

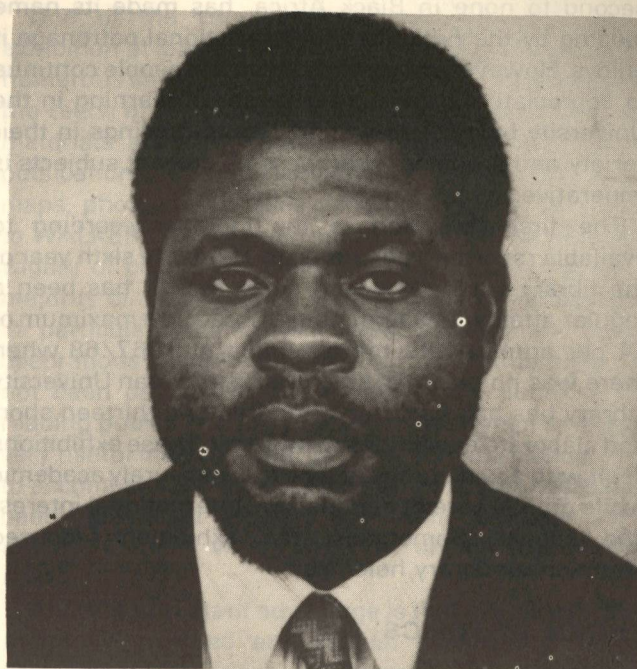
EXHIBITIONS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: THE EXPERIENCE AT IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Library displays vary in all aspects including content, planning, execution and functions but the most common form is the literary exhibition. This, according to Tanasoca, is more than an organised display of related objects. "It is a study of books, manuscripts, letters or any other material pertinent to literary production" Literary exhibition is of two types: the first is short-lived and limited in scope while the other is all embracing and more permanent. The former Tanasoca calls 'exhibition' and the latter 'display'. However, Library exhibitions at Ibadan University Library do not strictly conform to Tanasoca's definition. Exhibition as used here includes display and this paper has adopted this stand.

It is generally believed that library exhibition is used to supplement the efforts of classification and arrangement of books on the shelves. Because a display focuses attention on a particular aspect of the Library's total contents at a time, greater attention and closer study are accorded the displayed materials unlike when everything is on the stacks.

'There's no law that says outdoor advertising is the exclusive province of tobacco companies and auto manufacturers'² If so, what precludes a library from using exhibition to arouse interest in the use of its resources. Somehow, the rationale behind literary exhibition is often misunderstood by both the library patrons and professional colleagues. The usual argument is that only libraries in want of readers, especially the public libraries, should devote much attention to publicizing its holdings and services through occasional *exhibitions* but library as a centre of learning needs to promote the sale of its services especially in a fast developing country like ours where people are just realizing the importance of the library. And one sure way of helping the readers to make maximum use of the library is by advertising its holdings, and its services through regular mounting of exhibition and displays. Kate Coplan in one of her articles says among others: 'Today the most successful organizations everywhere are those which tell the world by every feasible means, especially pictorial presentation, who they are, where they are, what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they are doing it. Librarians must learn to borrow a leaf from the note book of business.'³ Though Coplan had Public Libraries in mind while saying this, the statement is not totally out of place in academic libraries.

Literary exhibition, a long established and accepted library device, is still relatively new in this part of the world and, in some cases, a completely forgotten or ignored aspect of library activities. This phenomenon was recognized by Tanasoca when she described Literary exhibition as 'the least developed of all library functions' but 'the most specialised'.⁴ This neglect is easily attributable to many factors. Both in advanced and developing countries, exhibition is not at all a popular aspect of librarianship at least in the library schools. It is not taken as a serious course in Nigerian



J. A. Abegunde
Circulation Librarian
Ibadan University Library
University of Ibadan

library schools and so it is not well integrated into the librarianship system in the country. Moreover, literary exhibition is a library art as opposed to literary science for it has to come naturally from one's instinctive mind. Consequently, a very negligible number of Nigerian academic libraries mount exhibition as an established part of their regular schedules. Worst still, the word exhibition to the general masses, including the academics suggests something very elaborate far beyond the scope of ordinary literary exhibition. Even at the University of Ibadan, where exhibitions have been regular features for more than two decades, many are yet to grasp the need for these periodic and selective exhibitions and therefore, library exhibitions have continued to fail to attract large numbers of intellectual viewers.

PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE

The purpose of this article then is to use the Ibadan University Library's case to sell the idea of mounting *exhibitions* in our various University libraries by outlining both the achievement and failures that have attended the exercise in Ibadan University Library. Secondly, it is my view that reactions to this article will bring some new ideas capable of revolutionising this aspect of librarianship in the country.

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

With the total number of registered readers per annum standing at about seven thousand (7,000) and

average daily users numbering about five hundred (500), it is indisputable that, unlike some academic libraries which are still in the making, Ibadan University Library by its age and long established reputation as second to none in Black Africa, has made its name judging by the national and international patronage it enjoys. However, the need to make the people continue to appreciate its claim as a center of learning in the University by constantly showing its holdings in their variety and arousing awareness on current subjects is imperative.

The first exhibition in the Library according to available record was mounted in 1954, the sixth year of the library's existence and since then it has been a regular affair with a minimum of one and a maximum of 14 per annum with the exception of 1967/68 when there was no record of any. In all, the Ibadan University Library has had about one hundred and thirteen short and elaborate exhibitions to its credit. These exhibitions dealt with a wide range of topics, some purely academic while others were of national and international interest and appeal. Sometimes, the exhibitions focused attention on library holdings.

CHOICE OF TOPICS

Controversial or partisan political subjects are completely avoided, while topics could come from any discipline or sphere of life. There are two principal ways of choosing exhibition topics. In some libraries, there usually exists a committee charged with decisioning all the exhibitions to be mounted in a session. In others, the librarian in charge of exhibitions thinks of possible topics and asks for the Chief Librarian's approval, whichever method is adopted, the essence is choosing topics that will interest the patrons. The two methods are jointly practised at the University of Ibadan Library. Literary exhibitions in the library have been diversified to reflect the different types of users and assure readers that there is something for everybody. Topics have been selected to cover the holdings of the Library and the developments around the parent organisation. Some others were chosen at the special requests of some academic departments. These usually involve laying bare the programmes of such departments or showing what could one get in the library on a particular author or subject being studied. These usually attract some members of staff as well as their students since the displays are focused on the information sources in their specific fields. Others cover subjects of general knowledge like art of printing, Culture or abolition of slave trade.

The new trend is mounting elaborate exhibition which demands a rather studious effort on the part of the organisers. It lasts longer and the subject is usually topical, either at the national or international level. Two striking examples are *Nigerian Constitutions and Their Makers*, organised to coincide with the Nigerian Constitution Drafting Committee's work and *The International Year of the Child in 1979*. About fifteen of such exhibition have already taken place. The aim of this is to arouse the awareness of the viewers and at the same time bring to their attention some good research materials on the topic. Such is usually accompanied by

carefully prepared commentary and a reading list. Efforts have always been made (though with little success) to bring outsiders and subject experts to participate both at the planning and execution stages to ensure wider scope of participation, greater publicity and in particular expert opinions on the displays. Such outside experts could, apart from contributing materials which are not available in the library holdings, write very illustrative commentaries and introductions to support the exhibitions.

PREPARATIONS

According to Walker, the tools of the exhibition worker are the building, its furniture and book stack as a whole. These, I will contend, are basic but not comprehensive. Ibadan University Library has all the necessary human and material resources in sufficient quantity to make for successful displays. We have the display boards as well as the display glass boxes and the drawing pins and other materials that are immediately necessary. These have to be made ready; the boards are covered with cardboard of different colours and the background is made of locally dyed cloth to suit the topic. An experienced Senior Library Staff looks for materials as outlined by the Reference Librarian while the Reprographic Section takes care of whatever photographs to be displayed. Relevant departments of the University who might lend us useful materials are consulted. The success usually, though not automatically, depends on the richness of the available materials on a given topic.

