SPECIAL COLLECTIONS IN NIGERIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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Special collections are indispensable to many students, researchers and librarians. Their composition makes them vulnerable to pilferage, and mutilation. Should this vulnerability be an excuse for making physical access to these collections a nearly impregnable thicket? They could also be very fragile and they deserve special conservation and preservation techniques. As national treasures, more or less, Nigerian academic libraries should do all they can to acquire, develop and manage them for maximum utilization.

DEFINITION

In this age of critical, bibliographic and textual studies in the humanistic and other disciplines, an age that has witnessed an increasing number of researchers in all fields, people whose research necessitates access to original sources, academic libraries have seen the need to acquire books and allied materials not only of considerable value but also of scarce nature. The departments or sections that assume responsibility for these rare and unusual library materials are variously named: university archives, department or division of rare books, department of special collections. Some of the materials in these collections may or may not be rare or even expensive. The term Special Collection is preferred in this paper because our definition also covers specialized collections in various university departments, faculties and institutes. The elephant and the special collection have one thing in common - they are easy to recognise but difficult to describe or define. A special collection is

“A collection of books connected with local history, celebrities, industries, etc. or a certain subject or period, or gathered for some particular reason in a library which is general in character[2].

Special collections may be housed in a separate building or within the central library building. Many departmental libraries contain subject-related materials that are rare, such as some materials in the law libraries at Harvard University and University of Illinois in North America. Special facilities within the departmental libraries are sometimes provided for these rarities. Specialized departmental libraries are included in our definition of special collections. Usually, special collections synthesize, correlate and document the history and thought of distinguished people. They are mines of information illustrating the richness of the history, culture and civilization of people throughout the world.

BACKGROUND

The development of special collections in Nigerian University libraries dates back to the establishment of the first university namely the University of Ibadan, in 1948. Because it was the highest institution of learning and because there was no national library in existence, the university library was designated the national depository for Nigerian publications (Nigerian Publication Ordinance of 1950). It thus became compulsory for all publishers in the country to deposit two copies of their books, journals, pamphlets, gazettes, sheets of
music, maps, plans etc. in the university library.

These deposits form a substantial part of the University Special Collection. It played this role fully till 1964 when the then Northern Region designated Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, as the legal depository for all publications emanating from that region. In 1970, the National Library Decree (Decree 29 of 1970) was promulgated and this transferred the role of legal deposit from the Ibadan University Library to the National Library in Lagos[2]. It stated that three copies of all books published should be deposited with the National Library with one copy to be re-directed to the University of Ibadan. Thus, these two university libraries (Ibadan and Zaria) were able to acquire materials that form part of their special collections.

ACQUISITION

Because special collections constitute a significant portion of primary research materials, Nigerian academic libraries should make conscious efforts to develop them. Since 1857, there has been in America, legal provision for distributing government publications to certain designated libraries and in 1962, the Depository Library Act[3] was enacted which makes the designated libraries provide readers such government publications under their care. Some of these libraries are academic, some more affluent academic libraries set out to deliberately build up rare and special collections from the scratch. In Nigerian academic libraries, substantial part of their special collections have more often been by deposits, gifts or bequests of private collections.

Over the years, the older academic libraries in Nigeria, which include those at the universities of Ibadan, Nigeria, Lagos and Ife have acquired through deposits, gifts, bequests and purchases varying but substantial quantities of special materials. The newer academic libraries are also trying to develop their own special collections. To what extent and under what condition are these materials available to the public researchers and others who have legitimate need for the information they contain?

If the exponential growth of factual information is making it increasingly difficult for subject specialists to keep abreast of developments in their fields, the situation is even worse for librarians in charge of special collections. They are faced with the problems of not only acquiring, housing, organizing and preserving these materials, but also of making them available to users promptly when they are demanded.

The Federal Government, apart from playing the dominant role in higher education in Nigeria, also almost single-handedly finances national research efforts. There is the need to monitor publications emanating from higher institutions and research centres in Nigeria so that they can be made available in special collections of academic and other libraries as well as to clients. At present, there is a chaotic situation whereby, for instance, one cannot easily trace government publications. This constitutes a great obstacle to research efforts since those who are to utilize such publications never have access to them.

Selection of materials in most academic libraries in Nigeria and elsewhere seriously involves faculty members who in some cases play major roles. But faculty members as major selectors have the following deficiencies[4]:

(a) They believe that only they are capable selectors
(b) some do not care and feel that the textbook is enough
(c) Preoccupation with other duties
(d) inclination to laziness
(e) tendency to concentrate selection to narrow field of specialization without any regard for the actual needs of students
(f) insufficient acquaintance with the world of books.

