



Feature Article

“WHITHER NIGERIAN LIBRARIANSHIP” AN INVITED PUBLIC LECTURE DELIVERED

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Introduction

The story of Nigerian librarianship is not an enviable one. The majority of Nigerians lack qualitative and quantitative information for daily living. Yes, the Nigerian media, especially the radio stations, are providing some enlightenment, education and entertainment to the general public throughout the country. But this is not the case with Nigerian libraries, especially the public ones, which should easily and freely accessible to all Nigerians for any information they need.

The main reason for this unenviable situation is that Nigerian libraries are underdeveloped, under-funded; few in number, unknown and unrecognized. In primary and secondary schools, libraries are few and inadequately developed except in privately owned ones. The situation is better in tertiary institutions Universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and technical colleges. Some tertiary institutions have good libraries of human and material resources while many others have mainly outdated collections and unchanging and unsatisfactory services.

Is there any world librarianship? Yes! Since ancient times, when the Babylonians and Sumerians decided to record their culture, history, laws and religion on stone and clay, the basic functions of librarianship were laid down. These were to gather, organize, preserve and disseminate knowledge and information. This was how ancient civilizations were not only sustained but propagated.

One of the notable examples of early recorded knowledge, to teach a nation, was that of the Ten Commandments. We learnt how Moses, the prophet, remained secluded for forty days while he wrote down the ten commandments of God for the guidance of God's chosen people, Israel, on Mount Sinai.

Libraries were great learning centres, but were not meant for the ordinary men, the general public. They existed rather in kings' palaces and religious monasteries. Their keepers were also great scholars.

Nigeria inherited British public librarianship. This was to provide informal education, preserve and propagate British culture and provide recreation and relaxation. Nigerian libraries have faithfully followed the culture of British public librarianship without any questioning, even when they attract few customers and do not receive the required public funding!

A British Librarian, Diana Rosenberg, in utter exasperation, pronounced the unsustainability of libraries in Africa! We should understand the librarian's exasperation. Initiatives by foreign agencies to support African libraries for many decades, have had limited success. Our first example was from UNESCO, which promoted very successful pilot public and school library projects in Nigeria, such as the Eastern Nigeria Library Board (ENLB) public library service in the 1950s and the Lagos School Library Service in the 1960s. The ENLB service became fragmented with the creation of states, without each newly created State Government promoting its share of public library services.

We all know about the dismal situation of the Anambra State Library Board, which does not even have any fixed abode as at now! As far as the UNESCO sponsored Lagos School Library Service pilot project was concerned, Nigeria never copied the example, even when the country incorporated school libraries in its National Education Policy! Secondly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA's) programmes, of Universal Bibliographic Control and Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) are yet to succeed even with the National Library of Nigeria (NLN) as the agency which should propagate the programmes. How can anyone expect the NLN to spearhead library services in the country when the Federal Government would rather spend billions of dollars and naira on sporting facilities, conference centre, etc. rather than invest in the NLN or provide it with a modern and permanent home and facilities like the British Library and the US Library of Congress did; and these are the nations which Nigeria often copies. The voluntary cooperative scheme, the National Documentation and Information Centre for Science and Technology (NADICEST)

Project, hopes to contribute to national bibliographic control in Science and Technology. Its first bibliographic series in biological and chemical sciences will be out soon.

Thirdly, the Book Aid International (formerly Ranfurly Library Service) is still active in the South Eastern States of Nigeria, with their determination to provide books freely to book famished developing countries. BAI is reported to have spent some 2 million pounds (over N500 million) on books to promote reading in Nigerian schools in the last six years. If not for BAI books, Anambra State Library Board may as well be a closed chapter in Nigerian library development Fortunately for the nation, the Nigerian Book Foundation (NBF) sponsored by a book development NGO, has been able to distribute valuable badly needed books, at highly subsidized rates, for example, a professional book in medicine or management sciences, which will normally cost up to N4,000 goes for as little as N300 through the subsidy provided by this NGO.

Fourthly, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) distributed current scholarly journals in various subjects, requested by Nigerian universities and research libraries, over a period of five years from 1987 to 1991. American publishers and scientific organizations gladly donated their publications and the Ford Foundation provided funds to AAAS to deliver the materials to Nigerian libraries free of charge. Of course, many of the libraries reverted to their out datedness in their collections at the end of the AAAS Journal Distribution Programme!

The four cited examples above were part of the reasons why Diana Rosenberg exasperatedly concluded that libraries could not survive in Africa. But of course, I believe that Nigerian librarians are hoping that libraries should not just survive but that they should become the major information centres in every community in the country.

