

LIBRARY AS AN INFORMATION-BASE FOR SUSTENANCE OF A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper identifies and recognizes library as an indispensable information base for sustenance of a Democratic Culture.

It examines the various types of Libraries and the role they stand to play in a sound democratic dispensation.

The paper concludes that if the government wants to achieve a virile democratic culture, it must carry her citizenry along, by giving them timely and reliable information, through information centers, like the Libraries.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever the term library is mentioned, most minds readily race to a storehouse of recorded knowledge or collection of books, Magazines or Newspapers (organized or unorganized) which they have seen somewhere. This conception is a far cry from what it stands for, most especially in this modern age. The library is not only a storehouse of recorded knowledge or collection of books, magazines and newspapers, but also a collection of non book materials, such as Tapes, charts, maps transparencies, microforms, Audio and Video formats, Art reproduction, computerized records e.t.c.

According to Nwosu (1995.1) a library is a place where professionally selected and acquired books and non book materials are processed and systematically and orderly arranged to make for easy location, retrieval and use". It can be said therefore that a library is a repository of prints and non-print materials that have been carefully selected and organized by trained personnel for the use of the populace. It is an intellectual powerhouse where ideas, experience and dispositions of individuals are stored in documented forms to assist posterity in appraising the past understanding the present, and facing the future with confidence.

Democratic Culture - Democracy in itself is the ultimate authority of the masses to have a say or control over matters and issues that concern them. Appadorai (1975 137) defines it as "a system of government under which the people exercise their governing power wither directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves. Abraham Lincoln, a one time President of United States of American, put it succinctly as "Government of the people by the people and for the people. This means that in Democratic government, the masses, who represent the popular constituency has the overall say in matters of governance and its related issues. Democracy therefore implies the existence of majority rule, electoral activities, rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of worship, independence of the judiciary, freedom of movement, right to life, right to gainful employment and right for information.

Culture on the other hand is simply taken to mean the way of life of a particular society or a group of people. Eshleman and Cashion (1985 81) see it as a system of ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge norms, customs, and technology shared by almost everyone in a particular society". From the foregoing it could be averred that Democratic culture involves the true exercise of democratic values and ideas, in accordance with the society beliefs, norms, customs and laws of the land. This means that for a Country to be truly democratized, her citizenry must be involved in the day to day governance of the state. They must be given up to date information about the activities of the government. 1.1

TYPES OF LIBRARIES

To fully understand the importance of the library as an information-generating agency it is imperative to examine the various types of libraries that exist.

- (a) School Library - This is an organized collection of books and non-book materials maintained in Primary and Secondary Schools. The functions of the School Library include the provision of all kinds of learning materials for pupils and teaching materials for the staff. It exists to complement the educational programmes of the School.
- (b) Academic Libraries - These are libraries that exist in tertiary, institutions, such as Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Universities. They are primarily established to provide faculty members and students materials for teaching, learning and research. Academic libraries are often regarded as centers for serious academic activities.
- (c) Special Libraries - This type of Libraries are established to cater for the information needs of members of organizations government parastatals, research institutes, commercial and industrial establishments, ministries, etc. Special Libraries are so called because their collections are devoted to a particular subject or group of related subjects, which the organization is interested in. They also offer special services like selective dissemination of information (SDI) literature searching, current awareness services ect. The services are organized to keep the users abreast of latest developments in their areas of interest.
- (d) National Libraries - National Libraries are established by law or edict of the nation and funded by the federal or central government. They are often charged with the responsibility of assembling. Acquiring and preserving the Nation's Literature; controlling the issuance of standard numbers (ISBN & ISSN) and coordinating Library and information activities, within and outside the Country. They also act as clearing house for inter-change of materials between Nigerian citizens or organization, and those of other nations. National Libraries are the giant memories of their parent nations, as such they are designated National Depositories for their Countries Literature.
- (e) Public Libraries - The last but by no means the least, is the public libraries. Public Libraries are established by the state governments, and are maintained with public funds. Consequently their services to the public are free of charge. They stock materials in virtually all fields of knowledge. Public Libraries are usually located in towns and cities. They have mobile library services attached to them, in order to ensure free and unrestricted reference and information services to the rural population. Public Libraries exert greater influence on the citizenry and this is why, they are fondly referred to as the Peoples University. Public Libraries play a very important part in the spiritual, political, economical and social life of the community. Unesco has through its manifesto proclaimed belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and understanding between people and between nations (Harrison (1972 23). Thus a Public Library is a real center of culture, propagating human knowledge and dispensing delight. It is a channel for the spread of ideas and provides the members of the community with a means of making intelligent use of their leisure. Specifically it offers the following services among others-
- (a) Free reading, services for all irrespective of race, religion or political opinions.
- (b) Free access to all types of information contained in books, pamphlets, periodicals and other information media.
- (c) A rallying point for the promotion of the peoples culture, national and international understanding.
- (d) Provides opportunity and guidance for children, young people, men and women in developing the habits of skills for self-education.

