

THE ELUSIVE NATIONAL LIBRARY: THE CASE OF GHANA

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Abstract

The paper heartily congratulates the GLA on its 50th birthday. But regrets that its inability to get the national library established has dented its achievements. It identifies, salutes and honours the pioneers of public librarianship in Ghana whom it calls the giants of public librarianship. The paper disagrees that the national library is elusive. Rather it suggests that it is the major stakeholders like the political leadership, the staff of the Ghana Library Authority, the Department of Information Studies and Ghana Library Association whose inaction and inadequate strategies have given the national library the semblance of elusiveness.

The paper submits further that if the main stakeholders mentioned above can close their ranks, present a united front and pursue a more pro-active and vigorous strategic plan, it should be possible to get the national library established earlier than anticipated. Finally, the GLA has been urged to provide firm leadership, bring all stakeholders on board and declare 2012 an action year for the establishment of the national library.

KEYWORDS: NATIONAL LIBRARIES, LEGAL DEPOSIT,
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Introduction

Hearty congratulations to the Ghana Library Association (GLA) on its 50th birthday. Any Golden Jubilee should be seen as an occasion for celebration and, most importantly, for introspection considering what that philosopher said that “*the unexamined life is not worth living.*” Today is also an occasion to remember and give thanks for the founders of the Association. I am thankful to the Almighty that I have lived to see this day.

The GLA might have and, indeed, has achieved a lot in its 50 years of existence. But all birth days are bound to evoke pleasant as well as unpleasant memories. For the GLA, its inability to successfully facilitate and prosecute the establishment of a national library for Ghana would top the list of its unpleasant memories and has, in my view, overshadowed any achievements it might have chalked.

Factually, as of now, the national library is considered by many, all over the world, as the leader or flagship of librarianship in countries which have taken librarianship seriously and understand its essence. In Ghana, this flagship of nationhood is conspicuously missing. Librarianship in Ghana could, in a sense, be likened to an army without a commander. This comes with dire consequences and says a lot about Ghana and betrays its inability to appreciate the importance and strategic value and role libraries play in national development.

Attempts to establish a national library in Ghana have had a chequered history/process. It is fraught with confusion, indecision, sabotage and, most of the time, unnecessary controversy. It is an understatement to say that I am highly disappointed by the situation and I do not intend to hide my grief.

Giants of Public Librarianship in Ghana

Before I proceed further, I ask your permission to make a detour in order to acknowledge and pay a well deserved tribute to the pioneers and originators of public librarianship in Ghana. I submit that without their foresight, dreams, courage, sacrifice and efforts the history of public librarianship in Ghana would have been different. Note that, in a way, national libraries are also public libraries and, therefore, I consider this acknowledgement relevant and appropriate.

1. **Bishop Aglionby:** I regard this great man the first among equals. Indeed, it was he who, in my estimation, initiated public library literature in Ghana. Through his numerous articles in the newspapers he was able to create public awareness for librarianship. But his greatest achievement was to

- challenge the government of the day by donating 600 pounds and a collection of books to start a public library. Earlier in 1928, he opened a 6,000 volume library in the Bishop Boys' School in Accra
2. **Sir Arnold Hodgson:** The Governor of the Gold Coast who saw wisdom in Aglionby's ideas and accepted his challenge to set up a committee in 1938 to examine the establishment of a public library
 3. **Carnegie Corporation of New York** which in 1939 appointed Hans Vischer and Margaret Wrong to investigate the expansion of library facilities in West Africa and made generous grants available for the establishment of libraries in the Gold Coast
 4. **Miss Fegan** who was mandated by Carnegie to, among other things, overhaul the Achimota College library and introduced the first formal training programme for “African Library Assistants”
 5. **The British Council** which retained the services of Miss Fegan and tasked her to establish the first library school in West Africa at Achimota in 1944; set up an Advisory Committee to advise library organizers on library policy to be pursued in the Gold Coast; and also set up the Gold Coast Library Advisory Committee in 1945
 6. **Miss Evans**, a librarian employed by the British Council in 1945 but later became the first Director of Ghana Library Board (1950), established by the G.C Library Board Ordinance of 1949. Undoubtedly she was the moving spirit behind the creation of modern public librarianship in Ghana
 7. **Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah** who conceived the universal availability of books through public libraries, supported, funded and gave the public library its modern character. According to Miss Evans little could have been accomplished without his support and encouragement
 8. **R.C. Benge** who started the first library school under the Ghana Library Board in 1962. This school was later upgraded to a graduate institute of the University of Ghana which has now metamorphosed into the Department of Information Studies.

