

# THE COLONIAL FACTOR IN LIBRARY EDUCATION IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING WEST AFRICA

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**Abstract:** This paper is a brief attempt to trace the development of library education in West Africa from the pre-independence days to the present time. The writer tries to provide a historical perspective of evolution while attempting to show the influence of the colonial masters at each stage of the development. It has been found that right from the early days of library training in West Africa to the present time, Anglo-American influences have dominated library school programmes. The writer concludes by suggesting that some of the contradictions on African librarianship can only be eliminated through an interchange of ideas and the introduction of workable adaptations.

## Background

The education and training of libraries in Africa as in all other colonial areas, for any years followed the British tradition, with regard to their motivation and method. There were many reasons for this development, but the most significant one is that libraries were established on a permanent basis in Africa by British librarians and educationists, hence the transfer of British theories of library practice.

Before library schools were established in African countries, most of the students from the British colonies were trained abroad mainly in Britain. There was no alternative but to award overseas scholarships to deserving students. The students often went to Britain to qualify to be Library Association (LA) Associates or Fellows.

## Advantages of overseas education

Arguments put forward in favour of overseas education may be summarized as follows:

1. Scholarship could be obtained without much difficulty from Governments and cultural foundations. It was also assumed that the public would gain confi-

dence in the knowledge that their librarians held qualification that were internationally recognised.

2. It was at that time cheaper to send a few students abroad, than to recruit highly-paid expatriate staff, put up an expensive building, and provide facilities for students in a local set-up.
3. The content of a local syllabus had not been given sufficient thought.
4. In ideal situations indigenous lecturers should be preferred to expatriate ones. But indigenous staff were not available. It was also realised that even if foreigners were to be employed, they need a long period of adjustment to local conditions before they could communicate meaningfully with students.
5. Equipment for teaching and technical aspects of librarianship - book production, printing and data processing was lacking in all parts of Africa. If these subjects were taught in theory only, students would not fully understand them.

### **Disadvantages of overseas education**

1. It was difficult at that time for metropolitan library schools to fully comprehend the priorities of African libraries and provide tuition accordingly.
2. The alien culture of Europe did in fact induce unhealthy psychological conditions in students who did not have too resilient a mental and emotional constitution. Whatever benefits are gained by travel were therefore negated by these adverse conditions.
3. Some governments were reluctant to release their best students for overseas study because if they did not return, as happened all too often, there would be more serious problems for the African countries.
4. Education abroad is expensive in terms of foreign exchange.
5. In terms of quantity, foreign education is not very productive. Local schools produce more students, although prolific student production may not necessarily be a good thing.
6. Prolonged foreign education may lead to professional alienation. Infused with great professional ideals, the young librarians are determined to overthrow the established order without delay, but this reforming zeal is often in excess of the remedy required to correct faults in the organisation.
7. A local school, offering local qualifications, is better able to integrate teaching with the examining process, and can make use of local experts for fringe subjects.

Despite the overwhelming evidence in favour of education at home, and despite the various incongruities noted by British visitors themselves as being the effect of foreign education, scholarship awards and local training schemes continued to follow the British direction.

## Comparative librarianship

In order to counteract some of the disadvantages in the education of African librarians abroad, comparative librarianship was introduced as a major subject in some of the Library Schools in Britain. The formation in 1967 of the International and Comparative Librarianship Group (ICLG) of the Library Association, was perhaps the first collective expression of interest, in evaluating library theory and practice in countries outside the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

A number of British Library Schools teach comparative studies involving developed and developing library systems. There have also been a number of FLA theses on African subjects. Impressive though these comparative studies may appear, they contain some weaknesses which should be pointed out.

First, some of the lecturers involved can only give students technical assistance of a purely bibliographical kind. They may also give guidance in methodology, but mostly by reference to the methodology of other disciplines. This is to say that the methodology of comparative librarianship is not sufficiently developed to enable either supervisor or student to properly evaluate the results of his work.

Secondly, despite the recent upsurge of library literature about Africa,<sup>2</sup> the quantity is still insubstantial. What is more, library systems in Africa do not really compare with Britain's, in terms of service, facilities or use. As the library institution and the concept of librarianship are more developed in Britain than in any individual African country, most comparative studies will tend to be lopsided. The basic and more fruitful approach in all comparative studies is to analyse systems on a similar basis. In other words, the two systems much have dimensional identities.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, a few of the lecturers appointed to lecture African students often do not have a deep professional experience of Africa. Their knowledge of African library problems was either gained from fleeting impressions acquired during short visits to the continent or from reading articles in professional journals. This is not meant to deride, but to comment on the nature of comparative studies in some of the schools overseas.

On the credit side the comparative approach to librarianship gives the profession a cosmopolitan character. It is an antidote to parochialism, a habit which for several decades was threatening to become an occupational hazard. Comparative studies are of value also as purely an academic exercise, as it offers opportunities for integrating librarianship with varying determinants.

## **Africanisation of the L. A. Syllabus**

For the past several years Ronald Bengé<sup>4</sup> had been an implacable critic of the British structure, particularly the separation of examinations from teaching. It would be recalled however that the first ever attempt to adapt the LA syllabus to African needs was made by Michael Jolliffe, the then Librarian of Khartoun University College Sudan.<sup>5</sup> He reported to a 1957/58 session of his library committee that he had designed a syllabus related in standard to the LA's but smaller in content and limited in application". It would be a purely local examination to provide a channel of advancement to Junior Staff.

