

Building A Firm And Sustainable Democracy Through Public Libraries: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

Democracy has been sought for by many countries; yet only very few have been able to achieve it. A nation which thinks it can be ignorant and still be free in a democratic state, expects what never was and what never will be. Democracy can only thrive where the electorate is patriotic enough, articulate and well informed through public libraries and other civilizing agencies of democracy. This paper highlights the relationship between democracy and public libraries, and mentions proximity to communities, offering free services to all, and being funded by the public as the characteristics of public libraries. It further discusses how these libraries help in advancing the course of democracy; examines the experiences of Nigerian public libraries vis-à-vis democracy development and sustenance; advances inadequate funding, low application of ICT, inadequate and obsolete materials as challenges facing Nigerian public libraries. Putting forward strategies for assuaging these challenges, this paper recommends information repackaging, resuscitation of governments' interests in proper funding, establishment of ICT policy and practice and others as some of the ways to help enable public libraries stem up their roles in keeping their clientele well informed for democratic growth and sustenance.

Introduction

All over the world, democracy as an enviable system of governance has been hailed for its efficacy in the promotion and holistic development of

man and his environment. It is an advanced and time- tested system that had its origin from Athens in Greece around 508-507BC. Since then, it has undergone several modifications and metamorphoses. Democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people. It is a political system that thrives best in a political environment bereft of high handedness and misrule. Democracy is acclaimed to be the best system of administration, and functions best where the electorates are literate, have freedom of assembly and full access to information, freedom of speech, and freedom to contribute to the civil and political decisions of their countries. For an efficient realization of the above outstanding qualities of democracy, some other democratic institutions are put in place in countries practicing democracy including law enforcement agencies, schools and libraries

Libraries are central to the quality of life in a society; they have direct roles in preserving democracy and its attached freedoms. This is because as Ansari (2008) observed, people who have access to the right information and understand how to make use of the acquired information in exercise of their economic, political, and legal rights become empowered, which in turns enables them to build a solid democracy. Libraries as institutions refer to a collection of books and other information materials stocked and made available to people for reading, study or reference. Different types of libraries are found all over the world. They include national libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, and public libraries .Public libraries are the focus of this paper, following their proximity to the populace and their inclusive services. They are those libraries which offer their collections and services to all members of the community without any discrimination as to age, race, and income level, social and academic status. Public libraries are known to offer diverse and increasing variety of services and activities in response to individuals' and community needs. Such needs include education and adequate preparation of individual for requisite civil and political responsibility through literacy programs. On the role of public libraries, Satpathy (2008) observed that they strive to enhance equality and social justice, to promote intellectual freedom and advancement of knowledge, to generate in the young generation a sense of purposefulness and maximum dedication, confidence in themselves and faith in democracy. Democracy cannot be put in place unless an informed and well-educated populace is assured through library services, especially when it supports indigenous efforts to change.

Public libraries are very powerful instruments of social and political changes; they can be helpful in upholding the tenets of democracy. It therefore follows that for any country's governance to be built on a truly firm and laudable democracy worthy of sustenance, her public libraries have to be adequately prepared and ready to supply materials and services that would educate her citizenry. This paper has the objective of discussing the role of public libraries in building a firm, formidable and sustainable democracy. It has also the objective of examining how far the Nigerian public libraries have been prepared and how they have fared in this task of helping to build a democratic Nigerian society. In order to achieve the stated objectives, this paper has to define and critically discuss the terms involved, list the characteristics and examine the global roles of public libraries in building and sustaining democracy. It also has to examine the position of Nigerian public libraries vis-à-vis the building and maintenance of Nigerian democracy with a view to seeing their challenges, and suggesting ways of improvement.

Concepts of Democracy and Public Libraries

Democracy” is a term derived from two Greek words of *demos*, meaning “people” and *kratis* signifying “rule of or by”. Democracy which started in Greece is a form of government in which the supreme power of governance rests on the people collectively and is administered by them or for them by their representatives. It is sometimes described as “government by consent of the governed”. Izukanne (2003) quoted Abraham Lincoln as defining democracy to be the government of the people by the people and for the people. Democracy has two main variants. One is direct while the other is indirect. Direct as practiced in early Greek city states represent a situation where all the citizens meet together in one place to take decisions concerning the governance of their states. Every free male adult participated in the administration of each state. The indirect or representative democracy is a form that emerged with the growth of population and the area to be governed. In this, the citizenry choose representatives who rule on their behalf and according to the wishes of the majority. Democracy is a form of government in which all the eligible citizens participate equally, either directly or indirectly through elected representatives, in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. It encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political

self-determination (Neuwman, 2007). Democracy has unique features which make it more acceptable to greater number of countries. These include equal opportunity of participation in the governance, provision of fundamental human rights, equality before the law, free and fair elections, equal voting rights, rights of opposition to government.

