

## THE ROLE OF ARCHIVISTS AND LIBRARIANS

A synoptic attempt, by B. G. ALEGBELEYE

### Abstract

THE ARTICLE attempts a synoptic analysis of the role of archivists and librarians on the basis of their *purpose* and *methodology*. The writer argues that although there are methodological differences in the processing procedure of materials employed by the two professions, the purpose of archivists and librarians is the same, namely: the orderly placement of materials within their holdings so that they can be easily retrieved when called for. The writer then recommends measures that can be taken to improve the relationship particularly in the developing countries where the relationship between the two professions is still very poor.

### Introduction

A careful canvass of the literature of archives and librarianship reveals that the issue of the relationship of the two professions has been very sadly neglected. Indeed the relationship between the two professions is frequently a topic of spirited debate in which advocacy of views, sidetaking and rhetorical philosophies becloud the issues. Perhaps, the most articulate and coherent advocate of a better understanding and co-operation between the two professions is still Theodore Schellenberg<sup>1</sup> whose exposition of the relationship between the two professions is still worthy of close study. Librarians and archivists belong to the same family. They both have a common ancestor — the old clericus, a literal keeper of books — and relationship between the two professions was very close until the invention of the printing press. Historically, a library similar in many respects to what we have today was not established until the time of the Assyrians. On this, Johnson illuminated 'since the major Egyptian collections were largely archival, the Assyrians may be said to have produced the first real library'.<sup>2</sup> Even after Gutenberg, the close association between the two professions was not severed until many books became available. Librarians and archivists operated as distinct professions over the centuries. Most developing countries inherited the unsavoury legacy of regarding the two professions as distinct and therefore having little or nothing in common. In many developing countries the two professions are still very tightly compartmentalized. This sad situation persists, in spite of the close historical connection of the two professions and in spite of their common purposes. While it must be conceded that the two professions differ in methodology, they have a similar purpose.

### Purpose

The first parameter for the synoptic attempt is purpose. Two common denominators in all definitions of librarianship and archival administration are people and information or knowledge — knowledge being what one has after information has been digested. Both librarians and archivists deal in information. To put it more radically,

they deal in what Kemp called Social Knowledge, that is, knowledge as recorded in documents and made available freely to users. While the two professions share a common objective, namely the utilization of graphic records at their disposal for the benefit of users, there exists between them differences from the point of view of methodology. Each for example deals with different formats of information and controls its information separately. The ultimate aim of both archivists and librarians is the placement of materials within their holdings so that they can be easily retrieved when called for.

### **Methodology**

The second parameter for comparison is methodology. This can be discussed under four major headings namely (a) Acquisitions, (b) Processing, (c) Description, and (d) Reference Service and use. It would be grossly misleading to regard archives as consisting only of documents and libraries as consisting only of books. In fact, librarians deal not only with printed matter but also with materials other than printed matter such as audio-visual materials, maps, charts and tapes. Archivists also not only deal with documents but may also be expected to deal with printed matter like reports, printed enclosures or publications. It becomes clear therefore, that as regards the format of the materials dealt with, very little difference exists between archives and libraries.

#### **(a) Acquisition**

There are some differences in the acquisition techniques of librarians and archivists. Most libraries purchase the greater part of their books and other materials. This situation imposes the need to budget their expenditure in order to do the most good with their financial resources. This requirement leads to an acquisition policy based strictly on the needs of library clientele. Outside books procured through purchase, the acquisition librarian can of course have recourse to other alternatives for balancing the collection. He may for example purchase particular materials when nearby libraries can co-operate to provide complementary or supportive collection. He may use serials exchange as a means of increasing certain coverage or he may judiciously encourage inter library loan for special requests. An effective librarian seems to have a greater managerial control over the growth of the collection both physical and intellectual.

On the other hand, a true archivist operating as keeper of the permanently valuable records of a corporation or organization is spared some of the acquisition headaches of the librarian. All things being equal, the archivist works under a retention policy that has been administratively determined. He has no need to purchase any materials because the corporate records are already owned, and all the archivist does is to transfer them to the archives when they are considered non-current. For the archivist, acquisition problems may arise when he has to collect private papers in which case he performs has to set up an acquisition policy and make efforts to collect the desired papers.

