

## CHAPTER EIGHT

LIBRARY HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BLUEPRINT FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF  
CONTEMPORARY LIBRARIES

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## ABSTRACT

*History is the study of the past as well as memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation and interpretation of information about these past events. The world today is a knowledge society, everyone is interested in getting what has been discovered, how to use the discoveries to solve day-to-day problems, and how to share or communicate the results for furtherance of knowledge. Hence, library historiography deals with the writing, presentation and interpretation of the past of librarianship. The past is central and often fundamental part of the present and future. Libraries are social institutions created to conserve knowledge, preserve the cultural heritage, provide information, undergird and underpin education and research; and to serve as fountains of recreation. Today, the library is conceived not as an archive, but as the foyer of living ideas-ideas that permeate and animate all aspects of life. The librarians themselves are veritable mediators between man and a vast array of information resources, produced through generations. Their primary objective is to maximize the social utility of these records of human culture for the benefit of the society. This paper is seek to examine how the past knowledge of librarianship can aid the librarians to effectively manage the library via function of planning, organizing, coordinating, directing, controlling and supervising the library and its patrons for the total actualization of the aim, objective and purpose of librarianship. Furthermore, the following recommendations are made; proper collection development be put in place and fully implemented, regular updates of resources and upgrading of the reference section of the library, proper mechanism be put in place for adequate management to the libraries and urgent need for digitalization of the library.*

**KEYWORDS:** Past, event, knowledge, management, librarians and library

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## INTRODUCTION

The word history comes ultimately from ancient Greek "itopia" meaning "inquiry"; the Greek word was borrowed into classical Latin as "historia" meaning "investigation, inquiry, research, and account description, written account of past

events. Primarily, history is the study of the past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation and interpretation of information about these events.

Historiography involves the study of history and methodology of history as a discipline. It can also be the study of a body of historical work such as the study of the history of libraries as the historiography of libraries. The Merriam- Webster Dictionary define historiography as “the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials and the synthesis of particulars into narrative that will stand the test critical methods”. According to Furay and Salevouris (2010) historiography is “the study of the way history has been and is written. The history of historical writing... when you study “historiography” you do not study the events of the past directly but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of the individual historians”. Therefore, Library historiography is the writing of the history of librarianship. Krzys (2003: 1621) define library historiography.

As the writing of the history of agencies, people and movement within or contributing to the development of librarianship; written history of those agencies, people or movement...library history is that branch of history that investigates the actions of people, the activities of a agencies, or the effects of social movements within or contributing to the development of librarianship for the sake of professional awareness.

It is essential to note that studying or writing history of library, cannot be done in isolation, so Thompson (1977) stated three basic principle of librarianship as (1) libraries are subject to political, social and economic processes operating in the society. (2) Library development in general fluctuate with the rise and decline of learning and (3) librarians however, influential they may be, have no power over the ultimate existence of libraries they manage. The societies that create the libraries may conserve or destroy them. Therefore, writing history of library must be an investigation conducted within the larger scope of civilization looking at the economic, political, religious and cultural climate of the times. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002:73) in affirmation observed that a clear delineation of forces likes political, economic and social which shaped the foundations for the eventual emergence of libraries is valuable in understanding the current problems facing the institutions. Ideally, library history should not be studied on its own, but always in relation to the relevant social, educational and publishing history (Olle, 1971:11).

Krzye (2003) describes three categories of library history. Firstly, library history written with a general purpose, the intent may be simply to report key events in history. However, in another case the goal may be to explore events within their historical context. Secondly, library history can be written in terms of specific subjects such as a biography, movement or agency. And thirdly, writing library history can focus on the method the historian has chosen to employ, for instance a writer might focus on statistical survey, case studies, interviews or historical travelogues as a way to describe library history.

