

SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN THE LIBRARY PROFESSION AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A PROBE

Chidi Nwosu

ABSTRACT

Symbiosis is a model of relationship where two parties complement each other by playing their expected roles effectively. In an attempt to determine if this relationship model operates between the library profession and the Nigerian society the paper identifies the roles of each party and assessed its compliance level. The library profession is found to show his commitment in playing its primary roles in the society viz conservation and transmission of knowledge. The society on the other hand is found to be lagging behind in its obligations to the library such as appreciation of the profession, adequate sponsorship, appropriate legislation, and hospitality. Hence symbiosis is yet lacking between the library profession and the Nigeria Society the paper concludes with a call on librarians to develop pragmatic ways of asserting their relevance to the society and thereby wooing the society to their side.

Introduction

Symbiosis is a word from the life sciences that denotes a mutually beneficial relationship between two things. For example symbiosis is evident between the insect and the flower since the insect feeds from the flower but also pollinates it. Symbiosis works with a principle of give-and-take and hence, it is the hallmark of any healthy relationship. This model of relationship is in sharp contrast to the parasitic model in which one party in a relationship benefits all the time, often, to the detriment and chagrin of the other party, in this later model, the losing party usually puts up a resistance so that sooner than later such a relationship heads for the rocks. Relationships, therefore, thrive on reciprocity; there is always a threat of collapse of any relationship in which one party consistently fails to play its expected role.

Symbiosis is desirable between the library profession and the Nigerian society espousing it. Both parties owe each other certain obligations. What is their commitment level to these complementary obligations? Symbiosis between them would mean that they are mutually, highly committed to the discharge of their obligations to each other. But this is still suspect. Hence, this paper is intended to probe into the nature of the relationship between the library profession and the Nigerian society; it will identify the expected roles of each party toward the other and then assess the degree of compliance of each party, if any.

The library profession's roles vis-a-vis performance

There appears to be a consensus among different-authors on the role of libraries in the society. Shera (1972) views the principal role of libraries in society as an agency of communication. Others are conservation, education, culture, dissemination of information, and promotion of reading, Thompson (1974. p.40-51) wholly shares Shera's view. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002. p.35) have similarly identified library "roles in society as knowledge conservation, information, education, research, culture and entertainment.

While this paper endorses these roles as valid, it sums them up simply as conservation and extension of human knowledge.

At the root of library professional practice is a concern with human knowledge. Librarianship is basically concerned with the provision of a conducive environment in which human knowledge thrives. All activities performed in the library zero into this. The importance of this concern can only be realized when viewed against the backdrop of the crucial value of knowledge to the society. Knowledge - scientific, social, humanistic, etc - constitutes the basic ingredient for societal advance. Human civilization progresses only in proportion to the amount of knowledge available and knowledge itself draws upon a well of accumulated knowledge for growth. The role of the library in societal progress is therefore easily discernible as it is the store of human knowledge, facilitating access to it to engender progress. If there were to be no such store of recorded knowledge, each generation would stand apart from its predecessors and successors. Each generation would need to relearn and re-invent skills and processes. It would mean a lack of continuity, a situation which would at best slow down civilization's progress and at worst lead to retrogression.

Thompson (1974. p.7) lends credence to the point being made in the following words: *Library power derives primarily from the repository and custodial functions of libraries. Libraries are the storehouses of humanistic, scientific and technological knowledge. They preserve the records of civilization and of mankind's achievements and discoveries. Not only do the libraries conserve our culture, but as agencies of communication they play an important role in its transmission.*

Quite illuminating too is Aguolu and Aguolu (2002. p.35) and Flexner's (1974, p.xv) reference to the library as the memory of the society. Aguolu and Aguolu put it this way: the library is society's memory standing in the same relationship as the human memory does to an individual. The society draws upon its library in the same way that an individual draws upon his memory to meet his varied needs". Flexner captures the idea very forcefully as follows: *Libraries are the memory of mankind, the storehouse that contains all which is known and has been thought. Were some holocaust to destroy all intellectual institutions except libraries, all could be re-created. But if the libraries were destroyed, all other institutions in the world could not re-create them.*