To these gallant and farsighted men, women and organizations Ghana owes tons of gratitude for the establishment and development of modern public librarianship in Ghana. Today, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Ghana Library Association, it is only fair and appropriate to acknowledge their invaluable contribution to the development of librarianship in Ghana. We salute and honour them.

Origin of the National Library Concept in Ghana

Records available (1) suggest that the concept of the national library might have been conceived between Dr. Nkrumah and Miss Evans. However, John Linford, E. J. A. Evans, S.A Kotei, A.G.T Ofori, A.J.E. Dean, J.B. Nii Moi and J.E. Thompson are some of the earlier prominent scholars on the concept. A notable academic dissertation on the subject is Kosi Kedem's MPhil thesis titled *“The National Library Concept and its Relevance to Library Services in Ghana.”*

As far back as 1961, Dr. Nkrumah raised the issue of the national library when he was commissioning the Padmore Library and predicted that the library would form the nucleus of the future national library. His vision for a national library was one without national frontiers. He envisaged a national library that would be at once the repository of a nation's culture, wisdom and an intellectual stimulant.

For here shall be stored the cumulative experience, the collective wisdom and knowledge about the entire continent of Africa and the assessment, evaluations and studies of observers from all over the world.

In order to actualize the national library concept she sent Miss Evans to some renowned national libraries to study their set up and operations. The report she submitted to Dr. Nkrumah led to the setting up of the National Library Technical Committee in 1963. The Technical Committee submitted its report in 1965, and recommended, among other things that:

1. A Council for the Coordination of Library Services and Resources should be established but should not be a monolithic central library directing and controlling libraries in Ghana
2. It should be responsible to the Office of the President
3. The functions of the Council should be
 - (i). To coordinate the acquisitions programmes of cooperative Acquisition Committee in order to ensure complete subject coverage without unnecessary duplication
 - (ii). To establish national resource centres in specific subject fields or groups of related subject fields
 - (iii). To arrange international exchange programmes
 - (iv). To arrange the provision of advisory services for government and school libraries
 - (v). To arrange for the maintenance of a National Union Catalogue, a Union List of Serials, and such other lists as are required from time to time

The recommendations of the Technical Committee were accepted by government for implementation but the whole concept of the national library collapsed with the overthrow of Dr. Nkrumah in 1966. We came very close to creating a national library.

The National Library Concept in Post Nkrumah era

The investigations conducted by the Technical Committee were thorough and the report submitted was so far reaching and farsighted that it still constitutes a point of reference for the establishment of the national library in contemporary Ghana. The principles and rationale for the national library espoused by the technical committee have not been faulted or disputed.

It appears to me that even though the idea of the national library is generally accepted, the method and the type of national library envisaged are seriously in dispute, especially among librarians themselves. By far, the most serious challenge faced by the national library is the complete lack of appreciation of the concept by the political leadership since 1966 which, in turn, has led to lack of political will to establish the national library.

Is the National Library elusive?

I am the last person to agree that the national library is elusive. The concept as envisaged and established by Dr. Nkrumah, Miss Evans and the National Library Technical Committee (1963) is still relevant and intact. In fact and indeed, the concept has been tested and tried and has been successfully implemented in many countries and has stood the test of time. If anything, it is the stakeholders in post Nkrumah era who have given it the semblance of elusiveness. The main stakeholders who, by design or default, are mainly responsible for the non establishment of the national library are:

- (i) The political leadership of Ghana
- (ii) The staff of the Ghana Library Board
- (iii) The Ghana Library Association
- (iv) The Department of Information Studies, Legon

The Political Leadership

The achievements made in librarianship during Nkrumah's regime were not by chance. They were brought about by deliberate well considered plans. Nkrumah was a bibliophile and he believed in books as a source of knowledge and as an instrument of spreading literacy and enlightenment. According to him

“Books must be readily available to satisfy the demands of the people whatever their age or ability, so that through reading they can derive information, enjoyment and broader outlook, and have the opportunity to enhance their moral, spiritual and cultural life.”

