

DELINQUENCY IN AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

This article defines the concept of library delinquency; briefly reviews the literature on library delinquency; discusses Kashim Ibrahim Library delinquency in the areas of extended borrowing, overborrowing, theft, mutilation, defacement, hiding of resources, etc.; preventive and curative measures employed are discussed with comments and suggestions made based on my experience.

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## INTRODUCTION

The establishment and growth of Nigerian Universities and their libraries could be traced to three phases or generations. Those of the sixties, seventies and the eighties and now there are about 29 Nigerian University Libraries (NUL)<sup>1,2</sup>. The University library collections of the first and second generations showed a fairly appreciable growth of between 3,900 and 13,600 books annually until in the eighties when the country started experiencing economic recession and the pinch coming from the economic recession was also felt by the NUL<sup>3,4</sup>.

Even though there was an appreciable book collection growth in the sixties and seventies (as mentioned above) and also quite a sizeable volumes of books in the market, anti-social acts were showing their ugly heads in the NUL and could be more serious now that the NUL are being badly starved of funds and books. The reading public cannot buy the few available books in the market because they are very expensive. A book that sold N6.50 in 1986 now sells above N35<sup>5</sup>.

The aim of this article is to refresh the minds of my professional colleagues on the subject of library delinquency in this difficult period of scarce and expensive library resources. The subject will be briefly defined and reviewed. The focus will be on my experience with the subject in Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U.) Library called, "Kashim Ibrahim Library (K.I.L.)"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In libraries, anti-social acts are referred to as delinquent acts. The Dictionary of Behavioural Science gives the literal meaning of a delinquent as: "one who offends by negligence, neglect or violation of duty or responsibility or by a minor infraction of a law"<sup>6</sup>. Many library anti-social behaviours as we shall know later fit into the frame work of this definition. Some of them include overborrowing, extended borrowing, illegal borrowing, theft, mutilation, defacement, double registration, hiding books in stacks, forging library ownership stamp, impersonation, etc.

While libraries are established to support educational, research and development programmes, library authorities are hardly free from pursuing this but busy trying to check anti-social acts posed by library users. According to Moeller-Peiffer<sup>7</sup> and Goetz<sup>8</sup>, attempts to check extended borrowing has compelled libraries to introduce measures such as overdue fines, book collection agencies, mailgrams, legal proceedings and so forth. Some of these measures have proved costly but concern for retrieval of library materials has continued to force libraries to apply all sorts of strategies which are not even cost-effective. These include claims court, multiple notices and billings, cablegrams, staff collectors, etc. Hansel and Burgin<sup>9</sup> summarised the results of libraries' retrieval efforts by saying that there has never been easy answer to overdue question.

Book theft, mutilation, illegal borrowing, over

borrowing and defacement are threatening the Security of library resources. In Okoye-Ikonta's<sup>10</sup> Studies of Security problems and Alafiatayo's<sup>11</sup> studies of malpractices in the NUL, these delinquent acts were reported as being major malpractices in the NUL. They warned that the NUL need to employ Sanctions, recovery and preventive measures to minimise malpractices. The measures should be taken seriously to be effective or else the NUL would be losing a high number of books annually, constituting a substantial amount of money. This would even be worse as the book industry has been hard hit by various economic measures taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The book would be priced beyond the reach of majority of the potential buyers. They advised the NUL to be more vigilant than ever before; apply sanctions strictly on any breach of rules and regulations; use dedicated and vigilant guards along with turnstile to deter those with stealing inclination; provide cheap photocopying facilities; instal generating plants to stabilise power supply; conduct periodic search of students' hostels and; offer user education to educate users on the need for and value of libraries.

There is extensive literature on library malpractices which its review can take several pages but the concern of this paper is the experience in KIL, that is, what are the acts and how the library has tackled them and suggestions that can be made.

## DELINQUENCY IN KIL

A number of delinquent acts take place in KIL. Library experience of some of them is sad and the library authority has had tough times dealing with delinquent acts. I served for eleven years in the Readers' Services Division of KIL which handles library delinquency. What follows therefore, is a discussion on popular delinquencies in KIL.

