



Feature Article

SENSITIZING THE SOUTH-EAST ZONE LIBRARIANS OF THE NIGERIA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

Most Nigerian librarians, prior to the promulgation of the Librarians' (Registration, etc.) Decree of 1995, considered this achievement as the profession's Eldorado. There is no doubt that this law, with its regulation of professional practice and particularly in Nigeria, will gradually but surely whip most librarians into the professional line. With the law here, we are however beginning to realise that it is not yet 'uhuru' Before it can have the expected meaningful positive impact on the profession, ' serious attention has to first go to a number of thorny problems, the removal of which is a 'sine qua non before the professional wheel can revolve very smoothly. This article suggests those various ways through which the many state chapters in the different geographical zones of Nigeria can effectively be sensitized to become the expected viable wings of the Association in its glorious flight to success.

Engendering Esprit de Corps Within a State Chapter

There is no doubt that the promulgation of the Librarians' (Registration, etc) Council Decree (Decree Number 12 of 1995 with its stipulation that no unregistered person can henceforth practise as a librarian in Nigeria, will whip most librarians into line. But there may still remain some reluctant ones whom it will be desirable to also bring into the fold. This can best be achieved by giving the activities of this Council a human face. The Council shall have a human face if its legislations bear in mind that librarianship is not such a gainful employment in Nigeria so that its financial demands on members should be moderate, transparent and by no means excessive.

In itemizing other factors that will help the state chapters of the NLA have a human face, I cannot do better than was already done by the professional staff of Enugu Campus Libraries of the University of Nigeria (in a document of 17th May, 1989). This document signed by Dr. Mrs. Dorothy Obi¹ and addressed to that doyen of Nigerian Librarianship, Mr. Sam Nwoye, the UNN University Librarian, proposed the following solutions to some ten cases of professional apathy which it had earlier mentioned:

1. Each chapter of the NLA should operate a welfare scheme for its members which is an important element of the more viable associations.
2. Each chapter, as well as older members, should host new members to dinners, etc. To welcome them into the profession.
3. A system of instalmentai payment of membership dues should be introduced: this is necessary because of the worsening economic situation in Nigeria coupled with the fact that the high scale of dues have made it difficult for those who formerly readily paid their dues to continue.
4. Employers should sponsor only paid-up members of the Association to conference; those who are not paid-up should not benefit.
5. Each state chapter should have a dynamic Programmes and Activities Committee (PAC) which should readily arrange its meetings and programmes.
6. The Association should ensure that copies of the Nigerian Libraries and its other official publications like the Newsletter, etc. get to paid-up members as well as that notices and circulars reach members in time.
7. The leaders (as fathers of the Association) must not sit at the background (except when incapacitated by illness or age) but must be seen to be involved in the mainstream of society and should play an active role in defending the profession if they are to inspire the younger members.
8. Since if things are not going well with librarians in their areas of employment, they will be unable to look beyond it, the Association should, therefore, regularly look into the conditions of service of librarians in the employing institutions and take bold steps to ensure that they are adequate.
9. Divisions between graduate and non-graduate librarians should be examined and hopefully eliminated as necessary. (An example was given of the Pharmacy profession where, it was said that both graduate and non-graduate professionals could reach the top).
10. All members must actively project the image of librarians whom they wish the society to recognize.

The State Annual Reports as a Sensitizing Instruments

Every State chapter of the Nigerian Library Association is required to submit an annual report of its activities to the NLA Headquarters at Abuja each year. The compliance rate can help to determine the level of seriousness of each chapter over professional activities. In 2001 only five state chapters and Abuja submitted their - annual reports, in 2002 the number came down to four and Abuja, whereas in 2003 the number went up to 8 and Abuja. Only two chapters (Abuja and Kaduna) reported for the three years. This means that apart from these two chapters, virtually new chapters, reported year after

year for the three years so that it is difficult to monitor the progress or retrogression of any one chapter, because for these three years (2001, 002 and 2003) a total of 10 state chapters submitted only one annual report with a staggering 27 others (as there are 36 states plus Abuja) remaining silent.

There is therefore, a pressing need, not only to improve the frequency but also the quality of reporting.