To him the surest way to make books and information and, for that matter, knowledge available to the people without hindrance was the library. Libraries were **high on his** priority list. He did not spare any effort or funding to establish, equip and develop them.

Governments after 1966 did not seem to appreciate the importance of libraries in national development. Libraries were neglected and left to degenerate. It is doubtful if successive governments have added any new public libraries to those built by Nkrumah. The present state of public libraries is quite sad. Consider the fact that there is only one public library serving Accra with a population of about 4million people. Only 50 District Assemblies out of 170 have District Libraries. I can say authoritatively that some of the libraries built by Nkrumah, like the famous Kaneshie Children's Library, are now in ruins. Not surprisingly, the reading culture is at its lowest ebb. Characteristically, we all complain about this but do very little about it!

By the way, have you noticed that since 1992, political parties hardly mentioned anything about libraries in their manifesto documents? Well, to me, this betrays their lack of appreciation and interest in libraries, especially public libraries.

The Ghana Public Library Service has suffered neglect to such an extent that it has, most of the time, existed without a governing Board. Between 2002 and 2009, for instance, there was no governing board. It is this same governmental neglect that has been visited upon the national library concept. In fact, most of the time, government functionaries and officials do not even want to know the difference between a national library and a public library system so it has been extremely difficult to convince them about the need for a national library.

The new governing board of the Ghana Library Authority has inherited an extremely challenging situation which demands bold and drastic measures to tackle. It is a difficult situation in which the Board has no option but to act decisively in order to uplift and improve the condition of the public libraries.

The Ghana Library Authority Staff

These are employees who consider themselves a neglected group of people. “Nobody likes us” has often been their lamentation. I beg to disagree. I have tried to assure them that no one dislikes them. It is true, though, that people are disappointed that the public library no longer provides services it used to provide. Indeed, many people, especially those who as children used the public library in the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s, have a feeling of nostalgia for it. Because of underfunding and poor conditions of service, the Authority has found it very difficult to retain its staff. Many professional librarians have made the Authority their transit quarters or stepping-stone. Most of the staff, because they are in a hurry to move somewhere else, are not dedicated or committed and, above all, they do not have any loyalty to the Authority. The staff who are unable to move or want to remain behind naturally develop a culture of resistance, mistrust and suspicion. They appear hostile to outside ideas and they are not conditioned to think outside the box, so to speak.

Because government and society seem to have neglected them they have also decided to make the Authority their “personal” property and a no-go area to others. Their defensive and xenophobic posture is amply demonstrated in an article they allegedly caused to be published in the *Friday January 5 2007 edition of the Ghanaian Times*

“...The workers protested against the selection (of an outsider)...to take up the post of the Director of the Ghana Library Board some three years ago. The then Minister of Education...put a hold on the appointment” Then the article threatened the government thus,

“Perhaps the government may not want to repeat the expensive experiments of the VRA and GBC where Chief Executives appointed from outside...did not receive the co-operation of the entire workforce”

Their seemingly hostile attitude is extended to the national library concept. In fact, they regard the national library as a serious rival or even a Trojan horse and have, therefore, developed, what some people may call, 'morbid fear' for it. Indeed, they fear that if the national library should be established the little attention and subvention they enjoy from government or society will drastically be reduced or taken away completely.

Logically, they have done everything possible under the sun of our planet to frustrate or even sabotage the establishment of the national library. For instance, during the NPP regime a draft bill on the national library was sent to cabinet and when the Authority was invited to speak to it, the Ag. Director at that time refused to go because according to him he did not have prior knowledge of the draft bill! Unfortunately at the time there was no Board in place to intervene to do the right thing.

