

BOOK THEFT AND MUTILATION: Case Studies of Anti-Library Habits In An Academic Library In Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Book theft and mutilation, especially in academic libraries in Nigeria have become so common among readers that few librarians ever thought of the serious problems being created for library development and services and their consequences for academic pursuits of the institutions the libraries are established to serve.

The author has held discussions with colleagues on various occasions to sound their views and reactions on the issue, but the usual remarks have been that "it is a common problem in all libraries" as if to give it legality. Some librarians seem to rest on that assertion without bothering about solutions for the menace.

Should librarians remain content on that assertion of "common problem" and thus allow the menace to persist? What are librarians in Nigeria doing to find solutions to the problems posed for library development and resource conservation in libraries? Do librarians realise the huge portion of their library funds that are usually lost through the anti-social behaviour of these devians who are the very persons the libraries are set to serve?

In an attempt to alert librarians about these anti-social habits of readers in libraries, this article focuses on some cases of book theft and mutilation and devices used by the culprits in an academic library so that other librarians may benefit from the experience. The involvements of library staff in aiding and abetting the crime are also discussed.

The extent of mutilations of some book materials as detected in the library are analysed, drawing attention to prominent areas of mutilation. Samples of books mutilated were used taking statistics of the pages affected and analysed.

Finally, a warning is given on impending danger to libraries, and library services if librarians do not find ways and means of solving the problems.

SOME CAUSES OF BOOK THEFTS AND MUTILATION

One of the fundamental causes of book thefts and mutilation among Nigerian students relate to their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Many students come from very poor homes, because of their poor family backgrounds they tend to live on the generousities of students from other well-to-do families.

Some of the students who are unable to obtain certain materials through the usual generosity of others resort to stealing them. They tend to make away fraudulently anything they cannot afford to buy, ranging from pencils, erasers, rulers to textbooks.

It is common knowledge that some people like to "acquire" materials "free", particularly what

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is regarded in some quarters as "Government property" which they consider as no man's property. What they term "government property" could be stolen or damaged with impunity, and it is always thought among such people that the "government" has unlimited resources to replace or replenish such property when stolen or damaged.

This misconception also gives rise to destruction of school or college property during students' demonstrations usually leading to vandalism and sometimes looting.

Many students of institutions of higher learning carry this misconception to 'government property' and apply it in their use of libraries, resulting in book thefts and mutilation.

One other factor lies in Nigeria's colonial educational system which is geared primarily towards securing employment for livelihood. Education is supposedly a continuous process throughout one's life. But in Nigeria and among Nigerians, education tends to terminate with the possession of a university degrees or any other qualifications which enable individuals to earn a living and maintain a family.

The terminal point of their qualifications is the end of education, especially for those who are not in academic employment. To this end, some Nigerians, while in schools, place premium on books as long as they (books) help them to attain that desired goal, i.e. the qualification which will enable them to gain employment. They will have nothing more to do with books after leaving school or university, except, perhaps the reading of newspapers.

This approach to books does not give the average Nigerian student pride over ownership of personal textbooks while in the school or higher institutions of learning as they (books) will become "useless" after school. Instead, the students spend book allowances paid to them by their respective scholarship boards or sponsors on the procurement of luxuries such as radio sets, cassette and video players, cameras and fanciful dresses.

They believe that instead of buying personal books from these allowances, they can continue to rely on borrowing such books from the libraries until they complete their courses. This often leads to heavy demands on libraries in institutions of higher learning to the extent that supply can no longer cope with the demands of students. And so, what books they (students) cannot get easily they resort to stealing or mutilating the pages for their personal use.

Broadhead bears this out clearly although in a

different context when he says that "the cause of most book losses is simply demand exceeding supply, and until libraries are in a position to offer unlimited supply of materials, security systems are the most suitable means of controlling the circulation, and thereby reducing book losses"¹

The situation is worse today in an era of economic down-turn. Scholarship awards by various State and Federal governments today are very selective in the sense that most governments can no longer cope with offering scholarships to every student who qualifies and gains admission to universities or other higher institutions of learning. Instead, they favour a few who pursue courses in selected fields of study especially, science-based courses like medicine and engineering.