(b) *Processing*

In the processing of materials, differences in methodology are observed in the performance of the two professions. The librarian catalogues and classifies a book and the classification designation applied to a book allows for its retrieval from a pre-arranged universal scheme. The librarian's objective is to fit the book into the scheme. The archivist, on the other hand has no predetermined scheme when dealing with corporate records. It even appears that the scheme is self-evident as it manifests itself in the administrative or functional structure of the corporation. It is the duty of the archivist to understand the structure and be certain that the records' arrangement or description conforms to this structure. It has been wisely said that there is no external imperative for putting the documents and other records in any pre-ordained patterns, there is only an implicit imperative derived from the corporate structure itself. The point is that each agency or office whose records find their way into the archives already has its own record arrangement and filing scheme. It is perhaps basically a recognition by the archivist of the organizational structure for the arrangement of records that has prevented any acceptance by archivists of any form of library cataloguing and classification techniques. The librarian on the other hand, dealing with a cataloguable unit — such as a book, map, or sound recording — goes through a series of steps that may include some or all of identification, description, analysis and classification. The librarian does not change the basic structure of the material either by rewriting the title page or reorganizing the chapters, changing the table of contents, modifying the notes or creating an index. The aim of the librarian is to describe the material in such a way that it can be identified and retrieved when needed.

(c) *Description*

As far as description is concerned, the purpose of both archivists and librarians is the same, namely, the provision of sufficient information about the described unit to permit a user to determine whether or not to look at the unit for research or other purposes. Description is useful in another way for the librarian for it also provides an administrative record of holdings so as to avoid unwanted duplication of acquisition.

The librarian uses a number of devices including the catalogue card both descriptive and subject filed in the main catalogue, and a shelf list. The classification scheme not only provides subject relationship thus bringing together like works but also serves to encode the book with a unique identifier for location and retrieval purposes. The librarian also tries to describe materials in bibliographies. The descriptive process employed by archivists in dealing with corporate records and manuscripts is similar. A difference lies in the fact that the descriptive device used for manuscript materials is the register while that used for corporate records is the inventory.

In addition to the inventory, archivists prepare accession records and other administrative controls. In short, the librarian describes by analysis, but classifies into a pre-arranged universe according to a

pre-arranged scheme or rules. The archivist uses external evidence such as corporate or government structure to determine the proper arrangement and description of records.

(d) *Reference Service and Use*

One of the distinguishing features between archives and libraries is the concept of open versus closed stacks. From this springs the difference between the user service of librarians and archivists. Most libraries have open stacks, while most if not all archives have closed stacks. In the case of the archives, the uniqueness of the materials that they house and the consequent monetary value of such materials coupled with the fact that papers are loose within boxes and therefore fragile and often irreplaceable, all impose a closed stack system on archives. One of the immediate advantages of a closed stack arrangement is that it prevents users from roaming around the stacks with the risk of damage to and loss of valuable materials. In a library situation, the user by a careful use of the catalogue can gain access to the materials needed. The job of the librarian is further facilitated by the fact that the user can, for example, enter either an academic or public library, take a few minutes to get orientated, observe what classification scheme is in use, record the location and go straight to the shelf to retrieve the material desired. It may not be necessary to say a word to the librarian. In the case of the archives, the archivist is the key to the collection. Typically, the researcher or user enters the manuscript room, declares his intention to do research, is asked by a clerk or professional staff to fill out a registration form and may be asked to present some identification. The researcher is then asked the nature of his research project, whereupon a dialogue begins between the archivist and the researcher. The archivist may consult the file of previous work on the topic that may help the researcher. The archivist may present the researcher with findings, aids, registers and inventories. Where the researcher needs certain materials he may have to go to the stacks to fetch such materials.

**Implication for developing countries**

It has been argued in this article that the professions of archivists and librarians have shared concerns and that by implication the purpose of the two professions is the orderly placement of materials within their holdings so that they can be easily retrieved. It has also been argued that the purpose is more important than the methodology. If this line of argument is accepted then it means that formal communication between the two professions needs to be improved. Developing countries cannot afford to delay for much longer the improvement of communication between the two professions.

There are cogent reasons why such co-operation should be considered with the utmost urgency. First, most developing countries are still relatively young and therefore have not achieved the degree of compartmentalization between the two professions as is apparent in many developed countries. Consequently it may still be easier for the two professions to interact. Again, developing countries need to

tap all available resources for the development of their countries. This is only possible if efforts are co-ordinated and outmoded autonomies obliterated. Archivists and libraries by the judicious management and proper co-ordination of their resources stand in a unique position to aid the accelerated progress much needed in developing countries. This is because both professions deal in information which is *a sine qua non* for proper decision-making. Such co-operation as has been discussed should transcend the mere appearance of an article in each other's journal. The type of co-operation envisaged could be initiated by the formation of committees on archive-library relations whose objectives will be to study areas of co-operation such as preservation of papers, establishment of standards, and education, while other areas of co-operation could be rigorously pursued by this type of committee.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Schellenberg, Theodore R., *The Management of Archives*. Columbia University Press, 1965.
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3. Kemp, D. A., *The Nature of Knowledge: An Introduction for Librarians*. Clive Bingley, London 1976.