New Imperatives for Librarianship in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa, in colonial times regarded as the "Dark Continent," faces many challenges, whether infrastructural, cultural, or political. Despite these challenges, countries on the continent cannot afford to be complacent. The digital divide between Africa and the Western world, with its new technological innovations, has been widening. Librarianship as a discipline is invariably affected by this divide. Since having embraced a Western model of librarianship, the question is whether there can be talk of African librarianship, or a librarianship for Africa. This conceptual dilemma is further explored by a discussion of development, the role of the library, training in library and information science (LIS), the relationship between librarianship and information science, and imperatives for the future. While it is acknowledged that new information technologies are important for development, this should not be embraced at the expense of traditional values of librarianship. It is argued that precolonial Africa has had a rich heritage of library scholarship; perhaps a rethink of this is needed, as well as a critical theory in LIS, for an understanding of an African-centered approach to librarianship instead of adopting the Western model, as has been the case for decades. It is therefore imperative to prevent LIS isolationism.

INTRODUCTION

One wonders if the debate on African librarianship will ever end. There are those who propagate for librarianship in Africa using the Western model, while others argue for an African model. The question, of course, is this: is there such a phenomenon as "African librarianship," or is it about

librarianship in Africa, and more specifically, library and information science/studies/services (LIS) in Africa?

Africa has certainly been regarded as the "Dark Continent" (see Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* [1899]), backward and a place without hope. In many ways, this was justification for colonialism. Tise (2012) alludes to this when she cites Bukenya (2008), who made the assertion that "missionaries had to spread literacy among the converts and create new literature for consumption" (p. 1). These missionaries were undoubtedly the colonial masters. Since literacy is often associated with libraries, it seems logical to question the concept of African librarianship and the state it is in. Tise suggests that "libraries and reading were alien to communities that had very strong oral communication networks for the sharing of information and knowledge" (p. 1). Would this then be devoid of librarianship? Some commentators question the leadership and competence levels of African librarians (De Boer, Bothma, & Olwagen, 2012, p. 88). As in many other cases, Western funds, in this case a grant from the Carnegie Corporation in New York, were made available to the Department of Library Services (UPLS) at the University of Pretoria to establish the Centre for African Library Leadership (CALL). The aim was to "give librarians the opportunity to meet colleagues as well as senior professionals from different backgrounds, provinces and institutions and so initiate a paradigm shift for leading the profession" (p. 88). This paradigm shift, it appears, dealt with the following:

> theoretical as well as practical aspects, including organisational leadership and behaviour; innovation and change management; leadership descriptor tools (such as the Campbell Leadership Descriptor and the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument®); multiculturalism and diversity in the workplace; organisational ethics; knowledge management; effective communication; advocacy; branding and marketing, and Web 2.0 and mobile technologies. (p. 88)

The program was contextualized through lectures about the position of libraries on the national and international agendas, as well as by lectures about next-generation librarians.

While the intention of this development initiative might seem noble and aimed at preparing library leaders, it comes across as producing thinking individuals for the digital age. De Boer, Bothma, and Olwagen (2012) remind the reader that

> taking up the challenges of the digital age while understanding and accommodating digital users is key. Failure to do so will result in a "meltdown" of libraries, the signs of which (as claimed by Nicholas and Rowlands [2008:4]) are already there for all to see. Library leaders need to be alert and understand the technical changes that have taken place in the virtual information space. Hence they have to be ready to implement new strategies appropriate to being a centre of excellence for the production and dissemination of knowledge, and

> constituting a place of dialogue and understanding between cultures and people. (p. 97)

The comments above suggest an African librarianship that needs the input from another entity (the West) to produce thinkers. It must be stated that Africa has a rich history of library scholarship. Here, one can mention a few who have contributed greatly to the development and social epistemology of librarianship in Africa. Some of the modern writers who have attempted to give Africa a rightful place in the discipline of librarianship include Amadi (1981), Mchombu (2004), Mchombu and Cadbury (2006), and Ocholla (2003), to mention just a few. However, librarianship in Africa prior to colonialism is also well-documented. One thinks of Ashurbanipal's library and the Alexandrian library with its famous editors, who were also known for their work on Homeric texts. The more celebrated Alexandrian editors generally also held the title of "head librarian" (these included, among others, Zenodotus [ca. early third century BCE]). Some other important contributors included

- Apollonius of Rhodes (ca. mid-third century BCE);
- Aristarchus of Samothrace (ca. late second century BCE);
- Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. early second century BCE);
- Callimachus, (ca. early third century BCE), the first bibliographer and developer of the *Pinakes*, popularly considered to be the first library catalog; and
- Eratosthenes (ca. late third century BCE) (Desai, 2001; Feather & Sturges, 2003; Jeppie & Bachir Diagne, 2008; Phillips, 2010; Wiegand & Davis, 1994).

