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Reference Services in the Libraries of the Republic of Cameroon: Current State, Problems and Prospects¹

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Abstract. The reference services in Cameroonian libraries are lagging in the exercise of their activities. Thus, this study raises the problem of the organization and functioning of reference services in the libraries of Cameroon. The purpose of the research is to provide an updated view of research issues in reference services in the libraries of the Republic of Cameroon. It outlines the definition of the notion «reference service»; opens his essence, characteristics, and content; reveals the current state of reference services for Cameroonian libraries and the main factors influencing the activities of reference services in libraries of Cameroon. The research defines the attributes of a reference librarian and proposes and defines several ways and trends for the future improvement of reference services in the libraries of Cameroon. As part of the research conducted, the following methods were used: observation and interviews carried out in Cameroon libraries. The results of this study would, no doubt, be of great benefit to all libraries in Cameroon and should ideally be completed by the Cameroonian reference services.

Keywords: reference service, Cameroon, libraries, competencies librarians reference, librarianship, library education, information, services, current awareness service

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Справочные службы в библиотеках Республики Камерун: современное состояние, проблемы и перспективы

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено организации и функционированию справочных служб в библиотеках Камеруна. Цель статьи – дать представление о современных проблемах справочных служб камерунских библиотек. Дано определение понятия «справочная служба»; раскрыта его сущность, характеристики и содержание; описано текущее состояние справочных служб камерунских библиотек и основные факторы, влияющие на деятельность этих подразделений. Определены качества библиотекаря справочного отдела, предложено несколько путей для дальнейшего совершенствования справочных услуг в библиотеках Камеруна. В исследовании использованы методы наблюдения и интервью. Результаты исследования полезны всем библиотекам Республики Камерун и должны быть апробированы их справочными службами.

Ключевые слова: справочная служба, Камерун, библиотеки, компетенции, справочник библиотекарей, библиотечное дело, библиотечное образование, информация, услуги, служба ИРИ

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Introduction

One of the aspect of bibliography is information provision and dissemination that deals with the effective and efficient provision of information on demand and anticipation of its users, or to provide information and its sources for easy access. Librarians are to assist their users in researching specific topics, and also in the selection of recreational reading materials. In other words, they provide reference services in terms of assisting uninformed users who are not knowledgeable in effective library search. These enable users to appreciate reading, enhance their reading habits and see libraries, especially public libraries as indispensable.

Reference services are personal assistance eagerly given to library users in pursuit of information by a librarian in charge of the reference section (Lamy, 1998; Prytherch, 2005). Reference services are personal assistance given by libraries to users who are in pursuit of information. A reference service rendered to its users include reader education, meeting users' requests for specific information and assistance, and the management of the use and loan of library materials and equipment (Collins et al., 1994). The library's reference section headed by the reference librarian is an important section that houses and takes care of important information resources that cannot be given to users on loan. These information resources include encyclopedias, diographies, gazetteers, dictionaries, maps, almanacs, periodicals, newspapers and journals, etc.

Reference services, selecting the right reference source, its type, where and how it can be found, and reference sources available via the Web.

The function of libraries is three-fold. They acquire information, organize that information in a way it can be retrieved, and disseminate it. Reference services fulfill this last function. A reference service may vary from a library to a library, but most libraries have an information or reference desk where assistance from a librarian is available. Almost all libraries also provide reference services via the telephone and in many libraries; you can email your reference question, or ask a reference librarian who will e-mail you back with the answers (Ayanlola, 2017).

There are three main types of reference assistance:

- Assistance or instruction in the use of the library, including the location of materials, the use of the catalog, the use of computers to access information, and the use of basic reference sources;
- Assistance in identifying library materials needed to answer a question;
- Providing brief, factual answers to questions, such as addresses, statistics, phone numbers, etc. that can be quickly located.

Users on regular basis, present reference queries/questions requiring complex information which cannot be obtained from a single source. It is expected that libraries answer these reference queries/questions asked by users. They are also expected to anticipate users' queries to readily provide the information resources needed to answer such questions.

Types of Reference Queries

The following are the types of reference queries as posited by Atanda Luqman Ayanlola (2017), which are anticipated from library users:

- **Straight or Directional Question:** This is a type of question that requires a simple answer. Here the users only need to be directed on where the information resources can be found. He may ask questions such as “Where is the Serial section?” “Where are the encyclopedias?” “Where are dictionaries and directories?” etc.

- **Factual or Ready Reference Questions:** These types of questions are answered with basic knowledge of reference books. The answers to these questions can be found easily. Examples of factual or ready reference questions are names of inventors of electricity, a formula for Sulphuric acid, the density of gold, etc. Answers to these types of questions can be easily found from reference books placed on the reference desk/shelves.

- **Topical or Specific Questions:** These are questions usually posed on topical or burning issues. In answering questions relating to this kind of search, there may be a limited amount of information on the topic which may also involve searching a large number of sources of information. Examples of this type of query may include the importance of vitamin C, properties of water, background information sources. Examples of long-range or advisory queries are current developments in political science etc.

