



To be or not to be: History and Dilemma of Public Libraries in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: *This article traces the history and current status of public libraries in Nigeria. It examines the actual situation of public libraries in the country.*

Design/Methodology: *The content of the article is based on literature, personal observation, discussions and interactions with colleagues, as well as personal visitations to public libraries in Nigeria.*

Findings: *Public libraries in Nigeria are inundated by certain multiple and monumental challenges that have been triggered by the current economic recession. Almost all public libraries are in chaotic situation because of lack of proper awareness about their roles, poor funding, high rate of illiteracy, poor reading culture, inadequacy of information resources and services, and above all inadequacy of professionally trained personnel.*

Research Implications: *The discussion may provide or serve as a reference point for future planning and development public libraries in Nigeria. Additionally, the discussion would also assist public libraries to review their operations and services so as to take measures to improve on their present status. Other developing countries facing similar dilemma may benefit from the discussion as well.*

Future Research: *Future studies can be conducted through more in-depth quantitative or qualitative approaches to get further insights about public libraries situation in Nigeria.*

Keyword: *Public libraries; History; Dilemma, Contemporary Nigeria*

Introduction

Public libraries are those libraries that provide services to the general public free of charge and without any discrimination. The importance of public libraries to societal development cannot be over emphasized. This is more so with the recent fundamental changes and transformations in all facets of public library activities which has been triggered by developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). According to **Shaffer (2014)**, libraries of every type and size face new challenges for survival and find new opportunities to redefine their roles in society at large or within a highly defined community due to the emergence of the Information Age which in turn gave rise to the Age of Intelligence.

For this reason, today's contemporary trends in library and information services in this electronic or digital age is deeply characterized with fundamental, dynamic and remarkable shift from traditional to virtual or digital libraries due to the influence of Internet technology on all aspects of human endeavors and on all aspects of library operations and services. However, it is worth noting that the pace of change in public libraries has

been varying in different parts of the globe i.e. there is a huge gap between the developed and the developing nations (**Abubakar, 2013**). Additionally, the fundamental philosophy of public library services can better be understood when one takes a critical look at the IFLA/UNESCO public library manifesto (1994) which states that the public library-the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

Therefore, public library according to **Henderson et al (2010)**, is an entity that is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and that which provides at least the following: (1) an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof; (2) paid staff; (3) an established schedule in which services of staff are available to the public; (4) the facilities necessary to support a collection, staff, and schedule; and (5) that is supported in whole or in part with public funds. Thus, public libraries are libraries that provide resources and services to the general public free of charge.

It is against this backdrop, this paper examines the history and dilemma of public libraries in Nigeria. It describes the real lingering situation bedeviling the public libraries in the country and offers solutions to such challenges.

History of public libraries in Nigeria

Nigeria is a country that is geographically located on the coast of western Africa. It covers an area of about 924,000 km²; it is bordered on the north by Niger Republic, on the east by Chad and Cameroon, on the south by the Gulf of Guinea, and on the west by the Republic of Benin. Nigeria is characterized with unique features and great diversity in almost all its sectors. With a population of about 173 million people, Nigeria is the largest country in Africa and the largest black nation on earth. It accounts for 47 percent of West Africa's population (**World Bank, 2015**). Similarly, it is one of the foremost oil producing/exporting countries in the world. Oil provides approximately 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings and about 80 percent of government revenue, and also contributes significantly to the growth of the nation's GDP (**Baghebo and Atima, 2013**). However, agriculture remains the dominant sector in the rural areas of Nigeria.

The public library development in Nigeria started with the Tom Jones Library in 1910 in Lagos, which was initially established as a subscription library. Another library of its type was the Lagos Library that was set up in 1932, by the Chief Secretary of Nigeria, Sir Alan Burns (**Nwokocha, 1998**). It is interesting to note that the Lagos Library was established with

financial assistance from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. According to **Aguolu (1989)**, the library was established with USD6,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Moreover, according to him, most of the users of the library were then, Europeans resident in Lagos. **Harris (1970)** state the library was opened for the use of members precisely on 29 September, 1932 as a subscription library, just like the Tom Jones Library. However at a later time, precisely in 1946, the Tom Jones Library and the Lagos Library were merged together to form the Lagos Public Library, which was administered by the British Council and the Lagos Town Council (**Nwokocha, 1998**).

