

# IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



## Cameroon

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Before the coming of democracy in the early nineties, intellectual freedom was just an empty concept in Cameroon. All those interested in politics, democracy and human rights in particular were considered as outsiders; they were therefore banned from the society and the country while waiting for better days to come. With such a political climate, authors, librarians and booksellers found it difficult to publish and acquire useful materials for the development of intellectual creativity. In fact, they have to be assured that all the material acquired was in conformity with the political editorial of the country. Such a situation was not specific to Cameroon but also existed in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa; the restrictions were specifically imposed on monographs declared as "subversives" with particular focus on books talking about the period after independence where the "unique" political party was denounced hardly.

<b>Population:</b>	13,560,000 (1996)
<b>GNP per capita:</b>	\$ 610 (1996)
<b>Government / Constitution:</b>	Republic
<b>Main languages:</b>	French, English, Bantu, Sudanic tribal languages
<b>Main religions:</b>	Traditional African cults - Christianity and Islam
<b>Literacy:</b>	63% (1995)
<b>Online:</b>	0.13% (July 2000)

With the coming of democracy after the first head of state abdication, the country was opened to new ideas, the unique political party was apparently dissolved and people acquired freedom of reading, freedom of writing (they now express themselves without fear) all sorts of monographs, dissertations, thesis, newspapers... All the library materials initially forbidden were now acquired, a National Committee on human rights was settled and people started to fight publicly for intellectual freedom. Reading habits immediately changed especially in big metropolis such as Yaounde, Douala, Bafoussam, Garoua, Ebolowa, Bamenda... People were now free to read everywhere and what they wanted: in libraries, on the road, in public transports, at home... Many informal reading places appeared in the streets owned by jobless university graduates. While some people buy their newspapers and other intellectual documents, many will read directly from the sellers paying an amount of or FF 1 or US \$ 0,6 per book per day (this is specific to informal reading places based on the main streets of most of the big metropolis). A decree on freedom of social communication with special emphasis on the freedom of the press was signed in 1990. More than ten newspapers were now put at the readers disposal each with its own policy, while some were pro governmental because they always excuse the state's errors and misdeeds, most analysed and criticised the present political situation, they were even referred to as "cabbage leaves" by the former. The general tendency was the fight for freedom and democracy..."... 1989 was the one year of the eighties, indeed since 1945 that differed from all others. The events came and went in such a quick succession that any attempt at either predicting their direction or at pointing to their destination would have been like trying to catch water in a sieve..."(1)

Information was flowing. Even if some newspapers were sometimes sold fraudulently (depending on articles) and some independent printing houses locked up, the case of Rotoprint on May 11, 1992 2, the press was playing its role as a conveyor of information in all the scales of the society. How did the libraries then cope with intellectual freedom in such a climate in Cameroon? Are the users satisfied in their quest for information? Are libraries associations in Cameroon have policies directly linked with intellectual freedom? Why do they need more freedom?

This study does not claim to be a masterpiece in "libraries and intellectual freedom in Cameroon", it is limited to some higher education institutions libraries in Yaounde (political capital of Cameroon): the Central Library of University of Yaounde I (CLUYI), and the National Library (NL); they are the most representative as far as librarianship is concerned, they provide the bulk of information on the profession, they are ruled by professionals with high academic qualifications and reflect the real situation of Cameroon libraries.

### **A General Presentation of Libraries, Librarianship and Intellectual Freedom**

Libraries are media resources, information and cultural centres. They are social institutions, which exist for the collection, preservation and dissemination of human intellectual experience and culture. Libraries aim at: promoting the education process in the society, accelerating the translation of knowledge into social action, enabling the individual to obtain spiritual, inspirational and recreational activity through reading and therefore the opportunity of interacting with society's wealth of accumulated knowledge from one generation to the next. In fact, they are reading places where people in need of information go and get knowledge.

Unfortunately libraries in Cameroon don't really play their role as gateways to knowledge; they don't always guarantee the

individual full opportunities to encounter free expression. Although the first school of librarianship in sub-Saharan Africa was created in Ibadan (Nigeria) in 1947, the concept of librarianship is a new phenomenon in Cameroon when we know that the two countries share the same borders! The majority of the population still knows nothing about the profession; for the layman, a librarian is somebody who arranges books on the shelves. Somebody (a non-professional) who has been working in a library for the past twenty years as a binder even refers to the profession as "the fact of writing numbers on books" and was shocked that one needs to go abroad to learn such a "useless job" (incredible isn't it?); the first school of librarianship was created in 1994 at the Advanced School of Mass Communication. Before all the Professionals were trained abroad (Senegal, Nigeria, France, Great Britain, USA).