- **Long Range or Advisory Questions:** These questions seek the librarian’s advice on available information sources. This type of question cannot be answered basing on only one or two sources. Rather, it would require the use of many specialized information sources. Examples of long-range or advisory queries are current developments in the manufacturing of cars, history of law, economics and political science, etc. To answer such a question, one may have to consult manuscripts, unpublished documents, periodicals, pamphlets, books, etc.

The reference librarian must do all he can to ensure he provides answers to the above-mentioned reference queries. He must know what is available in his stock and what his users want. To answer user’s queries, especially the difficult ones, the users on their part should be able to explain the meaning of the subject to the librarian. This will help to reduce the waste of the users’ time and also the provision of inaccurate information (Lamy, 1998; Prytherch, 2005).

Reference Services Provided in Libraries

The following are the reference services provided in the libraries.

1. **Information Services:** This service can also be called referral service. This is the process of identifying resources and agencies with special services or

information needed by library users or information seekers, and the ability of the libraries, from time to time, to refer these users to these agencies or organizations to satisfy their information need. Libraries from time to time receive a good number of reference and information inquiries whose range is usually very long, i.e. from general to specific. The majority of reference and information queries by users received at the reference desk can be answered through ready reference tools such as dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias, handbooks and manuals, atlases and gazetteers, indexes, and bibliographies, etc.

2. **Bibliographic verification and documentation services:** When organizing reference services, bibliography and documentation services should also be made available. According to C. N. Ezeani, I. J. Ezama (2011), bibliographic verification is the use of bibliographic tools for purpose of verifying the correctness and completeness of the user information. He further stressed that these verifications provide information about publications, and to achieve this reference librarian consults and searches both manual and electronic versions of standard bibliographic works. Some bibliographic tools may include abstracts and indexes, gazettes, encyclopedias, almanacs, catalogs, bibliographies, etc., while documentation services may include a monthly list of additions, reading lists, documentation list, subject bibliographies, etc., on the topics of seminars, conferences, research projects, etc., and documentation list of contents (Ayanlola, 2017).

3. **Inter-library loan and document delivery services:** these services are important services due to the rising document prices and budgetary constraints on libraries, which makes them unable to purchase more and new documents. This service is closely related to the bibliographic verification and documentation service. A library that does not have certain required documents among its collection may borrow, through the inter-library loan, from other libraries in the neighborhood and supply or make available to the users at the earliest and required time. In other words, not a single library or information center can boast about having in its collection all the resources that can be demanded for them. They, in this regard, appreciate the need to look for co-operation with other libraries or information centers to provide services to their clientele. After the library has identified its area(s) of need it places a request after a verification done manually in many libraries both within and outside Nigeria. The borrowing and lending process can also take place on the internet for both requesting for and the delivery of interlibrary loan materials. In the interlibrary loan and document delivery services, periodical articles can be transmitted instantly. The library can also enjoy the services of the interlibrary loan to enrich the collection and provide improved and qualitative services to users.

4. Current Awareness Services (CAS): These services are provided for researchers to acquaint them with recent publications that might help them in their research work. The reference librarians duty is to make its users aware of the latest information relating to their work field. Current awareness services (CAS) can be re-packaged to suit the information needs of the users. Its services can be introduced in the routing of periodicals, abstracting or indexing of documents, circulation of accession lists of newly acquired documents, library bulletin containing all types of useful information, etc.

5. User Education: The library must organize user education through the reference section. The basic objective of this service is to infuse information-seeking habits among the user so they can independently and without help from the reference librarian, search the information sources in the library.

6. Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) Services: This is another form of reference service provided in the library. In some cases, it can be referred to as CAS. It is a user-packaged reference service that keeps users abreast of the latest information. Many libraries use computerize service methods for disseminating selective information for the users to keep them well informed. This service is mainly for researchers. SDI alerts a user that a document/material of his interest has been received in the library information center.

7. Computerized Reference Sources: The internet in this 21st century is an excellent medium for accessing and using reference sources. In a short period, the internet has become popular as a source of information in that one can get any information he wants within a short time (Ezeani, Ezama, 2011). C. N. Ezeani and I. J. Ezama (2011) posited that with the use of computers and telecommunication in information handling, we now have access to electronically retrievable information in a wide variety of disciplines. Online reference sites or resources play a very significant role in providing reference and information services to users (Ezeani, Ezama, 2011).

In our country very popular are the following available sites:

- AltaVista (<http://www.altavista-digital.com>) as a search engine.
- Google (<http://www.google.com>), Google-Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>).
- Scirus (<http://www.scirus.com>, The Librarian's index to the internet (<http://www.lii.org>).
- Portals, e.g. SOSIG: Social Science Information Gateway (<http://www.sosig.ac.uk>), RDN: The Resource Discovery Network.
- Popular reference books, e.g. Britannica Online (<http://www.britannica.com>).
- Specialist Website, e.g. National Aeronautics and Agency (<http://www.nasa.gov>).