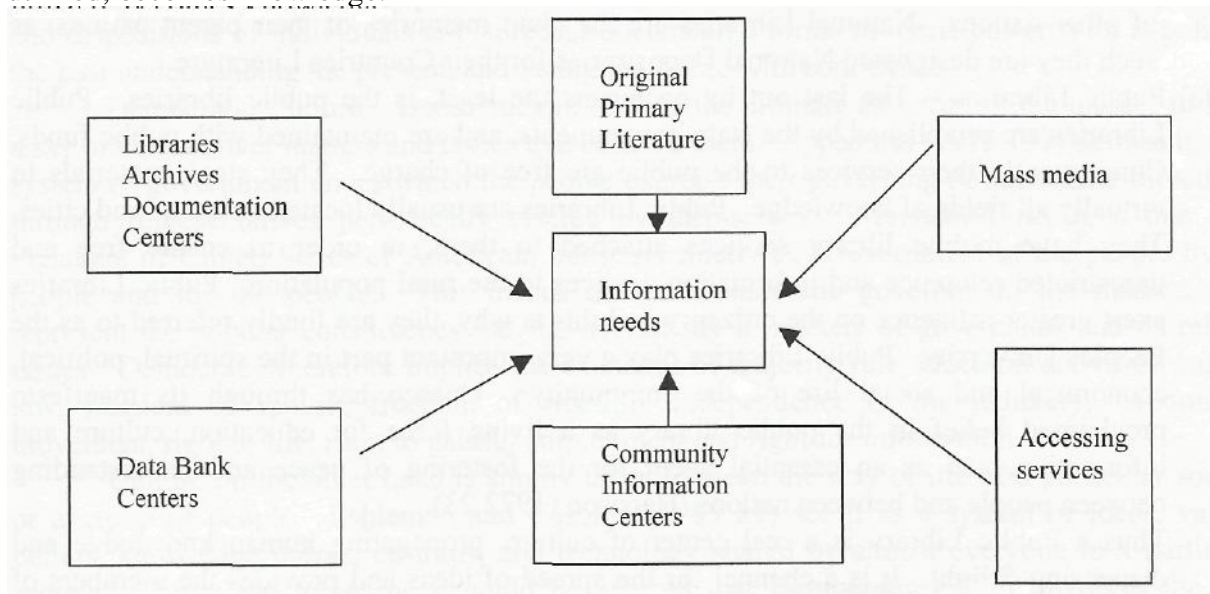
1.2 LIBRARY AS AN INFORMATION AGENCY

In books lies the soul of the whole past... all that mankind has done, though, gained or been... is lying as in magic in the pages of books. (Hero as a man of letters, 1840).

Having looked at the various types of Libraries that exist, one is now better placed to see how the Library constitutes an information agency. It is important to note that the business of any library is information gathering, repackaging and dissemination. It involves making information available to the right user. To accomplish this, the library selects, acquires organizes and stores materials that contain information in anticipation of request from users.