In terms of the number of\reporting Zones for the above three years, the South- West (with a total of six states) was leading followed by the North Central (with five states) and the South-South (with four states). Both the North-West and the North- East Zones brought up the rear with none of their state chapters sending any annual report.

Among the Sections, for the same period, only Public Libraries followed by Cataloguing and Classification section demonstrated the commendable consistency shown among the state chapters by both Kaduna and Abuja.

To appreciate the need for quality report, it is suggested that one compares (or infact contrasts) the less than half a page Kaduna state chapter 2002 Report (which merely presented its new Executive Committee with no date for the election and no effective date for assumption of duty) with the detailed and impressive four page report (for the same 2002) submitted by the Ondo state chapter.

Let us consider the annual reports for just one year (2001) which were presented at the Eko 2002 meeting of the Association held between 16th and 21st June 2002 at ASCON Badagry, Lagos State. We shall come up with the following analyses and deductions.

Only five state chapters and Abuja (Benue, Imo, Kaduna, Oyo, Rivers) at that meeting submitted 2001 Annual Reports. This meant that a staggering number of 31 state chapters (out of a total of 36) did not submit any annual report, which is disturbing, to say the least.

Only three sections (Association of women Librarians in Nigeria, Cataloguing and Classification, and Public libraries) presented their 2001 Annual Reports out of a total of eleven such sections. This is clearly uninspiring and does not convince one that the others have any acceptable reason for remaining alive nor for receiving any more benefits from the Nigerian Library Association. There is, therefore, an urgent need to stimulate every state chapter and section in the NLA (and we can also do this within the

South East Zone) to come up with an annual report each year to enable Nigerian librarians appreciate how each of them fare during any particular year in focus. This is necessary, at least, for their professional growth. It will also make the librarians and others believe that the funds left with the state chapters have been well utilized. To sufficiently motivate every state chapter and every section to consider the submission of an annual report each year as worthwhile, I suggest that the NLA Council introduces either the award of prizes to those chapters or sections that submit annual reports or imposes a penalty on those who fail to submit or both.

The idea of both reward and penalty, at the same time, arises from the fact that the penalties paid by the defaulters could well help the NLA to award prizes to those that submit reports and thereby keep the costs on that head as low as possible and at the same time achieve the end objective. A state chapter which fails to submit its annual report probably did not organize worthwhile activities within the period under review but could have still collected dues from its members without using them on worthwhile ends; it should, therefore, conveniently pay some of it back to the center. If, however, it did not collect any dues, the fine imposed on it becomes a desirable incentive for doing so.

Because there were shy-washy reports even among the few submitted in my sample, I wish to further suggest that among the states or sections that submit reports, effort should be made to determine the quality of each report and also accordingly award prizes each year to the best reporting state chapter and section. In other words, it is no longer satisfactory to merely receive the annual reports from those states and sections willing and able to do so; added effort should go to the need to reward those states which submit the reports and especially those whose reports are of high quality as an extra incentive to improve the overall quality of annual reports.

It may also be necessary for the NLA Council to stipulate that any state chapter or section which fails three consecutive times to submit its annual report stands suspended and subsequently needs a written permission from the Council to officially function again. (This may require a constitutional review). The Council may also need to determine the conditions for granting such permission. I am convinced that if these constraints are adequately put in place, the various chapters and sections of the NLA will definitely become much more active than they have hitherto been.

Let me add that the use of NLA annual reports as a sensitization instrument of its state chapters will best be applied by the NLA at a national level. But there is no harm if the

South East zone of the NLA sees a way of adapting some of the suggestions here, to galvanize into action, the few state chapters within its ambit in order to make them perform better. Thoughts on this have led me into adding one more strategy (which I have titled NLA Mid Year South-East Zonal Meeting) to this paper.

Whatever happens a state that submits an annual report (especially a good one) is a state that is active; An inactive state is usually too timid to submit one. And it is difficult to successfully cook up a report to present to critical people like librarians. This is why I see the regular submission of annual reports as a reliable instrument of state chapter sensitization.

