

**PHYSICAL BOOKS AND CONVENTIONAL LIBRARIES:
WHO NEEDS THEM IN THIS AGE OF DIGITALIZATION?**

BY

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**Text of A Keynote Address, Delivered at Nigerian Library
Association National Conference and Annual General Meeting,
Calabar, June 9 – 14, 2013**

Introduction

I am extremely delighted, indeed honoured and privileged, to have been invited once more to participate and present the keynote remarks in the annual gathering of what I consider one of the most important but usually not sufficiently appreciated professional associations in our country, the Nigerian Library Association. For a nation that tends to be unappreciative of the roles of Libraries and librarians in our nation building efforts, it is useful to remind that, as Melvil Dewey, perhaps the first professional Librarian insisted in 1888, "the library is a school" and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher." Libraries are critical in formal and informal education; citizenship political and values socialization and orientation; in self education efforts of individuals and communities desirous of converting their learning into vocations thus serving "as the layman's university."

No wonder that great Nigerian patriot who was largely responsible for laying the foundations of what is now the National Library of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe once described it as "an evergreen tree of knowledge which could, in such a complex, pluralistic society as Nigeria, contribute to building a richer and better social order, thus serving as a principal instrument in weaving the tapestry of the country's multi-ethnic and cultural pluralism". This is a point often forgotten by some of our present leaders who treat education with great levity bordering on disdain.

I am glad that at critical junctures in the life of your profession when confronted with new challenges, you have always invited me to share my thoughts on the matter. You may recall that on December 16, 1975, I played a role similar to the present one where I delivered an address titled "African Cultural Revival Studies: Implications for Library Development Programmes" which was subsequently published in *Nigerbiblios*, Vol. 1

Number 3, July 1976. In that presentation, I urged librarians and library developers to leverage with the changing nature of scholarship on African culture and history in assembling and collecting the materials and resources for their centres. On February 28, 1994, I delivered another Keynote Address titled "Archival Collection and Historical Research" at a workshop for Librarians in the University of Calabar where I challenged Librarians to embrace the then new trend for the collection, processing and preservation of oral evidences, especially Oral Traditions, as an important part of Library holdings especially in the light of the fact that the custodians of such traditions, the older generation, were dying off with volumes of books, their voices and memories consigned to mother earth whenever we bury them.

I am not sure that the appeal was fully embraced and implemented. I returned to the same theme more recently when I keynote another conference of Librarians at the ICT/Book Fair and Exhibition at the University of Uyo on April 28, 2009, titled "Indigenous Information Dissemination in the 21st Century". Here again, I challenged Librarians, especially University Librarians to be sensitive to the different and expanding forms and means of communication in a world which was increasingly becoming IT – driven and the threat this posed to our traditional information systems, still the principal means of accessing knowledge by the vast majority of our people, especially those in the rural areas.

In that address also, I publicly declared that "as a major beneficiary of books and libraries which have been my permanent companion since I wrote my first journal article as a University of Ibadan final year undergraduate student in 1966 which metamorphosed into a book, ***Preclude to Disaster: Analysis of the Racial Policies of Boer and British Settlers in South Africa before 1910*** (Howard University, Washington D. C., 1973), I can say without fear of contradiction that the widely acclaimed academic quality of my 166 publications including thirty-nine books owes a lot to the rather intimate interaction between me and libraries in such places as the U.S.A. (especially the University of Wisconsin, Madison Library; Moorland Spingharn Library of Howard University, Washington, D. C., the Library of Congress and the National Archives Washington D. C.); Europe, Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, University of Belgrano, Buenos Aires, Argentina; the National Archives and Library, Nigeria, The Unical Library and so on".

My romance with books and libraries thus partly explains my willingness to accept invitations to be part of your usually stimulating conferences and I am sure this one will live up to our expectations. Even if it tried to excuse myself because of my rather crowded programme especially as Member of

Panel of Eminent Persons of the African Peer review Mechanism which had to prepare and substantially shape the nature of the colloquium on Pan Africanism and Africa renaissance recently concluded in Addis Ababa as part of the 50th Anniversary of the Organization of African Unity/African Union, Professor Lawal would not let me. Indeed, he pursued me to Addis Ababa with phone calls to extract final commitment that I will be available for this conference. I must congratulate you for having a dedicated, well-groomed professional in whose formation I have had a hand, Professor Olu Lawal, as Chairman of the Local Organizing Committee.