The position of library as an information agency cannot be disputed. From time immemorial, Libraries have established themselves as cornerstones of the information materials (books and non-books) on which man's activities have been documented, and the people that need them. Thus, the Library is the custodian and dispenser of recorded knowledge and culture, which need to be transmitted from one generation to the other. Such materials enable the present generation to be abreast of the mistakes of the past generation to be abreast of the mistakes of the past generations and avoid them.

While illustrating the role of Library in knowledge and information production, Aguolu (1989 1) in a diagram titled the "information universe" posits that Libraries archives and documentation center are central in the production of information. He concludes that the information man needs in order to take decision, emanates from the libraries and when they are utilized, becomes knowledge.



(Indexing & Abstracting)

So it is from the Library that information springs. Information is collected through a variety of sources which included books, research, reports, periodicals, maps, newspapers, technical literature etc, and all these are stored in the Library, awaiting retrieval and dissemination.

A modern Library is therefore an active and dynamic institution for obtaining relevant information, which not only guarantees a calculated decision, but makes its implementation easy.

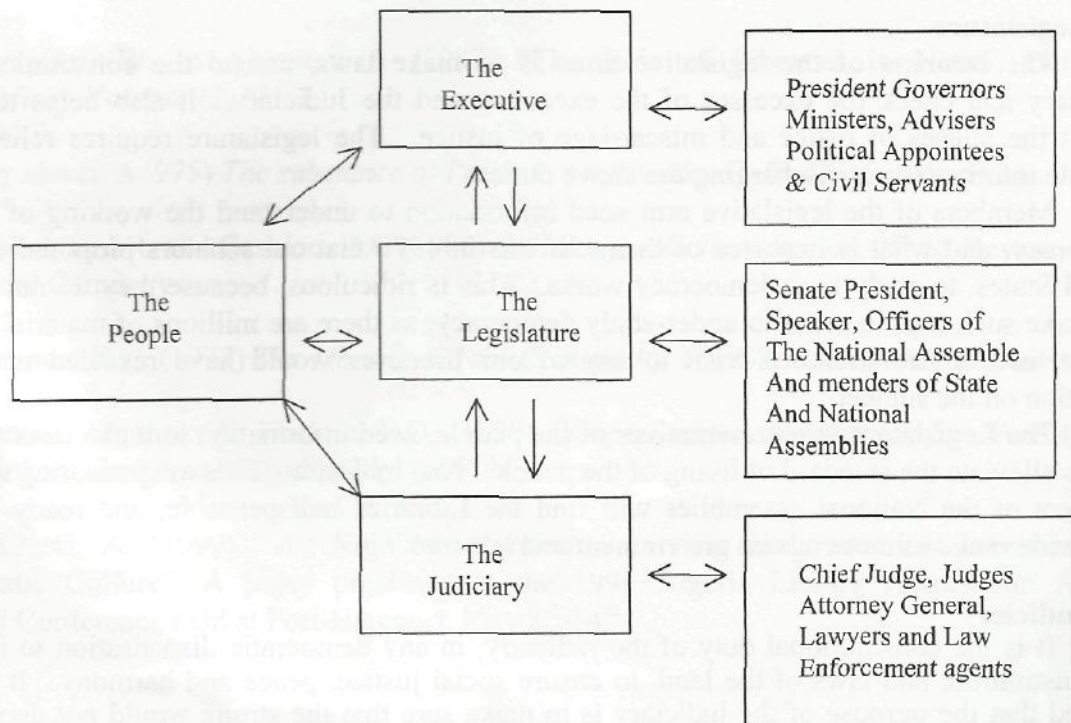
INFORMATION FOR SUSTENANCE OF A DEMOCRATICE CULTURE

In a democratic dispensation there are three points of operation namely, the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Each of these is in turn accountable to the "people" from whom they draw the authority to govern. They are duty bound to keep the masses informed of what they do.

It was Aiyepoku (1982) that affirmed "information is indispensable on national planning. It is important therefore, for our policy makers to appreciate the vital nature of information resources management in all sectors and at all levels of public policy in Nigeria". He went further to define information as man's cumulated knowledge in all subjects, in all forms and from all sources that could help it users to make rational decisions. According to him, information could be defined as data of value in planning, decision-making and the execution of government programmes.