Whether, any of the three categories, writing or investigating the history of libraries can be very difficult; as over the centuries; Buter (1933:79), put it thus “each age has formed its collections of graphic records to conform to its intellectual habits, from the simple equipment of a mediaeval monastery, limited to the needs prescribed

by its rule, through the meager collection of the early school, consisting only of texts required for the classroom, the modern form of public library has been developed through a long series of transformations." For instance, in the 1920's and 1930's, Mackenson and Inayatullah were some of the first people to focus on the history of Islamic librarianship, note this difficult as follows:

So far as I know, apart from the Egyptian writer Maqrizi's description, in his *Khitat* of the libraries that existed in his country and another Arabic work on libraries in Muslim Spain mentioned by Casiri, no systematic or satisfactory treatise on the numerous libraries that arose in the Muslim world has come down to us. It is only from occasional notices in works on biography, history and belles-lettres that we learn of their existence and a few details about them. The sources of our information on this subject are scarce and scattered; and it is often the case that we learn of a library or collection of books only when we come upon a report of how it came to a regrettable end, either by dispersion or destruction by accidental fire or through an act of vandalism (Inayatullah, 1930:156).

So the library historian who is a social science detective, who investigates past events related to the development of librarianship should know these difficult and others and should be able to apply the three skills relating to historical investigation, namely, use of evidence, assessing interpretations and analyzing change.

***Use Evidence.*** Historians use evidence in their attempt to produce accurate pictures of the past; whether interpreting the statements of leaders or assessing the value of an article, historians must distinguish fact from opinion and understand the contexts of the time when documents were produced. Arguments are made by combining different kinds of evidence from both primary and secondary sources.

***Assess interpretations.*** Historians must sort through diverse and often conflicting interpretations of the past. Understanding how libraries work within the context of a particular time or period is imprecise. The historian must identify multiple perspectives; evaluate conflicting views and also examine personal loyalties and biases.

***Analyze change.*** Historians must be able to determine the magnitude and significance of change. Comparing specific changes, using relevant examples helps determine causes of change and knowing that many factors combine to generate change.

The library historians should also apply historical revisionism which involves reinterpretation of standard thinking about a topic based on new evidence, perspectives and thoughts about a historical event. Regardless of the time, period, people are influenced by the *zeitgeist* or spirit of the time. In addition, additional information can provide new insights into history. From carbon dating to DNA analysis developments in related disciplines can impact our understanding of history. Also, access to information from other cultures expands our knowledge and changes in languages provide new insights in our interpretations of historical facts. Moreso, the library historian should develop a "Historical habits of Minds" which he can apply in future. As Steam notes:

The key to developing historical habits of mind...is having repeated experience in historical inquiry; such experience should involve a variety of materials and a diversity of analytical problems. Facts are essential in

this process, for historical analysis depends on data, but it does not matter whether these facts come from local, national or world history—although it's most useful to study a range of settings. What matters is learning how to assess different magnitudes of historical change, different examples of conflicting interpretations and multiple kinds of evidence. Developing the ability to repeat fundamental thinking habits through increasingly complex exercises is essential”.

It is the function of history to identify relations or connections between events and account for them. The episodic description of isolated events, which has been characteristic of much of the writing on the development of Nigerian libraries, has failed to illuminate our understanding of their development patterns. Henri Pirenne, a Belgian historian states that:

To construct history is to narrate it. From its first existence, it has consisted in narratives, that is, the telling of a succession of related episodes. Indeed, the essential work of the historian is to bring these episodes to light, to show relations existing between events, and in relating to them. Thus it appears that history is the expository narration of the course of human societies in the past.

Other historians who have an ontological view of history like White (1975) contend that “the distinctive task of the historian is to assess or measure the influence or virtually of a part up in a present. This implies discovering the links or connections between events as providing the key to the material causes in history.... The work of the historian is necessarily descriptive and idiographic. Furthermore, in the strict sense of them, the historian does not explain, he merely shows a particular events or a series of events as understandable as likely to have happen. According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) this is a misconception of historiography, the fact that the historian has to describe the events before attempting to explain them does not mean that history as a scholarly discipline, is a mere descriptive enterprise.