However, the major turning point in the history of public libraries in Nigeria came from the UNESCO Seminar on Public Library Development in Africa, which took place at the then University College (now University of Ibadan) Ibadan between 27th July and 21st August 1953. The seminar recommended, among others, the need for the establishment of public libraries in Africa (**Opara, 2008**).

Shortly after the seminar, precisely two years after, the first public library law in Nigeria was endorsed by the defunct Eastern Regional Government which gave birth to the Eastern Regional Library Board in 1955. Thereafter, the Western and Northern Regional Governments also followed suit through the enactment of legal deposit decrees in 1957 and 1964 correspondingly. Presently, there are a number of public libraries in Nigeria. Indeed, according to the report of the **Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (n.d.)** there are 316 public libraries in Nigeria. However, a state (Borno State) was excluded because of lack of full report. Thus, public library services are reasonably and widely scattered in the country with each state of the federation having an established library board with a number of branches.

The dilemma of public libraries in Nigeria

Based on the preceding historical antecedent of public library services in Nigeria, it is regrettable to note that after several years of public library services, the state of public libraries in the country is still far from reality. In other words, public libraries seem not to be among the nation's top priorities which invariably serve as a stumbling block to their development.

Specifically, it is quite regrettable to know that even among the educated citizens in Nigeria, there is the general myopic, unfortunate and negative perception about libraries, public libraries in particular which results to low recognition, lack of proper awareness and low patronage. This is contrary to what is obtainable elsewhere, particularly in the advanced countries where the level of awareness and recognition about the role of public libraries in all spheres of life is always on the increase. For

example, in US, the **ALA (2015)** annual report indicates that more than 2,700 libraries in the United States are using Libraries Transform, ALA's new campaign program to increase public awareness about the value, impact and services provided by libraries and library professionals. But in the case of Nigeria the reverse is always the case, because public libraries are highly docile, inactive and always lagging behind in this important aspect.

Additionally, another amazing hallmark to public library growth in advanced countries is that of philanthropic support to public libraries. Philanthropic organizations established by wealthy individuals have always contributed enormously to the development of public libraries in such places. Recently, **Ochs (2014)** reported that the William Penn Foundation gave a three-year USD25 million grant that will cater for the renovation at the Central Library at the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia as well as five other library branches.

Even in Africa, such good gesture had been extended to public libraries development. From 1911-1961 for example, the Carnegie Corporation had given the sum of USD894,049 to British Africa, while the sum of USD603,035 was given to South Africa for libraries development (**Olden, 1995**). Apart from the USD6,000 grant to the Lagos Library, the Carnegie Corporation had also given the sum of USD15,000 for the Kenya (Carnegie) Circulating Libraries (**Olden, 1995**). Unfortunately, this is not happening in Nigeria where there are a lot of wealthy individuals and corporate organizations who can as well play the same role and complement the efforts of the government. Thus, it is therefore impossible for public libraries to develop to a certain level in such situation.

Major challenges

The foregoing section of this article has signaled the obstacles confronting Nigerian public libraries. This portion will now be more specific on such challenges. Thus, it is essential to elucidate on each of the challenges and put them in proper limelight and perspective.

Poor funding

Poor financial support appears to be the major obstacle confronting the Nigerian public library system which has been the foundation of all other problems. This challenge is further compounded by the current economic recession and shrinking budgets, coupled with massive and persistent corruption that has affected almost all sectors. It is worth reporting here that the country has entered its first economic recession in 25 years (**Ishiekwene, 2016**). It is equally important to note that corruption, which

is endemic, has become a major way of life which resulted in lack of fairness in resources allocation to public libraries.