Thus information could be regarded as the life wire of any successful operation. Without information people could neither make calculated decision, nor even implement the ones they have made successfully. According to Uche (1999.34) "Information is progress, and access to it, or lack of access makes a world of difference in the success or failure of any programme".

In order to achieve a virile democratic culture, there must be free flow of information between the three tiers of government and the people.



Information flow in a Democracy

Since democracy demands that all the arms of the government should carry the citizenry along side them by not only informing them about government activities but also taking inputs from them, it becomes imperative that the various information needs that are essential for sustenance of a virile democratic culture should be discussed.

The Executive

The executive arm of the government is concerned with the issues of making decisions and laws, and seeing that they are effectively implemented. This function requires the availability of accurate and reliable information, which are readily available in the Library and other information centers. As part of its constitutional duties the executive is also required to make development plans. To this end, it needs statistical information about the people, it is planning for. It needs to know the national population figure, the basic needs of the masses and the resources on the ground for realizing these plans.

Most often the executive sends bills to the National Assembly to be approved as laws. In drafting and defending such bills, the executive requires to build its proposals and defence on a solid information background so that Legislators would be positively disposed towards them when presented.

The executive is also duty bound not only to inform the citizenry about its programmes,

but also educate them on issues that affect them. Experiences have shown that when the masses established confidence in a government, they tend to support its programmes, and ensure the attainment of its goals.

In most developed countries where democracy flourishes, there exists community information services, purposely designed to cater for the information needs of the society. Such services are often housed in the public Libraries. It helps to enlighten the citizens, with a view to improving their skills, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and commitment that result to improved relationship between the government and the governed. This type of political cordiality makes the achievement of National goals and aspirations attainable.

The Legislature-

The business of the legislative arms is to make laws, amend the constitution when necessary and check the excesses of the executive and the Judiciary. It also helps to guide-against the abuses of office and miscarriage of justice. The legislature requires reliable and accurate information in discharging the above duties.

Members of the legislative arm need information to understand the working of modern democracy, and what is expected of them. It was in 1979 that our senators proposed a trip to United States, to study how democracy works. This is ridiculous, because they do not need to undertake such trip, in order to under-study democracy, as there are millions of materials on the subject, in our Libraries. A visit to any of our Libraries would have revealed marvelous collection on the subject.

The Legislators as representatives of the people, need information to make laws that will help to alleviate the standard of living of the people. And in drafting bills or sponsoring motions, members of the National assemblies will find the Libraries indispensable, and ready to offer them wide range of materials on government and law making.

The Judiciary

It is the constitutional duty of the judiciary, in any democratic dispensation to interpret the constitution, and laws of the land, to ensure social justice, peace and harmony. It is often asserted that the purpose of the judiciary is to make sure that the strong would not deprive the weak of their rights, as such it is the last hope in seeking redress for any injustice. Consequently, the operatives (the Judges, Lawyers, and Law Enforcement Agents) need one type of information or the other, to ensure that justice is not only done, but is seen to be done. So, while the Judge and Lawyers may need information on judgements and cases, the Law Enforcement Agents may need information on proposed demonstrations, political rallies, crimes and criminals.

The people

The masses are the most important group in the democratic process. This is because the authority of governance belongs to them. They need to be carried along, by the three arms of government. They should be given accurate and up to date information about the day to day running of the government. Needless to say that if they are uninformed or uneducated they will make the realization of the government's goals and aspirations difficult. The people will readily participate and support the government, when there is no information gap, and they are not disregarded for an informed and enlightened society is the best friend that any government can have. The Libraries remain the best media, for reaching the masses, as they serve all categories of the society, irrespective of age, education, tribe, religious and political inclinations.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is our disposition that information is an indispensable resource for building and sustaining a virile and sound democratic culture. And since democracy requires the participation of the people in day to day running of the government, the people should be carried along. They should be given up-to date information about the government's activities, and their opinions tapped. The Libraries, especially the Public Library readily offer themselves as the best

media for achieving this.

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