

THE WEST AFRICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (WALA) IS TO BE REVIVED.

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Abstract:

The paper provides a context for the revival talks held in Accra, Ghana to resuscitate the West African Library Association (WALA). It traces the formation of the Association to the Ibadan Seminar of 1953, examines its membership and some of the problems that contributed to its untimely breakup in 1962. Some of its achievements are also examined. The modalities for resuscitating WALA are presented, as are WALA's future objectives. Important among these is the aim of making WALA a truly West African Association by opening its membership to library and information associations as well as institutions in all countries of the sub region.

INTRODUCTION

Positive steps have been taken to resuscitate the West African Library Association (WALA). These initiative were taken at the end of the IFLA Micro Computer Workshop organized for Senior Library Managers of Anglophone West Africa between 6th and 13th February, 1995 in Accra, Ghana's capital city. The countries that were represented at this workshop and at the revival talks were the original WALA member countries comprising the Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

In this era of regional groupings, it is not surprising that library and information executives of this sub region of the African continent have felt the need to revive an association that had boded nothing but good for the profession, and that had held so much hope for its development in the sub region in particular and the African conti-

ment in general.

It was WALA which first placed West Africa, indeed the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa, on the map of librarianship in 1954. Its demise in 1962 after only eight years was, therefore, much regretted by many contemporary supporters and subsequent generations of professionals. But what is or was WALA? The aim of this paper is to provide a context for the fresh initiatives at cooperation by giving a historical account of the formation of WALA, its significance, why it disintegrated and what the future may hold for a revived, revitalized WALA.

ORIGINS

WALA was created in 1954 at the end of the Unesco Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa which took place in Ibadan, Nigeria, on 27th July to 21st August, 1953. The "Ibadan Seminar", as it came to be known in professional circles, was part of Unesco's continu-

ing programme of stimulating the promotion of public library development throughout the world. It was the fourth in line of Unesco's seminars on public library development, the first three having been held in London and Manchester (England), Malmo (Sweden) and Sao Paulo (Brazil) respectively in 1948, 1950 and 1952.¹

The purpose of the Ibadan Seminar was to study the principal public library problems in Africa and to draft plans and proposals for the development of public library on the African continent. Most countries or sub regions of the continent were represented and J.O. Odumosu² informs us that there were momentous discussions and decisions on librarianship in Africa among which was the formation of WALA. The formation of WALA was therefore regarded in Unesco circles as a direct and immediate result of the Seminar, in response to the seminar's recommendation "that librarians working in various regions of Africa should take practical steps to form dynamic professional associations as rapidly as possible."³

The main objectives in setting up the West African Library Association were the need to unite all persons in West Africa interested in librarianship; to provide an avenue for discussion and exchange of ideas; and to foster the development of libraries in the sub-region towards the achievement of recognition for the library profession in Africa.⁴ The Association tried to pursue these objectives but its programme was derailed by factors that will be discussed later.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership was open, at WALA's inception, to anyone interested in libraries and the library profession, not necessarily to librarians only. However, from the very beginning, as was to be expected, most of the leadership positions were held by librarians. Non-librarians, nonetheless, continued to play an important role in it. It is on record⁵ that two such members - D. A. Cannon, a physician, and Alhaji Gwandu, a politician - served as Presidents. The founding committee consisted

of eleven people. Four of these were expatriate librarians, three African librarians, two educators, one administrative officer and one publishers representative.

For most of WALA's eight years' existence, expatriate librarians dominated the Association, serving as its officers or councillors. It has been observed that between 1954 and 1962, nearly three-fifths of the 85 council seats were held by expatriates,⁵ although there was regular African representation on the Council. Kalu Okorie, one of the pioneer librarians of Nigeria, was on the council for all of WALA's eight years. However, it was not until 1961, towards the end of WALA's life, that Okorie assumed the enviable position of the Association's first African President. Another prominent African member of WALA was George Pitcher of Ghana, one of the architects of the present library of the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi.

The first President of WALA was John Harris, former President of the New Zealand Library Association who became librarian of the University College of Ibadan, and therefore, the Seminar's host. It speaks a great deal for the position that Harris held in West African Librarianship in general and librarianship in Nigeria in particular that he convened the first meeting of the founding committee of WALA, served two terms as President (1954 and 1958), three terms as vice-president, and two additional terms as councillor.⁵ Other expatriates including Evelyn Evans and Jessie Carnell (both British) at the Ghana Library Board and the then College of Technology in Kumasi respectively, served on the WALA council as Council members and later as Presidents. Elise Walker of the University College of the Gold Coast was another prominent expatriate member.

