

Status and Professionalisation of Librarianship in a Non-Reading Culture: The Case of Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century when Flexler¹ took what may be regarded as the first critical look at what a "professional" means, the searchlight on the issue has remained focussed. He wrote about the medical profession. Similarly, Williamson² delved into Librarianship as a career in his article titled: 'Training for Library Services'.

Arguments mainly based on the requirements which an occupational body should possess to qualify or attain professional status have continued. Because of the growing importance attached to professional status, the debates have on many occasions been a subject of disagreement among members of occupational groups as well as between groups of practitioners.

Even here in Nigeria where librarianship is a relatively newcomer, this controversy has been, in the words of one of our eminent librarians, "a beaten track". Both at national and international levels, "the professional literature is replete with it".³

This present effort will, however, look at the controversy from a different perspective. Unlike most Nigerian contributors to the issue who tended to draw a parallel between what exists in the developed worlds and the prevailing conditions here to come up with their own position on the debate, this paper will examine the situations in a non-reading culture.

In a reading culture typified by most Western societies, the level of literacy is very high, the citizenry is information conscious and knowledge pursuit has more or less become a way of life.

On the other hand, in a non-reading culture like ours, literacy level is very low, knowledge in most cases is pursued in order to achieve an end. The importance of information in the political, social and economic wellbeing of the people has not been recognized. Librarianship is a service-oriented occupation and the consumers of these services should of necessity be literates.

It is the view of this paper therefore that since we have an environment that is diametrically different from those of the developed worlds, our effort at attracting recognition to librarianship should first aim at elevating our level of literacy, our information consciousness and finally, inculcating on our people the spirit of pursuing learning not only for achieving a set objective, but also for pleasure.

THE RISING IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONALISM

No single factor has been isolated as being solely responsible for the claim by various occupational groups to professional attainment. However, there have been many guesses, one of which was that rival groups in their effort to win public support, influence and power, do engage in such debates from time to time.

Perhaps, it was in view of this ever increasing importance of professional roles in modern societies that Deweese⁴ views it as gradually replacing such traditionally accepted status-gaining attributes as ancestry, ethnicity, religion and political affiliation.

In his judgement, it has grown to reveal more about an

individual's social position than any other single attribute, with race perhaps as the only exception.

What therefore are some of the attributes which an occupation should possess in order to attain a professional status? Sociologists have not reached a consensus on this. Achiem⁵ has observed that there tends to be a standard format for articles and even books on the subject.

Many writers according to him, begin with definitions of profession which had been formulated by others and then go to examine specific occupations for evidence that the definition applies to them. He offers some of the ingredients which should be looked for in determining the extent to which professional status has been achieved by a group.

First, he particularised the need for giving preliminary training to members of a group, emphasizing that the training must be intellectual in character and must involve knowledge and, to a certain extent, learning as distinct from skill.

Second, the occupation's basic interest in its pursuits must not be self-centered but should be pursued largely for the interest of others.



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Third, financial gain and the amount accruing to the practitioners should not be used as a measure for deciding if an occupation is a profession or not.

Ordinarily, professionals have control over their own affairs, thus they determine who should be registered as belonging to the profession. This perhaps may be why a fully-fledged profession, the members lay claim to the right to be final arbiters in matters which fall squarely under their jurisdiction.

It implies, therefore, that they have absolute and greater mastery of the knowledge in their area of specialisation than any other groups. The inert push or urge to gain professional recognition has some relationship with the level of concern by individuals in that group in matters regarding status.

Librarians as a group, have for long been regarded as being generally withdrawn, undynamic and lethargic. They are also said to be conservative. Even among themselves, they believe candidly that their occupation is not always highly regarded, at least not to the extent they would wish.

As a matter of fact, librarianship is often denied the status of being a profession at all Etzioni⁶ classed it in the category of semi-professions along with nursing, school teaching and social work.

Kaplan⁷ was even more forthright in his impression by arguing that though "some would deny that librarianship is a profession, but even those who do not, admit that in a continuum of occupation, it stands among those with little status".

THE INFILTRATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDEA INTO NIGERIA

The view so far has characterized professional idea as a cluster of ideals or attitudes. These ideals are targets which every group of practitioners aim at attaining. It is a goal. To some people, their belief is that no single group of practitioners has been able to achieve these ideals completely. From a sociological stand-point, human beings have always been classified into groups and given labels. Occasionally, these labels do attract some kind of values relating to their importance. The values have not been uniform, and possibly for this reason, there has been a continuous struggle by different groups for professional recognition.

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"Medicine, law and theology are the traditional professions which for many writers have formed the chief frame of reference"⁸. The European colonizers came with this notion. But in some scholarly quarters, the belief is that pre-colonial Africa did not have a well cut-out class structure.

