

UNISA/IFLA PUBLIC LECTURE ON AFRICAN LIBRARIANSHIP, 29 JULY 2009

Testament and professional belief

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Dr Henning, Dr. Mbambo-Thata, LIASA President Rachel More and members of the LIASA Executive, Robert Moropa, members of the UNISA Management and the Library Management team, CHELSA members and the management team of GAELIC and FOTIM, other distinguished guests and colleagues, it is a great honour to be invited to address you this afternoon on the occasion of the second UNISA/IFLA Public Lecture on African Librarianship. The high standard set by Kay Raseroka, who gave the first lecture, is a worthy reminder of the contribution that Africa has made, and will continue to make, to the development of our profession.

I wish also to thank IFLA and its Africa Section for having the foresight to make such an event possible. We spend too little time in celebrating our profession and this opportunity affords us a moment to consider the role played in the development of IFLA by such prominent South Africans as John Willemse and Peter Lor. This year, we see the inauguration of Ellen Tise as President, yet another example of how South Africa has grown into its larger role on the world stage. The munificence of UNISA is providing a location for the IFLA Africa Regional Office is also noteworthy. Locally, I should like to thank Lindi Nhlapo for making all the arrangements for my visit.

I wish to dedicate this lecture to the memory of Ronald Benge, who died at the age of ninety, earlier this year. By any standards, Ron's service to librarianship and, in particular, the education of librarians would make his life worthy of study. For those of us fortunate enough to have encountered him in the seminar room or as a colleague, the memory of his passionate commitment to libraries and the social role and work of librarians is indelible. His association with library schools started in the 1950s, when he tried to set up a library school in Trinidad; this venture, however, did not flourish. It was in Ghana in 1961 that his ideas for library school development took root. From 1967 to 1972 he was at the College of Librarianship Wales, Aberystwyth, where his tuition was legendary for its acerbic wit and penetrating insight. Following this, he established his third library school: that of Ahmadu Bello University in northern Nigeria in the 1970s. David Matthews, in his obituary of Ron Benge¹, notes that Benge could be exasperating, diverting and witty: he was a formidable presence.

Of the many themes that he pursued in his writing, one that has remained with me is the question of whether librarianship *is* a profession. The matter is not a trivial question within Africa and especially not within South Africa: the development of libraries on the continent remains a matter of *potential* in many cases, as distinct from actual achievement. In some cases, one can understand that the imperatives of providing food, water and medication to populations facing the disasters of drought, civil war and the consequences of global

¹ D. Matthews, Obituary of Ronald Benge, *The Guardian* [London], Friday 22 May 2009.

warming claim the attention of governments and civil society. Indeed, there would seem little point in trying to provide a service of a traditional kind where infrastructure is lacking or rapidly failing. Yet, we still find many examples of librarians pursuing their work in marginalised communities and inhospitable conditions. What, other than some zeal for their work and a belief in the basic goodness of what they are doing, keeps them going? The term “barefoot” librarianship became popular in the 1980s, first being used by Adolphe Amadi in his book *African libraries: Western tradition and Colonial brainwashing*.² The concept is recognised as having two quite different approaches. On the one hand, a “barefoot librarian” may be a person who is literate and who has received some basic training in librarianship, and who continues to train in an apprenticeship model in order to refine these skills. On the other hand, it can mean a professionally-qualified person who chooses to work within a community that is developing.³ Clearly, both approaches are valid but we must also recognise that, however desirable the second approach may be, it is unlikely to prevail because it is costly. What either approach can enshrine is one of the characteristics that distinguishes a profession: **Personal service and a code of ethics**.⁴ In South Africa, the Resource Centre Movement typifies information provision that is centred upon communities and where those providing the service are well-attuned to responding to social need. There are many other examples worldwide but one that is of some personal interest is the remarkable service that was provided by Father John Metcalf, whose mission to the people in the Cajamarca region of the Andes in Peru is of considerable interest to anyone attempting to run an effective information service in rural areas.⁵ Recognising that the conditions of the communities could be improved by providing salient information in a suitable format, Metcalf set about assessing needs. He found that an acceptable form of organisation was to find out who was regarded as the principal person, and thus the information gatekeeper, in the community. Providing information to that person, both in oral and visual form, meant that it was quickly spread and that person could also act as a link between Metcalf and the community so that emerging needs could be satisfied. This, and similar examples of dedication, indicate the immense importance of personal involvement and self-motivation.