Therefore considering its prevailing condition, in most instances, public libraries in Nigeria are receiving paltry budgetary allocations from their sponsoring authorities. To further buttress this point, the budgetary allocation of the Kaduna State Library Board for the year 2016 is worth reporting .The Library Board was given the sum of NGN 42,180,000 which was barely equivalent to USD211,959.80 as at that that time before the further crashing of the Nigerian Naira as against the U.S Dollar and other foreign currencies. Such amount was meant for both recurrent and capital expenditures. This means that after paying salaries and emoluments of its staff, the Library Board will definitely find it difficult to execute its planned programs. Likewise, the annual report of **Katsina State Library Board (2016)**; and the progress report of the **Bauchi State Library Board (2015)** indicate that two Library Boards have suffered from insufficient funding which hampered their operations. Thus, this circumstance is almost the same in other public libraries in the country. Therefore, the existence of poor/inadequate funding is very glaring in most public libraries in the country as one can easily see from the existence of tattered infrastructural condition of most public libraries.

Even though the issue of poor/declining funding of public libraries is not peculiar to Nigeria alone, in some advanced countries public libraries are also faced with similar situation. For instance, a report on the state of libraries in Germany by the **German Library Association (2015)** has indicated that due to continually reduced budgets, public libraries in the country do not have sufficient funding for essential services.

While in UK, according to the **Chattered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (2015)**, the total expenditure for the council-run libraries fell by GBP50m, from GBP0.99bn (2013-14) to GBP0.94bn (2014-15). However, from another side of the coin, in the United States, the scenario is entirely different. A report of the survey of public libraries in the United States conducted by the **Institute of Museum and Library Services (2016)** for fiscal year 2013 showed that “the public invested over USD11.5 billion in revenue to public libraries in FY 2013, which was unchanged from FY 2012 after adjusting from inflation. This represents an increase of 7.5 percent over 10 years.”

Indeed, to place the “Nigerian negative funding situation of public libraries” in the right context, it is important to note that public libraries are regarded as non-revenue generating agencies, as such less emphasis should be given to them. Aje (as cited in **Olden, 1985**) describe the situation in the following manner: “public libraries compete for public funds with other services whose benefits are easier to quantify. They do not bring in any money”. Of course, this view portrays the attitude

generally expressed about public libraries then, and even now, by the policy makers and the society in general.

Figure 1 Oyo State Library Board, Ibadan, South-West, Nigeria.



High Rate of illiteracy and Poor Reading Culture

In the words of former U.S President, Bill Clinton (1994):

“Literacy is not a luxury. It is a right and a responsibility. It is hard for most of us to imagine functioning in our society without the ability to complete a job application or balance a check book”.

However, in the case of Nigeria, this is also another major challenge affecting the development of public libraries at present. Although public libraries are not only meant for the literate members of the society, high rate of illiteracy can have severe consequences on them. Available statistics shows that illiteracy rate is still very high and surging. Indeed, according to the report of UNESCO (as cited in **Bakare , 2015 and Ugwu , 2016**), 65 million Nigerian are still illiterate indicating that the illiteracy rate stands at over 50%. Similarly, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has ranked Nigeria as the number 10 worst country with out-of-school children (**Pulse, 2016; The Telegraph, 2016**). This is despite all the efforts made to improve the literacy situation in the country.

The truth is that there has not been any significant improvement in the last couple of years in terms of eradicating illiteracy in the country, because a similar situation was observed by **Olden (1985)** when he cited the findings of UNESCO which indicated then, that 66% of Nigeria's population aged fifteen and above were illiterates. In a similar manner, **Diso (2007)** observed that the literacy situation in Nigeria had declined from 57% in 1990 to 49% in 2001.

In terms of reading culture, it is sad to report that after 56 years of independence, the reading culture among Nigerians is still very poor and discouraging. It is even sadder to know that even among the educated citizens; the culture of reading is always going down and at its lowest ebb despite the readership promotion campaigns of the National Library of Nigeria and other similar agencies. A visit to any public library in Nigeria will reveal that extent. Most public libraries are always populated by senior secondary schools students who are mostly preparing for their public examinations and who habitually disappear after accomplishment of their missions. To further support this point, the annual report of the **Katsina State Library Board (2016)** shows that the service points of the library had encountered acute shortage of seating accommodation for readers during the time of public examinations in the year under review. The above scenario which is disturbing portrays a dark picture to the survival of public libraries in Nigeria in this information age. The severe consequences can be viewed from two-fold dimensions. Firstly, public library services will remain highly irrelevant in any society where there is high rate of illiteracy and poor reading culture. Secondly, hardly can any library service that is targeting users thrive under such a disappointing situation.

