

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS IN REFERENCE SERVICES IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA

by

ABDUL-GHANIYA A. ADEBIMPE

National Library of Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Government documents, like all other information sources, are important tools for reference services. They are indispensable reference materials for library users; unlike the monographs and some other library documents, they can only be consulted in the library. This paper expounds what Government documents are; how they are acquired and processed in the National Library of Nigeria; the significance of catalog cards vis-à-vis information retrieval from Government Documents in a library system and their usefulness to the clientele in reference services.

INTRODUCTION

The key words in this paper are: Government documents and Reference services. Government documents are written or printed materials that have official character that gives information on the structure and operational activities of an organ or organs of a given Government.

Reference Services, in this context, mean books or library materials from which vital information could be extracted that could serve as authority for writing history of something, or documents that furnish important facts on certain issues that cannot be obtained from ordinary textbooks. These sources could be in form of books, publications, audio-visual aids, atlases or written documents. They cannot be loaned out of the library; they can only be consulted there. These are otherwise referred to as Reference books or Reference materials.

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

The main responsibilities of any given government are to make laws; to see that the laws made are carried out; to administer justice when necessary; and, to make sure that the laws made are not flouted, misapplied or misinterpreted. The Government organs that are in charge

of making laws, in the case of Nigeria, are the National Assembly or the Parliament which is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives at the Federal level, and the House of Assembly at the State level.

The Government organ that carries out the laws made is the Executive: that is the Presidency and the Council of Ministers at the Federal level, and the States' Cabinets or the Governors and their Commissioners at the State level, while the Courts of law – the Supreme Court, the High courts of Appeal, the Shari'ah courts of Appeal, the Customary courts of Appeal, the High courts, the Magistrate courts and the Customary courts – are in charge of interpreting and applying the laws made.

All these organs of government have publications they issue from time to time to let the citizenry and the non-citizens alike keep abreast of the essential facts of Government's activities that must be known to them. The publications emanating from these bodies are called Government documents.

Official publications and government publications are synonymous terms used for Government documents. Different definitions have been given to Government documents. Ferrer (1983) sees them as publications of various government Agencies through which the basic legislative, judiciary and executive functions of the government are exercised together with the publications of quasi-government bodies created and totally controlled by government.

Odumosu (1988) sees the government documents as records of public authorities, be they local, state, national or multi-national, issued in printed form, usually released for consumption by all and sundry for whatever purpose- information, education, entertainment, research, reference, reports of tribunals, investigating panels, feasibility studies. In the same vein, Mary Piggot (1991) sees them as items in any physical form that are issued by an official body and made available to the people to peruse and digest.

Taking all these definitions as our guide, official documents, therefore, comprise the publications of the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, their advisory bodies and the national, state and local institutions that are established, financed and controlled by any arm of government.

There are also publications of the International bodies and their Agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the ECOWAS Parliament, the ECOWAS Court of Justice, the United Nations (UN), the Organization of African Unity (OAU) now changed to African Union (AU) et cetera.

Government Documents also include the publications emanating from the government departments, ministries, parastatals, research institutes and the like. These documents may be on research, statistical data, or records of business etc.

The decrees that are promulgated by the military government at the federal level, and the edicts that are proclaimed at the state level, when published or gazetted, are, by and large, government documents.

PUBLICATION OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

The Federal Government and all the State Governments of the Federation have their own printing presses that print their documents for them. Other Ministries, Parastatals and Government Agencies that have printing presses also print their own documents, while those that do not have such facilities do engage private printers to print for them. Those that cannot print for them-selves, and those that do not have the means to hire the printers outside, but have mimeographing machines or duplicating facilities, use them to produce government documents. This is one of the reasons why government documents cannot be easily acquired.

While the government printers distribute the documents they publish, other government agencies handle the distribution of their documents by themselves. In effect, there is no policy guideline on the number of copies that must be printed; there is no particular organ that controls the printed documents; and, there is no specific mode for the distribution of these materials to the government institutions. This is another reason why the acquisition of these materials is difficult.

There is no library in the country that can boast of a complete collection of government documents. The National Library of Nigeria, by virtue of the contents of the Decree that set it up, and the powers conferred on it to achieve a complete bibliographic control in the country, is supposed to be

in possession of all the government documents published in Nigeria. But unfortunately, for logistic and other reasons, it scarcely has up to one tenth of the Government documents published in the country.