With such deficiencies, to allow faculty members play major roles in selection is dangerous but librarians are not without their own faults which include some of those ascribed to faculty members. Even though a librarian may be well acquainted with the world of books, he may be handicapped when it comes
to materials outside his subject area. In respect of some special collections, selection tools are grossly inadequate. It, therefore, follows that a combination of selection tools, opinion of librarians and that of faculty might serve a better purpose. There are, of course, the problems of reviews coming out too late, or not being critical enough and such other deficiencies in selection tools.

Need for acquisition policy

It is important for a special collection department to have a selection or acquisition policy either incorporated in the library’s general policy or independent of the general policy. The acquisition policy when drawn and approved by the academic library committee (or any committee that is responsible for the approval) becomes the special collection’s librarians’ guide. The acquisition policy to be followed is one that requires common sense, wisdom and sometimes the capacity to harden one’s heart against sentimentality of book-sellers. The special collection librarian must consider the genuine utility of the materials that he buys. The development of an effective special collection requires everlasting vigilance on the part of the librarian to see, that his library does not become merely a warehouse of dead books. He must be vigilant to see that his budget devoted to acquisition is not spent on useless books and manuscripts. He must not only be alert but tactful in fending off unwanted gifts that would make his library a warehouse of junk. The idea to build a “complete” special collection is fallacious. In absolute sense few special collection libraries can be complete. Special collection materials have intrinsic value, association value because they are autographed or contain valuable marginalia, and are difficult to replace. The special collection department should do all the bibliographical work necessary for ordering even when orders are centralized in the library’s general order department.

For the selection of special collection in Nigerian academic libraries, the librarian should as a desirable means of acquisition, submit an approved plan to the chief librarian. A selection policy determining what the special collection department would acquire is necessary if all types of materials are not to flood the collection department. Some materials in special collections are historical manuscripts that include papers of political figures, prominent citizens, business leaders etc. They come in as gifts, bequest, purchase, etc. An acquisition policy can determine which is to be retained.

A very popular method of acquisition of special collection is the presentation by a grateful or public spirited collector, of his own specialized library to an established institution. Jacon M. Lowy Collection made up mostly of five centuries of Hebraica incunabula was donated by the Slovakia born industrialist and philanthropist to the Crown of Canada. The 2,000 rare volumes are acknowledged as one of the foremost private collections in that field [5].

FACTORS IN BUILDING SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Most of the Nigerian academic libraries are known not to be eager to acquire manuscripts because of their fragile nature and donors’ imposed conditions. Technically, a manuscript is defined as a piece of writing prior to Gutenberg. However, manuscript production did not stop with the invention of printing, hence manuscript records being created exceed materials in printed form. Manuscripts are usually donated to university libraries by members of the university and others who for various reasons think the university library is the suitable repository. Take for example, the case of the University of Ibadan manuscript collection. The core came from private papers of late Herbert Macaulay, Bishop S.C. Phillips, Chief A. Obisesan, Rev. E.M. Dijadu, Rev. I.O. Ransom-Kuti among others.

Manuscripts are acquired not because they are physical objects or autographs but because they constitute historical evidence for the reconstruction of the past, for the interpretation of parallel experience, for the impeachment of false or mistaken or pervaded testimony and for the recovery of reality. They are authoritative since they are written by active participants or
shrewd and trustworthy observers of events. Nigerian university libraries need to intensify manuscript acquisition since unlike the U.S. and Europe, private collectors are very few. An aggressive acquisition programme as that of the Harvard University is necessary. The Harvard University archives (which is the special collection department of the main library) periodically writes to all (alumni) officers holding permanent position to put a provision in their wills making the University their library executor and leaving all their manuscripts to the university archives[6]. If Nigerian universities do the same, chances are, many will give favourable disposition to it and this will be a rich source of collection, but, since the real selection of materials to be retained begins after a collection reaches the library depository, the letter of transmittal or deed of gift should include clauses to the effect that materials judged inappropriate for permanent preservation will be destroyed, alienated or returned. The deed should also include the handing over of complete right to the librarian relating to materials such as determining public use and photocopying. Donors should be made to realise that they need to accept conditions which are reasonable and which conform with paper manuscript management practice.