The arts-oriented-course students are often left at the mercy of what sponsorships they can obtain from their individual poor parents. Such students go through their university or higher education under very poor financial conditions such that they cannot afford to buy needed books for their courses.

Even for the science-oriented-course students who are able to secure scholarships, the allowances are so meagre and often not paid on time so rendering them incapable of acquiring the recommended but expensive books. The situation is worse at this time of economic recession in Nigeria when costs of books are escalating every day. Some state governments no longer offer scholarships to any students as a result of dwindling resources.

LIBRARY CASE STUDIES

The year 1977, marked the birth of "Polytechnics" in Nigeria. The Federal Military Government opened the flood gate by establishing five Polytechnics among which was the Federal Polytechnic, Idah, which took off in September, 1977 to offer technological education to students at the National and Higher National Diploma levels in various disciplines.

The institution operated without a library during the first year of its existence (1977/78 academic year) and the initial setback of staff and students in the provision of needed library materials to support the teaching programmes for the achievement of the educational goals and objectives were obvious.

At the inception of the library in July 1978, it inherited 678 volumes of books² which had been purchased by the Rector of the institution who was the Chief Executive. The books were stored in cupboards in his office for use by the academic staff. These volumes formed the foundation stock of the Polytechnic Library when it took off later in 1978.

The Library was set to collect materials to support teaching programmes in Accountancy, Management Studies, Marketing, Secretarial Studies, Food Technology, Hotel and Catering Management, Science Laboratory Technology, General Studies and Engineering (Civil, Electrical, Mechanical, Metallurgy and Materials Science).

Because of the financial constraints and pro-

blems of book importation which hampered the development of the library collections over some years, the stock rose to 11,000 volumes with a subscription for over 300 periodical titles in a period of eight years (1978 - 1986). The stock was accommodated in two temporary buildings which were not purpose-built, or functional, but with numerous doors and large windows which could give rise to book pilfering.

However, the buildings were quickly modified to suit the immediate needs of the library on a temporary basis. The student population rose from an initial intake of 180 in November, 1977 to 1,554 in 1986/87 session. During the same period the institutions' junior staff population rose from initial 86 to 806 while that of the senior staff rose from 30 to 280. The temporary library buildings which had accommodation capacity for only 280 readers were extended by December 1987 to accommodate 600 readers and with a capacity to hold a stock of 50,000 volumes of books.³

It was with this background that the library operated but suffered a lot of vandalism in the hands of its readers through book theft and mutilation.

CASES OF BOOK THEFTS

Over these years, the Polytechnic library experienced cases of book thefts to the extent that many valuable library books disappeared from the shelves. In fact, there was a curious case of a book purchased on the history and cultures of the local people which only stayed on the shelf for a few days and never to be seen any more.

The library administration became terribly worried and it eventually set out plans to detect the culprits. Surprise hostel searches were organised by the library and a large number of books belonging to the Polytechnic library as well as other libraries were recovered. Those belonging to other libraries were later sent to the librarians who in turn, acknowledged the receipt with expressions of gratitude for the recovery of their stolen books.

Two incidents of the devices used by readers to pilfer books from the library are cited below:

A student was caught by a security man at the library checkpoint with an apparently correctly charged out book but one whose date-due label was dubiously gummed to the flying page. The library security man alerted the circulation staff who, after a careful examination of the book, made a startling discovery.

It was found that the student cleverly removed the date label of another book which he had previously borrowed from the library and taken into his hostel. He detached the date label and brought it into the library. He then took another book from the shelf removed the date-due label (or tore it off) and with the aid of a chewing gum, pasted the date-due label of the book he had previously borrowed (whose date-due was still current) onto the new book taken from the shelf.