Libraries are therefore a very important part of the society's life. This truth is' as valid in Nigeria as it is on a universal scale. There is no proof anywhere that libraries and librarianship in Nigeria opt out of their universally assigned roles of conserving knowledge and making the knowledge available to members of the society. Librarians in Nigeria acquire books and other records of human knowledge, organize them, store and preserve them, retrieve and disseminate them for the benefit of members of the society. These activities go on daily basis in all types of libraries-academic, public, special, and even school libraries. Permit an illustration with academic and public libraries. A visit to Imo State University. Owerri, Library or Federal University of Technology. Owerri. Library as typical academic libraries will convince anybody of the commitment of the library to the discharge of its principal roles of knowledge conservation and transmission. In these

libraries books and other sources of knowledge are made available to a teeming student population that has enrolled into higher education in quest of knowledge-knowledge that will eventually be used to solve societal problems. The public libraries such as the ones in Owerri and Umuahia serve as centres of free knowledge for all. By their services, they show commitment to promotion of knowledge in the society. It can thus be asserted that the library profession is fulfilling its primary obligations to the Nigerian society, barring certain limitations, which the society may still be blamed for.

In the next section, the paper will examine society's response to the library as an institution and to the library profession generally.

Nigerian society's roles: an assessment of compliance

The Nigerian society refers to the government and people of Nigeria. Can it be correctly stated that ours is a library-friendly society? The judgment will be conditioned by an assessment of the level of commitment of the society to the library cause. In other words, the role expectations of the Nigerian society toward the library and the library profession will be critically examined here with a view to ascertaining its performance level.

Appreciation of the role of the library profession:

There is, in the words of Aguolu and Aguolu (2002. P.441). societal misconception of the role of the libraries in national development". Explaining this fact, they have said:

From all indications, *very few* Nigerians can be said to understand the librarian's social role. ***Thus, the primary problem of the library profession is that of being misunderstood by the members of the society.*** This emanates from a high illiteracy rate (bordering on 75% of the population); lack of appreciation of the critical value of information in the solution of our complex economic, political and technological problems; a misdirected educational system that is based upon parrot learning and sets an inordinate score on paper qualifications, acquired through prolonged schooling, mistaken to be necessarily prolonged learning, and from excessive materialism that has infested the society that shams little regard for intellectual efforts or for things of the mind. (Emphasis added)

Lack of appreciation of the role of the library profession is the root cause of the poor attitude of society to the library. Every other problem is traceable to this fact.

Funding: Libraries are social services that governments sponsor for the benefit of the citizens. More important than the individuals' benefit from library services is its positive effect on the society, which cannot be easily quantified. In relation to this. Schaur (1986. p. 241) says. To the extent that we can establish a link between library service and positive external benefits, the case for relatively large public subsidies is strong". More advanced countries that have a better understanding of the economics of library provision for their citizens spend large sums of money running libraries. In contrast, all tiers of government in Nigeria that have the responsibility to sponsor libraries grudge over it. They unwittingly classify the library as an unproductive sector and hence do not

prioritize it. Library budgets are cut at will while approved ones are hardly released as and when due. Perhaps the experience of the Imo State Library Board as recounted by the erstwhile Director, Dr. A. Ozurumba (interview, 10 December, 2005) will serve to buttress the point being made. In his own words; The Imo State Library Board is poorly funded. Since 1998, the government has not released any overhead cost. The yearly budgets approved for the library are hardly implemented. The monthly personnel allocation has remained static - ₦2.5 million per month since six years. The library has however benefited from Education Trust Fund (ETF) Library Intervention Fund and received book donations from Book Aid International. *If the library had depended on the government services should have suffered.*

As a result of the continuous poor *funding from* the government the library has commercialized some of its services in order to generate resources to augment the limited government allocations..."

The insensitivity of the statutory funding bodies obviously has implications for library services provision. New staff cannot be recruited as the need arises. Salaries are owed for many months in a stretch with the attendant low morale, which negatively affects their services. Library collections are not updated, necessary equipment is not provided and general maintenance is lacking.