Those mentioned unique features of democracy blossom more where public libraries are established and properly catered for. Public libraries are community oriented libraries which are established and run with public funds with a view to providing socio-cultural, educational and political information to all without any restriction. This is intent on reducing the impact of illiteracy and assuaging the negative effect of political ineptitude. In effort to clarify the meaning of public libraries, Edoka (2000) quoted UNESCO 1994 Public Library Manifesto thus:

Public Library is a local center of information, making all kinds of knowledge and public information readings available to users. The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all regardless of age, sex, race, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reasons use the regular services and materials, for examples, linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospitals or prisons.

Public libraries have the purpose of offering all kinds of knowledge embodied in books and other information materials to all sort of people so as to prepare them for a truly democratic country. That is, public libraries aim to serve and enlighten them enough for the duties which democracy is trusting on them. According to Ekere and Ugwuanyi (2011) public libraries are libraries built within a community intent on helping to conserve their cultural heritage and keeping the people abreast with what is happening around the world. They provide traditional services as well.

Public Libraries and Democracy

Public libraries ensure that everyone can have access to information and thus engage fully in the democratic process of his/her country. The roles of libraries are, therefore, absolutely crucial in a democracy. Without this access, the electorates become ill-informed in the actions of their representatives. This is particularly a concern for the poorest in society who cannot afford books, let alone Internet

connections. While the affluent can keep in touch with democratic process with ease, the poor are left isolated and effectively disenfranchised.

Public libraries have certain characteristics and roles that make them very amenable to extensively preparing their patrons for making requisite contributions to the establishment and practice of democracy. These characteristics are obtainable and observable in all public libraries found in every truly democratic society. Public libraries position themselves well to collect, organize, preserve and provide access to government-held information regarding the fundamental human rights of the citizens, without which democracy will be highly endangered (Igbokwe et al, 2012). They help to ease and heighten the practice of democracy. For instance, being funded by the public makes them to be properly equipped with different types of materials for all ages, interests, academic levels, etc. The provision of these varied materials at the door steps of all citizens stimulates effective learning, group discussions, and public awareness, which leverage firm and democratic practice through unhindered political participation. These characteristics and roles help to make public library services indispensable for a smooth running of democracy. These characteristics include:

- ❖ Being funded by the public
- ❖ Offering of free services
- ❖ Being closest to the grassroots
- ❖ Rendering services to all without any discrimination
- ❖ Offering outreach services
- ❖ Stimulating reading at all levels
- ❖ Provision of different materials to suit all levels of human development

It is these unique dispositions of public libraries that make them extra relevant and most suited for building and sustaining a virile democracy. They serve democracy by providing a neutral forum in which all types of information and all points of view find equal voice. For instance, offering of free services and provision of varied types of materials enables the library patrons to regularly visit and access vital information that educate them on their civic and political rights. A firm democracy depends on an informed population. The primary recognition of this has been fundamental to the great financial and unalloyed moral support being given to public libraries by developed countries like Britain and America (Achebe, 2005). These libraries provide all types of

information-based services including Internet-based to all the citizenry for an effective understanding and comparison of what their rulers do with what obtains elsewhere. Upholding the importance of public libraries, Curly (1987) stated thus:

When the function of libraries (public) is put in terms of their contributions to the community, people see their centrality.

We must assert that libraries are central to the quality of life in our society; that libraries have a direct role in preserving democratic freedoms.

For any country that wants to have a society in which democratic freedoms, like the right of access to information, are guaranteed and safeguarded, public libraries must be given a pride of place. This is why they are built very close to the people and run with public funds. Information is a social good and a central element in the development and creation of a democratic society. Information as disseminated by public libraries serves to facilitate all types of decision-making and assists citizens' participation in governance. Comprehensive and well-organized information sources being placed in public libraries enables lawmakers to access relevant legal information and use it to make rational decisions devoid of despotism, bitterness and rancor, and so to maximize social welfare. Political information gleaned from libraries enables decision makers to bring past knowledge to bear on current issues and problems. These libraries use public funds to acquire many and relevant materials that match the interests of different classes of people. Assessing the position of public libraries in creating a democratic society, Mattson (1998, 106) stated:

As the public storehouses of knowledge, the public library can be viewed as a free society's insurance that all ideas will be accessible to everyone who may want them.