The preponderance of expatriates on the council was not surprising and could be attributed to the limited number of qualified Africans and the equally limited training facilities then available to Africans. At the time WALA was founded, there

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were only two Africans in West Africa holding the Fellowship of the Library Association - Kalu Okorie of Nigeria and George Pitcher of Ghana (then Gold Coast) mentioned above.⁶ Practically all prominent positions of head or deputy head of libraries were therefore held by expatriates. Despite the limited opportunities for advanced training prior to 1960, personal membership in WALA rose from 107 in 1954 to 159 in 1956 and 221 in 1961.⁵

WALA's membership was not based on professional associations because at the time of its founding, there were no library associations in those British West African countries from which WALA derived its members. Membership was territorial, but was based on individual, rather than institutional membership, although such membership was welcomed.⁷

It is also noteworthy that membership was limited to the British dependencies in the sub region. This was still the era of colonial rivalry and cultural imperialism. There was thus very limited or no cooperation in this sphere between the colonial powers or the territories over which they held hegemony. Thus, although a Francophone association - the Inter-African Library Association (A.I.D.B.A.)⁸ - was formed soon after WALA, there was never any link between the two.

The great majority of WALA's members were from the Gold Coast and Nigeria, with Nigeria dominating in this respect. There were only a few individuals from Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia. The Gambia and Liberia did not take an active part in WALA affairs and, therefore, the annual conferences of the Association were described as "an affair between the other three countries"². The meetings therefore alternated between the Gold Coast (Ghana after 1957) and Nigeria, respectively between Accra and Lagos (the capitals), and Kumasi and Ibadan (the inland university towns). The Association's inaugural meet-

ing was held in Lagos in 1954 and was attended by twenty-seven participants from Nigeria and seven from the Gold Coast.

CAUSES OF BREAKUP

The distance between the two main member countries of WALA was a major problem which became worse with the years. The number of delegates at WALA meetings was always limited by distance and transport difficulties. Conferences, therefore, gradually tended to draw heavier than usual participation from the host country, and attracted relatively few members from the other member countries. Funding of participants by WALA was out of the question because the Association depended largely on membership dues and received no official funding, or funding from aid agencies.

This situation made continued contact between members increasingly difficult. It was to circumvent this problem that *West African Libraries*, the first journal of WALA, was launched in March, 1954. It soon became *WALA News* and was published by Ibadan University Press. The journal also published the proceedings of WALA conferences and was a source of important information on members and events. At the time of WALA's dissolution in 1962, 16 issues altogether of the journal had appeared.

Odumosu² described the journal as "official organ of the Association" and Nyarko⁶ has commented directly on the articles it carried, describing them as of a generally high standard, although initially many were largely narrative accounts of existing library services. He adds that others, though, were "real contributions to library thought". Odumosu was less generous in his assessment of the contents of *WALA News* and suggested the exclusion of certain "childish reports" and other similar reports in order to raise the standard of publication. He also noted the preponderance of Nigerian contributions to the journal and lack of interest by other territorial members. It was obvious that distance, and the

fact that the Association's Secretariat was sited in Nigeria, had established the focus of the Association in that country. This situation, in the eyes of the other member countries, undermined the sub regional status of WALA.

The problem of distance was, indeed, seen by many as the main cause of the breakup of the Association. The two main means of travel between Ghana and Nigeria were and still are by air and land, but they took too long, and air travel, not very developed at the time, was also considered too expensive for most. Thus, at the Kumasi conference of 1960, the Nigerian delegation proposed that the meetings should become bi-annual rather than annual.

The main cause of WALA's breakup, however, was the tension engendered by the proposed library school at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. WALA has asked the Carnegie Corporation in 1955 to fund the training of some of its (WALA's) deserving members. The report of a later survey of West African libraries (1958) commissioned by the Corporation and undertaken by Harold Lancour, Associate Dean of the Library School at the University of Illinois, had proposed the establishment of a library school at the University of Ibadan for the whole of the sub region, rather than scholarships for overseas training which had been WALA's original request.