They do these things not because they do not appreciate the importance of the national library. After all, the Authority performs some functions of a national library, albeit without legal backing! They do understand, in fact, far more than most people but their actions are dictated by instinct of self preservation. They may love the national library but their interest comes uppermost. And who would blame them? It is a natural phenomenon in life. Their fear is that their job insecurity is bound to increase should the national library be established. They need to be assured and reassured that the establishment of the national library will not deprive them of their benefits, livelihood and the 'small amenities' they are enjoying.

Their fear is clearly articulated in the Regional Librarians' Communique of 10th March, 2010 at Kumasi;

“Though Ghana needs a National Library, its establishment should not result in the collapse of, or non-existence of the Ghana Library Board.” The communiqué accused the Ghana Library Board Chairman of attempting “to establish a National Council on Libraries and Information and a National Library to the demise of the public library services by the end of 2010.”

This fear is clearly unfounded because the Board Chairman knows better than that and would not do anything to harm his own Board and staff. Secondly, no matter what changes are made, it is impossible for the public library system to collapse. It cannot happen.

Mrs. Tachie-Menson, the former Ag Director of Public Library Services' view is even more blunt and forthright.

“The Board Chairman has been at the forefront in the establishment of a National Library since the 1990s (and recently a National Council on Libraries and Information... The Board Chairman is intent on using his position to push his main agenda of establishing a National Library and a National Council of Library and

Information Service at the expense of the Ghana Library Authority... The GLB is open for constructive criticism. However, an attempt should not be made to denigrate its services and sacrifice the career of some of its staff to pave the way for experimenting with a structure that has failed in other developing countries as well as creating position for members of the Ghana Library Association.”

The stand of the Ghana Library Authority staff on the national library issue is quite clear and the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Ghana Library Authority (2011) sums it up thus:

“Some members of staff had developed a mind-set of what a national library will be; hence they have taken an entrenched position on the National Council on Libraries and Information (NCLI).”

The attack on my person is not only regrettable but also uncalled for, and I would caution that we do not personalize the debate on the national library. More than that, I plead, in all humility, with all the stakeholders that we conduct our affairs professionally and play by the rules of the game.

Ghana Library Association (GLA)

The Association might be doing well in other areas but, in my view, it has not demonstrated much resolve and zeal in the affairs of the national library. Neither has it been pro-active in the pursuit of establishing the national library. Its actions are not well defined and coordinated. And its lobbying capacity is weak and defective. It has not been able to establish good rapport with the Ghana Library Authority staff who, I am told, constitutes the bulk of GLA membership. Neither has it been able to persuade the staff to accept the creation of the national library. GLA appears hesitant in giving firm leadership on the issue. Depending on who its President is, its actions could best be described as erratic, unplanned and disjointed. Yes, the issue of the national library is discussed, now and then, at the Association's seminars but thereafter what happens? How many times or how often has GLA met the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education? Has it lobbied other cabinet Ministers apart from the sector minister in charge of libraries? What has it done, formally, to bring on board other stakeholders like Public Records and Archives Administration, the Museum and Monuments Board etc, in order to forge a common front on the issue?

The outgoing GLA Executive, headed by Mrs. Bannerman, can testify that it achieved remarkable success when through its persistence and hard work it successfully got the former Minister of Education, Hon. Tettey-Enyo, to set up a committee to investigate the establishment of the National Council on Libraries and Information. Since then, the Association has recoiled into its shell again. It seems to me that the new executive could not position itself to meet the outgoing Minister for Education, Mrs. Betty Iddrisu, even though she expressed her desire to meet them. I, the messenger, who used to carry the message to them and pressurize them to meet with her became disappointed by their inaction. I was disappointed because she was one of the few Ministers known to me who understood the need for a national library and had wanted to help bring it about. Amazingly, not even the prompting of the South African National Librarian, when he visited GLA secretariat in December 2011, could move the GLA Executive to meet the Minister.

The leadership of GLA must realize that a weak hunter's dog does not catch an animal (game) on a hunting expedition; and that we are not going to have the national library established on a silver platter. At any rate, the principle of eugenics or its cousin principle, survival of the fittest, will not allow that. GLA must appreciate the fact that, every hour, every day, every year, government is confronted with huge competing interests and demands and is, therefore, compelled to operate by the process of selection and elimination.

