

The Poverty of Librarianship: An Historical Critique of Public Librarianship in Anglophone Africa

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The countries of Anglophone Africa, consisting of former British colonies and protectorates, almost all provide public library facilities in the form of national library services (also including traditional national library facilities). The idea is first found in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) in 1928. Evelyn Evans developed it fully in Ghana as the first Chief Librarian of the Gold Coast Library Board in 1950. The services to the public closely followed the example of the British county libraries. The idea was influential, first in West Africa, then in other parts of the continent. William Serwadda, Director of the Uganda National Library Service

(1964–66) criticised it, without success, on the grounds that it did not reflect the needs of African people. Since the 1970s the national library services have failed to attract significant numbers of users and have mostly stagnated from lack of funds. Critics such as Kingo Mchombu have taken up Serwadda's theme and there has been experimentation throughout Africa with informal community-based services concentrating on the dissemination of information. It is argued that the national library services need to adopt a fresh approach based on this experimentation so as to provide effective facilities for their potential users.

Introduction

The title of this article reverses that of Kingo Mchombu's (1982) seminal contribution "On the librarianship of poverty." Although this mimics Marx's reversal of Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty* into his own *Poverty of Philosophy*, there is no intent to attack Mchombu's ideas. The intention is rather to complement the argument that Mchombu developed. He suggested that librarianship when practiced in Africa needed to be adapted to the poverty that was the most influential under the prevailing circumstances. The theme of this article is that because public library services in Anglophone Africa were based on an almost complete poverty of fresh ideas, the services have been thoroughly ineffective. Their lack of success has made it virtually impossible for them to demonstrate a need for continuing government investment and they have stagnated in the extremely

difficult circumstances of the post independence era. This creates a requirement for great changes in the existing library services so that they can provide effectively for the needs of the African citizen. Before putting this case, it is necessary to explain some things about the origins of public library services in the British colonies and protectorates of Africa.

It is nowadays more or less universally the practice in Anglophone Africa to have a National Library Service that incorporates the main aspects of both public and national libraries. The countries to which this generalisation is applied, wholly or in part, for the purposes of this paper are Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. The origin of the idea seems fairly simple. The various territories administered by Britain had by the time of the Second World War virtually no publicly pro-

vided library services. A need for libraries was, however, recognized to an extent within the colonial administrations. Schooling was being made increasingly widely available to the population so as to produce workers and minor officials better able to contribute to the prosperity and efficiency of the territory. In this way, it was believed, the colonies could be increasingly self-administered (at considerably less expense than by a wholly British administrative service), but continue to produce high levels of revenue for the colonial power. However, an increasingly literate population needed things to read and libraries were a cost-effective way of providing them with access to books and periodicals. The expense of providing a complete pattern of libraries, including national, public, school, college and research libraries, was clearly too great in the short term. Therefore setting up some kind of national Library Board, which would gradually develop specific services as need was manifested and funds were available, was a logical response. Although it was generally the intention that such boards would concentrate first on some form of public library service, there was usually a plan including eventually a recognisable national library.

Origins of the idea

The earliest appearance of a well-articulated version of the idea seems to have been in the rather untypical social circumstances of the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1928. Dugald Niven, the long-serving librarian of an old-established institution – Bulawayo Public Library, founded in 1896 – suggested to the Carnegie Corporation of New York that the country needed a form of national library system. This would include ‘a central library, acting as a national lending library for schools and a central reference library’ (Made 1985, 53). By 1943, in response to his prompting, a National Free Library Service had been set up with Carnegie financial assistance and was operating from Bulawayo. In 1951 a report by D.H. Varley (then Librarian of the South African Library in Cape Town) recognized the role of this library as part of a wider national service. Varley’s report set out in clear terms the idea originally put forward by Niven. He suggested (Varley 1951, 11):

- A central point of organization directed by a qualified and experienced librarian, together with the necessary trained staff, responsible to an advisory policy board, in turn responsible to a minister of state.
- One or more comprehensive libraries of reference containing not only all the material relating to the country concerned, but also the best works relating to all other countries, in whatever language.
- One main centre, and if necessary subsidiary centres, where the total book resources of the country, other than fiction, can be recorded and through which loans can be effected either from these centres, or through inter-loan, from any point in the system.

