Books, No Readers

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Most educated Nigerians don’t read books and many of them say they either don’t find the time or see no need to do so

Omolabake Akinmorin, a resident of Ipaja, a town on the outskirts of Lagos, is a busy businesswoman. Everyday, she goes around offices hawking clothes like shirts, ties, suits and underwears. In the process, she spends considerable time commuting from Ipaja to Ikeja, Lagos and Victoria Island in search of customers. She returns home often tired but still has to cook for her family. Thus, she is without the desire and time to read books, even the short story books which her children enjoy, because with the little time she has to rest, she is either thinking of ways to improve her business or unwilling to expend the mental energy needed to read books. “I know that I should read at least one book in a month but I do not have enough time for that now,” she said. She said she tries to encourage her children to read as much as possible, but admits that they do not read as much as they should because she and her husband do not motivate them by being good examples. Unlike Akinmorin who knows that it is good to read but lacks the time, Ajibola Boluaji, manager of Ozzy Supermarket, Ikotun, Lagos, does not see any benefit in reading. To Boluaji, reading is a time wasting effort in his line of work. He said the nature of his job does not dictate that he read books. Boluaji who studied Sociology in Ondo State University, said his job basically entails satisfying the needs of people. “I do not need to read, I have studied in school and now I put what I studied into practice and learn the rest.” he said. Though Chika Agbo, a 400 level student of the University of Lagos creates time to read, she lacks the passion for it. “I read only when I have tests and examinations. The reason is because with the internet and other information and communication technology within easy reach, I do not see the reason to read books or even visit a library,” she said. These cases point to the growing problem of a poor reading culture among Nigerians. Time, economic crunch, parental indifference and the impact of the social media are part of this problem. Reading in other societies is as important as one’s daily food. It should be a way of life, a means of updating one’s knowledge in all areas of life. Unfortunately, the reading culture in Nigeria is rapidly declining. In Lagos State for example, about 17 million of the 19 million residents are literate. However, this does not mean that all the 17 million literate people read books to further enlighten themselves. “Virtually everybody is educated in Lagos but it doesn’t mean we have imbibed the culture of reading,” said Yinka Lawal-Folarin, an education analyst and chairman of Literamed Publications Nigeria Limited. Booksellers in Lagos are also lamenting over the decline in the rate people buy books to read. Victor Okwu, a bookshop owner in Ikeja, said people don’t like reading. “In fact, those we expected to buy books the more like married people and business people, do not even read, so we hardly sell. The books that sell the most are the educational books for the primary and secondary schools because they are recommended texts,” he said. Okwu said people now prefer to buy accessories and other expensive items that add minimal value to their lives. Wale Johnson, also a bookseller in Ikeja who specialises in fictional books, said there is a huge drop in the reading culture of Nigerians. He said that in the past, he sold as many as 100 books in a day. But now, patronage has reduced to as low as twenty books daily. “The market is shrinking and booksellers are pulling out of the business because it is not as lucrative as it used to be,” he said. Sola Agboba, assistant chief librarian, Ipaja Public Library, bemoaned the declining reading culture among Lagos residents. “People have come to depend on what they hear and see rather than what they read.” She attributed this to lack of time, poor economi enviroment and increasing dependence on information and communication technology. While she would not force patrons of her library to read particular books, she would rather give them the books they love to read. She decried the lack of good books in the country, describing reading as rubbing minds with someone else, thereby shaping your thinking and improving you all round. “For anybody that desires improvement, you have to read,” she said. The Lagos State government is addressing this problem of declining reading culture. Agboba said that the library has not stopped stocking books which cut across all professions. She estimated that 150 people visit the library daily but the figure is gradually declining. She enjoined people to create the right atmosphere to read the right books. Parents also have a role to play in improving the reading culture in Nigeria. Bovi Ugboma, a popular stand-up comedian, says he reads a lot because he grew up with a reading culture because his father is a historian and his mum a librarian and seeing them read, he grew up emulating them. “The best way to teach a child is to let them emulate what you do,” he said. He also said that reading has helped shape his career and distinguish him from his contemporaries. As part of the national effort to improve the reading culture, President Goodluck Jonathan launched, Bring Back the Book, his pet project, last year. He stressed the need for Nigerians to embrace books through which they can become thinkers and philosophers whose vision would help build a strong nation.