

# THE LIBRARY IS A CULTURAL CENTRE

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## ABSTRACT

Culture is one word that is in common use yet not well understood. This article, in highlighting the dynamic role of the library *in* the cultural process begins by defining and explaining, culture. Because of its importance in the everyday life of the society there is need for the establishment of a cultural policy. But then this policy can be actualized only with the total involvement of the library whose role is carried out in the preservation, promotion and presentation of culture. Indeed, Nigeria's own cultural policy has spelt out for the library the part it is to play.

The historical role of the library has included preservation of records and as a physical structure it has combined too the role of a cultural centre.

Therefore, as the home of research as the repository of records and documents, as the venue for exhibitions, artefacts, etc. the library's role as a cultural centre encompassing the past, the present, and the future is indisputable.

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This title is deliberate and the application of the assertive instead of the role definitive 'A5' is meant to drive the point home that the library is the melting point of culture. But, then what is not culture?

In 1977, Nigeria hosted the Black World when she staged the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, popularly called FESTAC '77. In the preparation of her own contingent for participation in the event a series of national festivals were held to select the best from the states. However, the most prominent of these performances were the songs and dances, which drew the ire of moralists, religionists, intellectuals, puritans, etc. who were not amused by what looked more like nude parades organised to sate the sensualities of high government officials. At least, their criticism showed one thing: culture is not just a show of nubile girls unabashedly dancing bare-chested before a crowd.

Culture is not a belated attempt to return to the days of yore when various gods reigned over their respective communities. Nor is culture the wholesale imbibing of other people's ways which because they had been incorporated into our own ways have now been given a right of place.

Culture is the total sum of the attainment and activities at any specific period, of a race and people, include their implements, handicrafts, agriculture, economics, music, art, religious beliefs, traditions, language, etc. Culture is the totality of the way of life

evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.

Culture comprises materials, institutional philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artefacts in its broadest form (namely: tools, clothing, etc.). The institutional aspects deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives. While the philosophical is concerned with ideas, beliefs, and values, the creative concerns a people's literature (oral or written) as well as their visual and performing arts which are normally moulded by, as well as help mould, other aspects of culture. Culture means a retention of (even a return to) some aspects of the customs of the past and embodies the attitude of a people to the future of their traditional values faced with demands of modern technology which is an essential factor of development and progress.

In short, all we are saying in the above is that culture is not something we create out of textbooks or reference sources, nor something we consciously involve ourselves in order to satisfy a pre-set idea. It is rather that which has always been in the society and into which the individual is born. Our lack of understanding of it has much to do with our alienation from our roots in more ways than one.

Interference from outside - both oriental and occidental nor deliberate that the screams of Michael Jackson has more appeal than the entranced chants of the village minstrel, or the sneer and disgust that would greet a masquerade performance by those who see nothing in it but just one of those heathenish pastimes that have kept the souls of our ancestors permanently in hell!

To show them that culture is not anathemic, there has to be a very visible official presence and support - and one way to that is well established and executed cultural policy.

### Cultural Policy

A cultural policy enables the understanding of the nation's cultural conditions, needs, aspirations and goals, to enunciate a set of rules, decide on requirements and priorities and sketch ways and means for attaining laid down goal. It is also a process of retrieving and restoring our history and our heritage in order to protect and project them for posterity.

A cultural policy is necessary to incorporate the essential parts of our history into our general national development process because culture as a force has both its own economic and social consequences. Furthermore, it should aim at some objectives, i.e. to mobilize and motivate the people through dissemination and propagation of ideas; to evolve from our diverse and plural societies a national cultural to promote an educational system that motivates and stimulates creatively based largely on our traditions and

values. Establishing a cultural policy and effective implementation is another thing. Sometimes implementation itself is handicapped by inadequately expressed letters of the policy. A meaningful policy can be expressed in 4 broad categories.

- (i) preservation of culture
- (ii) promotion of culture
- (iii) presentation of culture
- (iv) establishment of the structures to facilitate implementation.

Preservation is achieved by the pro-crete or non-concrete, the past or present, the written or oral which must be aided by research, the most important part of which is by documentation - on audio, video, tapes films, etc.

Presentation is the means by which culture is disseminated to make arts and culture accesible through the popular vehicles of the theatre, films, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, and publications.

In discussing the third and the fourth establishment of structures like cultural centres come in - which can either be specially designed permanent structures or existing buildings adapted or adopted for cultural purposes.

Still on cultural policy, the Nigerian Government has taken bold steps and in spelling out its cultural policy has appropriately defined the place of the Library. The stated objectives of the policy are thus:

- (a) to serve to mobilize and motivate the people by disseminating and ideas which promote national pride, solidarity and consciousness.
- (b) to promote an educational system that motivates and stimulates creativity.
- (c) to serve to evolve from our plurality a national culture.
- (d) to promote creativity in the fields of arts, science and technology, etc.