This has rather a flavour of what was actually already available, or obviously possible, in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) which were soon to be joined in a short-lived federation. The important thing to remember here is, however, the subtext. The systems discussed were thought of as basically for whites, with possibly some access for coloureds, Asians and maybe even some educated blacks.

Despite the idea having been given clear expression in Rhodesia, the system there remained comparatively fragmented. Ironically this did not change notably until after independence in 1980. Since then Zimbabwe seems rather to have reaffirmed Niven’s vision and Varley’s development of it. The convening of the National Library and Documentation Council in 1982 was certainly an expression of the national library services idea, whether it was drawn from its Rhodesian origins or not. Sadly the Zimbabwean National Library and Documentation Service has never succeeded in filling the gaps in national provision and has, indeed, presided over the sad decline of the National Free Library Service. However, the point here is that the idea can first be identified in Rhodesia. Unfortunately the tidiness of this identification of the source may be illusory, since there is no obvious indication that Rhodesia was actually an inspiration to the other countries that took up the idea. Rhodesia was a settler country with tens of thousands of residents of European origin. It tended to be attached to South Africa for many purposes, and it is an interesting question as to how far ideas were exchanged between it and the more northern British colonies in Africa in which Europeans were generally a tiny, though utterly privileged minority.

The national library service in Ghana

It seems to be the case that the national library service idea as developed and adopted in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in the 1940s and 1950s was arrived at independently. The Ghanaian experience was also certainly much more influential in other Anglophone African countries. Library activity in the British West African colonies had been stimulated to a surprising extent by the investigations carried out by Ethel Fegan, of Cambridge University, from 1941 to 1942. Her report led the British Council to send two librarians to the region in 1944, one of whom was Fegan herself and the other her cousin Kate Ferguson. Their energy and commitment gave libraries a place in the colonial agenda, but it was Evelyn Evans, who arrived as a British Council Librarian in the Gold Coast in 1945, who was the most significant influence. For five years she campaigned for library services in the Gold Coast like the public libraries she had known in Britain. Her accounts of her journeys up and down the country with her travelling collection of 2,000 books give a strong sense of her delight in this adventure. She talked to chiefs and educators, collected relevant information, and showed off the qualities of her small sample library. (Evans 1964)

This she later presented as an investigation, the results of which were the basis for the library system she then advocated. However, as Edward Sydney (a former President of the Library Association) put it in his introduction to her book, without obviously intending to be ironical, 'She must have done her thinking and her choosing at great speed'. (Evans 1964, xv) The book contains her list of seven 'Suggested steps in the planning of a public library service in a developing territory. (Evans 1964, 165) This progresses from the appointment of a Library Advisory Committee, through to the appointment of the Library's staff. Step two is 'a survey by a qualified and experienced librarian' which would include – distribution of population, pattern of literacy, schools and educational facilities, the state of roads and transport facilities. Although this does not exclude the collection of other data, it is a very limited list that does not even pay lip service to user needs and preferences. The utility of a library as defined by Evans is clearly taken as given. What she was doing on her tours was not a dis-

passionate investigation of possible solutions to the problem of providing for the reading needs of the Gold Coast population. She clearly felt that she knew what was needed and sought information that would enable her to provide services of a kind familiar to her from her own experience. Evans' inability to perceive the full significance of the very distinctive social and economic circumstances she witnessed on her journeys and her lack of fresh responses to what she saw was to have long term effects that were disastrous far beyond the boundaries of the Gold Coast. However, in the short term her campaign of persuasion was successful and in 1950 the Gold Coast Library Board was set up, with herself as Chief Librarian.

