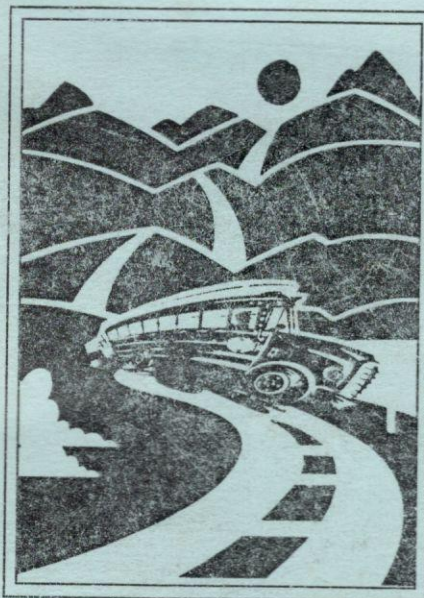


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The Libraries of Nigeria and Their Role in Promoting Peace, Unity, and Rural Development

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Introduction

The library as a repository of knowledge has changed its horizon over the years to become not only a place or building but a thoroughfare through which information can be delivered to people, no matter the location. Since the human race from evolution to date has metamorphosed in many ways, services to man should also change to reflect his present place and status in today's society.

Issa (2003) observed that economic and national power and status are considered to be dependent upon the wide dissemination and use of information and knowledge. Even though the onus of library and information services rests on the librarian and information scientists, there is also the need to collaborate with others in bringing optimum information services to the public. September (1993) stresses the need for cooperation between library and information professionals and educators as a requirement for establishing integrated information literacy programmes.

Information literacy programmes are all about bringing the information users and the information they are likely to need, together. The marriage of information and its users can only be possible through a link by someone who understands the two. Librarians, through the training received in the course of their education, are taught to identify the detrimental characteristics of both man and materials that can be used for effective information provision. (Even in education, it is not what one learns in school that he religiously practices at his place of work, but rather the application of other information outside of the classroom that forms the bulk of human experience). Human survival in society and at other levels of development requires the use of information at some level to cope with life's daily demands.

For libraries to cope with the new trend in information sourcing and provision, they have to introduce new methods into their practices, particularly that of modern technology, to make it possible to view and access the library collections of universities, law firms and courts, and even the Library of Congress (Dina, 1997).

Rural Development In Nigeria

Rural areas in Nigeria constitute 70% of the country's population while the urban area makes up the other 30% (Dosunmu, 1986). The development of the rural area falls within the precinct of the third tier of government called the local government. The local government is also known as the "grassroots government" because of its closeness to the people at the rural level. The developmental needs of rural people and provisions of social and economic amenities rest with the local government which oversees the human and natural resources requirements of the area. There cannot be national development without including the rural areas. According to Aboyade (1990), the well being of the greater percentage of the population depends on the benefits of rural development, which in turn, radiate national development.

In spite of the importance of rural development to national development, studies have clearly shown that there is no meaningful development in the rural area which can be used to jump start national growth. Therefore, local government area councils are to blame for the abandonment of tools needed for rapid social, economic, and political development. However, not only the government is at fault, but also the people and corporate bodies who are to compliment these efforts in the provision of amenities required to propel rapid rural development. Adebowale (1998) affirms that students, researchers, scholars, teachers, retired persons, farmers, and artisans are the different groups that make up the community in every local government. If this submission is right, then rural development deserves urgent attention before it reaches a comatose state.

For rural development to have a strong impact on national development infrastructures such as motor available roads, health services, schools, portable water supplies, and improved economic activities, adequate attention is a necessity. Above all, the rural populace must be well informed through adequate structured and unstructured information services; it is more important to prevent chaos, than to start looking for ways of quelling it. The true colour of the rural community in Nigeria shines with its abundance of human and natural resources. Through well designed information services that use indigenous and modern resources (within the environment), lasting unity and peace can emerge in multi-ethnic and diverse Nigeria.