Whose Development?

There are multiple views about the impact of colonialism in Africa, and in particular apartheid in South Africa. It seems that the emphasis in post-colonial Africa was mostly on the development of the continent. Some of these views are briefly discussed below.

In their introduction to *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* (Federici, Caffentzis, & Alidou, 2000), the editors argue that the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) brought its own problems to Africa. The idea behind SAPs was to bring about economic recovery; however, funds to education were cut. Federici, Caffentzis, and Alidou claim that "many teachers and other academic staff were retrenched and wages were frozen [and] development of an African educational system . . . seriously undermined" (p. xi). Students have waged struggles in most of the African countries against the SAPs adopted by their countries and institutions (Federici & Caffentzis, 2000, p. 115). Many student demonstrations have indeed "targeted state corruption

(Zimbabwe), authoritarianism (Zaire, Togo, Liberia) and the arrests of intellectuals critical of the ruling party (Sudan, Somalia)" (Caffentzis, 2000, p. 16).

Although Kenyans still suffered from colonialism, there emerged "an alternative way of thinking about education and development" (Närman, 1995, p. 4). However, this kind of development can only be realized if "an attempt to liberate our own minds from a basically Eurocentric perspective" is achieved and development involves "the needs and cultures of the very peoples themselves in Africa, Asia and Latin America" (p. 4). Närman later rightfully suggests that education is a basic human right but also an indicator of development (p. 61). Clearly then, ignorance does not stimulate development. For this reason, educational strategies and policies need to be formulated and implemented. Do libraries play a meaningful role in this formulation and implementation? Below, I want to briefly discuss the role of the library.

THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

The Western model of public libraries applied to Africa has often been criticized as being inappropriate. This had an effect on collection development and services aimed at illiterate groups, which caused a late start with literacy programs, retarding the public library's entry into the development arena, inappropriate training of staff, and poor cooperation with other information agencies, especially with regard to information for development. From the available literature, it is clear that the model of public library service imported from the West hardly took into consideration local needs and the sociopolitical situation of African peoples (Issak, 2002, p. 330). It seems therefore that the Western public library model was inadequate as regards meeting the information needs of African peoples. However, another view holds that public libraries provide access to knowledge, information, and works of imagination through a range of resources and services (Gill et al., 2001, pp. 1–2). The public library is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status, and educational attainment. Although people of all classes have access to public libraries in all communities, there is still, unfortunately, an unequal distribution of resources; it is also argued that public libraries are generally stocked with literature that is usually foreign, outdated, and irrelevant to the information needs and interests of the people expected to use them (Okiy, 2003, p. 127).

Public libraries are often perceived as elitist institutions serving only the most educated living in cities and ignoring the rural people. Suaiden (2003, p. 1), for instance, posits that public libraries became viewed from a social perspective as elitist places, book depositories, or somewhere to do schoolwork. These problems prompted the emergence of a conflict

of views between the information professional and the wider community. Okiy (2003) posits that the public library should discard its traditional docile role as repository of knowledge and ideas and rise to the challenges that any rapid modernization process entails. From these views, it seems that public library services in Africa have been operating without fully taking into consideration the needs of the people they are meant to serve.

For a long time it was considered that the main purpose of a library was to preserve its collection, and this made the circulation and dissemination of books difficult. This notion promoted the creation of "useless" public libraries (Suaiden, 2003, p. 379). However, with the emergence of the so-called information society, the preservation paradigm seemed to dissipate. This new society essentially demonstrates that information generates power, especially when it is disseminated rapidly or in real time (p. 379). With the emergence of the information society, it became more important for public libraries to play a vital role in enabling people to use information and communication technologies (ICTs). A detailed discussion of ICTs, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that a passionate embrace of ICTs, as if they would or could solve the problems of transformation, would certainly be unwise. Instead, using technology to achieve desired goals is more desirable. As I state elsewhere, "librarians need to build a healthy, integrated level of service to families and children. They provide the foundation for developing library relationships with other community agencies, which can be viewed as part of a continuum ranging from networking to collaboration" (Davis, 2009, p. 135).