Ideas and information are certainly available elsewhere, but no other agency or organization can guarantee such a wide accessibility to ideas of all kinds that will be free of charge to all its customers. Without this kind of accessibility provided somewhere within society, the danger of tyranny increases.

This assertion depicts that public libraries stand as symbols of the vital bridge between knowledge and democracy. Their patrons through using their materials and being enlightened by them act as checks against the irrational operations of government. It is the general knowledge given by

public libraries among the people who have the desire and the right mindset to know which preserves liberty that comes through democracy.

Through the supply of different information and educative materials, public libraries support the educational, civic and cultural activities of the people. They are usually tagged “universities of the masses”. The importance of education to both the government and the governed cannot be overstated. The strongest threat to democracy comes from ignorant masses who voted wrongly because of their “untutored choice” or by the influence of unscrupulous politicians. There can be no firm democracy unless there is an educated and informed body of voters who can effectively vote using their common senses. No wonder Ditzion (1947) observed that since all vital political decisions rested with the voters either directly or through their representatives, it becomes necessary to have a responsible citizenry. Any weaknesses in the bulwark of democracy would permit reactionary ideas to gain inroads into political institutions. The importance of public libraries lies in their availability somewhere within society as that society’s last defenses against the possibilities of oppression (Mattson, 1998). Public libraries educate their patrons. By throwing their doors wide open for education through outreach, their patrons are nurtured intellectually in order to make informed political decisions and become the vanguards against political oppression and repression.

As knowledge becomes increasingly a source of power, the struggle regarding its accessibility and use becomes more and more central to democracy. The success of contemporary citizens as political activists in a variety of contexts depends upon their ability to ferret out information. Sometimes, the information is in foreign languages and other multimedia resources very alien to the populace. Public libraries advance and preserve local research services and cultural heritage through repackaging. They do this to help their patrons to understand and internalize the available information for their political awareness and social growth. Information repackaging has to do with the selection of appropriate materials and the processing and presentation of the information therein in more understandable, readable, acceptable and useable forms with a view to making it more usable by the users (Ezeani and Ugwuanyi, 2011). Corroborating this, Ezema (2010) observes it to be the translation of the information in the language of the people; adopting the right medium familiar to the people and providing the right environment that would generate the required interest from the targeted

group. In so doing, public libraries have an important role in ensuring that all sections of the society are brought into the democratic process. Provision of wide variety of resources enables people of different strata to partake in governance. By translating information in the language of the local people, public libraries play a great role of increasing the access of citizens to vital public policy information that are sometimes difficult to obtain. Public libraries employ information professionals who are trained to find, organize and disseminate information of any type.

Public libraries act as the greatest melting point for different people with different learning, aims and objectives. As a result they create large spaces which enable people, both old and young, to assemble and discuss issues of vital interest to them. Public libraries hold film shows, lectures, community meetings, political rallies, workshops, discussion groups and other social activities. By coming together, citizens are stimulated and encouraged to have the opportunities and enablement to discuss their countries' prevailing socio-economic and political issues. This makes public libraries places where scholars who are not college affiliated can enter and work and feel at home. They are indeed, the places where opinions are expressed and refined, where views are exchanged and agreements made, where a sense of common purpose and consensus are forged. Public libraries therefore act as the breeding grounds for citizens' political ambition.

The case of Nigerian public libraries

Public libraries in Nigeria came into being after the 1953 UNESCO meeting held in Enugu to discuss the need for public libraries in Nigeria (Ene, 1979). The founders followed the 1944 UNESCO Public Library Manifestoes and good intentions for the country. From 1953 to 1966, public libraries spread rapidly in major urban centres like Enugu, Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna, etc. Then, these libraries were being carefully taken care of and enabled to do in Nigeria what their counterparts were doing in developed and democratic countries. They were properly funded. Professional librarians were employed and paid promptly. These librarians had conscience and maintained their professional ethics. Nigerian public libraries were then playing their expected roles, though they were not as many as they are today. They stimulated great learning among the populace and increased the desire for knowledge and human interaction. Public libraries stocked a variety of resources that aided people to become aware of their political rights and obligations. These

resources supported and sustained social, economic, and political development of the people, thereby enhancing full-scale participation in governance. Supporting the efficacy of public libraries Okoli (2001) observed that the Nigerian public libraries consider the following as their areas of focus.