I should also remind you that I have been intimately involved with library building and development at several critical moments over the years. While at Howard University as Tenured full Professor of African and African-American History between 1972 and 1974, I initiated the Dunbar Oral History Project which has since become a major feature of the Moorland Spingarn Collection. At the University of Calabar to which I returned in 1974, I was a principal participant and contributor to the design and execution of the magnificent University of Calabar Library, whose vastness which many misunderstood and criticized, was motivated by the conception, borne out of experiences around the world, especially those of the Universities of Ibadan and Nsukka, that Universities should grow into their libraries rather than the reverse. Fortunately, despite some deviations from the original design, the Unical Library remains what it was envisioned to be – one of the biggest Libraries in Africa South of the Sahara. At the National level, I was a member of the National Library Board from 1975 to 1979 during which time I played an important role in reviving the house journal, *Nigerbiblios* and the decision to decentralize the National Library service by establishing state branches. Incidentally, Calabar, Cross River State was one of those that benefited from that decision.

In terms of academic status, the designation of library staff of appropriate categories as academic rather than non-academic was straightforward and well justified given the nature of the work they do and we were glad to win the battle. The proper grading and designation of Librarians as Professors because they earned the same remuneration as Professors was all together a different kettle of fish. To be a Professor, one has to profess within a recognized academic discipline and department. We therefore, in the face of stringent opposition from those who wanted to play politics with the matter, insisted that those in the Library who aspired to be Professors or even Readers should belong to a designated academic Department, preferably Library Sciences in the Faculty of Education which had first to be established and then subjected to the standard assessment that others had to undergo.

Fortunately, this debate led to the establishment of our Department of Library Sciences and the first Professor in that Department who clearly merited the appointment in 2003 was Olu Lawal. I am happy that Professor Lawal later appreciated my position which I canvassed purely on academic rather personal grounds. Even more satisfying for me is the fact that Olu has justified our confidence as he can stand and defend his Professorship anywhere in the world. The lesson here should be clear, namely that in academic matters, principles rather than sentiments, however attractive, must prevail.

I have deliberately and provokingly titled my brief remarks as "Physical Books and Conventional Libraries: Who Needs them in the age of Digitalization?" which derives substantially from the theme of your Conference, namely "Future Libraries: Infinite Possibilities". Librarianship and Libraries share with Diplomacy and Diplomats the distinction of being two professions that have stoutly resisted and outlived predictions for their collapse, irrelevance and eminent death especially in periods of major advances in technology. For example, Queen Victoria rejected a proposal to upgrade the British legation in Rome to a full embassy because, in her estimation, "given the new telecommunication techniques then available the time for ambassadors, their pretensions and privileges, were definitely over". As we now know, the Queen was proved wrong because rather than die, diplomacy has survived and indeed expanded in scope, coverage and image, this has been the same sentiment that has greeted conventional libraries since the emergence of the new information Technology and internet systems, with their electronic mails and files providing instant and speedy means of communication, information sharing and knowledge dispersal – activities heretofore reserved for Libraries and Archives.

Particularly threatening in this regard has been the advent of e-books which allow access to Library resources anywhere in the world from our desks at home. In this era of instant inter-connectivity, some have questioned the relevance of the conventional Library filled with physical printing materials such as books, journal, articles, research findings and other resources which can now be accessed on line. Wearing my cap as a Minister of the Gospel, I predict and prophesy to you that Libraries will not die; that your professions will not become irrelevant, that in fact, with innovation, creativity and some adaptation, you will even become more useful and relevant in the years ahead.

Now, to show that these are not just pastorals to comfort you in times of distress and potential threat of unemployment, let me share with you the

following information drawn from the experience of the British Publishers Association. According to the Association, "record sales were recorded in 2012 despite the recession and rise of e-readers". Total spending on printed and digital books rose four percent and although digital spending rose by 66 percent, "it does not appear to have led to a market decline for print, with physical book sales down by just one percent". "Fears that the rise of e-readers would kill off physical books have so far proved exaggerated," the report concluded. Indeed, Philip Jones, editor of *The Bookseller magazine* reported that shops were seeing a "rebounding" in sales of physical books, thanks to "children and non-fiction areas and the growing market for books." "The death of the physical books was a long way off", he continued, pointing out that "physical book sales still make up around 80 percent of the overall market". "Digital is overtaking in some areas, but not all areas, so I think the physical book is going to be with us for long," he concluded. Similar trends have been reported in the U.S.A., Japan and other European countries.