Libraries and Rural Development

The concept of a library to an average dweller in Nigeria is foreign, due to high levels of illiteracy, non-adaptability of library services to local environment needs, and poor library services in the few rural settings where they do exist. The library's role as a major vehicle for dissemination of information cannot just acquire and dispatch it. The needs of the populace must be identified especially to support and sustain the educational, cultural, economic, social, political, and other programmes geared toward improving the standard of living of rural dwellers. Today, the world is going through rapid technological and economic growth and the information rich countries have taken advantage of this to advance technologically, while the information poor countries are yet to find their feet (Ochai, 1995). Librarians in Nigeria have universal goals of providing information services to the general public using the educational enlistment and awareness of rural and urban persons to enhance and develop their potentialities (Nuhu, 1994). The unique nature of people living in the rural areas requires that services provided for them should be tailored to suit their needs. The goals of these services should not elude anyone if they are to have an impact on national development for peace and unity.

For the purpose of this study, the few areas in which rural development can help to strengthen national unity and peace are identified as the following: rural dissemination of information services, micro credit information services, agricultural extension information services, health information services, and information on security for persons and their environment. The aforementioned areas can be assessed if the library provides the right information through collaborative efforts of the information source and its receiver. The library's role as a broker can enable the individual in respect of social, political, and economic status to benefit them in their various callings as rural dwellers. Though many attempts have been made to provide these services for national development, a concerted effort must be renewed to prove that the library can play a central role in information provision (Ochai, 1995). Ochai continues to stress that information is seen by librarians as the pivot around which development revolves and the library its vehicle. Since development has not taken place, the rural dwellers are not experiencing any improved living conditions. It is believed that the more information available to a group of people, the more successful they become in their various life's callings. A library structure to support a selected area of rural empowerment will go a long way in having a vibrant national development.

Information Services and Rural Development

Information is the only product which the library transacts and includes all formats in which the information appears. The only means through which the real integration of people living in both rural and urban areas could be brought together is through the actual cooperation and exchange of vital information between the two. The urban area is known for its elitist nature as a result of many infrastructure facilities like schools, hospitals, electricity, provisions of portable water, industries, and transportation system. The reverse is the case in most areas in Nigeria where one hardly finds any of the aforementioned facilities. These facilities and their presence are indicators of development. Aboyade (1990) observed that development involves economic growth, modernization, equitable distribution of income and national resources and socioeconomic transformation, among other things. This proves that it will be difficult to have development, even in the urban center, without adequate provision of information, not to mention that of rural areas. Human potential may be difficult to tap if the right information is not provided. For man to harness his personal potential and resources around him, he needs to be armed, not only with information, but also how to utilize it.

The philosophy behind the library and its services is based on information gathering, sorting, preservation, and presentation. At this time, when Nigeria is still nursing her nascent democracy and the people are savouring the dividend of democracy, there is a careful need for provision of the right information, in the right format, for the right people, at the right time, and in the right place. The long years of military rule in the country have witnessed several crises that have polarized the society and divided the people across ethno-religious borders. To bring everybody to the right lane and direction, it is important to flash the searchlight of development on the rural people so that they cannot be used to destroy the hard earned peace and unity the country is presently enjoying. Considering the fact that the majority of the rural dwellers are illiterate, the format in which they have to be provided with information should be one they can easily understand. Ochai (1995) observed that a rural library concept based largely on the print media has no relevance to the illiterate masses at the grassroots. It is sad that the concept of a library as bequeathed to us by the colonial master is applicable only to a functional literate society. Things should have changed for the better since we have at least an appreciable percentage of librarians who understand the detrimental nature of our society and can adapt the western style of information for our indigenous needs.

Average rural areas in this country are agrarian communities whose means of livelihood are subsistence farming and the art of making crafts. The urban drift has consumed most rural areas, leaving behind aged men and women who continue to live in abject poverty. The present picture of

the rural area can be changed only through concerted and well coordinated efforts of information specialists like librarians. However, this can only be accomplished if the right opportunities are provided to them through library services such as selective dissemination of information, references, and audio visual and current awareness services. Though these services are available in the public libraries (mostly located in the cities), the rural library and information services bring these resources to the doorsteps of users who are geographically disadvantaged from visiting the public library in towns and cities. The location of the rural library could be in village squares, schools, town halls, and community centers.