The National Bibliography of Nigeria (NBN) which is compiled and published annually by the National library of Nigeria does not include all the publications of government in Nigeria. Enumerating the reasons for this, Pampam (1981) said that it was as a result of lack of proximity to the government printers, the non-availability of regular list that carries the current government publications and the non-existence of a central body for their distribution to various libraries.

TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

Government documents are published at government expense, be it federal, state or local government. Most of these documents are usually printed by the Governments' Printing presses. They may be in form of reports, serials, monographs or pamphlets.

There are government documents that are published bi-weekly, weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, quarterly, bi-annually or annually. Ideally, a government document must basically focus on the activities of the organ of government that is responsible for its publication. Any document published by the federal or state government at times bears the Nigerian crest or Coat of arms. Occasionally, some of these publications are contracted out to private printers who fail to emblazon the crest or Coat of arms on them.

Government documents have certain characteristics with which they are known. Among them are:

- (i) they bear the imprint (the place of publication, the name of the publisher and the date the document was printed) of the government printing office;
- (ii) they bear the names and the seals of the Government Agencies that are responsible for their publication;
- (iii) they are recognized and used by such agencies in their operations;
- (iv) they are distributed officially in the course of Government business.

Acquisition of Government Documents in the National Library of Nigeria

Government documents, be they those published by Federal, State, Local government or any of their arms or agencies, are acquired by the National Library of Nigeria through the Legal Deposit provision. This is a part of the statutory duties of the National Library of Nigeria as enunciated in the Decree No. 29 of 1970 that set it up.

Section (4.3) of the Act states, inter alia, that:

"where any printed matter (other than matter of such descriptions as the Director may specify from time to time) is published by, or on behalf of, any department of government of the Federation or of a State, it shall be the duty of the official in charge of the department to deliver forthwith to the Director for the purposes of the National Library-

- (a) twenty-five copies of the publication, if it is published by or on behalf of a department of government of the Federation; or*
- (b) ten copies of the publication, if it is published by or on behalf of a department of government of a State, or such smaller numbers of copies as the Director may determine in any particular case."*

Funny enough, while the Act stipulates, on conviction, a ridiculous penalty that must not be more than one hundred naira (₦100.00) for a private publisher, who fails to deposit three copies of its published material with the National Library of Nigeria, it fails to stipulate a penalty for the erring Ministries, Parastatals or Government Agencies that fail to deposit their materials with the National Library. This is one of the reasons why some Government documents are not deposited with the National Library as Legal Deposits.

Secondly, the National Library of Nigeria is incapacitated to take legal action against the defaulting governments or their agencies, because there is no law that empowers it to do so. Thirdly, although the National Library of Nigeria has the locus standi to sue any private author or publisher that fails to deposit its publications with it, up till today, the National Library of Nigeria has not deemed it fit, despite the legal backing it possesses, to deal decisively with a single erring private author or publisher. Something

positive needs to be done about this.

The Collection Development and Processing Department (CDPD) of the National Library of Nigeria is directly in charge of the collection of the Government documents. Lack of Legal deposit drives over the years has made it practically impossible for the schedule officers to collect legal deposit materials, including Government Document, that are published in the country. This is why an alternative arrangement was made that the staff of Reference and Users' Services Department (RUSD) and the staff at the State Branches should assist in collecting the materials.

Under normal circumstances, these documents are supposed to be deposited with the National Library of Nigeria immediately they are published, but, unfortunately, many of the publishers do not comply, while, on the other hand, the National Library of Nigeria does not have adequate means of going out to collect.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

The three tiers of Government in the country e.g. the Federal, the State and the Local Government are involved in the political, economic, educational, religious, cultural and social activities of the people they govern. They publish documents to inform the people of the policies formulated, the decisions taken, and the reason(s) why they are adopted or rejected, the activities embarked upon and the justification for doing so.

While some are for administrative purposes, others are for general information on important national events. It is these government documents that the researchers use to postulate the changes in the country or solve one type of problem or the other at the various levels of government. The Government documents are also used for bilateral exchange of information within and outside the country. They are used for policy research and decision-making.

Enumerating some of the usefulness of government documents, Pampam (1981) maintained that they are tools for awareness of government activities and a source of enlightenment for the researchers and the elite, because they constitute primary source materials in the history of government administration and activities; they contain accounts of the work of Government Agencies; they give a statistical picture of

national conditions and they afford bases for measuring economic and social changes.

