

LIBRARIES AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL UNITY

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Abstract

Nigeria as a nation has been plagued by religious, political, cultural and ethnic conflicts that consistently threaten the actualization of national unity as enshrined in her constitution in spite of numerous government policies and programmes aimed at fostering unity. This paper, therefore, examines Nigeria's quest for unity, her need for an informed citizenry and how libraries through information provision and dissemination can ensure that Nigerians are equipped with relevant information for appreciating unity in diversity in order to promote lasting peace and a sense of unity. The paper concludes by noting that Nigeria can achieve unity in diversity through information provision and dissemination and therefore recommends that libraries of all types make conscious efforts to acquire and build collections that promote unity. Beyond making information materials available, it also recommends that libraries promote national unity through literacy programs.

Keyword: Nigeria, national unity, unity in diversity libraries

Historical background of Nigeria

Nigeria, a former British colony is located on the Atlantic coast in West Africa, bordered by Benin on the West, Niger, and Chad on the North and Cameroon on the East. It is made up of people of diverse ethnic groups estimated at 250 (Attah, 1987; Eric, 2016). Before the coming of the British however, Nigerians had lived independently of each other within communities, kingdoms and caliphates. The story changed with the creation of the Southern and Northern protectorates by the British and a formal amalgamation in 1914 under Lord Frederick Lugard. Southern protectorate was further split Eastern and Western protectorates while the North remained intact with the Hausa and Fulani concentrated in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast (McLoughlin & Bouchat, 2013).

While the idea of amalgamation was good for administrative purposes, as it suited the purpose of the colonial masters who wanted to have a clearly defined territory, the same cannot be said for the indigenous people with diverse ethnic groups, culture, and religion who were involuntarily brought together to live as one nation. It is not surprising then that amalgamation brought with it many challenges. The division of the country into three major groups created majority and minority ethnic groups with the Hausa/Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West. Other groups became minority and had to fit into one of the major groups. This arrangement according to Tangban (2014) created mutual distrust, suspicion, and fear of domination of the minority groups by the dominant group.

Amalgamation was a serious challenge for the democratic process in Nigeria as early political parties emerged under ethnic lines. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was from the North, Action Group (AG) was from the West while the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), emerged from the East. Other clear ethnic unions that changed to "national" parties included the Northern Elements People's Union (NEPU) and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) (Taiwo, 2000). Ethnic differences continued to eat into the fabric of the Nigerian people challenging her unity, which finally culminated into a civil war that lasted for three years.

As a country blessed with natural resources, Nigeria derives most of her revenue from the sale of crude oil however, McLoughlin and Bouchat (2013) identifies wealth distribution as a major challenge to the unity of Nigeria as oil-producing states continue to air their grievances at the way wealth is distributed within the country. This has further deepened divisions among Nigerians creating militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

The concept of national unity

Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines a nation as a country, especially when thought of as a large group of people living in one area with their own government, language, traditions, etc. It goes on to define unity as "the state of being joined together or in agreement". Going by the definitions, national unity can be described as the agreement to live in peace by diverse groups in a country. Although sometimes described as the coming together of a broad coalition of political parties to form a unified government (Reference.com, 2019) the concept of national unity actually transcends the formation of a unified government. Caplan (2019) describes national unity as a political construct that reflects the collective spirit and will of a group of people who agree to be part of the particular geographical area as a unit, for the purpose of governance and action on behalf of all.

The US Department of National Unity according to Olinya (n.d.) defines national unity as "a situation in which all citizens from various ethnic groups, religion, and states live in peace as a united nationality giving full commitment to national identity, based upon the Federal Constitution. National unity thus acknowledges diversity in the makeup of people who come together to form a nation. Diversity, in this case, acknowledges multiracial, multi-religion, multicultural, and multilingual makeup of the people. While national unity can be viewed as unity in diversity among people who accept their differences and choose to have a peaceful co-existence, it does not necessarily mean that the people agree on everything.

Zamare and Karofi (2015) describe National unity as a process that produce an omnibus of initiatives put in place by a state, its representative or institution guided by respect for the unique traditions and cultural background of ethnicities sharing the same polity with the goal of harmonizing all interest through a form of dialogue and representation and addressing differences that may be divisive and conflictual using the instrument of fairness, justice and equity in the sharing of resources, benefits, opportunities and responsibilities in order to guaranteed stability, longevity and prosperity of the polity as long as the inhabitants decide to remain in the polity

To Umaru and Usman (2015) as quoted by Onifade (2013), national unity is a relationship of community among people within the same political entity. Echem, Pokubo, and Ejuh (2018) expressed the view that national integration is crucial to the development of any meaningful nation. For any meaningful society to advance and flourish it must embrace national integration. The idea behind national integration is simply unity, oneness not minding differences as a people. In other words, it's unity in diversity.

Nigeria's quest for national unity

The quest for unity in Nigeria is a national concern as reflected in the constitution, which explicitly states that the motto of the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be "Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress".

Discrimination on the grounds of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic association or ties are equally prohibited by the constitution while composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs is carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character and promote national unity. To internalize the concept of unity within the citizenry, the Nigerian national anthem cites Nigeria as “one nation bound in freedom, peace, and unity”.

Despite all government efforts, policies and statements on national unity, Nigeria was embattled in a civil war between 1967 and 1970. It was a dark period in the nation’s history for which the country made conscientious effort to avoid future occurrences. This gave birth to the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973, which aimed at exposing Nigerian graduates to other tribes and religions within the country in order to boost cultural tolerance. Likewise, revenue sharing formula aimed at quelling agitation for resource control saw the allocation of 13% of the nation’s revenue derived from crude oil to oil-producing states.