I share the above views and sentiments. Physical books will remain critical in our educational enterprises for a long time to come, despite the emergence of the e-books and digital resources. If the experience of somehow technologically advanced Britain with higher density of digital penetration is as above, one can easily be confident the Nigerian example with physical books will be even more impressive. This will depend substantially on the ability of Libraries to establish effective liaisons with Book Publishers, Printers and end users such as the educational institutions. The critical bottom line, however, remains the attitude, disposition and commitment of governments at all levels to education as a major driver of needed national transformation in all sectors of our national life.

Given the rather poor, or should we say abysmally poor, reading habits of adult Nigerians which has now infected our youth, the major users of Libraries will continue to be lecturers and students at all levels of our education enterprise. Despite increasing privatization in this sector which incidentally is accentuating the gap between the rich and poor in our society, government policies and programmes will remain the major determinant of the kind of education we provide to our children and the relevance of books and libraries. Where governments fall or become insensitive or unconcerned about the **quality, not quantity**, of the education menu served to our children, we will continue to manufacture half bakes, barely literate, unskilled and unemployable graduates from our educational industries, sometimes almost totally oblivious of the fact that,

as stated by my late friend and colleague, Professor Adiele Afigbo, "the quality of people derives from the quality of their education". As I had occasion to assert severally, "although we experienced and are still experiencing crisis in the political, economic, religious and social sectors of our national life, crises in the educational sector, because of their multiplier long term effects, represent perhaps the greatest threat to the survival of our fragile democracy".

Indeed, the multifarious problems in funding, access, conditions of service, quality, morale, facilities, and even the meaning and purpose of education have so threatened our educational sector that many of us wonder whether or not we are consciously mortgaging the future of our children, indeed our country, since a country cannot be better than the products of its educational system. It is in this context of quality education for our children at all levels that libraries and books assume fundamental and critical importance and establish their uncontested relevance for now and in the future.

As a Member of the Panel of Eminent persons of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), I have had the privilege of observing firsthand the state of education in many African countries. This, in addition my experience with the Nigerian case at all levels especially at the University level as Professor and administrator for almost forty years and as a book publisher and author should enable me to make the following observations related largely to books and libraries.

The appalling and unacceptable level of illiteracy within and outside our educational systems can be reached to the collapse of the reading culture, even among our University Professors, Lecturers and students. Truth, which must be told, is that we do not read, unless compelled to do so by approaching examinations, promotions or teaching assignments, many students graduate from our Universities without having entered the Library, the academic nerve center of any institution of learning, indeed, for many students, the Library is merely a building, not the contents of the building. Because of this poor reading habit, our students and some of our lecturers cannot write anything of appreciable length without unpardonable mistakes with the most elementary rules of grammar. Truth is, you cannot write well if you do not read, and in an era of declining resources for parents and sponsors, the public Library should be a companion for the students, in my days in secondary school, we used to have a book titled 'Students Companion' May I recommend that all of us in the educational industry make the library and books our constant companion.

We note that our governments at all levels have embraced education as an important aspect of their Good Governance philosophy by initiating widely advertised free education programmes at some levels; establishing more schools to broaden access; and engaged in some form of teaching training or the other. However, it would appear that we have fallen prey to the "numbers game" which is the main emphasis in the so-called Minimum Millennium Goals. I had occasion in Addis Ababa to draw attention to this during the recent colloquium on "Relevant Education for Africa's Transformation" in which I was the main discussant. In the race to meet numbers and report impressive targets, many African governments at both national, regional and sub-regional levels are establishing ramshackle structures which cannot qualify as schools properly so-called-poor construction; poor facilities with no water, light or workshops and laboratories; untrained staff and most irritatingly no *Libraries*. It has always been my view that a school without a library is not a school. It will be interesting to have a census of schools even in Calabar, Cross River State, and the South/South Geopolitical Zone without appropriately stocked Libraries. ***Yet some of these governments are hurrying to establish e-libraries even when there are no Libraries in their Local Government areas.*** Yes, we need to catch up with the rest of the world, but the basic need of our educational institutions for now is the Traditional Library stocked with appropriate books. We therefore, call upon our governments at all levels to treat with seriousness the imperative of establishing Libraries in their Local Government areas and all primary, secondary and tertiary schools within their jurisdictions. This is essential if we are to make Good Governance a reality rather than a mere political slogan. It will also enlarge the patronage for books and libraries and increase the density of readers in our rural areas. In this regard, I am pleased to report to this distinguished audience that I have personally established a private library, the Okon Uya Heritage Library in my country home in Oron, Akwa Ibom State. Small as it is in size for now, the Library houses many important resources probably not available elsewhere in this area among them:

- i) Perhaps the largest collection of books on African Diaspora Studies, the African American Experience and Latin American History assembled since 1967;
- ii) All the records of Council, Senate, Faculty of Arts and Education, History Department, IPPA and many important committees of the University of Calabar where I served as Chairman or Member;

- iii) Complete Record, including audios and transcripts, of the Report of the Political Bureau, 1986 – 1987 of which I was a Member and Chief Reporteur;
- iv) Full Report, including transcripts, public Hearings and tapes of the work of the Electoral Reform Committee (Uwals Committee) 2008 – 2010 of which I was a member;
- v) Reports of the Panel of Eminent Persons, African Peer Review Mechanism important in understanding the triumphs and travails of democracy and sustainable development in African countries;
- vi) A substantial number of important and rare books on African, especially Nigerian, history, culture, politics, economy and society.

These Records private collection were organized and classified by the former University Librarian Professor Olu Lawal and his subordinate staff Dr Okon A. Ani. I am happy to report that our humble effort is attracting the attention of scholars and researchers around the world and some bodies like UNESCO interested in education. Graduate students at the Universities of Uyo, Calabar, Port Harcourt and Ibadan have also found the collection very useful. I invite you to visit us and help expand our holdings by donating copies of your publication to us. Recall the statement credited to our first Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa that “nothing could be more fitting than the gift of books”.

Conclusion

May I now conclude by trying to answer the question I posed in the title of my presentation – Physical Books and Conventional Libraries: Who Needs them in this Age of Digitalization? Clearly from this sketchy presentation, we can conclude as follows:

- i) Our students at all levels of education need them.
- ii) Our teachers, lecturers, professors and other University men and women need them. The most distinguishing characteristic of the intellectual and academic is an insatiable thirst for knowledge based on healthy skepticism that there probably is a better explanation for anything hidden away in the library. For those of us in the evidence based disciplines like History and Law, patronage of the Library and Archives, the store house of written evidences and documents, is simply indispensable.

- iii) Our communities desirous of engaging the so-called Democratic dividends of Good Governance need them to expand their mental horizon and empower themselves against bad governance since a mobilized, sensitized, knowledgeable, and conscientized citizenry is the greatest deterrent to bad governance and insurance for good governance.
- iv) Our leaders at all levels need them to overcome the unacceptable intellectual deficits in governance observed throughout Africa.
- v) Parents need them to socialize their children at home into a reading culture.
- vi) The media need books and libraries to constantly upgrade their knowledge and improve their analytical skills.
- vii) We, professional Librarians, need them to stay employed and expand our audiences to various publics.

In one word, we all who claim to be educated or aspire to be educated rather than just being certificated need books and libraries. Judged from this prism, the future of Libraries and Conventional physical books even in this age of digitalization and e-books is bright.

The real challenge for Librarians in our country, as W. N. Seymour insisted as far back as 1980 in the case of USA, is to remember that:

“responsive library service is not simply a product of Dewey Decimal system but it also requires intelligent planning, ability to learn from experiences, and sensitivity to human needs. Concerned library personnel who want to provide responsive service must keep themselves constantly alert to changing library roles and ensure that library users derive maximum benefit from the services provided”.

May our Good Lord, the source of all knowledge, wisdom and understanding grant us the grace to be wise, creative and innovative in confronting the challenges before us as Librarians and lovers of books. I thank you for your patience in hearing me out.

Editor's note: Professor Okon Edet Uya
Passed on peacefully on April 17th, 2014
May his soul rest in peace (Amen).