This is more so since every African was his brother's keeper. However, due to the Westernizing influence of the colonists, these three professions came to be accepted by Africans as the most important groups.

Understandably, their acceptance was very easy. The medical group caters for people's health; the lawyers see to their different disputes, while the religious leaders act as their spiritual directors. The three groups have one thing in common - they all have a monopoly of advice and judgement in their respective fields.

For example, a sick person goes to see a doctor. If he is not satisfied with the doctor's diagnosis and prescription, he could leave him to go to yet another doctor. He has no other choice. Similarly, the lawyer has this power over his client.

It may be partly because the librarian does not possess this power of monopoly over his clients that his services are not fully accepted by the community as very vital and indispensable. If a client feels the librarian's advice or service is not acceptable to him, he could decide to find the required information himself using alternatives other than the library.

This is perhaps what led Goode⁹ to conclude that presently, librarians have little power over their clients. The clients do not pay individually for their services. It can be deduced

therefore that the traditional occupations due to their age and acceptance in developed countries coupled with other advantages (including those mentioned above) are easily accepted by Nigerian communities.

Librarians, on the other hand, have this problem of recognition even in the developed countries. For instance, in the United States, the Library Association has been waging a long-drawn battle for official recognition.

Its members have succeeded in attracting a presidential attention as seen in the successful hosting of a national conference on library and information-related matters by the Presidential Office in 1978. However, the Library of Congress, the largest and the most important library of that country continues to be headed by a non-librarian.

In Great Britain¹⁰ also, non-librarians have had the privilege of heading the British Library. These are pointers that librarianship has not had full recognition in the developed countries also.

PROBLEMS IN PROFESSIONALISING LIBRARIANSHIP IN NIGERIA

It is against this background of struggle for acceptance and recognition by librarians in developed societies that we shall look at the prevailing conditions in our own society. We have seen so far that after many years of struggle, the developed countries have given librarianship a gradual, reluctant if not partial recognition.

No matter how one considers it, on educational, cultural, economic and political basis, librarians in Nigeria are grossly disadvantaged when compared with those of the developed nations.

From educational stand point, developed societies have achieved a near hundred percent literacy standards; their economy is viable. Culturally, they have attained what is now known as an 'information society'; that is to say, they are very much aware of the important role information plays in their lives.

Finally, they have established a very stable political base, a basic requirement for any form of development.

Nigeria being a developing country lacks some, if not all of the above pre-requisites. It is important therefore to examine how these short-comings inhibit efforts by Nigerian librarians to develop librarianship and thus win for themselves some recognition.

POOR ECONOMY AND GOVERNMENT APATHY

By simple definition, developing countries are economically backward. In some cases, resources needed to achieve rapid economic growth could be abundantly present. But this is only achieved by a combination of many factors of which financial capital is a major one.

Since this is also in short supply, it then implies that many projects would no doubt be struggling to have a share of the little finance available. Although most developing nations (including Nigeria) are fully aware of the importance of education in any developmental process, the role of the library in the educational process is not fully appreciated.

Library service is still regarded as a luxury. Almost three decades after independence, all successive governments of Nigeria have shown very little appreciation for the potential contributions of library services to national development.

For instance, the 1970-75 National Development Plan was aimed at producing a united, self-reliant nation. But it

"ignored one of the best long-term methods of achieving this aim by allocating only 1.1% of the national budget during those years to "information", which includes libraries"¹⁰.

"These limited roles of libraries as portrayed in the national development projections have helped diminish the support, status and opportunities for librarians. Librarianship still rates very low in the government priority list of training needs and scholarship."¹¹

That new countries are politically unstable is believed to be a symptom of growth since all nation states in their earliest stages of development have suffered from severe internal political disorders.¹²

This contention may be correct, but one sometimes becomes tired of explaining the causes of the ever present upheavals in the developing nations by referring to past historical or sociological events. After all, why don't we learn from them instead of allowing them to repeat themselves?

Given this very unstable political climate, no meaningful development could take place due to lack of continuity of some well-meaning projects by succeeding administrations. This situation affected library development adversely.

For instance, "between 1955 and 1967 the government of the (then) Eastern Region developed the best public library system in Nigeria."¹³ Some people believe that this was due to Nnamdi Azikiwe's strong belief in the importance of libraries. He had a very enviable collection at Nsukka himself. He supported library development very strongly.

When he left, his predecessor, Dr. M.I. Okpara, continued in his footsteps. But after Okpara, there was no continued interest by successive governments in library development. This could be said of many other areas in the country.

EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

The question of literacy level in Nigeria has on many occasions remained controversial. This is mainly because some scholars maintain that long before the Western European nations made contact with this part of Africa, there had existed a strong religious, cultural and educational link between the present Northern Nigeria and most of Arab North Africa.