At the check-point, it was the dubious chewing gum attachment that attracted the attention of the security man who alerted the circulation staff. The

student was brought before an investigation panel where he admitted stealing the book and pleaded for leniency. The Panel observed that the student (and many other undetected ones) must have engaged in pilfering books out of the library using the same device. The panel therefore recommended his expulsion.

Following the discovery of the device, the library embarked on stamping all the date-due labels with the same accession numbers as on the books themselves to enable the security men determine the compatibility of the date-due label and the book before it passes out through the check-point, i.e. if it is legally charged out.

Book theft on a larger scale was discovered later following personal confessions of a student. After the above incident was discovered, there was a confessional statement in a letter written to the Chief Librarian by an ex-student of the institution who had used the same device in pilfering out and stealing twenty-one (21) books from the library during his studentship. The confessional statement according to the ex-student, was prompted by a new spiritual change in his religious life.

According to him, he had found a new life through membership of a certain christian fellowship as a result of which he became a "born-again Christian". After confessing his theft of the books from the library, he promised to return the 21 books and to pay the penalty for any damaged or mutilated ones among them. The books were later recovered and returned to the library although some were defaced.

The books were all on electronics and electrical engineering which related to the ex-student's course of study while he was in the institution. The total cost of the 21 books was calculated to be N665.90 at their purchase prices.

When the case was taken to the Library Committee for deliberation and recommendation of appropriate disciplinary action, the Committee viewed the remorsefulness of the repentant and "born-again" believer and pardoned him, especially that the confessional statement was borne out of change for better spiritual life and also since the student had left the institution.

Records show that the two students involved in these cases came from educationally advanced states where scholarship awards were virtually non-existent.

INVOLVEMENT OF LIBRARY PERSONNEL IN BOOK PILFERING:

In some cases of book theft, it may be found that library personnel play a role in aiding and abetting the crime either directly or indirectly in the following ways:-

- (a) direct stealing of books from the library by staff for their friends among the students.
- (b) conniving with or aiding and abetting students to steal books out through some illegal practices of discharging books.
- (c) checking of readers by library security

staff at the exit check-points are often haphazardly carried out, hence some library users escape with their brief-cases unchecked.

At the Federal Polytechnic Idah Library, cases of this nature were discovered and the staff members involved were dismissed or had their appointments terminated depending on the degree of the offence or involvement. One Senior Library Assistant who was a head-shift was found to have illegally issued out eight books to a student instead of the official four books allowed at a time. The staff was also found to have issued out ten books to himself instead of two books he was entitled to borrow at a time. In both cases, the records were forged.

OTHER BOOK PILFERING DEVICES

Readers have all sorts of devices designed to remove book out of the library. such devices include the use of illegally designed date-due

stamps which are made in exactly the same pattern as the official ones used by the library. To combat this practice it is advisable to use particular type of ink or change the type of ink during certain periods.

One of the most serious factors contributing to book theft is frequent electric power failures. In Nigeria, the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) which supplies electric power to the nation is frequently characterised by sudden power failures without warning. As soon as this happens, students tend to rush out of the library with books in the darkness that ensues.

For this reason many libraries, especially those which open to readers till late in the night suffer a lot of book losses through theft by readers. In some towns electric power failure is a daily or regular affair hence some students who are conversant with the regularity of power failure come to the library waiting for the opportunity of power failure which leads to black-out so as to pilfer books out of the library.

Even where stand-by generators are installed, the time between the incident of black-out and when the generator is switched on, is more than enough for the readers to do their havoc.

To combat the situation some libraries now have automatic lighting gas lamps readily available on the issue desks which are switched on as soon as there is electric power failure.

BOOK MUTILATION

Book mutilation was discovered on a large scale at the Polytechnic Library. A survey was carried out of all the detected mutilated books. The aim of the survey was to determine the extent of mutilation as well as the subject areas that suffered most from this anti-social habit and to suggest lasting solutions.