For the period of colonisalism in Nigeria, a great wealth of archival materials, mostly manuscripts and printed documents, were accumulated. These materials reflect the social, economic, political, scientific, and spiritual interest of the Nigerian people. The struggle for independence, the civil war and events thereafter naturally resulted in the production of heaps of propaganda materials in addition to the regular official government record making. Ever since, all succeeding government administrations, including the present have contributed to the production of a tremendous volume of documents. Record creation has become an intrinsic aspect of government bureaucratic machinery. A substantial quantity of these government documents have found themselves in the custody of university libraries as part of their special collection.

Government documents constitute the bulk of materials deposited either through depository laws or otherwise, in Nigerian libraries. In 1979, there were 5,000 government documents in the Special Collections of the University of Ibadan Library[7]. Government publications include all forms of book and non-book publications emanating directly from such government agencies like the ministry and department or that are published on behalf of the government and its agencies by authorised publishers. They contain, apart from statistical data, primary, current and historical records. They also contain important secondary sources that include interesting topics (not necessarily political) related to the government and these readily supplement the library's general collection in these areas. University of Ife[8] has even gone further by identifying, collecting and preserving government posters in its document department as significant primary source materials.

Purchase is another method of building up Special Collections. Nigerian academic libraries should actively acquire and maintain special collections for the following reasons[14]:

(a) with the advent of nuclear power, there is the need to acquire these materials from all places so as to ensure the preservation of human heritage.

(b) As centres for the study of man and nature, universities should not rely on national libraries and national museums alone but should strive to build their own collections.

(c) Since these materials are of permanent value, university libraries are justified in their acquisition.

(d) A university derives a justifiable sense of pride and of responsibility from the fact that its librarian is the custodian of unique materials which are part of the cultural heritage of an entire nation and indeed of the whole civilized world.

(e) Such materials are very basic for research. Without access to them, scholarship and learning will suffer.

Special collections are not easily available in the open market. Nigerian academic libraries
get their supplies either by subscription or by auction sales or by gift. Even though the process of soliciting and organizing a flow of gifts are far less amenable to the development of a systematic method than those of acquisition by purchase and gift. Gift, in many respects, is of more importance than purchase as the history of any large academic collection will show. Gifts come in the form of bequests, presentation of money for the purchase of books in a specific subject area, concealed gift in which the library is given the opportunity to buy a complete collection, or its choice of books at a price considerably lower than the owner knows he could obtain in the open market. Here, the purchase of the Clarence L. Holte Collection of Africa displayed in Lagos at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture 1977 by Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, can be cited as an example, and virtual gift - when owners without surrendering legal ownership of material deposit it in a library and make it generally available for scholarly consultation etc.

To accept a collection as gift, one has to consider whether or not:

(a) the subject is still of interest to the university.
(b) the financial resources available to the library are enough to continue to augment the collection if it must remain alive and useful.
(c) there is sufficient space to accommodate the collection.
(d) there are human resources to sort and calander or index the collection for scholarly acceptability.

ALLOCATION OF FUNDS

Except for the intellectually arrogant and the sceptical relativist, special collections in Nigerian academic libraries need no special pleading. The importance of such materials in research and training are widely discussed in the literature of Library Science. Funds for the development of Special Collections may come from:

(a) Cash gifts
(b) Operating income
(c) Expendable trust funds
(d) Endowments
(e) University fundations
(f) Research and contingency funds

From formula for fund allocation (operating income) depends on the need, the university has for particular books and special collection in general. This is why, in a place like Nigeria where the graph for fund allocation has taken a complete nosedive, the librarian must encourage through subtle publicity the use of his materials so as to be able to justify any request for the increase of allocation. It is instructive that most academic libraries in North America do not budget annually for special collections yet spend so much annually because of the availability of cash gifts, trust funds, endowments, research and contingency funds, fundations, etc.

MANAGEMENT AND PRESERVATION

The unique nature of special collections makes their organization and management more difficult. Manuscripts are fragile and they need special care. The acquisition of rare materials is a painstaking exercise especially in a developing country like Nigeria. Some of the materials need special treatment because of their heavy use. If proper organizational and administrative care is not taken, the special collection will end up in a chaotic state and this will militate against effective utilization as is the case with the special collection department of the University of Ibadan Library.

Once records have been selected for permanent deposits in the special collection of a university, an accession folder should be maintained by the department. All accessions should be recorded in a single line entry in a register of record holdings. The library should go further by publishing bibliographies of its holdings. Historical manuscripts should be placed in document boxes after they are arranged in cataloguable units. Adequate records should be kept to indicate donors and dealers of manuscripts from whom purchase was made.
Conservation and preservation of library materials constitute a very vital aspect in library management. “Acid impurities introduced during paper production since the mid-nineteenth century and assimilated since from air pollutants cause a breakdown of the cellulose molecule and ultimate total deterioration of the paper. Harmful environmental conditions such as heat and humidity extremes, aid in this destruction”[10].