In my own early career in public libraries in the United Kingdom, I was fortunate to work under the supervision of librarians who cared deeply for the communities that they served and for their profession: their dedication has left an indelible impression on me and one, I like to think, that I have tried to pass on to my students. That quality of “face-to-face” service is one of our distinctive characteristics and one through which, even in an electronic age, we can continue the courtesies of our profession.

Many, perhaps most, librarians would readily agree that their distinctive areas of knowledge and expertise do not easily command respect or understanding. Many would go further and admit to feeling threatened by the very Information and Communications Technology that has become such an important tool for us. They feel marginalised and under sufferance within societies that tend not to value the contribution that librarians believe they can make to social development. The “digital divide” is not only between so-called “rich” and “poor”

² A. Amadi, *African libraries: Western tradition and Colonial brainwashing* Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981.

³ R. B. Zaaiman, P. J. A. Roux, and J. H. Rykheer. *The use of libraries for the development of South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, Department of Library and Information Science, Centre for Library and Information Service, 1998, p 9.

⁴ R. C. Bengé, *Cultural crisis and libraries in the Third World*. London: Bingley, 1979, p. 207.

⁵ J. Metcalf, Rural libraries in the Andes. *Community development journal* 17(3), 1982, 257-258.

countries – it is also about a habit of mind and of age difference. However, we should remember that our profession has long been an “early adopter” of technology: some of the earliest uses of computers can be found in the history of how we have managed libraries.

What are these distinctive areas of knowledge and expertise that connote the profession, though? Sidney Pierce and Thomas Gaughan remind us that, “Our field imports theory from communications, education, linguistics, management, psychology, sociology, and a host of other disciplines”.⁶ Pierce and Gaughan also remind us that this “borrowing” is characteristic of all professions: it is an acknowledgement of the growing complexity of any world view that a coherent pattern can only emerge if several tools of investigation are used so that comparative evaluation of information can take place and there can be some external verification. Would we have confidence in a consultant who maintained that the only way to study a problem was to use a special and secret set of tools that only his or her profession knew about? Pierce and Gaughan also remark that, “In library schools, we talk a great deal about theory without recognizing it for what it is. Theory is not dry abstraction but the body of concerns, methods, and research problems a discipline develops over time”. In designing courses have the educators of librarians and information workers tended to sideline this historical dimension and by so doing serving to trivialise our body of knowledge in the eyes of others, so that it seems atheoretic? If we cannot point to **a coherent and established body of knowledge** then we cannot claim professional status.

Equally well if there is no **adequate structure of professional education** there can be no claim for library and information science as a profession. Here I am stretching a point and I can almost feel the disapproval that Ron Benge would express when speaking of the collective term, Library and information science. He made a distinction between the two, seeing “information science” as being a separate, but related, body of knowledge, worthy of respect but quite definitely distinct. That battle is now largely over, though it is worth reminding ourselves that it was waged over some thirty years and that one of its fruits has been a determined attempt at seeking the foundations of librarianship, as Joseph Nitecki has demonstrated in his *Metalibrarianship*.⁷ As far as Africa is concerned, we have many examples of vibrant courses of professional education, several of which focus strongly on indigenous needs for knowledge organisation. Within South Africa the provision for professional education is in a curious state: we have at least four schools that are thriving, one, the survival of which is threatened, and several others. Potentially, we should be well placed to produce sufficient librarians with the technical knowledge that is required – and yet, the anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. Prospective employers complain that it is difficult to find sufficient well-qualified people and that those that do appear lack many of the skills that are required. I feel, however, that there is merit in reminding ourselves that *any* course of professional education is incomplete without the contribution of professional colleagues. The task of developing professional education is shared between the educators, who try to instil principles and a sense of perspective and also to imbue trainees with identification and ethical principles appropriate to their chosen profession. A former colleague, Kevin McGarry would frequently remind us that, when planning curricula, the dictum should be, “Train for a static situation but educate for change”. It is for the

⁶ S. J. Pierce and T. M. Gaughan, “Dead Germans and the theory of librarianship” *American libraries* 23(8), Sept 1992, 641-644.