Inadequate Library and Information Resources, Services and Facilities

Lack of proper information resources, services and facilities seems to be one of the most difficult of all the limitations retarding public libraries

growth in Nigeria. In the first instance, information resources development which is the backbone for all library services anywhere has become a dream rather than a reality to many public libraries. Secondly, where the information resources are even made available, the resources provided are not always current and hardly keep in touch with the realities of the changing period. According to **Abubakar (2013)** many public libraries in Nigeria have on their shelves archaic and old fashioned information resources. Additionally, most public libraries depend on donations.

Fig. 3: Kano State Library Board, North-West, Nigeria.



Fig. 4: Bauchi State Library Board, North-East, Nigeria.



A study conducted by **Saleh and Lasisi (2011)** which aimed at assessing public library services in North Eastern States of Nigeria found that 90% of the collections of the libraries studied were outdated and mostly were in form of monographs. This state of affairs is the same in other public libraries throughout the nation. In addition, most public libraries in the country are sited in urban areas thereby always serving the urban dwellers, while those in the rural areas are most often neglected. Moreover, the progress report of the **Bauchi State Library Board (2015)** shows that the two service points of the library in the state (i.e. Bauchi and Azare) had a total collection of only 20,464 volumes of books and 2,044 journals. However, what appears more striking from the report which is noteworthy here is the fact that apart from the inadequacy of the collections, new books were last purchased in the two libraries in 2001. It is a well known fact that libraries are expected to be dynamic not static. Unfortunately, this disappointing situation portrays the extent to which public libraries are neglected by their sponsoring authorities in the country. In a similar situation, while lamenting the setbacks confronting the Rivers State Library Board, the Deputy Governor of the State commented in the following manner “I am surprised that the State Library has deteriorated so much that current materials are not available for the reading public” (**The Gazette, 2015**).

Fig. 5: Grounded Mobile Library Van of the Kano State Library Board, Kano State, Nigeria



A further point to note is the state of modern infrastructural facilities in public libraries. At present, according to the report of the **Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (n.d.)** only 21 out of 37 State Library Boards have Internet connectivity; while only 3 out of 37 have been automated. Additionally, a recent visit to the Oyo state Library Board by

the present writer revealed that the ICT center of the library which was functioning very well had crumbled for over six months and has just been recently revived. Furthermore, one may even go a step further to compare the situation with that of other countries. For example, according to the report of **Public Libraries 2020 (2014)**, there were 5,353 libraries in Czech Republic with 91% of them offering Internet access. Similarly, the same report indicated that in Spain, there were 4,164 public libraries with 89% of them offering Internet access. Besides, the deplorable and disappointing state of mobile library services is worth reporting here. At present, this valuable service is not provided by most public libraries in the country. In the Kano State Library Board for instance, the mobile library/extension services that was started in September 1987 with a collection of 1,999 volumes (**Kano State Library Board Annual Report, 1989**) used to be one of the most important services of the library. But at present, the service is no longer provided due to the poor condition of the mobile library van.

Insufficient and Unmotivated Workers

For any successful library services, there must be adequate personnel in terms of quantity and quality. In other words, staffing is the nucleus of all library services provided anywhere. Accordingly, even the IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines for Public Library Services (**Gill, 2001**) has recommended the need for adequate staffing. However, in the present day Nigerian society, most public libraries are affected by inadequate number of staff especially professionally trained ones which in most instances can be described as abysmally poor. For example, this inadequacy can be seen glaringly when the total number of professional librarians in some state library boards is compared with the total population of their respective states (**Table 1**). For that reason, public library services are not properly rendered as expected.

Additionally, aside their inadequacies, most public libraries personnel in the country are not always motivated by their sponsoring authorities and, therefore, in most instances always looking highly dejected and unimpressed. Thus, it is lamentable to state that most public libraries are not able to achieve most of their objectives because of the inadequacy of staff which retard their development. Even in a situation where there is availability of staff, most public librarians are highly passive and non-innovative because of the insufficient support and attention given to them and their libraries. This is in addition to the very meager and discouraging salaries that hardly take them home, as well as the poor working conditions that are always accorded them which tend to kill their morale. It is important to put on record that most professionally trained librarians working in public libraries are always on transit waiting for any

available opportunity to offer itself so that they can scramble for greener pastures elsewhere.