The proposal was favourably received by the Nigerian Division of WALA, naturally, but not by the Ghana Division which wanted a separate school to be established in Ghana. Maack recounts that the tension between the two groups mounted as the preparations for the Ibadan school progressed.⁵

Odumosu² has described as the "deadlock" and immediate cause of the breakup of WALA, the Lagos Conference of 1961. Only a few Gold Coast members were able to attend this conference, and the Nigerian delegates proposed that WALA be dissolved as an inter-territorial organization, to

reconvene as a bi-annual conference of a federation of national library associations. This proposal was more or less the recognition of a *fait accompli* - the fact that WALA was as good as dead.

It was believed that the dissolution would enable attention to be focused on the development of national aims and objectives of librarianship and, by implication, the development of national library associations. It was accepted that Ghana and Nigeria could stand on their own, being relatively better endowed professionally, but that the other three - The Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone - could not. It was therefore proposed that these three should join the nearest neighbour (Ghana), which was considered "more advanced in the field" until they became more mature and able to stand on their own feet.² Odumosu's article cited liberally above, presented a fervent appeal to members of WALA for cooperation, understanding and the elimination of "political" and other differences in order to save the Association. But his pleas and those of other committed members and observers were to no avail. The West African Library Association split into two separate national associations - The Ghana Library Association and the Nigeria Library Association - in 1962.

FAILURES

The problems faced by the West African Library Association during its brief eight years' existence could, in retrospect, be said to have been predictable. Shortage of qualified African personnel and the resultant predominance of expatriate members meant that sustaining the interest and commitment of these African members, particularly those of the "smaller" countries, was going to be difficult. The minimal nature of the participation of these countries, in effect, diminished the "indigenous" and sub regional dimension of the association. Thus the cardinal aim of promoting bibliographical development in West Africa could not be achieved. Nor could WALA's aim of uniting those interested in equipping the sub region

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with a world class library service.⁷

The expatriate presence was, however, undoubtedly advantageous. WALA was able to draw on experienced professionals like John Harris and Evelyn Evans. Their prestige and the contacts they had offered them easy access to aid agencies and funding such as that provided by the Carnegie Corporation. They also carried enormous weight in the national contexts. However, their predominance in the Association for most of its life time diminished its claim to being indigenous.

Besides the foregoing problems, internecine political squabbles borne out of nationalistic fervour were no mean contributory factors to WALA's breakup. It is a fact that nationalism is capable of the highest good but chauvinism can be inimical to regional harmony and progress. This, in the view of this author, is what happened to WALA. Each of the two larger territorial members (Ghana and Nigeria) wanted to be the site of the West African Library School. Ghana argued, with some justification, that as the employer of the largest library workforce in the sub region at the time and the site of an earlier West African School, it had better infrastructure for such a school. A Library School had been established at the Achimota College in the Gold Coast in 1943/44. It had been supported by the colonial administrations of the same four Anglophone territories that were later to form the membership of WALA. The school, headed by Ethel Fegan, wound up after only one year but produced 8 "graduates", one from Sierra Leone, one from Nigeria and the rest from the Gold Coast.

It should be noted, however, that underlying these tensions was superpower rivalry, which was played out to the full in respect of this very African problem. Kotei⁹ has examined the issue in considerable depth. Presented here simply, this complicated problem was the conflict between British and American theories on library education which manifested itself as prograduate

(American), and pro-professional, non degree (British). The Nigerian division of WALA aligned itself to the American position and the Ghanaian to the British. This tug-of-war between the two main member countries finally pulled WALA apart.

ACHIEVEMENTS

WALA's achievements as an interterritorial association were limited due mainly to its short lifespan. Besides this, and as noted above, the paucity of qualified African members rendered many of WALA's laudable objectives for librarianship at the sub-regional level unattainable. However, the Association scored greater successes at the national or divisional level in its promotion of professional legislation. Maack¹⁰ has observed that although WALA wished for national legislation in British territories, it achieved its greatest success with the passage of the regional library law of 1955 in Eastern Nigeria. However, it presented recommendations on the issue to the governments of member countries (including the then Southern Cameroons) and urged them to adopt legislation using the Gold Coast Library Board Ordinance of 1949 as a model.

The Nigerian division was also instrumental in the raising of salary scales of chartered librarians to commensurate levels with accepted Federal professional scales. It was also able to convince the federal authorities to establish a library advisory committee which was later on to play a vital role in the establishment of the National Library of Nigeria.

On its part, the Gold Coast Division was also able to obtain Carnegie funds for training Library Assistants in the UK. On the whole, WALA was active in promoting improvement in training for personnel of member countries.

