

Development needs libraries

COMMENTARY

Jean de Chantal

Many people who have visited the Third World, especially those returning from a trip to French-speaking Africa, are amazed at the lack of public libraries in the former French colonies. The contrast becomes all the more striking when compared with impressive achievements of their English-speaking neighbours who also gained their independence in the early sixties. The marked difference is obviously not due to climatic or geographic factors. The causes, therefore, must lie elsewhere.

To begin with, there is the legacy of the past. A study published in France in 1968 showed that France herself had not yet attained the level of public library activity that Britain had known in 1908. In 1960, the *Syndicat national des éditeurs* (national publishers' association) found out that 58 percent of French people never read books. This rather uninspiring situation is further illustrated by these equally revealing figures: 4.5 percent of the population of France were at that time members of municipal libraries, as opposed to 20 percent of North Americans and 30 percent of the people in England, Russia and Denmark. Ten books per year per inhabitant were borrowed in Great Britain, 7 in Denmark, 5.4 in the United States and 0.75 in France. Annual library expenditures per inhabitant were 42 cents in Denmark, 30 in the United States, 15 in Canada and 1.5 in France. No wonder the Premier at the time, Georges Pompidou, remarked that France had a great deal of work ahead of her in the area of public libraries.

With such a situation in the mother country, it is hardly surprising that nothing was done in the colonies, so that when they achieved independence they found themselves without any kind of structure, framework or tradition of public libraries.

Their English-speaking neighbours, on the other hand, in the earliest years of independence already had well-equipped archives services in air-conditioned buildings, central libraries whose bookmobiles made regular trips into the bush, adequate legislation providing for public funds in accordance

with the available resources, and even schools of library science; the one in Ibadan, Nigeria opened its doors in 1960, while that of Accra, Ghana was opened in 1962. (*L'École nationale supérieure de bibliothécaires* was established in Paris in 1963.)

How is it that the development of a cultural institution as important as the public library has followed such divergent patterns in France and England? After all, many favourable factors are common to both countries: economic growth, the development of elementary schooling, the drop in illiteracy, and the progress made by democratic ideas. Although I do not wish to dwell on considerations outside the scope of this article, it is still worthwhile to recall a few major factors that shed some light, mainly on the European scene, to be sure, but part of it is reflected on the African territories which were then still waiting in the wings. The success of libraries in Anglo-Saxon countries is partly due to the spirit of association and enterprise, and to administrative decentralization. The English counties, responsible for their own cultural policy, have all been eager to outdo each other in dynamism and inventiveness, whereas in France, the communes were dispossessed of their power and showed little interest in the institutions imposed on them by the central government. Another determining factor lies in the importance attached by English-speaking countries to continuing education as an individual process. In France, education is seen as the exclusive domain of the schools, whose teaching approach is not oriented toward reading and individual work. Finally, in England as in the United States, libraries have symbolized a spirit of collective responsibility on the part of the citizens. They embodied the unity of the society: millionaires like the famous Andrew Carnegie were their patrons, they were frequented by workers and craftsmen, and everyone felt that libraries ranked with the schools and the Church as one of the cornerstones of civilization. In France, on the contrary, the society was divided and the country torn by deep-

rooted religious and political conflicts, so that there could be no collective, relatively disinterested effort toward such a goal. It was not until 1945 that the *Direction des bibliothèques et de la lecture publique* was established in France.

Thus, the newly independent French-speaking African nations were left with little or no tradition of public libraries. They were faced — and are still faced today — with a number of difficulties in setting up their libraries. First of all there is the omnipresent financial problem: libraries are expensive and make no tangible contribution to the economy of a country. Government officials confronted with economic development imperatives tend to think only in terms of immediate returns, and have not always understood the role that can and should be played by well-organized libraries (guaranteed by a strong, securely established library profession) in improving educational conditions, the modernization of teaching methods, and the economic life of the country. This is particularly true in Africa, which must learn to depend less heavily on the outside world, and modify its industrial development strategy by importing ideas rather than products.

The bureaucrats still do not understand that the circulation, safekeeping and redistribution of scientific, industrial and administrative information should be of primary concern to any government, that the librarian plays an indispensable role in this area, and that the creation and development of libraries must be given priority in the national plan for economic and social development. Libraries are at the bottom of the priorities list, and the library profession is suffering tremendously as a result.