The Library is specifically assigned its role as stated in the articles of the decree<sup>1</sup>:

- 5.6.1 The state shall recognise that libraries play a crucial role in the promotion of cultural heritage.
- 5.6.2 The state shall promote the establishment of library services at federal, state and local government level.
- 5.6.3 The state shall ensure libraries are stocked with books, films, records and tapes on arts and culture.
- 5.6.4 The state shall promote the integration of library services into the educationa system.

And closely linked with these is the place of literature spelt out in subsection 6.2.1 of the decree.

- 6.2.1 The state shall preserve and present oral tradition folklore, poetry, drama, essays, novels, and short stories through the theatre, film, video, audio tapes and the written form and popularise them by producing them in Nigerian languages through the school system, lanaguage centres. Writers' workshops, book

development councils, the media'.

### The Library, a Cultural Centre

Performing the role of the cultural centre is not new to the library. According to Benge<sup>2</sup>: "The history of libraries indicated how each culture maintained itself by the preservation of records, and how libraries were an indispensable agency in bridging the gaps in time between different civilizations". The Library's role in the promotion and preservation of culture is direct, varied, and diverse. Thus, it stands not on the surface position of performances or talks but on the deeper and more involving platform of being the one that keeps alive all the elements of culture which have been reduced to preservable forms like books, films, etc.

As a repository the library is responsible for the preservation of materials in all forms. The library brings the past to the present and prepares for future users. National and university libraries are research centres into culture. The library's information role is seen through documentation, which infact erases the traditional image of the librarian as merely a custodian of books.

Libraries themselves think along with the users that the public library is the cultural centre of the community in the widest sense; provision of lectures, concerts, exhibitions, dramatic productions, public readings, are part of the promotion and presentation of culture. The African university library, says Ogundipe<sup>3</sup>, can relate in the

cultural development context not in the spoken one but in the one in the form of the written words or literature. All these show that the library is the centre of both the written and unwritten, the concrete and the abstract, features of our cultures. And of course, that the library has no time to be idle in the cultural process.

Apart from the provision of materials and other facilities, acquisition can go beyond the routine assembling of books, journals and print materials. The library is a disseminator of cultural knowledge which in the Nigerian case is largely oral and has to be documented. But here the librarian is handicapped in his effort to contribute to cultural development, like going into the field with a tape-recorder to collect oral data - because of day-to-day routine duties. However, he takes some consolation in the fact that the library makes available materials which trains the individual as a man of culture - who may be a poet, a critic, or a scholar.

The Library has the function of promoting and encouraging its own use as a centre where individuals can take part in the arts. It should also encourage the librarian to liaise with local societies and cultural organizations and to assume the role of an initiator and organizer of cultural events. Libraries are also cultural information centres, the use of which should be promoted and encouraged.

Fortunately, the role of the library in promoting



cultural diffusion is steadily increasing with the increase in the number of libraries in town and villages. Which of course do acquire and stock literature that deal with Nigerian life and culture.

#### Sources of Materials

It must be obvious at this stage that the library functioning as a cultural centre does not necessarily mean it has a hall reserved for traditional performances, displays, etc. strictly on matters of culture. In its most visible role, the library is always the source of materials. That is a fact. But it does not hold that monopoly; other organizations and bodies also come in. In the Nigerian case, the foremost source is the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) which started in 1959 as the Nigerian Arts Council to promote the advancement of arts in Nigeria. It was formally established by the NCAC Act. No. 3 of 1975 as the body responsible for national condination of cultural and artistic promotion and development in Nigeria.

In composition, its executive council is split into committee of: Art and Gallery (for artists, sculptors, architects); music (for artists, musicians, musicologists); festivals; Dance and Drama (for artists/playwrights, poets, authors, actors); Research (for educationists, writers, film producers, researching and studying into culture). All these activities involve persons who inevitably must be connected with the Library.

The Centre for Black and African Arts and Organization

(CBAAC) was established to keep the spirit of FESTAC alive. Its functions, among others, is to locate, identify and assemble for better preservation all recorded matter, published materials and museum artefacts relating to FESTAC '77. It also produces guides, catalogues, bibliographies, abstracts and indexes to facilitate the use of the materials preserved at the centre. Its library Division has a collection of 15,000 books and it is as well UNESCO depository centre for all UNESCO publications in the field of Black and African Culture.

The Information Division of the Federal Ministry of Information publishes books, pamphlets, journals, and documents on government and programmes (e.g. information and photographs of official, social and cultural events, articles on Nigeria's participation in international festivals) and pamphlets like 'Our Culture Heritage', 'Nigerian Music', 'Nigerian Darama'. With the constant merging and de-merging of information and culture at the ministry level, it is not easy to know who to give credit for some publications. However, 'Nigerian Magazine' has been an enduring journal - starting in 1923 as the 'Nigerian Teacher' which remains authoritative and very informative about Nigerian culture - with features and scholarly articles on art and culture.

Then, of course academic and research libraries - which as a matter of course must stock materials on all subjects; but particularly libraries of African universities which have institutes and centres for African studies cannot but be rich

in materials - concrete and abstract - that reflect culture in the widest and deepest sense.

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