussions of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development. The recommendations of museum associations and the most recent debates about multiculturalism, inclusion and community participation. The aim of this model is to provide a list of the key responsibilities of museums within the cultural sustainability sphere, and these are broken down into seven separate areas, which are described as ‘Heritage preservation’, ‘Cultural skills and knowledge’, ‘Memory/identity’, ‘New audiences/inclusion’, ‘Cultural diversity/intercultural dialogue’, ‘Creativity/innovation’, and ‘Artistic vitality’. Stylianou-Lambert, Nikolaos, & Christodoulou-Yerali (2014) conducted their research across the museums sector in Cyprus, and the model was developed in order to aid cultural policy-makers in identifying ‘weaknesses or gaps’ in particular areas of cultural sustainability within different museum environments. For example, the research found state museums to ‘place their emphasis on heritage preservation, the passing on of specialized cultural skills and knowledge, as well as the construction of public memory and a sense of national identity’. However, they were considered less active in ‘the development of new audiences, the representation of cultural diversity, as well as creativity, innovation, and artistic vitality’, which would suggest that policy would need to be amended in order to encourage development within these areas.

This study marks a significant move away from the use of the triple bottom line approach, to include cultural heritage sustainability as an equal concern within sustainable development models for museums. Further replications of this study are however required in other countries as well as in other cultural heritage organizations such as libraries. In addition, a range of linked studies might support the development of a better understanding as to how cultural sustainability might be delivered in different contexts. This would seem vital to generate greater understanding of the different pressures affecting the sustainability of cultural heritage within the diverse institutional contexts explored earlier in this article.

Furthermore, the focus of the model devised by Stylianou-Lambert, Nikolaos, & Christodoulou-Yerali (2014) is upon developing ‘broader (external) cultural policies’ rather than on internal practices within the libraries and how these may need to be adapted in order for private libraries to demonstrate their contributions to wider cultural sustainability agendas. Without detailed consideration of cultural sustainability at practice level, and the development of ‘milestones, benchmarks or measurement facilities’ in order to ‘assist institutions in assessing their progress towards sustainability’, many organisations find ‘the practical application of holistic sustainability principles to their operations challenging’ (Adams, 2010). In consequence, whilst such policies may aim to help institutions demonstrate their value to wider society, the translation of policy into practice remains problematic, and as has previously been the case with the triple bottom line, may lead to organisations failing to include it as ‘a core part of their work and planning’.

Adams (2010) attempts to address this issue, and draws on existing publications and governmental guidelines within the sustainable development field in order to develop a set of indicators for use within private libraries that incorporates all four pillars. The benefit of this model is that it provides libraries with clear actions in order to work towards sustainability. For example, in terms of increasing environmental sustainability, it is suggested that organisations review their total water use and non-renewable energy use over twelve months, as well as the ratio of waste recycled to waste sent to Landfill over the same period. The overall sustainability goals are also specific to the organisations themselves, with, for example, the economic goal being defined as ‘To have a balanced and diverse budget. In comparison with the policy focused model of Stylianou-Lambert *et al.* (2014) which includes ‘Cultural tourism’ and ‘Economic revitalization’ of the local

community as the key parameters of private libraries' role within economic sustainability, the development of such specific goals and indicators as provided by Adams can help towards making sustainability more relevant and manageable to practitioners at an organizational level.

However, whilst Adams' (2010) model includes cultural sustainability as an equal concern alongside the triple bottom line, it does not adequately address the complex nature of culture, or fully explore the role that private libraries play. The main cultural sustainability goal for libraries is defined as being 'to hold the collection in perpetuity and maintain its quality'. The suggested core indicators for doing so focus on conservation measures, such as the 'proportion of the collection surveyed for conservation in the last 12 months', or the increasing or decreasing percentage of items within the collection that rate highly in terms of condition. It is clear, however, that cultural sustainability and the role that libraries play within, it is far more complex than the preservation of cultural artifacts. As explored earlier in this paper, libraries are organizations that often have complicated links to the cultural history of their local communities; Maintaining historic buildings, hosting a diverse range of cultural events, offering a wide variety of opportunities for research, and providing cultural inspiration to academics, artists, writers and the general public alike. If the full extent of the cultural value of organizations is to be harnessed for the purpose of expressing contributions to cultural sustainability, then models and indicators need to be developed that more fully reflect the diverse and complex nature of this role.