The pattern she instituted was clear and simple. First of all, she was convinced that the service had to be nationally administered. Local administration was neither sufficiently well organised, nor financially independent enough to permit the running of effective libraries. Secondly it had to be provided throughout the nation's territory. The motto of the service was 'Books to the People' and this meant fully diffused services, rather than centres of excellence or pilot projects. The service took over the British Council's book box system, and the Department of Education's postal book loans to teachers. A mobile library was built and began touring the country. Fixed service points were, however, not opened until suitably trained staff was ready to take over. The emphasis was on what Evans called 'a proper library service', and her success in providing such a service was impressive. After five years there were seven libraries open full-time, three children's libraries in Accra, a regional library in Kumasi and various other developments. The service thrived for some years and enjoyed the patronage of the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who opened libraries and made supportive speeches. By the early 1970s the headquarters library in Accra was at the centre of a system of regional, district and branch libraries, all complemented by mobile libraries and book box service to remote areas.

Unfortunately the country's economic disaster of the 1970s and subsequent years has left the system devastated, but so far as it went, it was a triumphant expression of an idea. The validity of this idea will be questioned in more detail later,

but Evans' wider influence is easy to identify. When in 1952 Yvonne Odden toured African libraries on behalf of UNESCO, she considered the Gold Coast as the only country she visited in which libraries for the public had progressed anything beyond the earliest stage of development (Olden 1995, 11). This was important because her tour was a preparation for one of an UNESCO-sponsored series of seminars on public libraries held in various cities throughout the world. This was to be the fourth and it took place in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1953. Its proceedings have been extremely influential in Africa during succeeding years both as a statement of principle and a description of conditions at the time (UNESCO 1954). In particular, a West African Library Association was formed to promote the principles discussed at Ibadan. As channels for the influence of Evans' national library idea, the Seminar and the WALA were obviously important.

That influence can be seen spreading through West Africa even before the Seminar. For instance, a Sierra Leone white paper on Educational Development in 1950 called for a national library; countrywide public library service; and the supply of books to schools and colleges. The Sierra Leone Library Board was set up as a response to this in 1959 and Evelyn Evans was asked to carry out a survey of libraries and make proposals for development. It was her report that was then used to plan the national library service. (Dillsworth 1990) In an even more concrete way, the influence of the Gold Coast Library Board Ordinance of 1949 can be seen in its role as a model for the legislation of a number of other countries. Only Nigeria seems to have taken a distinctly different route. It is a federal country and has placed responsibility for public libraries at state level, but they are organised on much the same lines as the national library services of the other countries.

National library services in East Africa

When in 1959 the British Council appointed a Libraries Development Organiser for Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda, their choice was S.W. Hockey, who came from a similar British public library background to that of Evans. Hockey was well aware of Evans' work and ideas, if only in-

directly through documents like the proceedings of the Ibadan seminar. His report, issued at the end of the following year, (Hockey 1960) set the tone and pace for development in East Africa and set it firmly in the national library service pattern. His influence then continued in a very direct way as Hockey remained in the region, until 1970 when he left to become Director of the Swaziland National Library Service. In the report he recommended the setting up of national library services, administered by statutory boards. The systems should consist of national central libraries in the capital cities, provincial or regional libraries, district libraries, small branches and bookmobiles. As he explained at a later date:

The organisation of an adequate service to scattered communities is a relatively expensive and complicated job, and it can only be done effectively by first establishing well-organised and properly equipped bases, from which the tenuous network of mobile stops and village centres can be supplied and supervised. (Hockey 1971, 167)

The language of this passage is instructive. It echoes Evans' references to 'a proper library service' (Evans 1966, 8) and her sense that services should only be made available to the public after full preparation. Hockey's 'adequate library service' was, like Evans' only a slightly Africanised version of the British county library.

Hockey drafted a Tanganyika Library Services Board Act, based on the Gold Coast Library Board Act, and it was passed in 1963. It was followed by a Ugandan Public Libraries Act in 1964 (Kigongo-Bukenya 1990) and a Kenyan National Library Service Board Act in 1965 (Pala 1971). Thus in a relatively short period, the national library service approach was completely dominant in the region. The first Director of the Tanganyika Library Service, Max Broome, was British, once again with a public library background. Taking his tone from Hockey, his first concern was to get the administration of the system working to his satisfaction and for approximately 12 months there were few additions to the services offered to readers. At the same time, however, he stressed the urgency of need and the lack of time in which to meet it, suggesting that "we must be prepared to cut corners, to operate without the necessary data and basic information, to make assumptions that one would never dare to make in Europe" (Broome 1966b).