⁷ J. Z. Nitecki, *Metalibrarianship : a model for intellectual foundations of Library Information Science*. 1993. Available: <http://www.twu.edu/library/Nitecki/Metalibrarianship/> (21 July 2009).

practitioners to supply the essential apprenticeship that allows these principles to be exemplified and applied.

This has been another example of a long-running battle and its roots can be traced back to the earliest attempts at developing professional education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As soon as library schools ceased to be an adjunct of a national or an academic library, the apprenticeship link was lost or became, at most, tenuous. Moreover, librarians have become increasingly reluctant to take on the task of supervising trainees and young professionals. One can understand that limited staffing resources make this more difficult to arrange – but I do wish to suggest that participation in professional education through supervision of this kind is both fulfilling on a personal level and important on a professional level. In the United Kingdom, all who aspire to becoming Chartered have to complete a Professional Development programme, which includes regular supervision by practising librarians. I believe this to be an important component in growth of the profession.

An effective professional organisation is the first attribute of a profession that Bengé mentions. In his book *Cultural crisis and libraries in the Third World* he offers some very sage advice: “. . . associations are often unfairly criticised for their lack of impact. It could hardly be otherwise; no library associations have been able to exert much influence in their early days”.⁸ Another important factor is the size of the membership: a large membership can fund the development of a secretariat and the sharing of tasks. If, at the same time, the membership is a high proportion of the practising librarians in the country, then the question of representativeness is largely solved. The position of LIASA in this respect is problematic. It has depended, in part, on external funding in its formative period; its membership is low compared with the estimated number of practitioners; it has no role in the accreditation of courses of professional education. There are positive signs: *LIASA-in-touch* is a good quality newsletter which serves its purpose well and the *South African journal of libraries and information science* continues to enjoy high status through publishing peer-reviewed articles; it is increasingly sought out as a potential publisher of papers from throughout Africa. The recent launching of the “Million for LIASA” fundraising campaign and the application to the National Lotteries Distribution Fund augur well. The news that the LIASA Sub-Committee on the Establishment of Professional Status has recommended that LIASA seek to become a statutory body is to be welcomed if the profession is to play a role in advising government. Advocacy and lobbying are more effective *if* backed by an organisation that has statutory status. One of the objections to this move may be that it could deter those who do not yet have professional status; however, there are examples, such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in the United Kingdom, that attract library and information workers of all levels of experience and qualification, as well as suppliers to the professional domain.

The **ethic of service** is bound up with the concept of personal responsibility. Whilst our professional relationships with our communities do not usually assume the same degree of intensity and privacy as, for example, doctors or lawyers, we are increasingly confronted with the problem of how best to guide people in the use of information. In developing information literacy skills I have frequently made the point that there is a primary responsibility for a librarian working with a community of users. This is especially true for

⁸ Bengé, p. 208.

those working in public libraries, where guidance is vital. We are aware that the ready availability of Information and Communication Technology has, almost paradoxically, made the task of finding *relevant* and *reliable* sources of information more difficult. It is fairly easy to show almost anyone some basic rules for assessing sources and how to improve searching skills. The place to start is certainly in the formative years, with children. We would be failing in our professional responsibility if we did not continue to insist upon the development of a well-maintained school library service in every Province. Whilst it is too much to hope that the staffs of all schools and public library service points will include a professionally-qualified librarian, it is not fanciful to expect that our profession can take on the task of ensuring that knowledge of information literacy permeates them.

The **status and public recognition** of our profession is a vexed question. We must be clear that having status is about recognition of the capacity of one's profession to make a beneficial difference – it is not about self-importance or aggrandisement. What we seek is recognition by employers, by government and by society that what we do is of significance to the development and protection of society and the communities that we seek to serve.

This leads me to my closing point. In 1961, the renowned author C. P. Snow was President of The Library Association of the United Kingdom. In his Presidential Address, he summed up what, for me, is the essence of what we try to achieve as a profession and why we should be confident in what we do:

Librarians are blessed in . . . that either they do no harm – that is the lower limit of their activity – or that they do a finite amount of good. That is a very rare privilege.⁹

⁹ Sir Charles Snow, Presidential address, *The Library Association record* 63 (11), November 1961, 359.