With the myriad advantages of government documents, he concluded that every citizen, no matter his vocation, will, at one time or the other, find government documents useful in his work because they are the living records of the efforts of people on how they govern themselves.

TECHNICAL PROCESSING OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA

The National Bibliographic Control Department (NBCD) is in charge of the technical processing of government documents and other library materials acquired for the establishment. This is so, because the technical processing of library materials is centralized.

The Library of Congress Classification Scheme and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) Scheme do not adequately cater for the Government documents published in Nigeria. The Library of Congress Classification Scheme was purposely designed for the technical processing of American government publications that invariably emanate from the American Congress. Although the Scheme is reviewed from time to time, it is still grossly inadequate for the government documents published in Nigeria.

It is in the light of this that some libraries in Nigeria developed their own local (home - made) classification schemes to integrate the government documents in the country into their various collections. Among the (home - made) schemes developed by the Nigerian libraries are: Moses Classification Scheme for African government documents. This scheme, according to Oke (1992), was named after Sybil Moses, the African-American librarian who was at a time in charge of government documents in the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. The National Library of Nigeria; the University of Lagos; and, the University of Jos also developed their own Home-made classification schemes.

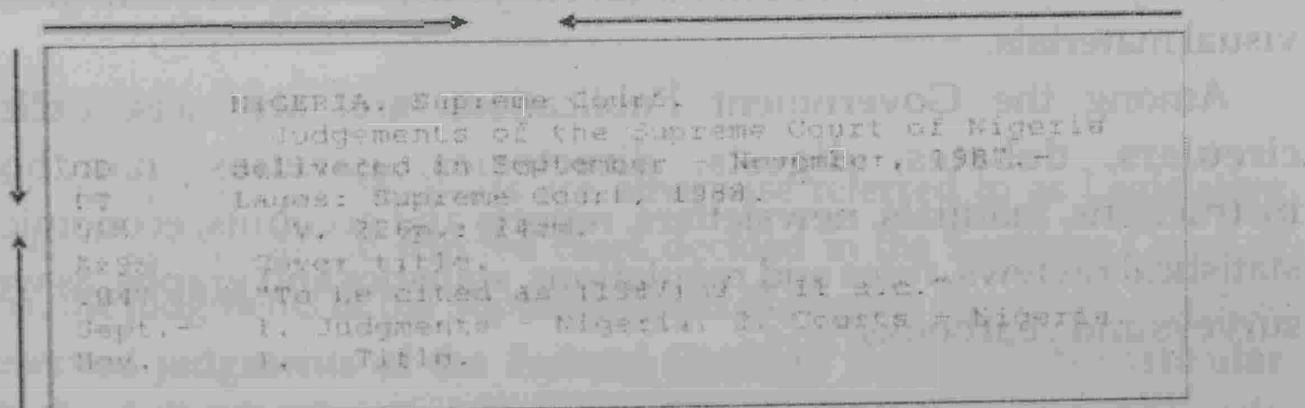
Each Nigerian government document acquired by the National Library of Nigeria has three identification numbers or call numbers through which it could be shelved or retrieved from the shelves. The identification numbers are a conglomerate of Library of Congress (LC) Classification

number; Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) number and National Library of Nigeria Home-made Classification number. Elizabeth Moy's classification scheme is only used for law materials.

The National Library of Nigeria's Home - made scheme is hierarchical in nature. All the official documents, when they are being processed, must bear "OD" (Official Document) symbol. They must also bear "DT515", which is the Library of Congress (LC) class mark for Nigerian History. Lastly, they must bear a location symbol. The cataloguer shall then cutter for the State that the document emanates from. For example:

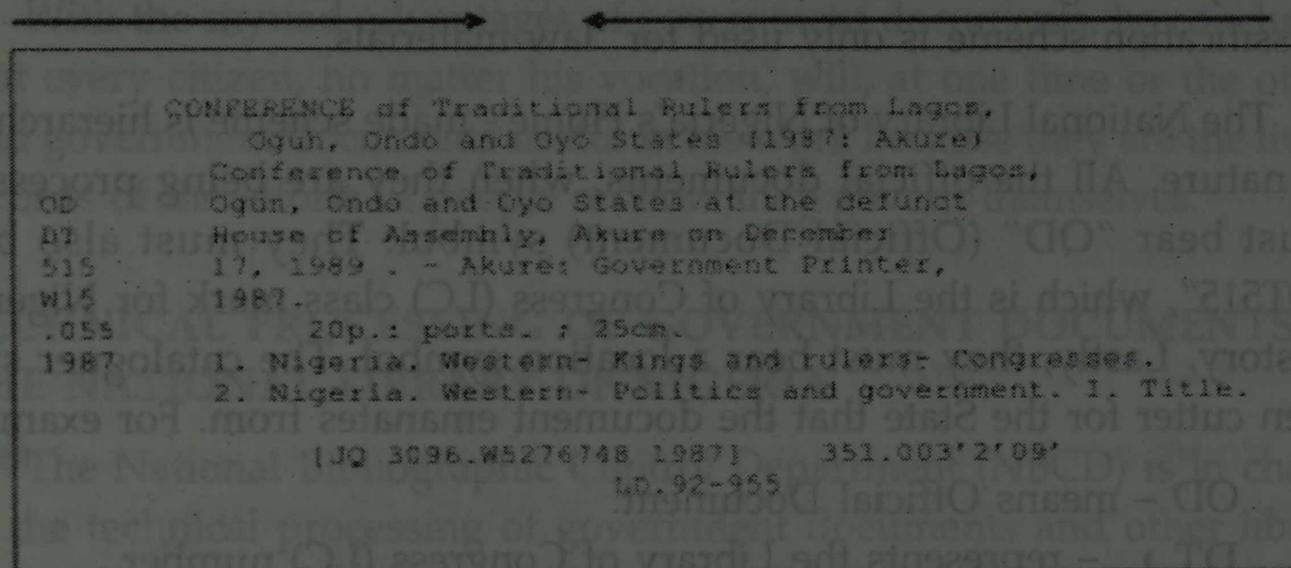
- a) OD - means Official Document.
- b) DT } - represents the Library of Congress (LC) number
515 } for Nigeria.
- c) Aa - Az represents the primary notation for Federal Government.
C-Wy represents the primary notation for Regional and State Governments.
- d) 1-18 represents the secondary notation for the various government offices.
- e) 01-.098 represents the tertiary notation for the general forms and subject divisions.

By way of illustration, a Government Document titled: "Judgments of the Supreme Court of Nigeria; to be cited as (1987). 9-11 Supreme Court", delivered between September and November, 1987, published in Lagos, by the Supreme Court, in 1988, that has five (5) preliminary pages and two hundred and twenty six (226) pages and is twenty four (24) centimeters long, will be processed technically like this:



Imagine another document that bears the following title: "Conference of traditional rulers from Lagos, Ogun, Ondo and Oyo States held on December 17, 1987", published in Akure by the government Printers of the defunct Western State of Nigeria on 17 December, 1989. It has twenty

(20) pages; it has portraits and it is twenty-five (25) centimeters long. Its technical processing will look like this:



Government documents are reference materials. They are usually consulted in the library. In other words, they are not, unlike the other non-reference materials, loaned out to the library clientele. This is to say that they cannot be taken out of the library for consultation. Katz (1979), defining reference materials, says:

Generally, a reference book is arranged so that you can extract information quickly and painlessly. It rarely is meant to be read cover to cover, and the arrangement is usually alphabetical or even chronological.

Government documents are of different types. They are varied in form and format and they treat different topics that hinge on the functions and responsibilities of the bodies that are responsible for their publication. They may be in form of monographs or non-monographs; they may be regular or irregular; they may be printed or mimeographed; and, they may be bound or unbound. They may even be in form of audio-visual materials.

Among the Government Publications are: abstracts, bulletins, circulars, debates, digests, directories, gazettes, handbooks, instructions, manuals, newsletters, reports and accounts, economic and statistical reviews, rules and regulations, statistics and graphs, as well as surveys and yearbooks.

GAZETTES

The printing of the official gazettes in Nigeria is as old as Nigeria herself. It is published weekly with or without a supplement. Gazettes

that contain longer texts of laws and bills are called Extra-ordinary Gazettes. They are published from time to time as the need arises.

Government gazettes are very useful for the civil servants. They contain the various appointments made in various ministries, and they are arranged alphabetically. Also contain therein are the confirmation of appointments, upgrading, secondments, promotions, acting appointments, leave of absence, resumption of duty, transfers and the like, that have to do with the civil servants in the country. Official gazettes are consulted by civil servants who want to get their entitlements after their disengagement from service.