- ❖ Identification of socio-political information needs of communities, extension workers, policy makers, politicians, NGOs, students, teachers, and the entire grassroots populace.
- ❖ Capacity building for stakeholders in governance through training workshops, book-talks, discussion groups and seminars on political leadership and followership.
- ❖ Production of rural information enlightenment and media such as posters, photographs, audio-visuals, pamphlets, etc to educate, inform and enlighten the rural dwellers on their political rights and obligations.

The activities of Nigerian public libraries leveraged the great aspirations to vote and be voted for which manifested among Nigerians. Nigerians got seriously involved in many socio-economic and political issues going on in British West Africa especially in Nigeria. A recurring explanation of all these changes followed educational and political enlightenment being hatched from the public library resources, meetings, discussions, and interactions among library patrons that converged in libraries.

At the stage where Nigerian democracy was, public libraries got involved in the development of informed and active citizens who understood how to act collectively, subtly voice out their interests and held public officials accountable (Igbokwe et al, 2012). Information from public libraries taught the patrons to exercise their rights and socio-political knowledge without unreasonable resistance or harassment from political office holders or others. In the heyday of Nigerian public libraries, they embraced the social responsibility to offer services that bridged political and economic barriers to the marginalized by giving unlimited access to information (Akande, 2012). He further observed that following this, people understood the political and cultural system of their community which helped them to support democracy. Public libraries as people's universities helped citizens engage public officials and political leaders on substantive issues of community concern. Public libraries were partnering with local civil groups to help undertake

organized political actions like civic and voter education efforts, issuing advocacy and organizing campaigns. This made the political party members canvassing for political offices to deposit their manifestoes in them.

After the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, these libraries took a downward trend and began to manifest woeful situations (Ene, 1979; Nkwocha, 2002; Opara, 2008). Ever since, Nigerian public libraries have continued to wobble, deteriorate, and appear to be highly incapacitated to carry out their roles and maintain their envisioned and enviable characteristics. They have almost become shadows of the founders' intentions. Today, majority of Nigerian public libraries have only settled as the dumping grounds for outdated and worn-out books, with dilapidated structures, dusty and cob web shelves. The literates and illiterates, the young and the old are rarely seen in these libraries. Ultimately, they ceased to play their expected roles of educating the citizenry for their effective contributions toward building and sustaining a virile democracy where there is rule of law. No wonder, Babangida (2014) retorted, "the whole essence of democracy is law and order; it is all about elections, about freedom of the individual. We have not reached the ideal level of democracy we all crave for in our political development." Nigerian public libraries no longer act as communities' universities which bred active political participants that developed grassroots through reading and public interactions. Some reasons for these libraries' rickety and colossal departure from the norm are briefly examined.

Challenges facing Nigerian public libraries

Public libraries are especially important in countries like Nigeria where struggles for human rights have been seriously repressed by corrupt and authoritarian regimes that have endangered major principles of democracy (Igbokwe, Ugwuanyi, and Nwafor 2012). Disheartening enough, most Nigerian public libraries stock information materials that have little or no relevance to Nigerian socio-cultural and political background. Not only do these materials not derive their values and significance from our cultural background but many are obsolete and not written in our local languages to aid comprehension. Corroborating this, Taiwo and Rachael (2012) observed that students and other readers go into public libraries with their reading materials because most of the materials in libraries are obsolete and not replaced with current ones. They further stated that neglect and underestimation of these libraries'

functions to the communities which they serve are the order of the day. This prevailing situation in Nigerian public libraries deters the populace from visiting and making effective use of their information for socio-economic and political development.

Another great challenge facing public libraries is the inadequate funding by the governments in power. This vitiates the solidity and efficiency of libraries. This poor funding has been responsible for such things as poor resource development, inability to hire enough trained professionals, non-installation of giant generators against power outage, and lack of spacious structures that are capable of containing people who would like to have social gatherings like lectures and meetings. Supporting the above as a factor limiting the operational efficiency of public libraries, Nkwocha (2002) listed low patronage, absence of current materials, inadequate number of trained personnel, and inadequate funding as the bane of Nigerian public libraries. Corroborating this, Ali and John-Okeke (2011) observed that the Nigerian public libraries have been bedeviled by government apathy on funding