### **THE WHY OF LIBRARY HISTORIOGRAPHY**

The history of libraries is really the story of individual people seeking ways to store, organize and share knowledge or information from generation to generation. In many cases, these collections are built for personal pleasure while in others; they are created as part of a focus on learning, laws or religion. Regardless of their purpose, these libraries are much more than books and building. They represent the passions of those who created them. The library provides organized access to collections of materials that serve the informational needs of an individual or group, throughout history, people have used the quest for information, the pleasure of reading, or the desire to do public good as reasons for establishing libraries. By the critical study of the history of library one can authoritatively know why libraries were established.

Historians investigate change over time by analyzing events and evaluating evidence from the past, as Krzyr (2003:1621) observed

If an extraterrestrial spaceship had been stationed high above the region of the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile for the past 5000years and its sights has been directed towards libraries, the interpreters of the data

would have observed remarkable changes. Clay tablets of Mesopotamia and Papyrus rolls of Egypt would have given way centuries later to parchment and paper codices and then to microforms and computer tapes. The buildings that house these bibliographic records would have changed from monumental archives to modest private collections and functional public, academic, school and special libraries. Lastly, the users of the collections would have enlarged in scope from few priests, royalty and scribes to masses of students, researchers and ordinary citizens. From this stream of changes the interpreters of data would have to isolate the main currents of librarianship, to identify the forces that drew them along and to formulate a theory explaining all the phenomena observed.

They look for patterns and develop possible explanations for why and how events took place. Peter Stearns (1983) in his article "Why study History" states that: People live in the present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, why bother with what has been?. History is in fact very useful, actually indispensable, but the products of historical study are less tangible, sometimes less immediate, than those that stem from other disciplines. History should be studied because it is essential to individuals and to society, and because it harbors beauty... all definitions of history's utility, however, rely on two fundamental facts. In the first place, history offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave....., history must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behaves as it does in societal settings. This, fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history; it offers the only extensive evidentially base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives. The past causes the present, and so the future. Sometimes fairly recent history will suffice to explain a major development, but often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change, only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of institution or a society persist despite change.

Applying Steam's fundamental facts about history cited above to the study of libraries. First, history helps us understand how libraries function in society. How and why do people and societies behave in relationships with libraries? How and why do libraries exist? Second, to understand the factors that cause changes in libraries, we must look to the past. While aspects of libraries change over time, other elements continue unchanged. Why do some things change and others remind the same?

Understanding how people in the past constructed their lives helps us understand why and how libraries came to be and continued to persist for thousands of years. The challenges and triumphs of library advocates from the past provide inspiration and guidance for the future.

According to Steam (1998), historical data include evidence about how institutions like libraries were formed and how they have evolved while retaining cohesion. For librarians, studying the history of libraries is like exploring one's own family history to know. it helps form a cultural identify. When told honestly, it explores

both the light and dark side of the profession by helping librarians see both the selfishness and nobility of the profession.

### **LIBRARY HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE BLUEPRINT OF MANAGING CONTEMPORARY LIBRARIES**

History of library allows us to understand our past, which in turn allows us to understand our present. If we want to know how and why libraries are the way it is today, we have to look to history for answers. People often say that “history repeats itself” but if we study the successes and failures of the past, we may ideally, be able to learn from the mistakes of the past and avoid repeating them. The past is what constitute the present day information which can be broadly classified into two types – soft and hard information. Most of what people regard as information falls into the first category. Some individuals and government functionaries, for instance, use the word to mean public enlightenment programmes and mass media activities such as radio and television programmes, image laundering, protocol and reporting of current events in magazines and newspapers. Even tertiary institutions seem to take this view. For instance, the establishment of the information and public relations/Protocol Division in the Registry but attached to the Chief Executive’s Office bears no other interpretation (Ifidon & Ifidon, 2007). These sources yielded only soft information. Soft information means the mass communicators’ information. In contrast, hard information is provided by libraries and other information-related institutions. While hard information which is required for national development and decision-making can exist without soft information, which cannot stand on its own without hard information.