Government Gazettes also contain registered trademarks of various companies and corporate organizations, trade disputes, loss of items, advertised vacancies for employment, revenue figures of Board of Customs and Excise, Scholarship awards et cetera.

LAWS OF THE FEDERATION OF NIGERIA

The Laws of the Federation consist of the ordinances; regulations and byelaws that were made by the Colonial masters; the Acts of Parliament and the House of Assembly; the Decrees; and, the Edicts promulgated by the past military Heads of State, the States' Military Governors and the Military Administrators. They are published by the Ministry of Justice, and are in many volumes. They are very useful to the lawyers and the judges who want to know about the laws and the statutes made, and the various decrees and edicts promulgated in the country. They are equally advantageous to the legal luminaries who want to up-date their knowledge in their professional calling.

ALL NIGERIA LAW REPORTS

The All Nigeria Law Reports are otherwise referred to as Legislative Texts. They consist of the selected cases decided in the Supreme Court of Nigeria, the judgments of the Supreme Court of Nigeria for certain months, the reserved judgments of the Federal Court of Appeal in a particular month, the Annual volume of the laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria containing the decrees and the subsidiary legislations made in the year 1968, the Wages Board Ordinances, the Electoral Regulations et cetera.

The Law Reports are published weekly, monthly, bi-annually and annually, and they are in many volumes. They are useful sources of information for the legal luminaries, the jurists, the lawyers, law students and researchers on legal issues amongst others.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

The Parliamentary Debates contain the debates of the National Assembly (the Senate and the House of Representatives) as well as those of the States' Assemblies before and after the independence. They are reference sources for politicians, political scientists, lawmakers, researchers and the like.

ANNUAL / OTHER REPORTS

Each ministry, government parastatal or department issues annual or periodic reports on the activities, aims, objectives and achievements of its establishment at the end of every fiscal year. For example: Annual Report of the Federal Civil Service Commission. January- December, 1999; National Library of Nigeria Annual Report, 2000.

The Federal Office of Statistics collects, tabulates and publishes statistics on various subjects that are used for planning and development of projects and allied matters in public and private sectors.

Another type of report is the one written by Public Commissions, or Tribunals of enquiry set up by the various Governments to investigate specific matters of public interest. For example: Report of the Oputa Panel of Enquiry.

The Annual /other reports are the library materials that the clientele consult for feasibility studies of Government projects; in-house memoranda; and reports of Commissions appointed by the Government; Government position papers on various issues and subjects and so on.

PRESS RELEASES

Press Releases and other publicity materials are useful to historians, political scientists, media practitioners and researchers generally.

ACCESSING GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

Government publications, like the other library materials, are processed technically before the library users consult them. These materials are processed in the National Library of Nigeria by the National Bibliographic Control Department (NBCD). The publications, having been catalogued and classified, catalog cards are produced and filed in the catalog cabinet for the clientele to consult.

The catalog cabinet is made up of many trays. The 3"x5" cards are arranged in the trays in an alphabetical order. They are vital guides for information retrieval in a library system. Traditionally, the catalog cabinet is the first port of call for any library user that knows how to make use of it for information retrieval. However, with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) the computer has virtually taken over this role.

There are three types of catalog cards: the author cards, the title cards and the subject cards. The Author cards are the cards where the names of the authors are used as Access point. They are filed alphabetically in the card cabinets. The title cards are the cards that bear the titles of the documents as Access point. The subject cards are the cards that bear the subject headings treated by the document.

There are two types of catalog cabinet arrangements in the National Library of Nigeria: the Author/Title catalogue and the Subject catalogue. The title of the material and the name of the author constitute the Author-title catalogue. The subject(s) treated in the material constitute the subject catalogue.

The names of authors and the titles of materials are typed in black on top of the cards, and filed alphabetically in the Author/Title catalog cabinet, while the subjects treated by the documents are typed in red, on separate cards and filed alphabetically in the subject catalog cabinet.

Each card bears a classification number otherwise referred to as Call number. But these call numbers are very difficult to use by the clientele who are not familiar with the classification system in librarianship. This is why most library users prefer the Author/Title and the Subject card systems to using call numbers for retrieval.