### (i) Extended Borrowing:

This is keeping books that have been borrowed longer than the time allowed by the library. Like in all other lending libraries, extended borrowing in KIL has posed serious concern which no solution has completely solved the problem. The act is out of sheer greediness or lack of consideration for others who may have need for the same books checked out. Some of the KIL users have gone to the extent of keeping borrowed books for a term, session or even for the whole duration of their course. Some of them are ready to pay for the overdue fine or abandon the overdues elsewhere at the end of their course provided that only themselves should have access to the materials. We have had the experience of collecting borrowed books abandoned in the students' toilets, on the streets and in the offices of departed staff. It is even uncountable the number of times one has been approached to return overdue books for borrowers (staff and students) who have kept books long overdue. They would want to avoid paying overdue fines or cannot afford it. They would either find a library staff and enjoy his good will to return them

free of charge, abandon them elsewhere or take them home.

Checking this group of delinquents has not been easy though some reported cases of success are available. The traditional practice of sending reminders to readers is applied and appreciated by some busy users. But these reminders get to wrong addresses due to change of Halls, Faculties or Departments by users without informing the library to effect the change in their registration. Some users ignore the reminders in their pigeon holes knowing that they relate to overdues. We studied the situation and discovered that they are intentionally left unattended to. This recovery method has now come to a halt as there are no funds to procure stationaries.

However, students' overdues would normally be high during the session but at the end of the session this is highly reduced because the departure of many of the final year students would be delayed for lack of clearance and non-final year students would return overdues before vacating to avoid piling up overdue fines. Staff members would normally be sent reminders, then followed by bills for overdue fines. Failure to come and settle the bills in the library, the bills would then be sent to the Payroll for direct deduction from the staff salary. Staff would not normally be hesitant to act on receiving the bills and this accounted for their overdues not usually very high. Today, this recovery method has gradually come to a halt for lack of stationeries, hence there is a poor return of overdues on the

part of staff.

Amnesty, a period usually set aside for the return of overdues without payment of fines due for the extended borrowing, is one recovery strategy used by KIL. Although no record of returns kept during amnesty periods, the returns have always been substantial with defaulters appreciating such gesture from the library. But my observation of the recovery strategy is that it does not encourage prompt return of overdues. Readers tend to wait for such amnesty periods to return their overdues. They go to the extent of asking library staff when amnesty would be granted to overdue returners. Amnesty as I have observed should not be practised quite often as it does not encourage prompt return of overdues for wider circulation of books amongst readers. In fact, it is common knowledge that overdue fines are imposed to encourage prompt return for wider circulation of books.

In KIL any overdue or suspected illegally removed library material brought into the library is confiscated at the security check-point. The material could be for any library, both inside and outside the country. It is then sent to the owner library. This gesture initiated in this country by KIL has been appreciated by many libraries in this country and abroad. However, defaulters have learned to avoid bringing into the library such overdues and suspected illegally removed books. But we still recover these materials through surprise checks of the hostels.

Another strategy being used by KIL to recover its resources is clearance with the library at the end of one's stay in the University. In terms of recovering the materials back to the library in the end, the recovery method is effective with the full cooperation of all the units concerned in the university and careful keeping of loan records by the library. Supposing you do not clear with the library and you are refused NYSC posting, statement of results, refund of caution fee, last salary or benefits at departure? Certainly, you have no option but to clear and KIL will then have all its books back from departing students and staff. But this cooperation has always been one of principle rather than practice. We had, on several occasions, recovered books from offices of departed staff or located and contacted staff on books they failed to return on departure. One can make a long list of such staff. A good number of students too still find no difficulties leaving the university with library books without clearance with the library. We have had to compile long lists of departed students who did not clear with the library and yet had books to return. These overdue are either declared lost or the loan records kept as archives.

Clearing departing registered readers needs securing the good will of library staff too, hence appeals are always made to staff to avoid offering undue assistance but to be fair and just in clearing readers.

Mounting surprise checks of students' hostels on the



main campus with the view to recovering overdue and illegally removed library materials has been carried out on a number of occasions with tremendous successes. The first of its kind after several years came in July, 1982 with a total recovery of 1,781 books, out of which 36 were suspected stolen. Another surprise check was carried out in October 1983 with a recovery of 375 books of which 83 were suspected stolen. And even during a vacation in 1984 a check of the students hostels yielded 190 books abandoned. A huge success was recorded in July 1985 when 1,407 books were recovered from the students' hostels during a surprise check. Out of this number 16 were suspected stolen while 273 belonged to other libraries. The last surprise check was in March 1986 with 1,680 books recovered. Out of this number 28 suspected stolen and 491 belonged to other libraries<sup>12</sup>.