There is self-contradiction here, and a little earlier he had written of this fallow-seeming period in something of an apologetic tone. (Broome 1964) He clearly understood that African circumstances called for different solutions, but suppressed the full implications of this understanding whilst methodically reconstructing British models. Broome was also aware that this approach was attracting criticism.

The most significant source of criticism, amounting almost to a refutation of the approach shared by Evans, Hockey, Broome and other expatriate librarians, came from within East Africa. William Serwadda, a young Ugandan, had worked as a library assistant at Makerere University between 1955 and 1957. At that point he had gone to study in Britain, where he had passed the necessary examinations and become an Associate of the Library Association (ALA). Interestingly he had not made an immediate return, but had stayed in Europe taking the opportunity to make what he called extensive tours of libraries in continental Europe, including Scandinavia. When he returned he wrote a short article that contained a statement of his beliefs. In this he affirmed his faith in libraries as a sort of powerhouse in the struggle against illiteracy, disease and ignorance. However, his distinctive contribution was the thought that

The main duty of librarians in East Africa is to set out to learn what the society wants, and then try to satisfy that want in terms of a library service, specially designed to meet the country's needs, [and] fit ideally our own environment. (Serwadda 1964, 11)

This may look at first reading to be the same thing as Evans' 'survey by a qualified and experienced librarian', but it certainly was not. Evans and her spiritual successors were clear in their minds about what a library was. It was just like an English county library. Serwadda was open to the possibility that it might be something quite different. Indeed he suggests that the East African librarian had a duty to 'get away from the traditional concept of British librarianship which puts stress on book service' towards a service based on the extension concept.

Two things followed. First, the hostility of those already in positions of influence was aroused. Hockey responded in defence of a book-centred service in the next issue of the journal,

prophesying that it would be justified by swift increases in the number of users. Second, Serwadda was appointed as first Director of the Ugandan library services, after the resignation of an appointee who never took up the post. This was in July 1964, only six months after he had returned to the country. He started with clearly stated principles, but little knowledge of the structure he was to manage. As he put it,

I had heard of the Hockey Plan. But nobody seemed to have seen the plan. Whether it was packed in my predecessor's luggage, or thrown in the waste-paper basket, goodness knows. (Serwadda 1966, 26)

This levity undoubtedly added to his unpopularity in established circles, as did the plan he developed, after a hasty exploration of 'the country's needs and problems'. This rejected the ponderous approach hitherto favoured, and sought a swift expansion of service points to be followed by a new emphasis on exploiting radio as a medium of communication to non-literates. He moved fast, experimented, and made, by his own admission, mistakes. The mistakes might or might not have been disastrous, but Serwadda was later described as having 'no political base' and without protection he was vulnerable. In November 1966, not much more than two years after being appointed, he was dismissed. He is described as expanding the service too fast.

The result was the mushrooming of branches all over the country, inconsistent with available resources, and hence leading to poor library accommodation, furniture and equipment, and book stock. (Kigongo-Bukenya 1990, 132)

An enquiry, under a clergyman, the Rev. Tom Nabete, sought ways out of the difficulties, but this and subsequent enquiries failed to solve Uganda's library problems. In fact the Library Board retreated into the most obvious kind of orthodoxy, seeing the problems as centred on "the lack of a National Library building for the deposit of national literature and from where the Library Service can be conveniently operated" (Nabete 1966).

Serwadda's critique of the existing national library services was not, however, entirely isolated.

At the East African Library Association conference in 1965 Broome had felt it necessary to counter what was being said in 'some circles in the United Kingdom' about expatriate librarians.