Proposals for Future Research and Development of Private Libraries in Northern Nigeria

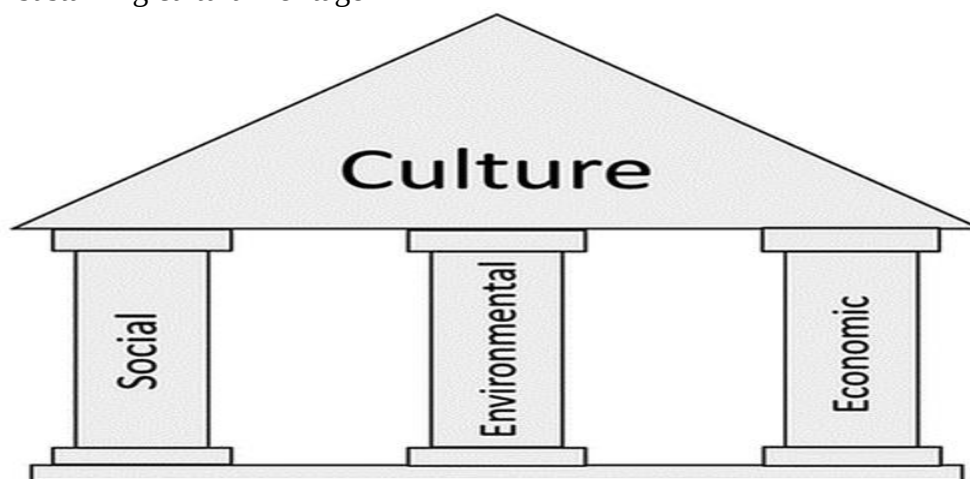
For private libraries to receive adequate recognition of their unique value in sustaining culture and indigenous knowledge, it is imperative that the concept of cultural sustainability is more fully introduced and developed in cultural policy contexts. However, further research is first required so that the value of the role that private libraries play in sustaining culture can be articulated in greater depth than the criteria currently provided by broader sustainable development agendas, and with greater breadth beyond preservation and conservation practices. Such research could enable the contributions of private libraries to cultural sustainability to be more adequately expressed within sustainability policies, thus enabling a wider appreciation of the value of the private libraries to society. This would seem especially necessary within the library sector, where the role of organisations in sustaining culture is often not immediately discernible as it is in museums, and has consequently remained comparatively under-explored.

To achieve a deeper understanding of the role that private libraries play within cultural sustainability, it will be necessary to revise sustainability models. Models so far have concentrated on reflecting external sustainability concerns, which consider environmental, social, economic, and cultural concerns to be equally weighted. However, as the main strengths of this organisation lie in sustaining culture, it could perhaps be more productive to consider their role in sustainability first and foremost according to their role in cultural sustainability. This would not only ensure that their full value in sustaining culture is recognized and harnessed for the purposes of cultural sustainability, but would also help to make sustainability seem more relevant library professionals, who sometimes struggle to understand the applicability of sustainable development concepts to their organisations.

In addition, rather than seeing all four dimensions of sustainability as equal pillars within the library environment, it may in fact be beneficial to utilize sustainability models to consider how social, economic, and environmental structures within the library environment works to support their cultural contributions (see Figure, 3). In terms of social structures, it could be helpful to investigate the role of governing bodies, staff, the community, and other external bodies that play

a supportive role through associations, partnerships, and collaborations in sustaining the cultural value of individual organisations. Economic considerations would include an investigation of funding and income streams, ways of reducing costs, and the development of business strategies in order to make the cultural contributions of organisations more economically sustainable. Lastly, environmental concerns would focus on the physical conditions and processes required for the conservation of collections, archives, and buildings, and providing the environment necessary for the physical survival of cultural heritage assets within organisations.

Figure 3: Re-imagining the four pillars: social, economic, and environmental structures supporting libraries in sustaining cultural heritage



Such a model would still need to be informed by external sustainability concerns, as organisations would still bear a responsibility towards wider society, but it would enable sustainable development concerns to be better aligned with the strength of private libraries in sustaining culture. This alternative perspective could also help to highlight any conflicts that may exist between organizations' cultural missions and wider sustainability goals. For example, environmental considerations would need to incorporate both a concern for the conservation needs of collections as well as for wider responsibilities to the natural environment, which, owing to collections' conservation practices not always being eco-friendly, can often be opposed to each other. Trying to find ways to resolve these issues could help to make the application of sustainability measures more practicable within the museum and library environments, and again help to increase the uptake of sustainability within the core strategies of organisations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the use of sustainable development concepts within cultural policy to provide justification of the value of private libraries to society. It argues that whilst cultural sustainability has become an increasing concern in wider sustainable development agendas, it has not yet been given adequate coverage within sustainability policy and research in libraries. As a result, the work of these institutions in sustaining culture continues to be valued according to its instrumental role in social, economic, and environmental sustainability rather than based on its intrinsic cultural value.

Private libraries have an inherent investment in sustaining and promoting culture, and the growing concern for cultural sustainability provides a compelling perspective from which they can re-establish an understanding of how crucial is their work to the society. Formulating sustainability policies for culture and private libraries as an equal concern alongside their commitments to social,

economic and environmental impact would help to develop an understanding of this role and appreciation of the unique value of these institutions to the society, thus helping to secure their future.

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