Rural Library Services

For rural development to make a strong impact on the lives of its people, they will need to be provided with the essential materials and technical support that match their needs and cater to their areas of interest. Since the rural communities are farming communities, information on how to improve their farms and means through which they can improve their farming techniques should be provided for them in a format they will understand (Aboyade, 1990). Information on modern farm practices and chemicals that will improve their farm yields should be in a language that they most understand, with pictorial articles showing how such can be applied to their farms. These articles or information could be in pamphlets or shown to them through audiovisual aids. The audiovisual aspect has the advantage of combining both vision and sound especially for the demonstration of modern farm techniques.

Though information officers and librarians may not be agriculturalists, because of their professional background, they are usually equipped to provide technical information services to experts in other fields using the language they understand most. In providing agricultural extension services, librarians may need to adopt canvassing or mobile libraries to bring library services to the doorsteps of the farmers in the rural areas. Nwalo (2003) points out that the collections carried by mobile libraries reflect the requests previously made and the perceived need of the local communities where there are service stations. This will provide multiple services to rural communities and help the individual patrons of the library attain maximum information services, irrespective of their callings. Agricultural extension information services (AEIS) are carried to the individual farms and houses as a way of encouraging them to seek and utilize such information to improve farm yields and ultimately their standard of living.

Since most farmers living in rural areas are illiterate, they hardly understand the importance of banks and other credit facilities and how to seek and use them. The library in rural areas can furnish these people with information on where and how to obtain micro credit facilities through a special service called Micro Credit Information Services (MCIS). The bane of poverty in the rural areas is the non-utilization of available credit facilities designed for them. There is a nonchalant attitude and ignorance on the part of rural people, and the consequence is one of default. The library as a tool of development can provide specialized information to the agencies in charge of such facilities and remove the consequences of default by linking them up with officers of the micro credit agencies. These people are in a better position to give them expert advice on the application of such credit so that they do not use it for multiplication of wives.

Effort can be made for provision of information within the library (if the space allows for it) or at the village square for interaction. This will afford rural people the opportunity to ask questions on information that can improve their lives. Television programmes can be shown daily, weekly, or on an occasional basis to allow people to react to issues from the programme watched. Radio, in most rural communities, is the highest medium through which programmes are relayed. Mchombu (1992) claims that radio is the main means of mass communication in rural areas. The library in the rural area can set aside part of its resources or facility for people to sit and listen to programmes, especially those in the local language. The programmes can equally be relayed on air so those who cannot participate in the live broadcast can hear it on a continuous basis.

Library Services for Peace and Unity

Food security is one of the monsters that target many developing countries of the world. With the majority of people in this part of the world as farmers, there is an urgent need to save the rural communities through the provision of an adequate infrastructure. Such a system would support food and cash crop production for domestic consumption and export (bring foreign funds for development of the country). It is pertinent to note that most of the rural communities are border towns. Rural people should be enlightened on the importance of the country's sovereignty and (they should be on alert) on the damaging effects of intolerance of neighboring brothers. If the rural communities are at peace, the rest of the country will also enjoy peace because they are the majority. The library must wake up from its traditional role by imbibing ideas and services that will have direct and relevant bearing on the citizenry.

Recommendation and Conclusion

The library in the rural area could be utilized to distribute and support literacy materials to the rural community through the provision of educational and non-educational, but literary materials that will help these people to be more functional in their occupations. It is high time librarians and other information related experts design a blue print that would accommodate people from all spheres of life and benefit them toward attaining their individual goals, as well as taking the country to greater heights. The curriculum of various degree and non-degree awarding institutions should be redesigned to accommodate service for these categories of the population. Also, libraries in Nigeria could seek assistance in terms of funds and technical support from sister, but buoyant, libraries in the developed world.

The information explosion currently being experienced all over the world calls for a concerted effort from all directions so that Nigeria, as one of the fastest developing countries of the world with her abundant human and material resources, can be brought to the same level among the comity of nations. In conclusion, the library and librarian should be seen as important tools in rural development. Peace and unity are possible through the utilization and collaboration of library, human, and material resources.

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