Problems:

1. Libraries are foreign to Nigerian culture, having not evolved as a response to any cultural, educational or social needs. This may be why they have remained irrelevant to the information needs of the Nigerian community. They are not enthusiastically embraced, supported or sustained by the individuals, communities or governments, Federal, State or Local. In comparison, with the western developed countries, it is known and acknowledged that public libraries have "physical accessibility and social acceptability." For example, one only needs to read British library professional publications to find confirmation of the importance of libraries in the life of the British public. The British Government, as well as the public libraries are full of innovations, constantly carried out,

sometimes almost feverishly, in their commitment and efforts to provide library services which meet the information needs of the people. The British Government has invested heavily (over 100 million pound) in the People's Network to provide free Internet access to everyone through its public libraries. There are even Bookstart and Suresart programmes through which books are donated to mothers with newborn babies at their clinics to encourage them to read to their babies of six months of age!

Likewise, the Americans, of a highly developed society, value their libraries and invest heavily in them through the public, the government, individuals, foundations, Friends of the Library groups, and so on.

Only recently, in spite of the fact that some 80 per cent of the population have free access to seamless information on the Internet (the new information superhighway) at home libraries, at school or work place, the American Library Association poll in 2002 found that 62% of Americans were still ardent library users. The users asserted that their libraries serve their communities as cultural and educational centres as knowledge institutions (Daniel Akst). Akst also quoted R. Kathleen Molz and Phyllis Dain in their 2003 national survey of public opinion as recording 94% of Americans as finding their public libraries valuable in their communities. Very few certainly not an overwhelming number of Nigerians, can vote in favour of any library!

2. Nigerian librarianship has not evolved concepts and practices that can serve the Nigerian communities. Nigerian culture is not yet well documented, nor committedly embraced and used by the owners and very little effort is made to propagate them to other nations. Rather, Nigerian libraries copy wholesale British culture and have little room left for their own culture, even in their library collections and practices.
3. Nigeria has a large illiterate population and the libraries do not care about or cater for their information needs.
4. The generality of Nigerians do not regard libraries as centres from where they should seek and find information. Hence very few are interested in funding libraries. By comparison, Andrew Carnegie, a poor immigrant youth in UA, who was able to improve his lot through the generosity of a rich man who gave him access to his library, valued libraries so much, that when he made it in industry

and had wealth, he built libraries throughout the UK, his native land, USA his adopted nation and throughout the world.

In Nigeria, on the other hand, the number of libraries established by generous individual Nigerians could be counted on one's fingers. Hilary Obu built such a library at Ajalli in Orumba North L.G.A. a long time ago. It happens to have remained the only such library, public and academic in a vast area! One hears of a few of our millionaires in the National Assembly establishing Information Centres in their constituencies. This of course is a good prospect and one wishes that all the 360 representatives and 109 senators will each build a modern, well funded, equipped, staffed and sustainable library, a viable information, resource centre or whatever, in his or her constituency. What a valuable and lasting national legacy that would be for Nigerian library development.

5. Nigeria lacks a national public library act. The Act should stipulate the provision of easy and free access to comprehensive library and information services throughout the country. Such an Act may stimulate more rapid development of library services for the nation. Perhaps, it may even help the State Governments to take library development for their people more seriously.

Strategies:

1. An important concept of Nigerian librarianship and information services should be that the community should be served wherever they normally gather. A Nigerian library should learn to take its services to the gathering or congregation of the people rather than expect them to look for the services in only a segregated and designated location, called a library. Nigeria should develop and invest in 'mobile' library services. In some difficult terrains: bicycles, beasts of burden like donkeys or other unconventional methods could be used to take library services to the people.

This is a people or user-oriented idea rather than the management of buildings or sites with "silence" as their watchword! It will be inspiring to see a mobile library standing near a market, a community health centre, a village square, a church, a mosque, or any communal gathering. The basic information resources provided should be relevant to the economic, health, social, cultural and religious purposes of the gatherings. Likewise, there will be information resources on agriculture in rural areas or on commerce and finance in urban centres.

2. Nigerian libraries are book libraries! And this is in a country with a low literacy rating. Yet an illiterate needs information for everyday living and survival. Therefore, Nigerian libraries need together materials in appropriate formats and languages for even illiterates.

Someone wrote: “a picture speaks a thousand words”. I found this true while teaching rural libraries to library students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. I made the students to collect posters and extension materials published by ministries of agriculture, health, etc., by politicians, by manufacturers, etc. For example, an illiterate can understand the devastation of malnutrition, polio or dysentery, etc. by looking at posters on health. Likewise, he can learn about other subjects of his interest from poster collections in a library.