Captions are prepared artistically or simply arranged to capture the attention of viewers. The captions are formed with plastic letters of various dimensions and colours with pins which easily fix into the cardboard background or the display boards. In all, it is the duty of the organiser to coordinate to good effect the activities of colleagues, technicians and other members of staff involved.

DURATION

For how long should an exhibition last? There is no hard and fast rule about this. The guiding principle at Ibadan is that a library exhibition is allowed to stay as long as it can sustain the interest of readers. We realise that exhibitions can even be allowed to remain permanently if it is deemed necessary but we dismantle them as soon as they lose their grip on the viewers. This is reflected in the table given on the following page.

GAINS

In all, attempts are usually made to effect a pleasing and aesthetic touch for the satisfaction of the viewers. Apparently, nobody has made a detailed study of what effects these periodic events have had on both the library system or the viewers but it has been found out that many benefits have been derived. Lately, a notebook is supplied where viewers give their comments and these are sometimes generously given. This has helped the organisers in improving their strategies. For example, the number shown against the

following exhibitions represent the number of comments on them:

TOPICS	DURATION		NO OF COMMENTS
1. International Year of the Child (IYC)	13/2/79	30/3/79	324
2. Nigerian Traditional Medicine	31/1/80	9/4/80	73
3. Agriculture and the Nation	29/12/80	20/1/81	53
4. Development of University Education	6/5/81	21/6/81	46
5. Traditional African Culture-ORAL Performance.	29/7/81	30/9/81	24

Through short-time exhibition of whatever materials that are available on a country whose important national is visiting the library or during the national day of a friendly country, the Library had helped to strengthen in its own way the cordial bilateral relationships between those countries and Nigeria. The visitors usually feel happy and delighted to see works of their country.

The library has ensured that its services reach the greater majority of the community which it serves through diversification of topics and in addition, it acts as an effective means of imparting information by exposing viewers to variety of opinions on a topical subject since it does not take side in any issues.

Furthermore, by going beyond its immediate academic circle to reflect the events in the whole society in which it exists, the library has helped the parent body to reduce to some extent the accusation that the University lives in a world of its own without integrating itself with the local community. Many requests from outside have been received for the bibliographies of the materials displayed.

Judging by the number of people who cared to put down their comments on the exhibitions, one could safely conclude that the Library has able through this medium, to provide relaxed atmosphere for the clientele especially if those exhibitions have aesthetic touch as people take them as a source of refreshing variety to the usually serious academic work.

In conjunction with other means adopted by the Library, exhibitions and displays have helped tremendously to sell the services provided in the library system especially to the students and lecturers. Among others, these two sets of readers are the greatest users of the library resources and their impression about the library counts a lot. The "Know Your Library" exhibition mounted at the beginning of each session to accompany the orientation week helps a lot to advertise the library and its services. In developed countries with long established tradition of academic libraries, efforts are still being made to sell and improve on the proper use of libraries to students and staff. In Nigeria where only a minority of the senior members of staff and students are good users of the library while the preponderant

majority remain passive or inexperienced users, constant efforts at making services users-oriented are not misplaced. In this regard a lot of success has been achieved as many more students and staff have increasingly continued to use the library with minimum enquiries from the librarians.

One of the very important objectives of library exhibition at Ibadan is to let the readers know about the numerous special collections which are housed beyond the reach of the general reading public. Some of these materials are rare books, Africana materials, U.N.O. publications, P.O.'s, manuscripts, arabic collections, maps, photographs, slides and microforms. According to WALKER "No book, no subject field can be left to the vagary of casual discovery".⁵ Many of these and the majority of the reference books and Africana materials in particular would have remained ordinary library decorations if something practical like exhibitions has not been devised to bring them to the notice of the reading public. The organisers, in an attempt to display very useful materials and get a reasonable bibliography to accompany the exhibitions have, in many occasions, been compelled to fish out from obscurity some important items which are now on high demand by users.