Philanthropy: The rich in Nigeria have a habit of showing their affluence through philanthropy. But how many of such philanthropic activities are in favour of libraries? Overseas, libraries enjoy good philanthropy from well-meaning individuals and organizations. Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation have for many years been sponsoring library projects in the United States of America. In fact, their generosity has continued to overflow to Nigeria. Curiously, Nigerians that are good imitators of westerners have failed to imitate them on this. There are yet very few indigenous foundation that sponsor libraries in Nigeria,

Laws and legislation: Nigerian government seems to feet-drag in the promulgation of laws and legislation that are favourable to the library. It took several states an unduly long time to enact a public library law or create a library board despite the recommendation of the 1953 UNESCO seminar on public library development and the subsequent incessant calls for such laws by the Nigerian Library Association at both national and state levels.

This lack-interest attitude toward library legislation is further exemplified by the long delay in according librarianship legal recognition. Librarians demanded this recognition for forty years before it was finally granted in 2002, albeit on shaky terms. Those four decades were very frustrating to the profession as the professional association. Nigerian Library Association (NLA) could not regulate professional education or professional practice. The society then was at the mercy of anyone who paraded himself as a librarian, qualified or not. With the Librarians Registration Council now on board things are taking a new turn in the professional practice of librarians.

Recognition/respect for the profession

Certain actions and attitudes of members of the Nigerian society betray their lack of respect for, and non-recognition of the professional status of librarianship. Recently, at the University of Port Harcourt, a professor of biochemistry was appointed the overall head of the university library. Although he was not designated a librarian, this practice runs foul of the norm in the civilized world. It cannot be argued that there are no capable librarians to be hired to occupy that top-notch position, the envy of any librarian working in the university library. Despite the professional association's outcry condemning this, the authorities of University of Port-Harcourt took a long time to budge. As though that was not enough slap on the face of the profession, the government of Rivers State appointed a non-librarian to head the public library system in the state since 2003.

The undermining of the professional status of librarians is also visible in the non-definitive career structure for librarians in the civil service. Librarians in ministry libraries tell tales of woe in their experiences with designation, promotion and deployment in the civil service. Equally irksome is the appointment of non-librarians as head of library establishments in the ministries and some government parastatals in a period when there are hundreds of jobless librarians roaming the streets.

This writer observes regrettably, that the image of the librarian has not greatly improved in relation to some other professionals. The Nigerian public has remained frugal with its prestige and honour for the librarians in contrast to the measure given to the lawyer, the doctor or the engineer. The public rating of the library profession can be gleaned from the pattern of course choice by candidates wishing to enter institutions of higher learning. Very few indicate library science as a course of choice at all while even fewer indicate it as first choice. Often, candidates grudgingly accept supplementary admission into library science with a view to transferring to their dream courses after a year or even two years.

Patronage: Library services are organized for use by people. However, more often than not, the report from libraries is that they experience low patronage by the people. There have been studies on the reading habits of Nigerians and the uniform result is that Nigerians are basically not a reading people. One such study conducted by Nwokocha (1993) to determine the patterns of public library use by adults in Owerri and Umuahia, confirms this claim. Nigerians read to pass examinations; this accounts for the high traffic in the public libraries at periods before major examinations with a drastic decline soon afterwards. This is also true of academic libraries. For the vast majority of Nigerian elites, a few glances at the dailies suffice for their total reading. What emerges then is that Nigerians in general are averse to printed information. Much of their information seeking is through interpersonal means. This state of affairs does not encourage library development. Hence, Aguolu and Aguolu (p,441) have noted;

Libraries can only flourish in a society that appreciates the need for preserving, transmitting and enlarging a body of knowledge, where there is emphasis on self-improvement and well-informed citizenry, where the government recognizes that scientific and technical information constitutes the key to national economic growth and

prosperity, because national progress is bound up with scientific and technological development based on research.