I am sure we all learn more vividly from audiovisuals audio and video tapes, films, etc. We all know the impact of audio and video tapes on all listeners and viewers, especially the illiterates. Therefore, it is possible to serve the information needs of Nigerian illiterates, using library materials in appropriate formats and languages.

3. Nigerian librarians are book dispensers and gatekeepers in library buildings. These are inappropriate functions, especially in public libraries, of a mainly illiterate population.

First and foremost, Nigerian public libraries should be accessible to all members of their communities young and old, literate and illiterate, poor and rich, able and disabled.

- a. There should also be services for children who certainly should not be confined to “silent” areas only. They should enjoy reading together from a book, listening to stories from the librarians or trying their hands at story writing from their naturally fertile imagination or watching children's educational films. Libraries should keep children users usefully occupied with interesting activities. They can also do their home work in the library, well assisted by educated parents and librarians.
- b. Youths should be provided with creative activities that interest them, such as games, creative writing with the help of creative writers or do-it-yourself series, computer programmes, etc. A modern Nigerian library should be a better and

richer learning centre with all its variety of information resources as well as Internet accessibility than any commercial cyber cafe. Such a library can wean Nigerian youths from dangerous to healthy living and from cultism to positive living.

- c. Old people, literate and illiterate, can enjoy playing games, draughts, ayo, chess, scrabble, etc. in their local libraries. They can tell stories for the librarians to record for publication. They can form Library Old People's Clubs on health home management, horticulture, technology, etc. Their meetings will have library resources, books and audio-visuals, to enrich their activities. Such old people, who have access to libraries, will stop being housebound, lonely or unhappy. Visiting and using their libraries can certainly make life more meaningful to them in their old age. Their discussions can keep them current on local, national and international events. The illiterate can attend literacy class based in the libraries.
- d. Learned people and professionals can give occasional talks to the community in their libraries.
- e. Extension workers in agriculture, health, cooperative schemes and education, could have library periods during which they can enlighten the communities on their work. They will impact positively on the life of their local communities which they serve officially. They themselves will increase their knowledge and improve their skills by using their local libraries regularly. Such extension workers will in this way become true allies in serving the community.
- f. Members of the community, with traditional and indigenous knowledge, can have their knowledge recorded by the librarians for publication for posterity and for input into global knowledge available and accessible on the Internet.

Nigerian public libraries' could become true community centres easily accessible, acceptable to their community and real busy hubs for their activities.

Friends of Libraries

A friend is a confidant, an advocate, a strong supporter, who is committed to your well being. Nigerian librarians must learn to identify, cultivate and make maximum use of anyone who is interested in, makes use of, establishes and supports the establishment of libraries in every nook and corner of this country until they become essential part of the Nigerian community. From being peripheral, non-essential, unknown and unrecognized elements in the life of the Nigerian community, such people should now begin to turn the table around by librarians harnessing their support. Every human being needs information whether it is on market days, or on which accessible markets

have items a man needs and at comparatively good prices, especially at a time like this in Nigeria, when prices of goods, especially everyday food stuffs, have hit the skies. Nigerian libraries ought to be in the forefront, not mere onlookers, in adult education and readership promotion in our country with a predominantly illiterate population. If any Nigerian library provides excellent adult education services to the teeming illiterate Nigerian population, the governments and relevant NGOs ought to provide funds for such services.

In the global village, the global citizens need ICT skills. Nigerian libraries ought to be in the forefront of providing such skills, which they have conceded to commercial cyber-cafes! There are many wealthy Nigeria, especially the politicians who ought to be wooed as Friends of Libraries in their constituencies in order to fund cyber-cafes within the libraries. Why? Each library provides free information for all the people all the time. Cyber-cafe users should willingly, if necessary, pay for such services within their libraries. Why? Because, libraries have added values, namely, books, the everlasting and trustworthy convenient companions, for users to borrow, free of charge. Libraries usually have music collections for all ages of users. They have greater documentary audio visualo materials tapes, films than any FRCN or NTA stations in Nigeria.

Libraries in the English information societies, such as England, but especially America, derive great support from their Friends of Libraries. Certainly Andrew Carnegie, the world's greatest builder of libraries was such a FRIEND before the word was appropriated by librarians. Corporate bodies, such as the Nigerian Breweries, should be lobbied to build a modern public library, with research facilities and resources, at the 9th Mile Corner in Enugu State as part of the state of the art brewery there as well as in their brewery headquarters.