Of all the existing definitions, the one provided by Aiyepoku (1982) would seem to be more all-embracing. According to that definition:

Information is man’s accumulated knowledge in all subjects, in all forms and from all sources that could help its users to make rational decisions... it is processed data of value in planning, decision-making and execution of programmes.

Such information is found not only in books and journals but also in technical reports and feasibility reports on proposed development projects; in-house memoranda; reports of government-appointed commissions and white papers on them; government position papers on various issues and subjects; gazettes which normally report the laws, statutes and decrees of government; hansards, learned journals in which subject specialists communicate the latest knowledge in their areas of specialisation; rules and regulations formulated by government parastatals or private sector organisations; non-book and machine-readable materials such as CD-ROM, diskettes and microfilms; government and United Nations’ documents of all kinds published for mass circulation or unpublished and classified, newspapers and magazines. The most important sources of information are the unchangeable Natural Laws in Creation. It is from these that economic laws, scientific principles and development derive. All these sources produce hard and soft information.

In library management, information effectiveness connotes the plans that the librarians need to execute so that the library can run efficiently. The basic tasks expected to be performed to achieve this effectively include:

- i. gathering of sources of information externally and internally;
- ii. processing of sources of information;
- iii. information storage;
- iv. reproduction and dissemination of information at the shortest possible time;
- v. management of both the use and change in the use of information.

To accomplish these tasks there are three information managers:

- i. librarians and information officers;
- ii. researchers and information analysts;
- iii. information systems specialists; and
- iv. the end-users.

These are not mutually exclusive categories. However, they can be differentiated by reference to the principal characteristics of the tasks they carry out within the library. Librarians and information officers are primarily concerned with bringing sources of information into the library. This activity involves:

- i. identifying and gathering sources of information on behalf of the library;
- ii. building of collections of sources of information in anticipation of future use and the demands which will be placed on them;
- iii. processing of the sources of information;
- iv. using the processed sources of information to answer enquiries and to provide information to the end users;
- v. handling of large number of bits of information - books, journal articles, machines-readable materials, etc;
- vi. handling of large number of enquiries; and
- vii. providing services to large number of users.

Researchers and information scientists are also concerned with information which is generated within the library as well as with information generated externally. This involves:

- i. collecting sources of information in response to particular demands;
- ii. collecting primary data through small focused research projects;
- iii. handling a relatively small number of bits of information;
- iv. dealing with a much smaller number of enquiries;
- v. adding large amounts of value to the information they handle;

- vi. assembling, evaluating, analysing, synthesising and repackaging information so that it is easily usable by their clients; and
- vii. providing services to a small number of clients.

Information systems specialists handle data generated within the library. They are the interface between the library's information system - usually a computerised system - and library management. Their primary tasks are to:

- i. identify and satisfy users' information needs within the framework determined by ICT. People in this position, therefore, require a high level of understanding of, and familiarity with, ICT;
- ii. design information systems;
- iii. interpret the requirements of management;
- iv. work with technical experts to develop the most effective information systems;
- v. collect, analyse and interpret the data produced by the system;
- vi. deal with very large number of bits of data;
- vii. add value by shifting the data and transforming it into information; and
- viii. provide information for a small number of clients.

The tasks of the users are to:

- i. know what exactly they want;
- ii. ask the librarians for what they want in a manual system; and
- iii. determine the relevance of the information.

Close collaboration between the librarian and the user is essential if the service is to remain a highly valued support. But often the debate between these two is too simplistic. If quality assurance is to be achieved, the librarian has to work hard to maintain a high level of user satisfaction. This is more demanding than simply responding to demands placed in the library or the online searcher. It requires effective teamwork. This is why it has to be reemphasised that the above four categories are not mutually exclusive. Many tasks involve elements of two or more of the categories. It is also important to realise that job titles are merely labels and not necessarily good indicators of the nature of the work. Thus, it is possible to find jobs which are clearly in one category only for it to turn out that people in other categories have developed or performed it.