Culprits of suspected stolen books are usually brought before the vice Chancellor Advisory Committee on Students Discipline and those found guilty are punished appropriately. The 1982 suspected stolen cases which emerged from the hostel search were not presented to the disciplinary committee but the 1983 cases were taken to the committee. However, a number of problems cropped up and the suspects could not be disciplined. The 1984 surprise check ended with ten persons disciplined by the committee. They were either suspended or suspended and also paid charges/fines. The 1986 check had eleven persons to face the disciplinary committee. Unfortunately, no action has been taken on the cases up to

this time of writing and should be considered closed as the suspects have left the university<sup>13</sup>.

To deter others from this anti-social activity, KIL publicises the activities of the offenders and this would have had a great impact in the seventies when the book industry was cheap. But now even with disciplinary and security measures, cases of theft are still there because of scarce and highly priced books which the majority of readers cannot afford.

Surprise check has proved effective but only when it is carefully planned, the cooperation of units concerned secured and the plan executed without being leaked out. The timing for the search must not be the same period or else students will learn to prepare for that period. Care must be taken because of the legal aspects involved, hence the exercise is not an easy one.

(ii) Book Theft/Illegal Removal/Mutilation

Like any other library, KIL is not free from the activities of those with stealing inclinations. These thieves would always have eyes on rare, expensive and beautiful library materials to steal or mutilate. Alafiatayo<sup>14</sup> in his research article confirmed that after overdue comes mutilation followed by theft as the most serious delinquent acts in the NUL studied. The magnitude of these acts especially theft has forced KIL into rounding the library building with burglary proofs to the extent that the emergency escape gates of this 42,988 meters square giant

library cannot be used during emergency.

We have had opportunity to collect books thrown out of the library through the windows at nights by readers hoping to collect the books on coming out of the library. Readers have been apprehended at the Library Security check point with illegally removed or mutilated materials. They hide the books in their dresses, bags or files. Sometimes, the date due slip is removed and marks of the library ownership stamp erased to make it look as if it is a personal book. Or a current date due slip for an officially checked-out book is removed and used for a book one wished to steal. At the check point he will not be stopped because the book is not due. On coming out of the library he removes the date due slip and he can then keep the book for as long as he likes or convert it to personal property since no loan record is in his name. Fake or personally designed date due stamps are sometimes brought into the library to check books out as if officially issued to the defaulter. A very special case (in 1984) was the one who forged the library's date due stamp and used it to check books to himself. When he was apprehended after a hot chase, it was discovered that he was not a student of the university and so, as a policy, was handed over to the police for prosecution. He was sentenced to six months imprisonment with an option of N169.99k fine.

Records of recovery of books through surprise check of students' hostels have shown that a good number of books are illegally removed from KIL and it is feared that with scarce

and exorbitant book prices now, the solution to these problems could be far. Now and then books are discovered mutilated or defaced by greedy readers who use the cover of the night or hide themselves in the stacks during the day to mutilate. We rarely apprehend anybody committing this crime because it is difficult to know when it is being committed and when one is suspected, it is difficult to prove too.

The library also experiences cases of impersonation or illegal borrowing whereby one uses someone's borrowing tickets without permission to borrow library materials and the owner of the tickets is held responsible. The culprit does this in order to over borrow or steal.

How has KIL been combatting theft, mutilation and defacement? The security point has guards at the entrance to permit entry to only eligible members and the exit to ensure that only legally borrowed materials are allowed out of the library. Bags are not allowed into the library. Emergency lights, torchlights, and gaslamps are provided for use during power-cuts. Security lights and burglary proofs have been provided round the library building. Ownership rubber stamp is carefully stamped on all materials coming into library. A set of specially designed date due stamps with special codes known only to library staff is being used. This has helped to check those who come with fake date due stamps. For lack of sufficient funds some of these measures are poorly maintained.