The magnitude of this problem can be appreciated when we realise that most of the total stock of special collections in Nigerian academic libraries are made of wood pulp paper which are very vulnerable to decay. Acid content in books is presumably higher in modern books. Humidity and lighting problems aid rapid deterioration of special collections. The higher the temperature, the faster the deterioration of special collection and Nigeria is a tropical region. The accelerated growth of library holdings continues to put pressure on new methods of preservation. The growth of library holdings is the result of expanding scope of book publishing. Like a chain, this increase in book publishing in Nigeria has led to greater demand in paper and subsequently resulted in the fall of quality of paper.

It is believed that there are about 1,000 species of insects that can damage library materials apart from 300 species of mild fungi[11]. An academic library acquiring catalogues and storing paper-based and other special materials is of no guarantee that these materials would be preserved for the use of future generations. Means should be devised to prevent their rapid deterioration. A strong and comprehensive preservation programme with the following objectives as recommended by Sylvester[12] are desirable:

(a) The preservation of the intellectual content of deteriorating materials which have permanent research value, but which do not warrant the greater expense of physical preservation.

(b) The preservation and restoration of library materials that are valuable beyond the information they contain.

(c) Ensuring the preservation of future library materials through preventive conservation.

Microreproduction is a means of preserving intellectual content. Rare books, books important for their illustrations, books annotated by famous people, music and library manuscripts and cartographic materials are all examples of materials that need to be physically preserved. The use of acid-free paper is a means of preserving future library materials. When repairing a book, care must be taken so that nothing is removed or added to the document in the course of repair. Plastic lamination is considered suitable for holding together fragile documents painted in mechanical woodpapers - for instance, newspapers.

Special collections should be housed under conditions of strict security, in stacks to which direct users’ access, though seldom completely prohibited, is the exception rather than the rule. Direct access limitation to research materials such as special collections is a security not only from rough handling or theft or mutilation but also in respect of conservation. Books are known to survive better when light is subdued or there is no light at all and at temperatures rather lower than those comfortable for humans. Achievement of these measures is more probable in a closed stack than in open access. It is important that special collections, whether in closed or open access should be protected from direct sunlight and also artificial light should be reduced to barest convenient minimum for direct light has adverse effects on books. Adequately filtered and fluorescent lighting is considered better suited for the stacks.

ACCESSIBILITY AND UTILIZATION

The basic and fundamental difference between the general collection and special collection in an academic library is the question of material accessibility. Most general or main collections are on open stacks while almost all special collections are on closed stacks. While the patron can, if conversant with the catalogue in use, gain direct access to materials in the main collection without bothering any of the library...
staff, the circulation desk is the ultimate key to the special collections.

The question accessibility of special collections, vis-a-vis their utilization, has continued to generate serious debate. Should special collections be on open stacks or closed stacks? Closed access has resulted in under-utilization of special collection apart from de-emphasizing the significance of browsing. Proponents of open access have always drawn attention to the possibility of serendipity. Users should be allowed to roam in the stacks because they are likely to pick up materials of interest. But there is the nagging question of whether a reader is best served by turning him loose in the collection to seek his salvation. What are his chances of finding the right material? Since a high percentage of library users in Nigeria avoid the card catalogue, does direct access to shelves not waste readers, time? Even though special collections need to be properly handled, physically protected and accessibility to these collections be controlled, yet they exist to be utilized. Discouraging their utilization in any form is to turn the special collection into a museum, which is only one part of its functions. While acknowledging the validity of the points in support of open access, it might be unwise to leave access to special collection unrestricted without solving the accompanying problems of theft, mutilation, improper handling, space, disarrangement, etc.

CONCLUSION

Special collections in Nigerian academic libraries are comparatively grossly inadequate. The materials available lack properly coordinated arrangement for the purpose of easy retrieval and utilization. The inability of the major academic libraries in Nigeria to cope with these problems have driven enthusiastic researchers in the humanities and social sciences for instance, to turn to foreign academic institutions with the mistaken belief that no material of their interest exist locally that could aid their research efforts. For these collections to be well-exploited, their existence and location must be known, they must be well-organized and managed for easy retrieval. Academic libraries in Nigeria should strive to encourage rapid development of existing special collections and where there are none, effort should be made to develop them.

REFERENCES