Another important advantage is that exhibitions have indirectly provided an unusual opportunity for the professional librarians to enhance their prestige as academic staff. This is done by trying to win the confidence of both the teachers and students through literary exhibitions which adequately supplement the teaching programme of the lecturers and thereby stimulate research interest in the students as much as the classroom teaching. This helps to close the information gap between the librarians and the teaching staff.

PUBLIC RESPONSE, MAJOR INHIBITIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The success of an exhibition is difficult to assess because the same yardstick cannot be applied at all times. Yet, success could only be measured in terms of the number of viewers and the feedback from the public. Who are the people who watch it and what are their comments? Is the librarian in-charge invited to explain some points about the exhibition? Is it ever the topic for discussion among students and staff? Are there criticisms and suggestions for repetition and improvement after it has been officially dismantled? Favourable replies to many of these questions will show the usefulness of the exercise. In general, we have found out that many people appreciate the efforts of the organisers by passing favourable comments and asking for permission to photocopy or borrow some of the exhibited materials. In one particular case, schools and colleges as well as organisations came to see the exhibition which is on 'International Year of the Child,' Despite the appreciable success attendant on many of the exhibitions, the need for constant improvement became apparent as some elaborately prepared exhibitions did not have the anticipated impact on viewers.

If exhibitions are to project the image of the library and make stronger impact on the readers, then a dose of publicity is a sine qua non. At the Ibadan University Library, the amount of publicity given to these displays is almost nil so that it is still only the active users of the library that see them.

It has been pointed out earlier that short displays are used to welcome certain important visitors to the Library but in most cases those were hurriedly done or not done at all because of the usually short notice given by the parent body. This kills initiative and the potency of the library display in this regard. The only way to improve this is for the University Librarian who is the chief host to the visitor in the Library to ask for a regular notification at a reasonable period.

Viewers are yet to grasp fully the usefulness of literary exhibitions so that they can stop evaluating them in terms of commercial or museum exhibitions. Some readers still expect materials that could help to enliven displays such as phono records, films, or even songs all which the mandatory quiet atmosphere in an academic library situation would not permit. For example, many people questioned the non-inclusion of such materials to accompany the exhibition on the International Year of the Child, 1979, Nigeria.

Another important aspect is choosing the topic. Shouldn't the library display always be on a serious topic? Or what damage, if any, will a display with lighter theme do to academic readers? Arlene D.C. Luster, librarian at Wheeler Air Force Base, Honolulu, said, "Libraries do have a responsibility to provide materials and have special programmes showing that libraries care enough to educate the uninformed, that is, anything that is discussed in the world should be discussed in the library."⁶ In Ibadan University Library, the motivation behind any topic has of recent added currency and amount of public appeal a topic can generate to exposing what the library has in its holdings resulting in a neglect of less serious topics. A marriage of the two would provide better public acceptance.

Casual titles rather than too academic and serious ones can be more effective and eye-catching. For example, when we mounted a display on mutilated microfilms, battered books and others, we titled it "mutilated defaced Library Materials: Conscience exhibition" while the same display at Dry Memorial College Library, North Buffalo, New York, was titled 'Rest in Peace', both portraying the extent of damage done to materials by thoughtless patrons. But the message from the brighter and sarcastic second title will be more attractive to the viewers.

CONCLUSION

Even though little attention is paid to literary exhibitions and displays in the libraries, yet, it has become an accepted mode of inviting public views on specific issue at a given time in the library and consequently make people stay abreast of ever-changing modern life.

The enthusiasm of the chief librarian is paramount to the successful mounting of meaningful exhibitions and this is enjoyed at Ibadan University Library. The inherent advantages of this venture far outstrip the expenses to be incurred. The apparent dearth of exhibit librarians can be overcome by training librarians locally on the job or formally in our library schools which should henceforth make it an important part of their programme at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Finally, it will be wrong to suggest that both students and lecturers are not using our resources, rather, Ibadan University in particular enjoys a very high patronage for and wide but there is need to help users get maximum advantage and services our libraries can offer.

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