Petroleum companies, Texaco, Oando, etc., which declare good dividends yearly, should be lobbied to incorporate in their services to the public, the establishment and sustenance of public and research libraries in their places of choice throughout the country. These corporate bodies provide canteens, clinics and sporting facilities for the physical welfare of their staff. They should invest in libraries forthe mental, intellectual health and improved skills of these same staff.

It is high time the Nigerian Library Association and its State Chapters served the information needs of this country. They should be the main organs to identify the Friends of Libraries in the National and State Assemblies, in commercial enterprises, among wealthy individuals, town unions, Tas, old boys and girls associations, all

churches, mosques, etc. They should establish a Friends of Libraries Forum for all stakeholders in building and sustaining libraries throughout the country. They can take a cue from the example of the National Parents Teachers Association to launch their own Friends of Libraries Fora or Associations for advocacy, lobbying as well as for the practical establishment and development of libraries.

Here is a true story, not fiction. In 1980, when I was elected Chairman of the Lagos State Chapter of the Nigerian Library Association, the Executive Committee decided it must reach every part of its constituency and it did. When we visited the National Assembly, then located in Tafawa Balewa Square Complex in Lagos, we had audience with the Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives. And you better believe this, he had never used the National Assembly Library! He did not know the National Assembly Librarian and we had to introduce herto him for the first time! We quickly realized after that why libraries were regarded as useless in Nigeria. If the parliamentarians did not know that such a valuable asset and information infrastructure existed at their doorstep and was dedicated to their use, how can anyone blame ordinary Nigerians for not knowing what a library is?

But more culpable were the National Assembly librarians, who obviously rendered themselves useless in their primary assignment of becoming the self- appointed Special Assistants on Information to members of the National Assembly rather than Special Assistants on political propaganda!

What about librarians going into close partnership with other public service providers in this country? Librarians need materials for informing their public (both literate and illiterate) Nigerian ministries and parastatals, political parties, NGOs, educational and commercial institutions and bodies, etc., provide materials that are a mine of information on the country and the people. A partnership between these public agencies and libraries will be of great benefit towards the provision of necessary information to Nigerian citizens.

We are advocating that Nigerian librarians should put into practice their professional knowledge on how to seek, select and package information to suit the information needs of the Nigerian citizens. If they do this, they will find helpful and supportive Friends of Libraries, not just in National and State Assemblies, but within members of their communities where youths will volunteer to serve in the village, town, church or mosque libraries and retired educated, enlightened and well informed citizens will be excited to lend their helping hands and rich experience in their local libraries.

The Digital Divide

The digital divide is real for developing countries such as Nigeria. There is a great digital gap between the developed countries with unlimited access to knowledge through the Internet and a country like Nigeria with very limited access to ICT. Some of the reasons for this gap include the cost of ICT and electronic access to information. It is unrealistic to spend a month's income on Internet use as can happen in Nigeria. Electricity supply is still so irregular and unreliable in the country that normal offices, which want to operate maximally, should be well advised to keep the manual typewriter handy when it is impossible to operate computers for lack of electricity. The majority of Nigerians are so poor that they need all their income for survival rather than the "Pentium". (Mark Atkinson)

Nigerian governments, Federal, State and Local, invest very little in modern libraries, with ICT facilities, accessible to the general public and even in educational institutions. In the UK, the government invests heavily in ICT to bridge the gap between its privileged and less privileged members of the citizenry. She provides access to Internet free-of-charge through its People's Network established in public libraries throughout the country by 2002. To bridge the digital divide, Nigerian governments should invest in IT in all libraries throughout the country, while public educational institutions complement government's efforts (Stephen Akintunde). It is only the libraries public and academic (schools, college, polytechnic and university), that can and should provide access to the Internet, free of charge, to Nigerian citizenry to enable them have easy access to whatever world knowledge they need.

Ross Shimmer, IFLA Secretary General, believes that the international library community can help to bridge the digital divide through advocacy and lobbying which IFLA is already admirably doing. I believe that Nigerian librarians have a crucial role to play in bridging the digital divide through lobbying the governments to invest in ICT in our libraries. Likewise, the libraries should lobby corporate bodies, individuals, religious organizations, town unions, etc. to donate ICT facilities to libraries in their local communities, in their areas of operations and to the general public. The ownership of 14 million GSM handsets by Nigerians, claimed by the Nigerian Communications Commission, may indeed have tremendously increased teledensity in the country very rapidly within a few years. But this is not a viable strategy to bridge the digital divide nationally or internationally.

For example, the NADICEST Project, in which we have been involved since 1988, was established to help bridge the digital divide in science and technology. African, including Nigerian, science is regarded as “lost science.” An experience of trying to locate information on just one topic,, “Guinea Corn in Northern Nigeria”, some twenty-one years ago, convinced us that we cannot b3e part of the global village if we cannot contribute to its content.