These people tend to criticise the British librarians for what appears to be an unthinking reproduction of British library practice in an alien setting. Borrowing their techniques from the social research workers, the economic analysts, and the market survey experts they advocate a completely fresh approach to the problem – a careful analysis at grass roots level. (Broome 1966a, 18)

Broome's counter to the contemporary line of assault was that the situation was urgent, people were desperate for books. Provision of libraries was anyway an act of faith, and it was better to test the market rather than open dozens of service points in temporary premises, which would be 'unforgiveable'. This is not a strong line of argument. The survey was there in Evans' 'steps', merely inadequately developed. Arguably part of Serwadda's problem was that he did not take sufficient time and care over his survey. Deep and detailed local knowledge was surely indispensable, when working in conditions quite new to formal information and library provision. Certainly the need was urgent, but attempting to fulfil it with only imperfect knowledge of the form the need took was not wise, and indeed Broome had not shrunk from taking time over setting up what he felt were appropriate services. The case against the national library services is that they were not truly appropriate to African circumstances, and that however tentatively they might have been introduced they were still extensions of what was known and loved in mid-century Britain. 'Acts of faith' and 'assumptions that one would never dare to make in Europe' were just not good enough. Yet this way of thinking and the library services resulting from it, were characteristic not only of Tanzania and East Africa, but effectively all of the Anglophone African countries

The failure of the national library services

It is now widely accepted that for the most part the national library services have failed to develop beyond what was seen as their early promise. The writer's own observations when visiting libraries in a number of Anglophone African countries (Sturges and Neill 1998) support the conclusions of a whole series of commentators whose work is abstracted in Issak (2000). What they generally say about the impact of services is summed up well by Banjo (1998) when he reports

that public libraries in African countries are hardly used and that such users as they have are school-children using the library as a quiet place to do homework. This has proved de-motivating in the extreme for librarians trained to perform all the normal functions of a busy library. A dispiriting sight that the visitor will often see is a library workroom with no sign of new acquisitions. A row of cataloguers may be dozing at their desks, not able to perform their function, but not re-deployed to useful tasks either. Mchombu (1982) estimated that 60% of national library service budgets went on salaries and that other non-book expenditure took up the major proportion of what remained. The national library services have staff, buildings and systems of work. Unfortunately they have little stock, and that stock attracts few users.

The inadequacies are abundantly documented in the African library literature. Issak (2000) sums them up by speaking of conditions that are 'very poor', of 'serious problems', 'financial difficulties' 'dramatic decline', 'alarming deterioration', 'low morale', and 'lack of motivation'. In summary, she identifies major problems centring on: declining government funding (and over-dependence on donor-funding); weak book publishing and distribution sectors; a lack of popular enthusiasm for reading; little change in library practices since the colonial days; no clear public library policies; low professional standards; little adjustment to the potential of IT; insufficient evaluation of existing services and informal alternatives; and consequently questionable sustainability. She lists hundreds of items that illustrate this case and two examples from Kenya will serve as examples. A story from the *Kenya Times* of January 7, 1995 entitled 'National library in shambles' talks of inaccessible libraries with irrelevant stocks and no funds to acquire new materials. What this means at a more local level, is shown by a story in the *East African Standard* of June 4, 1999, 'Kisii library ceiling a threat' which talks of the danger to readers of a collapsing ceiling that has not been repaired despite complaints. Examples of this kind could be multiplied over and over again, both from published sources and from the experiences of those who frequently visit African libraries.

Thoroughly inadequate budgets explain much of this. Mambo (1998) and Rosenberg (1994) for

instance, are among the many writers who make it clear that there are appalling funding deficiencies at the root of the difficulties under which libraries suffer in very many African countries. Librarians cannot be held responsible for the natural disasters, coups, and economic mismanagement of nations that create national poverty. They are at the end of the chain of consequences and suffer these consequences powerless to influence the broader circumstances. Unfortunately, but understandably, some librarians have more or less given up the struggle. There is a sad tendency to argue that only money will solve the multifarious problems of the libraries. There is however, more to what Mchombu described as the librarianship of poverty than mere shortage of funds to run services. He suggested that there were also gross inequities in provision. According to his calculations, by about 1980 the library services in Tanzania were still only serving as little as 1% of the population. (Mchombu 1982)

Mchombu's figures may have more of a rhetorical status than a statistical one, and there is a lack of precise data on the proportion of the population currently served in African countries. However, the levels achieved certainly represent a great shortfall from what had been hoped and predicted. Hockey, for instance, in a response to Serwadda, had suggested what he clearly thought a modest target for the potential user community of the type of library he was promoting.