Using NLA Mid-Year South-East Zonal Meeting to Achieve Excellence Rationale:

There is this saying that nothing is good or bad except in comparison with some other means. If a state chapter sees itself regularly in competition with others close to it, it is more likely to continue to strive towards perfection than when it does not. And the smaller the group is, the keener will be the competition, perhaps the sharper the focus and possible the more the concentration in terms of details. This is why I consider the introduction of a competitive spirit as more effective within the South East zone than in the general setting of all Nigerian state chapters. We can, therefore, hold a South-East Zonal Meeting once a year for this purpose.

The South-East zonal meeting of the NLA should hold six months after each annual national conference and six months before the next; hence it is meant to be a mid-year meeting. It will give each state chapter within the zone (Abia, Anambra, Ebonvi, Enugu and Imo) the opportunity to report on what it has done within the six months after the last annual national conference of the Nigerian Library Association. It will also give the indolent state chapter(s) six months within which to make up for its deficiency before the next annual national conference and annual reports presentation to the NLA Annual General Meeting.

Membership: Participants in the Mid-Year Annual Meeting of South-East Zone librarians are as follows: IFLA, COMLA and NLA Councilors in the zone, the members of the LRCN in the zone. The Executive Committee of each state chapter, University Librarians, Polytechnic Librarians, College Librarians in the zone, Heads of Library Schools or Departments of Library and Information Science in the zone.

Duration: One day (24 hours) made up of three sessions:

- a. A general session which will involve all the participants to discuss issues and handle problems of relevance to all librarians in the zone.
- b. Special session: during which the participants may be broken down into areas of function or fields of specialization to identify, discuss and find solutions to issues peculiar to their duties or areas of function.
- c. Wrap-up Session: This will be shorter than (a) and (b) above and is meant to draw up achievements, identify areas for further action and by whom, and issue a communique, if necessary.

Venue: The meeting should rotate among the state chapters/university libraries in the zone beginning with the state chapter identified as the last or among the last on a performance scoreboard.

The NLA Mid-Year South-East Zonal Meeting of librarians will also give our councilors an opportunity to report to us what happened at the national and international levels either at the deliberations of IFLA, COMLA, the Nigerian Library Association or at the Librarians' (Registration, etc) Council. It will also give the South-East zone librarians the opportunity to come together and take a stand on national or sensitive professional issues when such becomes necessary.

In an election year, it will give the zonal librarians the opportunity to field its candidates for national posts, get their profiles well prepared, avoid in fighting among competing zonal candidates and choose and campaign for candidates mutually chosen by the zone. The zone should see itself as one.

To ensure better performance, the zone can insist that each state chapter in the zone should hold an election every two years to select the members of its Executive Committee, and that no officer should serve for more than two terms of two years per term as stipulated in the NLA Constitution.

Institutionalizing Ombudsmen for Conflict Resolution

Often, due to poor leadership, autocratic rule of unimaginative administration, a paid-up member may be oppressed, severely marginalized or very unjustly treated by his or her chapter officer, to induce him/her to seek redress within the Association. This situation could be disturbing enough as to prevent the complainant from fulfilling his/her professional duties. There is, therefore, the need for a Corps of Ombudsmen (about three in number) to fully investigate and report on complaints and other cases made by members against serving officers in each state chapter and prescribe a solution

which should be enforced by the Zonal chairman. Where an marginalized or very unjustly treated by his or her chapter officer, to induce him/her to seek redress within the Association. This situation could be disturbing enough as to prevent the complainant from fulfilling his/her professional duties. There is, therefore, the need for a Corps of Ombudsmen (about three in number) to fully investigate and report on complaints and other cases made by members against serving officers in each state chapter and prescribe a solution which should be enforced by the Zonal Chairman. Where one is Ombudsmen comes from outside the state, both the complainant and the alleged oppressor may be required to bear the transport costs of the visiting Ombudsmen.

Conclusion

It is my strong belief that given three to five years' operation, the programmes articulated in this paper will, with God's help, not only enable the other South-East state chapters of the NLA join Imo State in excellence but will, in a fair assessment, begin to compete very effectively with South-West zone state chapters and possibly outshine them from time to time.

References

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