Training in LIS

It cannot be doubted that the environment is rapidly changing. According to the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (2002), more and more information disseminates and new knowledge is discovered and produced constantly. To this end, De Saulles (2012, p. 1) refers to an "explosion in digital technologies that have transformed the ways we create, distribute and consume information." Realizing this change has prompted teaching and learning institutions to adapt their curricula from a traditionalist one to a more technological savvy approach. So, for instance, one would now find that librarians no longer rely upon an encyclopaedia or index as the first reference source when dealing with an information search. Estelle and Woodward (2010) note that users themselves make use of search engines like Google and Yahoo, therefore arguing that librarians need to recognize that users can easily bypass the library. Therefore, the library must embrace new technologies. But is it as simplistic as this? The question that invariably springs to mind is whether librarianship deals, specifically, with *information* or *knowledge*? Can its fixation with information be the actual reason why most library schools in sub-Saharan Africa have opted for the fancier "information science" rather than "library science"

in their curricula? Does this then also imply that knowledge should be discarded? Perhaps we need to explore this further and as point of departure be reminded of Foucault's (1980, p. 77) observation that "the genealogy of knowledge needs to be analysed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power."

However, Ingwersen and Järvelin (2005, p. 323) posit that modern work increasingly has to do with knowledge work. They argue that to have access to recorded information or human sources is essential. In their understanding of *knowledge*, it is clear that it is "an individual's total understanding of itself and the world around it at any given point in time incorporating thinking and cognition as well as emotional, intuitive properties and (sub)conscious memory (tacit knowledge)" (p. 387). *Information*, on the other hand, is merely the result of a transformation of a generator's cognitive structures. Ingwersen and Järvelin further comment that information in the context of information science is supplementary or complementary "to a conceptual system that represents the information processing system's *knowledge* of its world" (p. 385; emphasis in original). Since librarianship deals with knowledge and knowledge structures, it is clear that information science as a discipline is supplementary or complementary. However, can one necessarily divorce the two disciplines? The next section briefly deals with the two disciplines.

Librarianship and Information Science

Bawden and Robinson (2012) define *information science* as "being concerned with computing, algorithms and information technologies . . . as being concerned with information recorded in documents, with meaning and knowledge, and hence as growing from the older disciplines of *librarianship* and documentation" (p. 2; emphasis added). These authors admit that the information sciences tend to be dispersed across faculties; this is true also in South Africa in particular and Africa in general. In some instances, information science departments are part of the faculties of engineering, arts, humanities, and so on—clearly a sign that much confusion exists about the place of the discipline. In fact, there is no clear definition as to what the discipline of information science actually entails.

Cornelius (1996, p. 156) views information science as a "somewhat battered and in some ways a disoriented field." Although an earlier view (Griffith, 1980), as cited by Cornelius, indicated that information science's origin stems from "a migration of a number of natural scientists, behavioural scientists and applied mathematicians into problem areas dealing with information" (p. 156) during the 1950s, these approaches were mismatched. Other authors approach information science from a cognitive point of view. Of interest in this regard are the reflections of Frohmann (1992), citing Belkin (1980). Frohmann notes that "information is pro-

duced by 'generators,' each with their 'world images,' or 'knowledge structures'" (p. 136). The idea is that these generators of knowledge would change the worldviews of the recipients, who pursue this information as a result of a gap in their own image structures. Therefore, the assumption is that the generator of knowledge has a *cognitive* state of knowledge while the recipient or seeker of the information has an *anomalous* state of knowledge.

Another viewpoint of the place of information science is Cronin's (2009), who relates its social dimension and relevance to its disciplinary predecessors, documentation, and librarianship. He posits that "the sociocultural dimensions of knowledge and the socially embedded nature of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are, and to some extent always have been, integral to the theory base of information science, an assertion that is easily confirmed by inspection of the published literature" (p. 112). Clearly, there is no clear indication that information science is an *exact* science, let alone a replacement for librarianship. The question invariably follows: *quo vadis* for librarianship in an African context?