With the vast education programmes now going forward, I would hazard a guess that these potential users amount to at least 20% of the population, increasing rapidly. (Hockey 1965)

This has just not materialised and the libraries have, almost everywhere, remained a service for a small minority of the population. The point that Mchombu makes is that this tiny minority is already the most privileged part of the population, so that library services are unjust as well as ineffective.

This is best illustrated from a country, such as Botswana, that is well-governed and has a balanced budget (Dale 1971). The catastrophic decline of basic library services has never occurred there and the libraries of Botswana National Library Service have a satisfying air of 'normality'. However, normality means pleasant well designed libraries with collections that would not

disgrace an English county library branch, but with very few users actually exploiting the type of provision that has been made. To give the Botswana National Library Service proper credit it must be recorded that they have been well aware of this for many years and have been at the forefront of experimentation with less formal services. For the moment, however, Botswana can be taken to illustrate the point that failure, to some considerable degree or other, is the consistent outcome of the form of library provision present in the Anglophone African countries.

Origins of failure

It is the author's contention in this article that the failure of the national library services, with its acknowledged financial basis, was also very much a failure of ideas. The problem has been a poverty of librarianship, not just a poverty of libraries. Commentators such as Olden (1995) and Rosenberg (1993) have demonstrated the dimensions of this in some detail. They, and others, show in ample detail the ways in which the expatriate librarians brought with them the preconceptions that were the original source of this poverty of ideas. A major part of the problem was that, arguably, the ideas on librarianship that they brought with them were not in a fit state to export. Indeed Michael Harris has argued precisely that in relation to US librarianship, and his remarks ring true if applied to the state of British ideas. He suggested that public librarians were,

Less and less able to provide reasons for the processes that were being performed in their libraries ... most had completely lost sight of the founders' vision, and the few who could see it had lost their faith in its potential for fulfillment. (Harris 1978, 49)

Amongst other evidences of the staleness of British librarianship at the time, one could cite the setting up of the Institute of Information Scientists in 1958. Information professionals in the industrial and business sectors were convinced that the librarianship offered little if anything to support innovative, proactive services for a fast developing information sector. They defined themselves as information scientists, at least in part, because of the perceived inadequacy of librarianship. The same sentiment could also have been applied to the answers that librarian-

ship offered to the information needs of the African colonies and newly independent states.

By the time that library systems had been established in most of the Anglophone African countries, the nature of the challenge that they faced was becoming clearer. When Douglas Varley, by then Librarian of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, returned to the country in 1963 after attending an UNESCO seminar on 'Public library development in Africa' at Enugu, Nigeria, he was clearly full of the messages that emerged from the proceedings. He identified the mission of African library services as concerning,

How to equip the people at large, and in time, with a progressive understanding of the cataclysmic social and technological changes which they are fated to undergo in the second half of this already cataclysmic twentieth century. (Varley 1963, 6)

His use of the word cataclysmic might, at the time, have seemed excessive, but subsequent events have fully justified it. This is the kind of sentiment with which few of the librarians then practicing in Anglophone Africa, British or British trained, would have failed to agree. However, the availability of suitable human resources to achieve it was even then seen as in question. As Varley put it,

Librarians tend to divide themselves into two groups: those with a flair to collect and conserve, and those with an urge to distribute, disseminate, and, in brief, communicate the materials and tools of their trade. (Varley 1963, 9)

In fact the problem was not quite that simple. The real difficulty was that even the communicators, amongst whom Evans, Broome and their colleagues should certainly be included, did not necessarily have the vision to break away from their professional heritage. What is more, the arguments and examples of the expatriate librarians were absorbed and internalised by succeeding generations of African librarians.