In order to exploit information effectively, the librarian should adopt a strategic approach to the concept of information management. Like many other concepts, information management has been defined in various and varied ways. The user is interested in one, input - decision support and one, output - purposeful action. The concept has, therefore, been defined here as:



The handling of information acquired from one or many disparate sources in a way that optimizes accessibility to all who have a share in, or a right to that information.

This concept is characterised by the phrase “getting the right information to the right person at the right place at the right time.” It does not, however, address what constitutes the “right information.” This omission is explained by the phrases adapted from Swanborough (2006): “knowing what information to gather, knowing what to do with the information when you get it, knowing what information to pass on and knowing how to value the result.” This tends to place the onus and the value judgement on the librarian rather than on the user who should determine the appropriateness and relevance of the information. The knowledge of the past through history of library guides the librarian on these tasks.

History of library is important because library as an institution is embedded in the cultural realm of the society and the extent to which it’s structural and functional characteristics are determined by its definition as an institution contrived to consume, preserve, transmit and reproduce the history of civilization (Harris 1986). In other words the lack of historical awareness or being a historical made impossible for us to understand the enormous power of the cultural definition of the library; what Winter (1988:78) called the “overwhelming counterweight of historical tradition”. Winter a sociologist pointed out that facile calls for abrupt system change overlook a fundamental reality:

Even if libraries disappeared tomorrow, they would at that point have existed for many thousands of years, and for that reason alone would exert a great influence on social and cultural life for centuries afterwards. So for the present, the foreseeable future, and for an immense stretch of the past, libraries appear to be very durable institution.

A considerable amount of ink will be saved and a sizable amount of silly and distracting rhetoric will be avoided, if history of library is readily available. A deeper sense of history will remind all of the principles and values of the library as an institution; as Degler (1976:183) once noted:

All historical interpretations are shaped by values. No interpretation can transcend the values that a historian brings to his or her own investigation of the past; any more than historical figures at the time could escape their values. In short, if historians did not change their minds as value shifted, their history would be cease to be a living part of their culture and therefore incapable of illuminating the present with the light of the past.

## SUMMARY

For the librarian to effectively manage the library, library historiography served as a compass because the primary task of a librarian to whom the unique custody of world’s recorded knowledge is entrusted is to select from the universe of records of human culture and acquire those that may be needed by the actual and potential users of the library; to store them for future use, to organize them by creating appropriate bibliographic access controls; to interpret their contents through personalized services;

and to disseminate information stored in these records. The extent to which the librarian has been able to fulfil these social functions for centuries is perhaps, a matter of dispute. However, it must be noted that right up to the nineteenth century, the librarian was seen largely as a “keeper of books”, efficient in his custodial function. His primary interest appears to have been in preserving rather than in using the library resources (that it is to connect, engage and enable the users to use the library resources). He was not wholly to blame, as he was held accountable by the library authorities for all lost materials.

Besides, the librarian learnt on his job the task of managing the library and the demand for the librarian to perform his true interpretative function and to serve as a dissemination of recorded information grew only after World War II. Libraries were then faced with the increasing demands of scholarship and research. As they became more complex, access to information resources became more difficult in transferring the information that are stored in books, periodicals, newspapers, technical reports, pamphlets, microforms, conference or seminar papers of learned societies and professional association, magnetic tapes, audio-visual materials, and in many other formats to the end users, these call for the digitalization of information.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are hereby recommended:

- i) Collection development: Proper collection development policy via selection and acquisition policies should be put in place and fully implemented.
- ii) Reference section: There is need for regular update and upgrading of library resources in the reference section of the library to link the past to the present.
- iii) Library digitalization: With the current realities, there is urgent need for full automation of the library.
- iv) Curriculum innovation: Efforts should be made to ensure that history of library courses are introduced at the earliest stage of librarianship education in Nigeria.
- v) Re-orientation programme: There is need for a sustained awareness programme on the positive contributions of the past knowledge to the present and future society.
- vi) Capacity building: There is urgent need for more training for librarians for effective discharge of their responsibilities to meet the current need of the individual users.

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