NIGERIAN LIBRARIES IN PRE-COLONIAL ERA

BY

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ABSTRACT

The history of library development in Nigeria is causing great concern for those wanting to know the real or gift of it Librarians and historians writing about Nigeria particularly in the area of library scene tend to omit many important facts. Several authors writing about library history in Nigeria attempted to put the picture in the dark by writing only about library activity which started recently around 1920 or 1930. Many writers preferred to relate the history of library in Nigerian with the coming of the White man. This paper attempts to shed light to this distortion of history. It tries to show that libraries existed in some parts of the country particularly in the North before Nigeria itself became a geographical entity. At the turn of 18th century and early 19th century, libraries were well scattered throughout the North. At a stage Dan Fodio the founder of 19th century Sokoto empire had to cry out one time for the failure of return of his books borrowed. He considered it as bad habit for people to borrow books from Ulamai and fail to return them. By this, it is evidently clear that Dan Fodio's statement supported the belief that libraries were known in this part of the country as early as 18th century and before.

The importance of libraries to a nation's economic and technological advancement cannot be over emphasized. Libraries play an enviable role in promoting educational advancement and in preserving cultural heritage of a nation. They help to give enlightenment and information to the citi2enry. Without any doubt, libraries are intellectual repositories of a nation.

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The Nigerian public have started realizing this important role of libraries in recent times. Federal, State and Local Governments are now determined more than ever before to establish and raise the standard of national, public, and academic libraries in the country. Libraries of primary and post primary schools, colleges of technology and Polytechnics are not left out either. In short, the interest of Government in the development of libraries in Nigeria is now very high. Yet, the library history in Nigeria is still very obscure. The suggestion that librarians or historians trying to write library history in Nigeria should study them carefully and profoundly before they write so as to avoid distortion of genuine history, was quite in order. Because many librarians writing about library history in Nigeria confined themselves to events or to library activity of twentieth century alone and forgot anything that went beyond that period. It is the intention of the writer therefore to try to: (a) high-light some facts that library activity started in this country even before Nigeria became a geographical or political entity and (b) invite interest to more rigorous research into proper library history in Nigeria since librarianship in this part of the world is gradually becoming an enviable commodity.

The word Nigeria is not appropriate for this paper since it was non-existent before twentieth century. It is used here for convenience and to avoid misconception. The word Western Sudan might have been appropriate because it was in

use by then. But it was avoided for fear of unpleasant confusion of the word, because it is no more familiar to our people. By definition, Bilad al-Sudan is a name given to this part of the world by the Arab travellers. But the area is popularly known as Western Sudan. Bilad al-Sudan or western Sudan refers to the countries and peoples of South of the Sahara Desert. What is now known as Northern Nigeria was a part! Spencer[2] and Al-Hajj[3] go by this definition. Sultan Bello in his Infakul Maisuri refers to Kano, Katsina, Kanem, etc. as Bilad al-Tokror[4]. Bilad al-Sudan and Bilad al-Tokror refer to the same geographical area. Dan Fodio refers to Bilad al-Sudan as the "Land of pagans"[5]. Library is used here to refer to any record ~~or records~~ arranged and preserved for public use whether in clay tablet, ~~papyrus~~ roll, parchment codex, printed and non-printed materials or microfilm reel, and in whatever language the material was written.

The writer's observation was that librarians or historians writing about library development in Nigeria or history of Nigeria in general tend to limit their scope to twentieth century scene alone. Last[6] only made reference to the manuscript libraries which he noted as an innovation. Nnaji[7] accepted the need for research into library history in Nigeria before twentieth century, but quickly warned that such innovation requires archaelogical searches. This claim may not be absolutely true since literature of pre-twentieth century libraries are still available that can shed lights

into library activity of the period. Harris[8], Aje[9], Ifidon[10] and Wynter[11] all in their articles dwelt mostly on mid-twentieth century library development in Nigeria. Adeyemi[12] in his chronology of Nigeria library development started only between 1910 and 1920 beginning with Lagos Book Club.

Lack of attention into the history of library development before twentieth century and because of rich collections the libraries of this period had; some writers have started making calls for research into libraries of pre-twentieth century in Nigeria. Adeyemi (1975) quoting Kensdale in his Ph.D dissertation expressed such desire. He states thus:

> The history of libraries in Nigeria can be traced to the Arabic collections which existed in various parts of the North of the country for centuries as extension of the Timbuktu centre of learning before Nigeria became a geographical entity under the British flag[13].

It is noted here that Arabic collections played a leading role as historical source for the history of Nigeria. Adeleye[14] in his writing of Nigerian history confessed solemnly his use of Arabic materials. Several historians including librarians have continued to admire the rich collections in Arabic in their pursuit of authentic information about Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Angered by lack of attempts by librarians in making research into the libraries in the North since Kensdale's article in WALA in 1955, Harris' remarks:

> Finally, what is often over looked though not at this conference there were libraries in the North before Nigeria itself came into existence. The full extent of those is still not known a reflection, perhaps on our professional maturity, but since Kensdale's article in Wala news June 1955, there has b been no excuse for not knowing of their e existence. The knowledge has widened c considerably since then[15].