IMPERATIVES FOR THE FUTURE

This paper by no means argues for a rejection of technological innovation but cautions against an embrace of such innovation without a rethink of the traditional values of libraries. In the African context, this is ever more important. As LaFond (2004) suggests, librarians continue to be marginalized by the development of ICTs. The author ascribes this to "technolust," which is about commercial gains and, for political reasons, common among African administrators responsible for directing university resources in the development of ICTs for Africa (p. 211). Rehman (2000) suggests that if one regards this as the "information age," then it stands to reason that "information workers are the essence in the vital information dynamics regulating human civilization" (p. 1). If one considers the *IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines* (Koontz & Gubbin, 2010, p. 9), it is clear for developing communities that the library should be a public space, a place where people can meet; a positive social experience can be encountered in such instance. It is in this regard that Mchombu and Cadbury (2006) quite aptly state that

> libraries play an important role in the acquisition, maintenance and development of literacy skills. They achieve this through offering access to reading materials that are relevant, stimulating, enjoyable or useful. Pleasure in reading, which in turn helps to foster a lifelong reading habit, is often experienced in the library in which readers gain their first opportunity to pick a book of their own choice. Libraries are also important for providing practical information that can be used to facilitate development, whether for seeking employment, understanding rights, learning a skill, checking a fact or gaining health information. (p. 3)

However, the authors caution:

> With lower levels of literacy, particularly amongst poorer groups and those in rural areas, great care is needed to provide appropriate information resources for all members of the community. It is vital that potential library users are not alienated by libraries which only contain material that is too detailed, too advanced or simply irrelevant to their needs. (p. 3)

It is also imperative that "reliable, relevant, and timely health information is accessible to everyone, especially countries in Africa where many are wallowing in ignorance, superstition, fear, poverty, and diseases" (Anasi, 2012, p. 121).

These are traditional library attributes that need to be in place in order for libraries in Africa to fulfill a meaningful role. There are views that seem to support what is known as the "transformation of librarianship." According to Mutula (2013),

> Greater competition posed by the proliferation of information services that are not library based and the increasing use of information and communication technologies, especially personal computer[s], the Internet, electronic database[s], electronic data-retrieval methods and the emphasis being placed on knowledge management, are factors in the transformation of librarianship. (p. 89)

Should librarianship be transformed or newer technologies studied to enhance the role of librarianship? Mutula further claims that

> as a result of the transformation that has taken place in the nomenclature librarianship, it has given way to library and information science, which in turn has evolved into information science or information management in 1990s. . . . The transformation of [*sic*] librarianship profession has enhanced access and participation in higher education in LIS training because of diverse option and choices in academic programme offerings. (p. 90)

Certainly, this optimism does little for an Africa that, in the words of Mchombu (2004, p. 33), is faced with challenges to encourage and support the processing of knowledge by community members so they may find solutions to the community's problems. If librarianship is transformed, does this mean it is for the benefit of the community the library has to serve or merely for enrollments at universities to increase? The issue is not so much about transforming librarianship as it is about transformation and the role that librarianship can play. Ocholla (2003), however, is of the opinion that information technology (IT) does play an important role in the enhancement of librarianship but says that "while the importance of IT education is recognised by all LIS schools, IT is underemphasized in the majority of existing curricula despite the prevailing positive attitude towards the incorporation of more IT into the curricula" (p. 183). Ocholla (2003) extends his argument by mentioning that with ICTs,

there is room for more research on ICT in LIS education generally and particularly in Africa. Lack of ICT support resources, infrastructure, space for practical work by students, sufficient time in the curricula and often poor student background in relation to ICT literacy, lack of innovative learning methods, inadequate job challenges after ICT education and improper balance between theory and practice are identified to be major obstacles to ICT in LIS education. (p. 192)

Despite applications of new technologies, Kwanya, Stilwell, and Underwood (2009) argue that

although the form and delivery of information through libraries has changed, the basic functions of a library remain to identify, acquire, process, arrange and make available information. Consequently, libraries continue to perform essential operations such as material selection, acquisition, cataloguing, circulation, maintenance, preservation, reference and document delivery. (p. 73)

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing arguments and views, it is apparent that Africa still grapples with major developmental issues. There are infrastructural challenges, not to mention the challenges regarding reading and sustainability, including health. While the application of new technologies are vital for countries in Africa to catch up with the rest of the world, can one ignore the basic needs of the continent and its people? One questions the wisdom of the application of ICTs—for example, where basic literacy is still lacking. A new imperative for Africa in terms of library services would warrant a shared vision by way of its affiliated library associations. For librarians, this calls for a critical theory of LIS. LIS schools in Africa need to take cognizance of the "sophisticated use of critical theory [which] makes our scholarship and practice more relevant to a larger academic society and wards off the dangers of LIS isolationism" (Leckie & Buschman, 2010, p. xi).

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