Leaders, past and present have also reiterated the need for unity and harmonious living among Nigerians as Obasanjo (2018) affirmed that “We can have a country that is at peace with itself, where unity is enthroned, a country where everyone will be their brothers’ keeper, where performance will be obvious in the governance and running of the affairs of our people, a country where everyone will have a sense of belonging”.

Need for an informed citizenry

Information is a necessary ingredient for life as it is needed to solve problems and take decisions in every aspect of life. Uttor (1999) defines information as data that has been subjected to some processing functions capable of answering user’s query, be it recorded, summarized, or simply collected would help in decision making. Information in the view of Ifidon and Ahiauzu (2005) is structured data that causes a human mind to change its opinion about the current state of the real world and contribute to a reduction in the uncertainty of the state of the system. It is a new idea or knowledge extracted from the environment for human use with the aim of modifying behaviour, effecting changes, and enhancing efficiency in all human endeavours (Ajegebomogun, 2008). Going by the definitions, information can take different formats, however, its main function is to change the state of a recipients’ knowledge.

Information in the view of Anasi (2010) helps in creating enlightened and responsible citizens. Sokari (2006) agrees that information is necessary for liberation from the shackles of ignorance, misconceptions and social unrest arguing that social cohesion cannot be achieved without timely, accurate, and relevant information. Satgoor (2012) noted the importance of information on national unity by emphasizing that information is needed to understand the impact of the past on the present; redressing iniquities of the past; creating an acknowledgment and appreciation of existing diversity, fostering communication across cultures and safeguarding human rights. The ripple effect of an informed citizenry is not lost on Maswabi, Sethate, Sebusang, and Taolo (2011) who noted that having informed parents can lead to having children who are well informed. The more people get informed on the need and ways of maintaining unity, the more they are likely to share their knowledge with others thereby creating more informed citizens.

Libraries as agents of change

The major objective of any type of library is the provision of information. IFLA (2003) describes libraries as key actors in providing unhindered access to essential information resources for economic and cultural advancement thereby contributing to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, democratic values, peace, and universal civil right. Libraries are so crucial to human societies that White (2012) opines that a world without libraries, would be difficult in terms of advancing research and human knowledge or preserving the world’s cumulative knowledge and heritage for future generations. This is because libraries bring all forms of recorded knowledge in one place. For those seeking to advance knowledge, they can study

and build upon what is already known and for those in search of unity, the library provides facts based on history which is essential for dispelling hate resulting from rumours and other forms of misinformation.

Information materials acquired by libraries are available in diverse formats, hence the need to ensure that citizens are equipped to search and retrieve information from different sources. Libraries, therefore, engage in information literacy programmes. American Library Association (1989) defines information literacy as the ability to recognize when information is needed, the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. By embarking on information literacy programmes, libraries are able to transform the ordinary citizen into an independent learner, capable of identifying when information is needed and equipped to seek, find and make ethical use of information. The need for information is not only necessary in times of peace but also in times of misunderstanding and conflict. Using libraries, the citizenry is therefore in a better position to seek for information from which intelligent decisions can be made. As noted by Amisah-Arthur (2014) a reading nation is an informed nation. People who utilize libraries get to know what they were previously ignorant of. They tend to have a better understanding and appreciation of other cultures leading to better lives as individuals and as citizens.

With the advent of information communication technologies, libraries worldwide have played major roles in reducing the digital divide. Access to online information is no longer an exclusive right of the rich as libraries offer free computer and WiFi access thereby widening the nations' access to information. Citizens who would have been caught off from accessing information on the Internet can do so in libraries and as such people now have access to information from diverse cultures both globally and locally which leads to more exposure and appreciation of others and their way of life.

Libraries of all types perform educational functions. According to Olili (2008) as cited by Ugulu and Oghuvwu (2015) the library is an educational organization and a useful instrument for combating illiteracy and erasing ignorance. American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology (1998) points out that school libraries "provide learning resources that represent diversity of experiences, opinions, and social and cultural perspectives and to support responsible citizenship in a democracy" (pp. 6–7). Learning resources are equally provided by school libraries in Nigeria as a means of raising cultural awareness. For other types of libraries, seminars are also used as tools for reaching out to users. Ogunkelu (2001) as cited Echezona (2007) in notes that seminars are useful for behavioral changes as some seminars equip users with the techniques for identifying, preventing and managing conflicts.

Conclusion

National unity is a matter of concern for every society. For Nigeria, a county with diverse ethnic groups the need is even more pressing. While the Federal Government has formulated policies to maintain unity, libraries as gatekeepers of information continue will no doubt continue to perform traditional roles of information provision and dissemination because information is necessary for dispelling ignorance and ushering in harmonious living built on understanding and appreciation of the diversity within the society.

Recommendations

To further achieve unity in Nigeria through libraries, this paper makes the following recommendations,

- 1 Libraries should be more engaged in the promotion of government policies on national unity for better outreach and citizenry participation.
- 2 Libraries of all types should continue in their efforts to acquire and build collections that promote unity especially in rural areas where citizens may not have ease of access to information.
- 3 Libraries should be at the forefront of promoting reading culture because they more the citizenry reads, the more enlightened they become.

- 4 Librarians should seek out more opportunities to promote national unity through seminars and lectures addressing areas of diversity and misunderstandings among the general public
- 5 In order to breach wealth gap which is a major cause of disunity, libraries should provide work-related information as well as engage in vocational training so that individuals can be lifted above poverty lines

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