Bello[16] in his study of pre-twentieth century libraries in Western Sudan discovered that there were libraries scattered all over the North before the advent of the British and even before the establishment of Dan Fodio empire of between 18th and 19th centuries. It was said that Born or (Kanem) was one of the centres of learning in Bilad al-Sudan that was before Nigeria became a geographical entity. Islamic system of education was well established there by the fifteenth century. Muhammad quoting John Lavers on libraries and education in Borno, states that:

> .....more advanced studies were pursued in centres such as that of Shaykh Ahmed Machana Kalumbardu or in Birni Gazargana itself. We are further informed that in the capital, in addition to the numerous schools organised by Mallams, the principal school was in main mosque which was provided with a library and where not only reading, writing and calculating were taught but also other sciences.[17]

The writer would not like to dwell much on library development in the Northern part of the country before 15th century. He would like however, to confine himself with 18th and 19th centuries library scene and attempt to high-light the role played by the founders of the celebrated Sokoto empire for their contribution to the library development in

Nigeria particularly Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio during his life time. What was known as "Library" in its true sense in the North could be associated with the influence of Timbuktu as a centre of learning and including scholars from North Africa. At the turn of 18th century and during the early 19th century the literary activity flourished in the North. The by-product of this activity was the development of libraries among the scholars. The formation of Islamic government whose seat was in Sokoto gave impetus and quest for private and semi-public libraries. The leaders of the empire encouraged the use of books and they themselves wrote many scholarly books on various disciplines during their time. The writer would like to mention here that the "Libraries" referred to here during that period should not be equated with our present status of libraries. The present standing of most libraries throughout the world is of twentieth century phenomena. John and Harris state thus:

> .....But on the whole these libraries (Italy, France, Britain, etc.), have still been available to only a few of the people the collectors, librarians, teachers, a few students and scholars and the concept of popular libraries of mass culture, has been realized only in the twentieth century, if at all[18].

Before then, it is pertinent to explain that the leaders of Sokoto empire concentrated on writings, collection and preservation of manuscripts, this did not mean that their collections should not be regarded as libraries. During this period and through out the world manuscripts collections dominated library resources. The first printing press

appeared in Europe at the turn of 15th century or early 16th century. And the first Arabic printing press was brought into African continent through Egypt by Napoleon in 1798[19]. The libraries of the leaders of the empire comprised of their valuable works as well as their personal possessions of imported books including gifts they received from Europe. They made these valuable materials available to their communities; scholars and students the same way as was done in Europe by then. It is clear here that the use of library during this period was not new to the scholars and students and even to the public. The library service was widely used by them. Sultan Bello, spoke about one of his teachers Muhammad bin Bakri al-Wankari of Timbuktu. He said he benefitted very much from the teacher's library. He narrated the story far thus:

> The collection of al-Wankari was full of precious and expensive books, representing all branches of sciences. Most of the books were lost to people who borrowed them and failed to return them. He did not ever know most of the borrowers. I (Sultan Bello) went to him one day, wanting to borrow some books from him. The teacher allowed me to take away all what I could lay my hands upon[20].

Sultan Bello was noted to have read or to be in possession of not less than 20,000 books.

The leader and founder of Sokoto empire, Uthman Dan Fodio was the man who was so acclaimed to have enlivened library development in his life time. Through some of Dan Fodio's writings one was able to understand clearly about library situation from the end of 18th century and through

19th century. In one of his poems written in Fulfulde, Dan Fodio complained bitterly in 1792, about people coming to borrow books from Ulamai and failed to return them. He wrote:

Defte'he mairi to ngu'yama ngartata
Ngalibi non be ahi'en be cahnata.

Translation:

The books you have, if borrowed would not be returned to you.
Often, it is so, you will see them the borrower, but no greeting.

This poem shows clearly about the existence of libraries in the part of the country before the advent of the white man. The use of "library" in the 18th century as shown in the poem indicates that the people of that period actually understood what the library was all about. It is not known if any where in the world understanding of use of library had reached this dimension as to warrant this statement. The library culture in 18th century in this part of the world was second to none.

Dan Fodio encouraged his people to create interest in reading and to pay constant visits to the libraries of Ulamai for more enlightenment. He states:

> Among the exalted positions of people are: to share sitting with the Ulamai, to show love to the Jurists; to show interest in the study of books of sciences and the rhetorics; to show great interest in visiting the libraries of Ulamai[22].

During the time of Dan Fodio, books were freely sent out all over the places and lending of books among the people and Ulamai was very much in practice. It was reported that people went as far as Agades (now in Niger Republic) to

European libraries of a similar type. This view we accept and recommend[26].

However, the writer would like to investigate later to test the authenticity of Pearson's statement that Arabic manuscripts and private libraries had existed in Western Region before the advent of the British. He cited examples of Ibadan, Oyo, Iwo, Abeokuta and Lagos where such libraries were found. He added that these sources presented important information on the social, religous and political life of Yoruba Muslims[27].

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