Aboyade's (1982 p.27) opinion is also germane here

The problem of poor recognition of the importance of information in the society is not just due to the fact of illiteracy of the greater percentage of our citizenry. Even among the highly educated Nigerians, there is still that lack of appreciation for the difference, which the provision of library and information services can make in their lives and that of the society at large. The result is that if such people are ever in a position of policy making, they find it difficult to support the library cause.

Hospitality toward the library

Books: "precious friends with abounding enemies"

The paradox in the above title of an article by Ononogbo (2002) is illuminating. Books present themselves, as friends to man but paradoxically man is one of the archenemies of the book- Anti-social behaviours such as vandalism, book theft and mutilation are regular occurrences in libraries (Onyechi, 1997, Anunobi, 2000. Edom 2002) etc. A few cases of arson have also been reported. (Jam. 2000).

These anti-social behaviours perpetrated by library users are inimical to library growth. Take the case of book theft. In an earlier work, this writer has argued that theft of library materials threatens the very idea of the library. She writes:

Imagine that one after the other the books of a library had been removed by stealing. Would you still recognize such a place as a library? Is there any such thing as a 'bookless' library? The book makes the library and therefore a library without books is a misnomer. Hence, stealing puts the library in terrible jeopardy (Niuosu, p.93-94).

Libraries will normally flourish in environments of peace and stability. Although there was no large scale destruction of libraries and books in the recent religious and ethnic clashes in parts of the country, the damage inflicted on the library of University of Nigeria, Nsukka and other libraries in Eastern Nigeria during the civil war remains a reference point.

Conclusion

The above perspective on the library-society relationship clearly shows that it has not been smooth between them. The Nigerian society appears to be hostile to the library profession. The compliance level of the society in the performance of its expected roles toward the library profession is less than desirable. Symbiosis between the two parties is still far flung. Yet, this model of relationship - symbiosis - is sine qua non to the growth of the library profession. The situation as it is presently places an onerous challenge on librarians who must be jolted into a search for pragmatic approaches to remedying the situation. Although this paper observes a high commitment level on the part of the library profession in discharging its obligations to the society, the profession needs to do more in order to woo the society to its side. There is an urgent need for greater initiative and innovation in library professional practice.

REFERENCES

- Aboyade, B.O (1982) *The Making of an Informed Society*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
- Aguolu. C.C. and Aguolu, I.E. (2002) *Libraries and information management in Nigeria: seminal essays on themes and problems*. Maiduguri: Ed-Lin form.
- Anunobi, V. C. (1998) A study of library crimes in Nigerian University libraries (Master's thesis. Imo State University Owerri. 1998).
- Edom, B.O. (2003) Causes and consequences of book theft and mutilation in academic Libraries a study of IMSU and FUTO libraries. (Master's thesis. Imo State University Owerri. 2003.
- Flexner. J.T. (1979) Foreword. For *the people: fighting for public libraries*. By Whitney North Seymour and Elizabeth N. Layne. New York: Doubleday.
- Jam, Z. (2000) Tertiary Libraries on Fire in Benue State: Barbarians resurrected!!! *Frontiers of Information and Library Science* 1 (1) 43 - 56.
- Nwokocha. U. (1993) Resources Utilization by adults in Nigeria: the case of two public libraries. *International Information and Library Review* 85-91.
- Nwosu. C. C. (2000) *A textbook in use of the library for higher education*. Owerri Springfield.
- Ononogbo. R- U. (2002) Books: Precious friends with abounding enemies. *Nigeria Library and Information Science trends...* 1(1) 1-10.
- Onyechi. N.N (1997) Effective security and control of Nigerian academic library materials". Paper presented at the National Training Workshop on Implementation of Library Services organized by Centre for Research and Manpower Development Owerri, Imo State 8-11 July. 1997.
- Shaur Bruce P. (1986) *The Economics of managing library services*. Chicago: ALA.
- Shera, J. H. (1992) *The foundations of education for librarianship*. New York, Becker and Hayes.
- Thompson James (1974) *Library power: a new philosophy of Librarianship*. London: Clive Bingley.