Higher institution authorities does not find it necessary to invest in knowledge and intellectual creativity. Most of the time, the budget allocated to local libraries is meaningless when not purely non-existent; at the Central Library of University of Yaounde I (CLUYI), library materials have not been acquired for the past ten years; documents on the shelves are old and sometimes out of date. From 1988 to 1998, no real budget was allocated to the library although it was stated in the budget that US \$ 33,333 was given each year for the functioning and acquisition of library materials. From 1988 to 1995, there was no provision for the library; from 1996 to 1998, the University authorities give respectively US \$ 416, US \$ 833 and US \$ 2,166 to the CLUYI. Libraries in Cameroon are not linked to each other; new technologies are unknown (the libraries are not automated). The professionals know nothing about refreshing courses; those who decide on the profession are usually incompetent! The libraries are not working on network at the Internet era. In fact, they survive because of foreign donations, legacies and international co-operation although the materials provided don't always meet the library needs. The users therefore find it very difficult to express their views and other personal opinions.

At the National Library where acquisition should be made essentially through legal deposit and donation no specific law has been adopted for the purpose. Many Cameroonian authors and foreigners writing on Cameroon are not aware that some copies (4 exactly) of their work should be deposited to the NL to save our cultural heritage. In 1999, only 63 monographs were donated against 14 for legal deposit. There's no national bibliography and therefore no bibliographical control. Because the National Library (NL) is under the authority of the Ministry of culture with whom it shares the budget, the librarian of the NL find it very difficult to acquire necessary library materials and to ensure the functioning of the library: the house is almost ruined by time, the shelves are empty, the tables are dusty; in brief, the NL offers a sight of wretchedness. When discussing with the librarian, we were told that the library has some projects with BIEF as far as public reading is concerned.

The general impression one has in contact with Cameroonian libraries is a feeling of emptiness, a lack of seriousness due to the refusal of local authorities to invest in acquiring library materials, promoting culture, developing technical and scientific research, keywords to intellectual freedom.

### **Specific Cases of Censorship or Violations of Intellectual Freedom**

As far as Cameroon is concerned, there are no written restrictions on the use of libraries; most of them are open-accessed institutions where all the genders are represented despite one's moral, religious or political beliefs. Beyond this, it should be noticed that various types of censorship are practised within libraries at different levels:

Librarians have their hands tied; they can't order library materials at their own pace; most often others will do it for them. Recently (June-July 1999) the Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs ordered 183 monographs worth US \$ 11,666 for the Central Library of University of Yaounde I (CLUYI) without consulting the professionals, the Director of the library was simply informed!

A user will censor the others by removing a monograph from the correct shelf and hide it where he will be the only one to consult it; in doing so, he will prevent the other users to work in the library efficiently. Some dishonest users will cut the most important pages of a reference book and keep them in their socks or pocket.

Some professionals and other library workers will censor the users by giving them wrong information or by answering rudely to their requests. The suggestion box must therefore be consulted frequently in order to satisfy the users needs and promote intellectual freedom.

### **Legislation of Relevance to Libraries, Librarianship and Intellectual Freedom**

There is no legislation related to libraries and intellectual freedom but a decree organising the profession of librarianship signed in 1986 and a law on social communication signed in December 1990; it deals with the freedom of the Press and has nothing to do with libraries and intellectual freedom! A project has been adopted for the purpose but has not yet been initiated.

Nevertheless, there are two categories of professionals in Cameroon: the civil servants and those working under contract. In fact, the civil servants are integrated in the Public Service; they earn more money than those working under contract although they've been to the same schools. Most often, the contract officers are the professionals working within the Universities libraries who were recruited in the late eighties.

### **Library Association Positions and Policies related to Professional Codes of Conduct and Ethics**

The Cameroon Association of Librarians, Archivists, Documentalists and Museologists (ABADCAM) is the only reliable library association. Created in 1974 and updated in 1992, ABADCAM aims at:

- Working towards training librarians, archivists, documentalists and museologists.
- Ensuring the application of norms of excellence in the profession and safeguard its value and dignity.
- Encouraging the creation of different categories throughout the country.
- Drawing the attention of the public on the role of libraries, archives, documentation centres and museums in the field of information, education and culture.
- Studying and resolving scientific, technical and administrative issues on archives, libraries, documentation centres and museums.
- Representing archives, libraries, documentation centres, museums to national and international organisations and to have a permanent dialog with them.
- Facilitating the acquisition and access to different media useful to the expansion of information, culture and education.

To meet these aims:

1. Some training courses for school librarians have been organised with the collaboration of the Ministry of National Education
2. A project on creating libraries in hospitals and prisons in accordance with the concerned authorities is still on study
3. Conferences on evaluating university libraries have been taking place through out the country; the first one took place in Buea in 1998, the second one will take place in Ngaoundere (Northern Cameroon) from the 20th-22nd December 1999.

## **Conclusion**

A lot has to be done for libraries and Intellectual freedom in Cameroon. In fact our libraries don't acquire themselves, they cannot be intellectually free without a national policy on information. There's no global policy on acquisition, no fund provided for libraries functioning, no network between libraries nationally and internationally, no inter-library loans; in brief no proper conditions have been created to ensure the growth and efficiency on libraries. We then call for the authorities to solve the problem urgently.

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