PROBLEMS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Unfortunately, the catalog cards in the Government Documents Division in the National Library of Nigeria are grossly deficient in that there are many documents that are on the shelves without classification numbers. Faced with this problem, the method adopted in the interim for the easy retrieval of materials, apart from the catalog cards, is to arrange the documents country by country, State by State and label them on the shelves according to their arrangements and the subjects they treat.

Another problem facing the Government Documents Division in the National Library of Nigeria is that the documents are not up-to-date. There are many official gazettes that have been published, but are not available in the library's collection. Funds should be made available to photocopy the ones that are not in the stock, bind and process them technically for the clients. Doing this will go a long way in enriching the Government Documents collection, and, at the same time, minimizing the degree of frustration and disappointment that the clientele usually encounter whenever they come to the library for certain information in Government documents.

Apart from the above, some of the government documents are scattered in the State Branches of the National Library of Nigeria. For example, some official Gazettes are in abundance in Minna, Niger State Branch, while maps are plenty in Jos, Plateau State Branch. Such documents are hardly consulted because majority of the library's patrons come to the Headquarters for them. Arrangement should be made for their transportation down to Abuja for proper preservation, consultation and utilization.

Government documents in the National Library of Nigeria collections should be digitized for proper preservation and conservation. They should be made available in electronic format, that is Compact Disk Read Only Memory (CD ROM) and microfiche for the use of readers. Concerted efforts should be made to achieve these.

CONCLUSION

The importance of government documents for reference services cannot be overemphasized. They are very important because they are the

primary source materials of Government activities and planning. The subject matters treated by the Government publications are wide in scope. The type of information one gets in the Government Documents cannot be obtained in ordinary textbooks. They inform the public about the policies the Governments adopt; the new laws that are in force; the new decrees that are promulgated; the ones that are abrogated, and the like. They are vital sources of information on social, political, cultural, economic, religious and allied matters for the development of the country.

All said and done, the bottom line of the matter is that:

1. The system of proliferation of the printing of Government documents should be checked and controlled.
2. There should be a clear-cut policy guideline on the number of copies that must be printed.
3. The mode of distribution of Government Documents should be streamlined and centralized.
4. The National Library of Nigeria should be empowered to penalize the Government Ministries, Parastatals and Agencies that fail to deposit their publications with it.
5. The National Library of Nigeria should be bold enough to take up the legal gauntlet against the erring Government Printers and Government Agencies that refuse to comply with the Legal Deposit Provision Act.
6. The penalty fee should be reviewed upward to justify the present economic reality in the country.
7. Efforts should be geared towards the technical processing of the materials that do not have classification numbers.
8. Government documents in the National Library of Nigeria should be digitized, and made available in electronic format.

Until these are fully addressed and faithfully implemented, the problem of acquiring Government documents will continue unabated; the possibility of the accessibility of these documents to the library's clientele for reference services would remain a mirage; and, the importance of Government Documents for reference services to the library users will be rendered useless.

REFERENCES

1. Federal Republic of Nigeria (1970). *National Library Decree No. 29, Supplements of Official Gazette No. 27, volume 57, 14th May, 1970.* Lagos: Government Printers.
2. Ferrer, Susana S. (1983). "Nigerian Government Publications: Problems of Cataloguing and Classification." Paper presented at the 1983 Nigerian Library Association (NLA) Cataloguing and Classification Seminar on the Organization of Knowledge in Nigerian Libraries held at Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port-Harcourt.
3. Katz, William. (1979). *Your Library Reference Guide.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston .
4. Odumosu, J.O.O. (1988). "How to handle Serials and Government Publications in a School Library". A paper presented at the Training Workshop for the Teachers-in-Charge of libraries in the Federal Government Colleges held at the Federal School of Arts and Science, Victoria Island, Lagos.
5. Oke, Olufunke A. (1992). "Organization of Government Publications with Special Focus on the modification of Home-made Classification Scheme: A User's Comments". Paper presented at the 1992 Nigerian Library Association (NLA) Cataloguing and Classification Seminar/ Workshop, Katsina.
6. Pampam, Ade. (1981) "Nigerian Government Documents" *Nigerbiblios* 6 (1-2). January/April, pp. 29-30.
7. Piggott, Mary. (1991). *The Cataloguer's Way Through AACR2: from document receipt to document retrieval.* London: The Library Association Publishing.