At our request for publications on the topic, we found that publications by Nigerian agronomists were missing from hundreds of titles, which tumbled out of the database at the US Department of Agriculture Library in Baltimore. But contrary to this discovery, we knew that Nigerian agronomists had published widely on the topic. More importantly, we knew that the results of their research efforts had yielded fast growing and heavy yielding guinea corn crops for the benefit of the people.

At NADICEST, we have been gathering information on the publications of Nigerian scientists for addition to world knowledge, available and accessible on the Internet. We hope to produce the first series of Nigerian science and technology bibliographies in the near future.

Other librarians can take up other subjects, such as, Nigerian history and culture, or even Nigerian politics, and publish knowledge in them on the Internet so that the world can share the available knowledge about us just as we devour the knowledge about everything foreign.

Information Professionals Relevant In 21st Century Nigeria

Where does a librarian come in here? I became interested in librarianship as a career when I observed how a friend, a practicing librarian, Chief Christian Momah, then of the University of Ibadan Library, could never rest even during private visits off duty, from garnering and gathering information from any newspapers he found in a place he visited! I used to jokingly call our friend a nuisance! But I discovered that identifying information, relevant and useful to his academic community, was his passion, not just a means to a living! That was decades ago in 1959, I believe that today this country needs passionate librarians. This country also needs zealous librarians. This country equally needs highly knowledgeable as well as skilled librarians without whom there shall continue to be lackluster library development and services for the people.

The Nigerian Library Association must rededicate itself to the professional development and retraining of its members through professional programmes of

seminars, workshops, and conferences on cutting edge librarianship, not just gatherings to read textbook papers in order to gain promotion! Judy Palmer, the Chair of Cilip UK Health Libraries group, recently advised the British Library Association on how to effectively reposition the profession and its members for the 21st century.

Nigerian library schools must reexamine their curriculum to ensure that they produce graduates with appropriate knowledge and skills to serve the information needs of Nigerian people in its entire ramification. I have had library graduate youth corpsers who could not catalogue or classify books properly, such elementary skills which we taught library assistants successfully in past years. I have also discovered that fresh library school graduates have not the remotest clue about how they could start any library for any community. So, what then do the graduates learn in our library schools? Sure, you cannot recreate God's creatures if they have no imagination, no zeal, no creativity, etc. which form the elements of a successful librarian. But evidence shows that slow or not so bright pupils do learn to copy from good examples. Such copying of good examples is also possible from librarians and library schools of excellence.

I would urge Nigerian libraries and library schools to invest good funds in professional library literature, especially that of Cilip, U.K. All librarians and library educators will learn a lot on how to innovate or at least improve on what they do. Of course, NLA Chapters ought to provide the Nigerian librarians with current professional publications, not rhetoric, not rehashing well worn phrases, not the quantum of papers for promotion, but quality sharing of knowledge of 21st Century professional practices, events and peoples.

Mentoring is a good strategy for professional development of librarians. This means purposeful learning by professionals from experienced professionals. It is not really an apprenticeship. Nigerian librarians could rather be sent on exchange to libraries and librarians of excellence to be mentored by the experienced professionals. I was privileged to have learnt how to be committed and zealous in my profession from Christian Momah, my unofficial mentor in my library career. I also learn how senior librarians should encourage the junior ones to excel, according to their personal attributes, from another unofficial mentor, late Sam Nwoye, University Librarian of University of Nigeria for decades.

Mentoring can improve library services across the country. It can also provide training grounds for grooming future leaders as well as for providing for succession within the profession.

Conclusion

We have dealt extensively on this topic with strategies for public libraries in Nigeria because we are anxious that they should become relevant to all Nigerians. But some of the strategies we have here advocated could also be used in academic and research libraries. Such libraries should tailor and package their library services in such a manner that the Senate and Academic Boards of their institutions could be wooed to become valuable advocates and friends of their libraries.

It is, of course, only possible to give a bird's eye view of Nigerian librarianship at any given time. The hope is that the NLA and its Chapters will give teeth to the nitty gritty of our library development and services so that they can fulfill our yearnings.

I hope all of us in this gathering are getting excited about the new vision of a vibrant Nigerian librarianship. I hope all of us will try many more than the few strategies spoken about today in our various places of work. I hope our individual successful strategies will be emulated by our peers and widely published in national and international library literature until Nigeria gets the information services it deserves from its consequent renewed information professionals.

I wish Anambra State Chapter and its parent, the Nigerian Library Association, a new lease of life and relevance to the information needs of the country.

Thank you.

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