The two national library associations of Ghana and Nigeria can be said to have risen from the ashes of WALA. This may sound negative in

sub regional terms, but it has resulted in the building of national professional infrastructures that poised to launch the profession in the sub region into the age of electronic information.

PRESENT AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

In the time between the disintegration of WALA and now, all the former member countries have grown in stature professionally. Various types of libraries have been established and the Presidents, and/or Vice-Presidents of the present national associations and Senior Librarians who converged on Accra in February, 1995 operated on the basis of the best of Ghana's SANKOFA tradition, which literally means "reach back into the past and retrieve what was lost". They are highly qualified men and women with years of experience in various kinds of library and information organizations. Specifically, they are Directors and Heads of National, University, major research and special libraries in Anglophone West Africa who are responsible for policy making, strategic planning and who either direct or will direct technological applications in their institutions.

Their aim is to unite the various appreciable efforts that range from the traditional library practice to some very sophisticated levels of systems into a coherent whole. As had emerged at the preceding workshop, a great deal of expertise, talent and achievement is available in the sub region. If harnessed properly through a deliberate policy of cooperation and resource sharing, the result would make it worthwhile to look inward, and, to quote Odumosu, "exploit and exhaust their own resources before looking to the outside world for cooperation"².

Thirty years after the breakup of WALA, it was not surprising that there were no 'expatriates' at the meetings. There were colleague professionals from other parts of Africa, Officers of IFLA Africa Section. The representative of the IFLA ALP Core Programme was the only true 'expatriate'. They were there not as initiators or dictators of policy but as facilitators.

It was interesting to observe that a considerable number of the Ghanaian and Nigerian participants had been members of WALA. J. Anafulu, University Librarian, Federal University of Technology at Owerri, was among this group and provided, the historical background. The Presidents of the national associations briefed participants on their associations' standing and achievements to date. These, though modest, were a definite advancement from WALA days. This presentations, however, should not be taken as reflecting real achievements on the ground. It is well known that African library associations depend on part-time workers and are always cash-strapped. Their performance, therefore, cannot represent real national professional achievement, which tend to be much greater.

Kay Resesoka, Chairman of IFLA, Africa Section and University Librarian at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, as well as a prominent member of SCECSAL - the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Libraries - made valuable and insightful inputs on the dos and don'ts in regional groupings based on SCECSAL's experience. The presence of IFLA ALP was also strategic in respect of logistical assistance for future WALA projects.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE NEW WALA

One major goal of the new WALA is to make the Association truly West African. To this end, membership will be open to all library associations and institutions in the countries of the sub region, regardless of linguistic, religious and any other barriers. The factors that divided us in the past will hopefully be used as forces of unity and as agents for enriching the library and information profession in the sub-region.

INTERIM COMMITTEE

To establish modalities for bringing all this about, an Interim Committee was set up based in Lagos. Its composition is totally Nigerian, made up of people in close proximity to that city, with the

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head of the Nigerian National Library, Alhaji Mu'azu H. Wali as Chairman.

The main criteria for the Committee's Nigeria-biased membership were convenience and pragmatism. It was considered that geographical proximity of members of the Committee would minimize the problem of communication which still plagues the sub region and could create difficulties with regard to meetings and contact between members. Secondly and quite important, the National Library of Nigeria and its incumbent Librarian, command considerable stature in the profession in Nigeria and would have access to resources and the right contacts from which an ambitious programme like the one that the Committee has before it could derive great benefit.

The terms of reference of the Interim Committee are to identify and compile a list of the library associations and institutions in all the countries of the sub region, whether Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone or whatever. In addition, the Committee is mandated to explore all possible avenues to revive the WALA. The assignment is a great challenge but the enthusiasm of the professionals assembled at that concluding session made it less daunting. The Committee is expected to present its report to the national associations for study and debate. The outcomes are to be communicated to the Chairman of the Interim Committee for further action.

THE FUTURE

The programme that has been set in motion for West African librarianship and information science can be described as epoch-making. Its significance for the development of the profession will be all encompassing in so far as it is being designed to tap the resources available in the sub region. At this initial stage, we can only express the hope that the objectives identified for profes-

sional development would be realized. Not least among these objectives is the hope expressed at the opening ceremony of the Microcomputer Workshop by the Minister of Environment, Science and Technology who performed the opening function, that WALA would become a technical sector of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS). With the enthusiasm and support displayed at the deliberations and the maturity of the actors, this hope cannot be misplaced.

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