Perhaps the most strongly stated case for the national library services on the pattern created by the expatriates was written by two of the first generation of local librarians in Tanzania. Kaungamno and Ilomo (1979) in their *Books build nations* argued that because the industrialized countries had long recognized the value of library and information services in national development, Afri-

can countries should learn the same lesson and follow suit. The second volume of the book was an impressive description and justification of all types of library service in Tanzania. The authors did not shirk discussion of the problems experienced in the country, but time and time again their arguments were built on experience and ideas derived from the industrialized countries. This is, in essence, typical of the approach adopted by the librarians of Anglophone Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Two obvious reasons can be suggested as to why this approach continued even after the senior posts held by expatriate librarians had largely been filled by local citizens.

First of all, in the early years, African librarians were trained within the libraries that employed them, and the same expatriates who were responsible for the setting up of the systems did the training. Usually the new librarians were trained first as assistants and then a lucky few were sent to Britain, often with British Council scholarships, to study for the Associateship of the Library Association. The programmes in the British Library Schools were very practice based and did little to encourage the students to develop original viewpoints. Most returned with a strong grasp of the routine aspects of library administration and bibliographical activity, but little perspective on the validity of these. Serwadda was a definite exception to this generalisation. Since then the position has changed somewhat. In the 1980s and 90s, graduates from African universities were sent overseas to study for Postgraduate Diplomas and Masters degrees in librarianship, though still mainly at British Universities. These students had a stronger academic background than their predecessors did, and the programmes have had a rather stronger theoretical base. Also in the last twenty years, African Universities have developed their own library schools, which include some very good examples such as those at the University of Botswana, Moi University, Kenya, and the University of Namibia. To some extent what is taught in the African schools continued on from what the teachers learned from their own British teachers. There is, however, more of a questioning spirit to be found in some of these new schools, and a sense that maybe the cycle of the transmission of ideas can be broken. Up until recently, however, education and training has perpetuated orthodoxy.

Secondly, there was an encouragement from international organisations, such as UNESCO and IFLA, to think in terms of national information planning on a standardised formula. This need not have diverted African librarians from concerning themselves with basic services to the people, but there is some evidence that it did. (Mchombu & Miti 1992) A whole series of conferences sponsored by UNESCO, the Deutsche Stiftung für Internationale Entwicklung (DSE) and others, took place in African cities, beginning with Kampala in 1970. They promoted the idea of integrated national library and information systems known as NATIS. This idea attracted a great deal of attention amongst the librarians of African countries and meetings and working parties put in a great deal of effort to draft NATIS plans for each country. In Malawi, for instance, although the country had only rudimentary library facilities and was notoriously subject to the suppression of information and the surveillance of citizens by the state apparatus, the librarians embraced NATIS with enthusiasm. An Interim National Information committee was set up in 1977, a conference was sponsored by DSE in 1978, and a survey of information resources and library collections was carried out in 1979. By August 1983 a draft National Information Policy had been formulated, but government simply ignored it. Years had been spent on ambitious schemes that had no impact at all. The NATIS enterprise and other international initiatives merely served to confirm librarians in their detachment from the more urgent issues of services to the public. As Bengé put it

I worked out a similar scheme for Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, which was never even presented and it was only after further experiences in Nigeria that I fully appreciated the impracticality of superimposing rational constraints on a number of mutually exclusive units. Integration has to grow from the immediate urgent needs of the people. (Bengé 1996, 172)

Internationally sponsored programmes like NATIS encouraged African librarians in the same concern for the broader picture and for internationally acceptable standards that was implicit in their adoption of British models. But was there really an alternative?