This link, they claim, had produced many Islamic scholarly centres, as well as important libraries. These views were not held by others who insist that "the conservative philosophy of education held by the Islamic religious and scholastic elite, together with Islam's feudalistic, stratified social structure accounted in large part for the limited impact on the indigenous population, by the Arabic libraries established in West Africa from the 15th to the 19th centuries"¹⁴.

No matter where one leans his support in this argument, it is not very much in doubt that much of what constitutes the estimated 98 million people of Nigeria today are rural, traditional people. This population is put at between 70% to 75% illiterate.

Aboyade,¹⁵ insists that "Nigeria is foremost among developing countries with an overwhelming proportion of illiterate citizens estimated at 70% of the total population."

One of the characteristics of an illiterate, traditional society is that be the basic means of communication is oral, that is to say, by word of mouth, or what others regard as 'face to face' communication process. Again, information or knowledge is not generally gathered, stored and disseminated in any popular codified form.

Consequently, information is passed from one generation to another mainly by the oral method. Kotei gave the

consequences of such method of knowledge preservation, and by extension, its effects on library development.

He emphasized that "it is a historical fact that wherever books are first introduced to an oral society, there has been a negative reaction to their wide dissemination, because literacy threatens the habits of thought, as well as the cohesive structure of traditional life."

In traditional societies, therefore, the harbinger of knowledge and the gadgets for its retention and dissemination is that person who is bestowed by nature with the gift of recalling the past and the present and transmitting this corpus of knowledge from generation to generation.

Without braking these educational and cultural barriers, meaningful professionalism in Nigeria will not be possible.

READING HABITS

Kotei¹⁷ maintains that "most developing societies today are still such an 'agora', or outdoor people and not individualists preferring the seclusion of the home or reference library where they can indulge in the internal monologue of reading." The eminent Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe,¹⁸ agrees with him, affirming that even the educated elite among us hardly read beyond *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines, among other national dailies and weeklies.

Many other observers have noted that in the developing countries, reading is largely utilitarian or what Landheer has called 'achievement' reading. "Outside the institutions of formal education, vast numbers of people read with some immediate practical purpose, usually concerned with the acquisition of skills or qualifications".¹⁹

Because of some attendant anti-reading factors, plus the fact that the educational base was poorly laid, even those who are literate are gradually relapsing into illiteracy. According to Fafunwa²⁰ "armed with some half dozen books which are all the average Nigerian parent can afford, the primary school pupil goes through the system, emerging at the other end with little or no contact with any other books outside the six."

The legacy of British education during the 19th century has been largely authoritarian. Learning has been mainly by the rote process, and this has been to a very great extent, planted in most of her former colonies. Thus, here in Nigeria, from the elementary through the tertiary levels, schools pupils and university students do expect their teachers to provide the answers to all questions, and books are not used to develop individual enquiry.

As a consequence, this attitude of lack of enquiry extends beyond school years and does not in any way help the development of reading habits. These are not all. The environmental influences which in most developing countries is tropical climate, do not improve the situation.

The housing situation is not only deplorable but also in short supply. Overcrowding is common, and given the communal, cultural life style, reading can hardly take place. Most people would rather talk than find a quiet nook where they can read undisturbed.

This may explain why official government policies have done little to encourage the development of librarianship and consequently facilitate the image making of the librarian.

For instance, librarians were rated with clerks at a sub-professional level by the Nigerian Federal Service and the minimal qualification required for the Scale C (E) of this classification was a general certificate of education.²¹

A Permanent Secretary who has made little or no demand for the services of a library all through his educational pursuit, and who has gone through his career rungs unimpeded without support again from the library, would definitely pay little attention to library affairs.

SANCTION BY THE COMMUNITY

It is against this background that librarians in the country have strived to establish some presence and recognition. Most of the criteria which we have discussed so far and which are necessary for according to any group some recognition cannot be satisfied.

One such criterion is that of 'sanction of the community.' This can only be achieved if the community accepts a group's service as not only necessary but required. Although there has not been detailed study about the perception of the librarian and the services he renders by the generality of the Nigerian population, it is widely believed by most Nigerian librarians themselves that most people do not know much about them.

For the few who do, librarians are not highly regarded. Nwafor²² in his paper, "The role and status of the Nigerian librarian" made a good documentary of what most Nigerian newspaper public opinion columns think of librarians.

Awaritefe²³ undertook a research on "Attitude towards librarianship: a test case," at the University of Benin. Although her sample population was small, (74 undergraduates) which makes her findings suspect, it is revealing to note that her "results uphold the hypothesis that the attitude to librarianship as a profession is negative."

The above judgements were given by the sample population from the 25% to 30% literate Nigerian. The questions that easily come to mind are: if this minority segment of the population does not find favour with our services, what about the majority population who are illiterates and consequently do not know that we librarians exist at all?; on what premise do librarians therefore claim that they have attained a certain level of professionalism?