The main concession made by the LA to overseas African candidates did not appear until the new 1964 syllabus came into being. But it was governed by regulations which gave it a reception of mixed feelings. It required six months' notice of a candidate's intention to sit. Although administratively necessary, this condition, together with obligatory attendance at a full time school, caused despair in those countries where there were no library schools.

## **University departments**

After several years of preparing and writing the LA's certificate examinations, some African countries found it necessary to establish Departments or Institutes of Library Studies in their Universities. A university course was justified on the following grounds:

- a. It would conform with modern trends in library education; library graduates will compete on an equal footing with their colleagues in other professions and this would raise the status of librarianship.
- b. It is important that librarians should have an appropriate general education. Libraries in Africa would be unable to recruit high quality staff if librarians' qualification were not made equal to university degrees.

## **British and American theories**

Before any significant number of library schools had been established in Africa, there was a heated controversy as to the kind of education more suited to West African needs. The main point at issue was the level (post-graduate or professional). The controversy came to a head at Ibadan in the course of the Unesco Seminar for Public Library Development in Africa, held in July, 1953.

In a review article on the Seminar, Jessie Carnell<sup>6</sup> emphasised that the basic need for African Libraries was not "leaders" but "workers". At any rate leaders were not

made in schools. The essentials for leadership were certain innate qualities such as character and a high level of intelligence; quality of leadership evinced themselves through discipline of work and the experience of responsibility.

The director of the Gold Coast (Now Ghana) Library Board, E.J.A. Evans was even more forthright in denouncing the idea of a post-graduate leadership course. She expressed a total disagreement to the whole idea.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the two main large library systems in West Africa at that time, namely those of universities of Ibadan and Ghana (led by John Harris, the Librarian at the University of Ibadan) supported the leadership idea and encouraged its development.

It is significant that Unesco did not invite American Librarians to the Seminar, presumably because their system was not considered appropriate to African public libraries. The theme of the Seminar itself suggested that Unesco was more interested in professional training than education, at higher level. If this deduction is correct, then it would explain the Assistant Director-General's intention to found a professional course on the British, rather than the American pattern, despite the seminar's recommendations to the contrary.

#### **The Lancour report of 1958**

A request by members of the West African Library Association (WALA) to the Carnegie Corporation for funds to establish a library training school, led to the arrival of Harold Lancour in West Africa to make a reconnaissance survey of the library situation, to assist the Corporation evaluate each request for funds. In his report Harold Lancour stated his preference for a school in a local institution of higher education, "with the resources, personnel and prestige to develop a high quality professional training agency".<sup>8</sup>

After a careful appraisal of the universities in the subregion, he came to the conclusion that Ibadan had better accommodation and bibliographical facilities than the rest. Upon his recommendation to the Carnegie Corporation, a post-graduate Institute of Librarianship was accordingly opened at Ibadan in October, 1960 on a grant of \$88,000 for the first five years after which the university would take over financial responsibility.

A prospectus was published by the Institute the same year, which announced among its main objectives, the investigation of "problems of librarianship and bibliography, and with particular attention to the leadership level".<sup>9</sup> In the implementation of this objective however, the institute for a number of years operated a curriculum which gave it very little scope to exercise its African prerogatives.

Initially, from 1960-1963 the Ibadan Institute recruited both graduate and non-graduate students and awarded them the same diploma after a course lasting one academic year.<sup>10</sup> Non graduate entrants who passed two parts of the ALA could proceed with the rest of the papers under the tuition of the Institute (Nongraduates have since been eliminated from the programme).

Incidentally, no student outside of Nigeria applied for a place at Ibadan in the first few years. This was due partly to the fact that the authorities in the other West African countries preferred to send their trainees abroad. Nigerian graduates themselves did not clamour for places at Ibadan because there were limited opportunities in library work for graduates, as compared to opportunities in other professions.

Critics in Ghana would have looked upon the first few years of Ibadan with consternation. Its adoption of the ALA syllabus and qualification was a contradiction of the much vaunted leadership idea. The fact that there were more non-graduate than graduate students confirmed the view that workers, not leaders were more in demand at that time.

To conclude the controversy, it seems that each faction (led on the one hand by John Harris and on the other by Evelyn Evans) advocated the system best known to themselves, and which seemed to conform with hallowed practice in university and public libraries respectively. If this is so, then their attitudes were more subjective than objective, and their inability to find a compromise probably stemmed from circumstances beyond their control.

### **Present situation**

When one takes stock of the staff situation of the 1950's, the greater need in quantitative terms, was for workers, and not leaders. However, the situation has now changed. As time went on and libraries in West Africa grew in size and complexity, the need for more mature persons with university education became apparent. More library schools have therefore been set up in the various countries, that are offering post-graduate and middle-level courses.

Currently, there are about twenty library schools in English-Speaking West Africa, with a large majority of them in Nigeria. Apart from the Ibadan library school, all the other schools in Nigeria have first degree programmes in operation.<sup>11</sup>

The Department of Library Studies at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone offers undergraduate certificate and diploma course. The Department of Library and Archival Studies at the University of Ghana has undergraduate diploma, post-

graduate diploma, and masters programmes. All the library schools have structured their courses along the Anglo-American models although attempts are continuously being made at modifications.

### Conclusion

Many of the issues raised in this paper have not yet been clearly articulated, much less documented in the form of textbooks. It may be necessary to treat them at seminars and conferences so that different points of view can be collected into coherent, meaningful theories. In so far as library education in West Africa was based on foreign systems, and continues to be operated on those premises, it should be necessary also to exchange views on persistent contradictions of African librarianship with experienced practitioners from the older countries, so that workable adaptations can be introduced. To this end, current studies in comparative librarianship, which take into consideration the diverse streams of world dimension should be encouraged.

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