Reference Sources

Factors influencing reference services in the libraries of Cameroon

At the moment in Cameroon the main current factors affecting library reference services are:

- inadequate and obsolete reference collection;
- inadequate qualified librarians reference in libraries;
- lack of space and space available for readers;
- shortage of books needed in quantity and quality;
- lack of scientific journals;
- lack of computerized organization of available funds;
- lack of scientific journal documentary databases;
- lack of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) facilities and know-how;
- lack of proper library cooperation;
- inadequate funding;
- inadequate current SDI;
- poor communication and telecommunication facilities;
- irregular power supply;
- lack of financial, material, and technical resources (Земенге, Мбила, 2017; Zemengue, 2019).

Attributes of Reference Librarian

The reference librarian is said to be the image-maker of the library (Ayanlola, 2017). He should possess a wide range of intellectual interests, as well as the desire to assist the users. He should have a flair for organizing documents, the ability to search the literature, and adequate knowledge of the resources of the library (Utor, 2008). Considering the rigors of his professional duties, the reference librarian is expected to possess certain qualities that will enhance his performance. For the modernization of the library reference services of Cameroon, we propose some basic competencies, qualities, and attributes of reference librarian according to Utor (2008), Opara (2006), and Ifidon (2008) among others:

- **Versatility:** the reference librarian should be an ardent lover of information. A reference librarian is a person of intellectual breadth and depth, a generalist combined in one.
- **Excellent Communication Skills:** The ability to communicate effectively and efficiently is one of the attributes a reference librarian should possess. As a front line, the reference librarian comes in contact with several patrons who come with various queries, and these queries have to be properly understood for the right response to be given.
- **Receptivity:** the reference librarian should be friendly and accommodating to create the right atmosphere for cordial and effective interaction with library patrons.

– **Curiosity:** The reference librarian must be an information seeker, someone who is persistent in following up queries. He should conduct the necessary resources within and outside his library, to keep abreast with the current trends and information.

– **Creativity:** Some patrons come to the reference librarian with ambiguous problems and the latter looked at from different viewpoints to arrive at an appreciable solution. The reference librarian should be imaginative and resourceful which will enable him/her to handle difficult circumstances that may arise from time to time.

– **Information Communication Technology (ICT) Know-How:** it is believed that an effective library and informative services without basic information communication technology know-how is almost impossible. As one of the transforming technologies of the information society, the internet has changed undoubtedly, affected the information-seeking behavior of our patrons. Reference librarians must keep abreast with current information trends to satisfy the information needs of our post modern patrons.

Absence of qualified library workers: It is often said that the quality of staff usually reflects on the quality of service delivery. Certain basic attributes earlier mentions are required of an effective reference librarian, sadly enough most reference librarians lack these basic qualities partly because of poor training or sheer lack of job satisfaction as some find themselves in the profession as a means of survival.

Moreover, it is important to note that the development of reference services in Cameroonian libraries today goes through the integration of collaborative remote reference projects, among them, we can cite:

1) Canada:

Libraries at Simon Fraser and Victoria Universities share a common REF D service based on chat only, Ask us Live,

2) In Nova Scotia, a consortium of libraries within Novanet has an RFED service, Live Help, which brings together and centralizes remote reference services (<http://novanet.ns.ca>),

3) USA:

OCLC 24/7 Consortium: As a group of American libraries offering RFED service, Ask us a Question, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Technological innovations have led to the emergence of a new user service in library bibliographic activity: remote or virtual service. As a result, the information search process is gradually moving onto the internet. Modern reference services now offer users information via the Internet, that is, virtual consultations.

The efficiency and the quality of the execution of virtual information depend on the competence

and the knowledge of the reference librarian (mastery of professional knowledge, the definition of the research strategies, and orientation of the users in the various information research activities. Virtual information requires the correct formulation of the response in line with the request. In connection with this, the reference librarian must be able to work with the web technology tools 1.0 (surfer domain: passive, consumer, he seeks information with search engines) and web 2.0 (the reference librarian: contributor, active, producer of information, the reference librarian goes towards the user and builds with the user) (Электронные..., 2007).

Today, the web allows any user to directly find the information in the multimedia form, the comfortable system of navigation, the fast and simple movement between references (Электронные..., 2007). The creation and development of Cameroon's web portals and reference services sites in the libraries have become a major and urgent issue.

Conclusion

Results show that reference services in libraries in Cameroon are lagging in their development. Challenges to their efficient organization and functioning include insufficient financial resources, shortage of qualified librarian staff – all these prevent the development of librarianship in the country. Cameroon does not have a body to design policy and strategies in librarianship and bibliography at the national level. Most librarians working in the reference services lack professional training and do not have access to refresher courses and retraining. Poor information and communication technologies do not facilitate inter-library cooperation at the national, regional, and international levels. Low-speed Internet connection and power failure further complicate the functioning of the reference services. There is also the absence of programmers or computer specialists to install the software in libraries and ensure their maintenance. Most of the graduate staff in librarianship and bibliography working in the reference service has just theoretical knowledge in the library automation and information system. It should be also pointed out that many Cameroonians so far have a vague idea of what a reference service is in a library. Reference services are unevenly distributed across the country. The results of the study are significant and allow defining the strategic orientations, ways of the future development of activities for the reference services in the Cameroonian libraries. Besides, the reference librarians and libraries should do their best to ensure that all the factors mentioned in this work hindering the reference services are solved.

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