The procedure was simple. All the detected mutilated books were removed from the shelves and assembled and grouped into broad subject divisions. A sample of 38 books which were found to have had their pages mutilated fall into the following subject groups:

Arts
Business & Management Studies
Engineering Science
General Works
Law
Mathematics
Science (Pure and Applied)
Social Sciences

The mutilated pages range from one to a few hundreds in some books. In two cases the whole pages of the books were totally removed, leaving only the back covers. The mutilated pages were counted within each subject group and the results were as shown below:-

Table 1: Number of Mutilated pages of library Books.

Subject group	Total No. of Pages Mutilated
Engineering Sciences	501
Mathematics	216
Business & Management Studies	196
Social Sciences	173
Arts	36
Science (Pure and Applied)	34
General Works	4
Law	4
	<u>1,164</u>

The analysis shows that mutilation is highest in engineering sciences and mathematics, with 501 and 216 mutilated pages respectively, while Business and Management Studies, and Social Sciences follow closely with 196 and 173 mutilated pages respectively.

One, however, bears in mind that the degree of mutilation or non-mutilation of materials in any of the subject groups above has a bearing on the quantity of collections available in the library. The library under study above was stronger in engineering, and business studies. There was very little in law.

A further investigation was carried out to examine why books on engineering and mathematics suffered heaviest mutilations. Where multiple copies of the books existed in the library and where those copies had not been mutilated, the pages of the mutilated books were compared with the corresponding pages of the unmutilated ones. It was discovered that most of the mutilated pages contained diagrams or illustrations, formulae, statistical tables, etc. in engineering and mathematics.

This shows clearly that where students are unable to copy these diagrams, formulae or statistical tables into their note books, they resort to rip-off of the pages for their keeps. It was also suspected that they (students) could not meet the cost of photocopy services available in the library. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the high cost of photocopy services could aid book mutilation.

CASES:

One of the cases of immediate detection was that of the mutilation of a book on electromagnetics suspected to have been done by one of the second year students of the Higher National Diploma (HND II) programme studying electrical engineering who had earlier borrowed the book and returned it. It was not immediately discovered that some pages had been ripped off.

But after persistent threats by course mates among themselves, the removed pages were secretly stuck to the doors of the lecture room over night, and later recovered. It was obvious that one of the course mates must have ripped them off but returned them after the threats.

In a similar survey of mutilated books in a branch of a University library involving a total of twelve books, the following results were obtained:-

Table II: Mutilated pages of library branch books.

Subject Area	No. of Pages Mutilated
Science (Pure and Applied)	161
Mathematics	42
Agriculture	36
Engineering	5
Arts and Designs	1

Although the number of books analysed is not the same in each case, Science ranks highest in the case of the university while the same subject group ranks lower in the case of polytechnic, which has engineering ranking highest. In the case of the university library too, Engineering ranks among the lowest. In both cases, Mathematics ranks high.

The tendency for the number of mutilated books to be lower in the case of the university library than the polytechnic library may be attributed to the relative maturity of university students as well as to their higher degree of appreciation of values attached to library materials than the polytechnic clientele.

The quantity of library collections in a subject group, the age of the library could also account for the difference. The analysis goes to show that if the books mutilated are put together the damage is enormous.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to librarians to the silent and undetected harm being done to their library resources. Like herpetension, it is a silent killer disease, "killing" the valuable resources of our libraries. Unless ambitious efforts are mounted by librarians all over the country to combat this anti-social habit among readers the much needed collections of our libraries are threatened. It is in this regard that Richmond (1975)⁴ alerted librarians that "there are many natural disasters that cause loss of all or part of a library's collection: water, humidity, fire, and many others."

None of these, however, has caused as much loss to as many libraries as theft and mutilation of the collection by the very patrons those libraries seek to serve." Richmond, however, recognised the conflict between the philosophy of making as many library materials as possible available to as many patrons as possible and protecting the same holdings of the library against those for whom they are provided from stealing or destroying them. This philosophy is what Richmond says every librarian must confront.

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