It would seem that we have found favour with De Weese's²⁴ three strategies for improving one's occupational status - (1) leaving the occupation for one with a higher status; (2) increasing one's status within the occupation; and finally (3) improving the status of this occupation generally.

However, since we have not established some visibility within our communities, it then implies that our strategies are being applied on the minority element within the population. Predictably therefore, these strategies would not help much.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

According to Emenyonu²⁵, the world-wide literacy statistics show that one out of every three persons could not read (800 million illiterates). On availability of reading materials, about 30% of the world population reads 81% of the world's books.

For the continent of Africa to which we belong, about 75% of her book supply came from other continents, and this represents less than half of her book demands. These facts look grim enough. The problem therefore is not only that of fighting for increase in literacy standard but to achieve this very successfully.

For many years now, the UNESCO has campaigned against illiteracy in many parts of the underdeveloped world. In this relentless campaign, effort has been made to prove that

ability to read and write is a right which all human beings should 'enjoy'.

Unfortunately, the library associations, among other organization in the affected countries, did not catch on this noble effort by teaming up with the world organization to achieve high literacy standard.

Happily, recognition has been given to the problem by researchers in one of our library schools. "In the firm belief that librarians can bring library services to the level of the non-literates", Aboyade²⁶ embarked on an experimental project in Bedeku village near Ibadan in August 1982.

The idea here was to give a peculiar library and information service to this community comprised mostly of people who can neither read nor write. According to her report she has not had very strong support, particularly from fellow librarians:

In the past few years when the idea has started to be more vigorously voiced out, the greatest resistance has come from librarians themselves. Such professionals counter with the argument that since we are still not able to serve satisfactorily those who have the educational capability to use our services, it would amount to misdirected effort to even contemplate serving the non-literate (Aboyade, 1984, p.90).

From the outcome of the above research, what Aboyade and her team envisaged is to identify the needs of the rural poor, who, due to their inability to read and write could not understand how to get across their problems to the government or its agents. They do not, for example know the details of the governments' policy on agriculture.

Consequently, they fall victims to the unscrupulous middlemen who exploit and capitalize on their ignorance and cheat them. Aboyade therefore, advocates rendering services to this class of clientele which may not be based on utilising materials found in an ideal urban library.

This concept of special library service to the rural population is not a new-concept. Many public libraries in Nigeria have tried to reach them through the book-mobile, the book-box services, the rural reading rooms, and even the boat services, the rural reading rooms, and even the boat service which was introduced in the Rivers State.

The criticism levelled against these methods has been that they did not make much impact on the targetted population because its demands were not met by the method of services that were provided. Ochai,²⁷ agrees to a large extent with what Aboyade is advocating.

He insists that a meaningful and effective rural library service must shun our present preoccupation with services which favour "only an infinitesimal segment of the population who are mainly urban dwellers." More emphasis should be laid on creating a completely new breed of what he called "barefoot librarians" or "oral librarians".

What this new rural library concept advocates is a complete departure from our present arrangement in which printed and non-printed materials is organized and housed in a building called a library. The librarian's work here will be more or less liaising between the population being served and the sources from which their requirements would be fulfilled.

This means, reaching at the clientele, identifying their information needs, gathering this information and packaging it in the forms it would be consumed.

The answer to this problem lies therefore in formulating an effective book policy aimed at making reading materials not only available but also-affordable. A combined efforts of all

organizations who are interested in the book industry - writers, publishers, librarians and others.

The Federal Government should be convinced of the need to get books and related publishing materials off the import tax list. Indigenous authors should be encouraged. The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) should endeavour to team up with all organizations which have the interest of the rural poor in mind. The Reading Association of Nigeria is one of them.

If there is a thorough penetration of the grass-roots, and the literacy problem is tackled from that level, whatever is achieved could then be sustained by encouraging the establishment of school libraries in our elementary schools. This will nurture and sustain a lasting reading culture in the future.

CONCLUSION

The issue of professional attainment in our book-oriented organization is one where success could be effectively

achieved by widening the segments of our society who understand what we are and the essence of the services we provide. Some people maintain that this goal has, to a large extent, been achieved in the developed societies. Yet, librarianship is barely tolerated by them.

They may be correct, but it would appear that our situation is bad enough. Only a very small portion of our population patronizes our services. Reading to them is utilitarian consequently our services are not fully utilized and their usefulness terminates as soon as the demands for them get fulfilled.

Our present efforts at achieving professionalism through satisfying the needs of the elite class is not effective.

This paper has expressed the view that the most appropriate means of promoting and enhancing the professional status of librarianship in our society is by getting the majority of our population who are still predominantly rural and illiterate to understand what our services are and get them to utilise these services for their self-development and self-actualisation.

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