Staff are always reminded to be vigilant to check

mutilation, theft and defacement. Some of the staff are placed in strategic places to watch out. Even reading tables that had semi-enclosure, the tops had been chopped off so that readers would not hide to mutilate.

Photocopying facilities exist to allow readers photocopy materials that cannot be lent out to help avert stealing or mutilation tendency. In view of insufficient funds for the library to finance its services, the library premises has been rented out to two private companies to provide efficient and regular photocopying services.

As a deterrent to others, apprehended cases of theft and mutilation are sent to the disciplinary committee for disciplinary measures to be taken. A number of suspects have been tried and punished accordingly, ranging from expulsion to suspension from the university or use of library or replacement of the material or both. In the case of non-university member, it is referred to the police for court redress.

To minimise impersonation, KIL insists that you come personally to borrow books you need and, if you have to send, give a signed written note. Registered members are informed of their responsibility for the safe keeping of their tickets. Library staff are instructed and reminded to ensure that details on the reader's identity card and borrowing tickets agreed before issuing books.

(iii) Overborrowing

This implies a reader has more borrowing tickets than is legally permitted and he therefore, borrows more books at a time than is officially allowed. This is made possible by a reader coming to register more than one time or complain of loss of some tickets. In the early seventies this practice was not common in KIL but started rearing its ugly head in the early eighties. It became necessary for KIL to take steps to check the malpractice. Hence on registering new readers their admission or appointment letters must be signed, that is, after having met the registration requirements. By this your admission or appointment letter would show that you have once registered with the library should you come again for registration. For a student not registering in the first year of stay in the university, the student would have to present an introductory letter from the Head of Department confirming the student still being there before the registration can be done. Before then, a careless or busy library staff could mistakenly register a reader twice because of faulty filing of registration records. This measure has been effective except for the case of replacement of purported lost borrowing tickets which can give room to the possession of more tickets than is allowed and therefore, over borrowing can result. At any rate, with computerised circulation system double registration and overborrowing can easily be checked.

(iv) Hiding Materials from other Users

This is not illegal removal of materials from the library but a selfish behaviour which makes it very difficult for one to locate available materials that are not already on loan, lost or withdrawn temporarily. Books are taken and hidden where they are not supposed to be.

The practice has become very common in KIL today that it is daily some circulation books are collected from the shelves of reference books and sent back to the open shelves. They have been brought there to prevent other users from having access to the books. Books in the same stack area, say open shelves, are not necessarily misshelved but hidden on stack tops or elsewhere by readers. Library staff have to carry periodic check of the stack tops to clear such books and in the reference section, circulation books and other reference books hidden there are cleared mostly through shelf-reading. But with shortage of staff and busy session, shelf-reading is hardly properly carried out except during vacations. And with few tickets to borrow at a time, without sufficient copies of books, without photocopying facilities or available but costly photocopying services, it will be hard to minimise this malpractice. Library staff must have to be vigilant and regularly return the books to their respective locations for accessibility.

### CONCLUSION

All along discussion has featured delinquency in KIL, the solutions attempted and my candid stand on some of the solutions or delinquencies. Like Alafiatayo concluded in his research article, anti-social acts in libraries are a universal problem which cannot be completely stamped out. However, I would like to say that internally controlled measures are, in most cases, more effective than those externally controlled. To internally control delinquent acts is to inculcate in library users positive attitude towards library and its use through user education, publicity and seminars/work shops. While this would seem a welcome and appreciable course of action I wish to stress the following areas again for greater success:

- (i) Strigent security and disciplinary measures must be employed and maintained to be able to combat to some reasonable success the malpractices in the present period of scarce and expensive library resources. Some of the existing security measures have been relaxed. Emergency lights, torchlights, gaslamps and generating plant have become dormant giving room to theft and mutilation during electricity power-cuts. The disciplinary committee has also closed eyes to suspects presented to it as those of 1986 were not prosecuted and punished.



(ii) Computerised circulation system will go a long way to reducing many delinquent acts and enhancing efficient and effective running of circulation system.

(iii) The library should build a strong cooperation with the University Teaching Departments, Registry, Bursary and Students Affairs Division for effective recovery of library materials. Efforts in this direction have been made and should be further intensified.

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