Department of Information Studies

What concrete role has this department played in the fight for the national library? If it has played a role, that role has not been visible enough. We expect the department to be the incubator, think-tank and 'maximizer' of ideas on the national library. It is expected that Lecturers at the department would take the lead in generating and publishing ideas on the concept. Where are their articles in the newspapers and journals projecting and justifying the need for a national library in Ghana? How many brain-storming sessions or seminars has the department organized, inviting experts and stakeholders from within and without the university to discuss and articulate the national library concept?

The fact is that, governments all over the world, including Ghana, respect the views of academics a lot. But in Ghana, I am not sure if the Department of Information Studies has made its views on the national library available to government, Parliament or even to the public for them to form an opinion. The Department, with its scholars and intellectuals, is expected to show direction and

formulate the way forward in an uncertain situation where most of us are confused or just being mischievous. It is expected to provide the body of knowledge, the magnum opus, in the field which should guide the Library association and the practitioners in the library profession. But we scarcely hear from the Department on the national library issue. I am worried.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

From what I have said all the stakeholders are to blame in one way or another. We have not lived up to expectation. Admittedly, we have done something but it has not been considered good enough. Anyway, this is not the time to indulge in a blame game. This is the time for all stakeholders on the national library issue to speak with a common voice and forge a common front in the fight for the establishment of the national library. The South African National Librarian, Mr. John Tsebe, came to Ghana in December, 2011. He insisted on meeting the Minister for Education. When he did, he told the Minister in no uncertain terms how disappointed he was that Ghana had no national library.

The Hon. Minister responded positively that she was equally concerned and promised to do what she could to get the national library established as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the Minister has left the Ministry when it was clear that she was going to fulfill her promise. The national library fight has suffered another setback, albeit temporary.

Conclusion

You can see from my presentation that Ghana came close but missed the national library boat under Nkrumah. And since then she has been searching and groping in the dark for the “perfect” national library. I am afraid she will not have it because the perfect national library is a mirage. It does not exist anywhere in the world; not even in the great Library of Congress or the British Library, the two most prominent national libraries in the world.

In fact, the inadequacies of the concept in the USA and the UK have compelled them to re-structure and attempt some decentralization in order to take care of subject and peculiar information and cultural needs of their societies. Thus in the USA, there is the Congressional Research Library, the National Agric and Medical libraries. The UK has split its national library into the main national library (London) and the National Science and Technology Library at Milton Keynes.

Again, circumstances, challenges of the time and cost-benefit considerations have forced some states to modify and amalgamate the national library with the public library; the national library with the Archives or national library with the university library, etc.

In Ghana, what we need to do, and must have done, is to agree to have a legal framework and backing for the national library just as all other nations have done. Then we can continue from there. Indeed, Ghana cannot claim to be wiser than all other nations which have successfully established the national library using the legal framework. May be she is trying to re-invent the wheel! Well, while she is indulging in that futile exercise, she must recognize the fact that other nations with great and solid national library culture have moved ahead and embraced the concept of information networking based on harmonisation, coordination and sharing of information. Thus the USA has instituted the National Council on Libraries and Information Services; the UK, the Library and Information Commission and the Libraries, Archives and Museums Council; South Africa, the National Council on Libraries and Information and the South Africa Bibliographic Information Network (SABINET). Even our immediate neighbor, Nigeria, who Ghana 'taught' modern public librarianship has had a national library since 1963 and has now established the Librarian Registration Council, which I personally envy and consider a great forward move for librarians in Nigeria. Whither Ghana?

If you ask me whether there is any hope for establishing a national library in the near future, I would say, yes. I am cautiously optimistic that we could establish the national library, and even an umbrella coordinating body, the National Council on Libraries and Information Services, that is if we work together and heal the split mind that has characterised our approach over the years. I am thinking and hoping that it could even happen this year, 2012! To me, that will be an invaluable gift to the Ghana Library Association on its 50th birthday. Let me repeat that this can happen only if the stakeholders close ranks and intensify their fight for the realization of the national library dream. I urge the GLA to declare 2012 an action year for the realization of this dream. I wish the Ghana Library Association a happy anniversary celebration. Thank you.

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