Then there is the problem of professional training for the French-speaking librarians of Black Africa. Before the opening in 1967 of the only French-language school of library science for Africans south of the Sahara (there are at least six English-language schools), training was available only in France. Such training was often unsatisfactory, being largely geared to the needs of developed



Young Ghanaians enjoy excellent library facilities, but their neighbours in Francophone Africa are not so lucky.

countries, and in any case the number of places made available to Africans was insufficient, and admission requirements often unrealistic.

The final report of the meeting of experts on national planning for documentation and library services in Africa, held in Kampala in December 1970, concluded "that the training of competent personnel in sufficient numbers and at all levels is a decisive factor in library development. This can be best accomplished by creating schools for librarians in which the necessary human and financial resources are available. Training in other countries has been recognized as a means of providing both instruction which would not otherwise be available and a source of enrichment for locally trained librarians, but participants have found that, on the whole, it is preferable for African librarians to receive their basic training in Africa."

Providing this kind of basic training presents numerous problems, such as that of recruiting local librarians who are able to adapt their training (in most cases received abroad) to the needs of their own countries. The second most difficult problem is to find textbooks adapted to African needs. A few already exist, but they are in English. Since good translations are difficult to come by, trainees generally make do with texts used in France or Belgium.

In February 1974, the *Ecole des Bibliothécaires, Archivistes et Documentalistes* (EBAD) of Dakar organized a seminar (at which the IDRC was represented) on problems common to schools for librarians in Africa, both Anglophone and Francophone. After an exhaustive study of these difficulties, the participants recommended, among other things, "that an information program be established to facilitate the exchange of documentation such as annual reports, development programs, research documents, teaching programs, statistics and lists of professors; that an exchange program for professors and students of the different librarian schools be set up as soon as possible; that Unesco assist in the preparation of a book on the history and development of libraries in Africa, which would include information avail-

able in the various librarian schools in Africa but not yet published."

But what is the present status in the profession in Francophone Africa? For an answer to this important question, I cannot do better than to paraphrase the remarks of an African librarian who has an extensive knowledge of the situation. The role of libraries in these countries is not well established and is therefore far from being fully appreciated. This lack of recognition, this ignorance of the librarian's profession, is painfully evident during a period, not yet over, in which the librarian, considered a keeper — a "guardian" — of books, is not thought to need special training.

Consequently, the job is given to the pretty young niece of a high official for whom it is necessary to find a position involving little or no work, to the incompetent clerk no one quite knows what to do with, or perhaps to the headstrong employee one wishes to subdue by the silent atmosphere of rows of books piled up and forgotten on the shelves. Such attitudes obviously make it impossible to produce a solid group of professionals capable of changing the situation by imparting a sense of direction to library services. To compound the problem, the organization of such services is rarely the responsibility of a single ministry; in most cases the ministry of education takes charge of the school libraries, the ministry of cultural affairs is responsible for the administration of public libraries and yet a third ministry is in charge of the national library, if indeed one exists. In addition, each government ministry operates a library service for its own sphere of activity. The profession therefore suffers from a lack of coordination at the national level in most countries; in others, no policies on library services even exist. Professional librarians find themselves working in a kind of vacuum and face numerous difficulties when attempting to find employment at the administrative level.

As early as 1970, the participants at the Kampala conference mentioned above expressed the hope "that a government organization in charge of library and documentation services be

created, that it be fully representative of all agencies responsible for library services and all government ministries concerned, including those involved in planning and finance, and that it be placed under the jurisdiction of a single ministry having sufficient authority to deal effectively with other government bodies and to sustain a position of political strength."

This desire will eventually be fulfilled especially now that attempts are being made to generate an awareness of the importance of having competent personnel at all levels to assist in the development of effective library services and the establishment of long, medium and short term training programs for library personnel. Some countries have already created library directorates. An effort is also being made to encourage the establishment of professional associations which would constitute a dynamic force capable of uniting the profession, and provide the technical and social framework required for harmonious development. Many countries have opted for a single national association designed to include not only librarians but archivists and documentalists as well.

Finally, efforts are underway to have special status enacted on behalf of librarians that would guarantee the proper recognition of their profession. The IDRC supported these efforts by sponsoring a special conference, held in Dakar in early June of this year, which brought together professionals and senior government officials to discuss the possibility of creating a statute for librarians and documentalists in Francophone Africa. The outcome was an agreement by the participants to recommend to their governments that steps should be taken to recognize and regulate the profession.

If these suggestions are implemented, it will no longer be a case of deploring the situation of readers without libraries but rather of feeling a proud sense of achievement because the people of Francophone Africa will finally be able to enjoy libraries in their own communities. □