Serwadda certainly thought that there was, but he did not have the opportunity to do more than

sketch out an idea. He wrote of services based on the extension concept and stressed dissemination of information. This is very much the principle embedded in hundreds of experimental and semi-experimental small-scale projects providing simple reading and information facilities to the public. Sturges and Neill (1998) provide an overview of this type of development and Giggey (1988) has prepared a simple manual for those setting up services. Some of these facilities have been developed as support for the mass literacy programmes that have taken place in many African countries. Tanzania provides a major example, claiming several thousand rural reading rooms provided with small collections of useful publications including vernacular newspapers specially written for new literates. Zimbabwe has the impressive Rural Libraries and Resources Development Project (RLRDP) which works with communities throughout the country to set up relevant information services in the rural areas. The examples could be multiplied. Few areas of Anglophone Africa do not have at least some experimentation of this kind, and Francophone Africa is also fertile of such developments. The alternative was certainly there to be found and it is only a pity that the investigation and experimentation that has taken place since the 1980s was not at least begun in the 1960s, when the need for it was just as clear as it is today.

The future of the national library services

The national library services of Anglophone Africa have been in eclipse since very soon after their creation, but they have continued to exist. They have buildings in large numbers of communities and employ numbers of trained and experienced librarians who provide a reservoir of technical expertise. Their future is therefore a matter of some concern. Whether or not they have the ability to adapt both to the local circumstances from which they have been so detached for so long, and to the changes that are such a central feature of information work in the twenty first century, is an important question. There are both encouraging signs that progress is being made, and distressing suggestions that nothing has been learned.

The Kenya National Library Service, for instance, has recently shown an admirable willing-

ness to experiment with fresh ideas. There are libraries built with funds raised jointly between the library service and the local community. Income is being generated from book-binding, printing and photocopying. The National Library Service is associated with an AIDS awareness project that repackages and translates information from foreign sources. There are book box services to student groups, transported by bicycle and more spectacular than any of this are the new services to nomadic people in the Garissa district. The use of camels to transport library materials to small, isolated groups of people is a colourful story that has been reported beyond the professional press, and accounts of it have even appeared in British newspapers. Certainly this has more than a suspicion of window dressing, but it promotes a fresh and more relevant product. Disturbingly, there are also signs that this new approach is not yet fully internalised. A statement like 'According to the Director of KNLS, a library is a foreign concept in most parts of the country; therefore there is a need to market the concept' (Issak 2000, 138) is not wholly logical. What is needed is an African concept that can be marketed with confidence, not a foreign concept that has to be promoted to a sceptical public.

As an indication that in some cases the lessons do not seem to have been learned at all, take a sad plea from a Ghanaian librarian published recently. He outlines the difficulties experienced by the public libraries of his country since the setting up of the national library service. It then goes on to list the main functions of a true national library (collects the nation's literature, acts as a centre for union catalogues, handles the allocation of ISBNs, produces a current national bibliography, and develops cataloguing standards, etc.). Then, clearly convinced that this type of activity would somehow address the difficulties he had previously mentioned, he concludes that "it is now clear why it is important to establish a National Library in Ghana" (Obeng 1999, 8). This kind of massive non-sequitor is sadly typical of the thinking of quite a few inheritors of the British tradition.

In this article it has been contended that the reliance on stale and irrelevant British experience for approaches to Africa's most urgent information problems demonstrates an intellectual poverty. Conventional librarianship has offered

illusions to the librarians of Anglophone Africa, but its poverty as a paradigm for information service in Africa has been proven by the test of time. Even though there is now a wealth of other ideas and examples, precisely how the national library services ought to develop is still the subject of debate. Although the answers that are chosen depend ultimately on the politicians who approve plans and allocate budgets, there are also decisions to be made by the librarians themselves. They need to decide whether they want to be involved in change or to accept the status quo. In many ways, the easiest thing is to drift along in the present ineffective manner. Salaries, though inadequate, seem likely to continue to be paid and the work is often not onerous. To adopt a new direction is difficult and professionally risky. In the year 2000 the need to make decisions is placed in particularly sharp focus. The Carnegie Corporation of New York is providing money to help improve African public libraries. This is a marvellous opportunity for careful experimentation and investigation. Deciding which projects to put forward to Carnegie will test the leadership of the library profession in Anglophone Africa. The decisions made in this year will show whether a new, less conventional leadership is emerging from amongst the librarians educated on Masters programmes outside the continent and in the Library Schools of Africa itself, or whether those who cling to the old, unsuccessful orthodoxies still hold sway.

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