Table 1: Some Public Libraries and their Number of Professional Librarians in Nigeria

Name of Public Library	Year of Establishment	Number of Librarians	Total Population of the States
Adamawa State Library Board	1991	15	3,178,950
Anambra State Library Board	1991	15	4,177,828
Bauchi State Library Board	1976	18	4,653,066
Benue State Library Board	1976	05	4,253,641
Gombe State Library Board	1996	10	2,365,040
Kaduna State Library Board	1967	14	6,113,503
Kano State Library Board	1967	29	9,401,288
Katsina State Library Board	1987	09	5,801,584
Kebbi State Library Board	1991	07	3,256,541
Kogi State Library Board	1991	05	3,314,043
Kwara State Library Board	1968	08	2,365,353
Plateau State Library Board	1976	05	3,206,531
Ogun State Library Board	1976	15	3,751,140
Oyo State Library Board	1978	10	5,580,894
Zamfara State Library Board	1996	09	3,278,873

Sources: Telephone Calls; Available Annual Reports; National Bureau of Statistics, (2012)

The way forward

For public libraries in Nigeria to be in tandem with global requirements, they need to be satisfactorily and comprehensively supported by the policy makers and the society at large. Therefore, as a way out of the logjam, the following are suggested for urgent consideration:

- **Sufficient and sustained funding:** Adequate and sustained provision of funds by the policy makers in the country is highly desirable. The respective governments should fund the nation's public libraries very well so that they can go on board with their real business of service provision, delivery and awareness campaigns. In addition, this would help in addressing the infrastructural deficit.
- **Total restructuring and transformation of public libraries:** The government should restructure, and repositioned the nation's public library system through the actual implementation and review of relevant policies regarding public libraries on regular basis. If the government is serious, the recent campaign launched by the President in September, 2016, tagged as 'Change begins with me' should be the guiding principle. Thus, it is hoped that the change agenda at all levels will have absolute regard and respect to libraries.
- **Adequate staffing:** Provision of adequate staff and improved working condition for public librarians is extremely desirable. This

would help to address the capacity problem and constant migration of public librarians to other types of libraries and other sectors.

- **Professional associations:** The various professional library associations and regulatory bodies operating in the nation should wake up from their slumber and become proactive by putting heads together and develop a synergy with the policy makers which should aimed at educating them about the role of public libraries in every sphere of human endeavor.
- **Deliberate aggressive campaigns against illiteracy and poor reading culture:** A more purposeful, deliberate and aggressive approach should be jointly developed by the government, the public libraries and all other critical relevant stakeholders with the aim of curbing the high rate of illiteracy and poor reading culture. It is vital to note that no nation can attain development where there is high rate of illiteracy and poor reading culture.
- **Initiatives:** Public libraries should be innovative enough by developing strategies through lobbying, advocacy, and promotion campaigns aimed at attracting the attention and sympathy of wealthy individuals and corporate organizations so that they can get support from them just like their counterparts in the advanced countries. This is necessary because the government alone cannot effectively fund the public libraries. In addition, they should develop alternative means of generating revenue through initiatives and ventures as the case maybe in order to supplement what they are given.

Conclusion

Public libraries growth and success can be stymied anywhere if there is no proper support and attention. In other words, lack of proper support to public libraries can make them weak and indolent. There is no gainsaying the fact that public libraries in Nigeria are in 'real dilemma' i.e. their major intent is still very far from being achieved. Additionally, there is a popular saying that goes this way: 'to whom much is given, much is expected.' However, in the case of Nigeria, one can equally and unequivocally say that 'to whom less is given, less is definitely expected.' Undeniably, whenever there is poor support, recognition and awareness it will be extremely difficult for any library to flourish and even survive. Thus, the existence of numerous and very glaring challenges confronting the Nigerian public library system which is pathetic is worth reporting and at the same time worth knowing by whoever cares to know.

The discourse above tried to explain the real lingering state of affairs in the Nigerian public library environment which in all ramifications appears to be highly not conducive enough. Therefore, all hands must be on deck

to ensure that public libraries in the country are adequately supported and fully integrated into all schemes of national development.

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