The non application of ICT in order to beef up the scarce resources has become one of the greatest challenges confronting Nigerian public libraries. Their inability to acquire both software and hardware for automation and digitization, reach out for Internet and database subscription and ensure sufficient power supply has belittled them. As powerful instruments of social and political change, public libraries can help in the demands of democracy and the spread of literacy when they optimally apply ICTs to increase their resources. Low application of ICTs in these libraries is a great hindrance to their ability to uplift the political awareness and the contributions of Nigerians to the building and sustenance of a virile democracy. Discussing the status of ICT in Nigerian libraries, Achebe (2005) found out that low application of ICT and the absence of its policy has been a serious problem to their functionality. She further stated that lack of ICT policy has negatively impacted on ICT availability and use in Nigerian public libraries. In addition, Mole and Dim (2011) observed that low access to online services by public libraries has constrained them to rely on the print sources, which are usually inadequate and outdated. This state of affairs among Nigerian public libraries has kept them bereft of global democratic information, impoverished their resources and drastically reduced their would-be clientele.

Strategies for enhancing the performance of public libraries in Nigeria

Public libraries need clear internal management and communication structures that are well known and understood by clientele. Their survival also depends on their ability to recruit professionals, raise funds, and explain their principles and policies to staff, the media, and the public. Furthermore, transparent and participative means of administration, selecting resources, and formulating policy can make public libraries more open, responsive and attractive to citizens.

Information and communication technologies present benefits and challenges to democratic development. The Internet provides a voice for all people and groups - democratic and undemocratic. The Internet, cell phones and related technologies are profoundly affecting social, economic and political institutions worldwide, particularly in new and emerging democracies. In the hands of librarians and political activists, these tools can overcome resource disparities and remove monopolies of power and voice. Successful democracy employs powerful technologies which further highlight and empower democrats and institutions to safeguard the rights of their citizens. Using ICTs as a tool to enhance the information sharing, efficiency and transparency that are crucial to building and sustaining democracy is vital for public libraries. Achebe (2005) observed that these Internet technologies enhance communication, improve global access to important information, and increase public libraries' efficiency, resulting in strengthened democratic processes and more effective governance.

Democracy's credibility and sustainability depends, to a great extent, on how it works in practice, and on what it delivers. Democracies must be able to move beyond organizing elections and chanting empty slogans to successfully tackling issues related to security, jobs, human rights, physical well-being and human development, and provision of freedom of information. Public libraries should facilitate economic growth and deliver the means for people to achieve a better life through adequate provision of varied materials to serve many interest groups. Library resources and services are to be aggressively marketed. This is to create awareness and help in protecting fundamental rights and ensuring that citizens are free from oppression and arbitrary government intrusion.

For public libraries in Nigeria to regain their pre-civil war glorious status and be able to help build a firm and sustainable democracy, the following factors are to be taken care of.

- ❖ Adequate provision of materials for all ages and interests.
- ❖ Building befitting and spacious structures
- ❖ Adequate funding.
- ❖ Repackaging of information
- ❖ Requisite application of ICTs
- ❖ Effective marketing of library resources and services
- ❖ Recruitment and development of professional librarians

Conclusion

While democracy has been acclaimed to be the best system of political administration, it can only be established and maintained with the institutionalization of vibrant public libraries that could supply the citizenry with current economic and political information. Democracy ensures the rights of citizens while public libraries acquaint them with their rights in truly democratic governance. For democracy to be practiced as it ought to be, its principles must be known and jealously guarded by an informed electorate. Public libraries have been known to be great reinforcers to genuine democratic governance in highly developed countries. They partner with the populace in order to foster, substantiate, and sustain interactions between citizens and public officials. Democracy facilitates economic growth and delivers the means for people to achieve a better life, while protecting human rights. At the early stage of Nigerian public libraries they were fortified and worked assiduously towards solidifying the gains of democracy. However, not long after, erosive agents like funding apathy and neglect from governments crept in to undermine and vitiate their stability and directions. Ever since, they have been wobbling and not been able to regain the strength to serve for democratic growth and sustenance. As great levelers, supplying rich literature by which the ordinary man could experience the pleasures of democracy and providing a common ground where both the government and the governed could meet on equal terms, the restoration of the public library activities becomes imperative. Many suggestions including application of ICTs, revival of governments interest, and adequate funding of public libraries have been given as the way forward for Nigerian public libraries in helping to rebuild and sustain Nigerian democracy.

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