The former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was never one of my favourite politicians because of the colonial link that South Africa has with Britain. However, I came across one of her quotations on public debates, and I would like to share it with you because of its fitness for purpose:

“I love argument. I love debate. I don’t expect anyone just to sit there and agree with me. That is not their job…” (Margaret Thatcher)

Opinions are formed and insights are gained in a process of open discussion and public debate like this. If there’s anything I would like
you to take away from this encounter, it is some informed opinions and perspectives on African librarianship.

How fitting it is to engage on the issue of African librarianship on Africa Day. Before I respond to the presentation by Ms Ellen Tise, I just want to congratulate the IFLA Regional Office for Africa and Unisa for organizing this lecture and providing a platform to stimulate debate on this thought-provoking and delicate topic. It is delicate because for some of us who have operated in the space of African librarianship for many years, this topic touches a raw nerve, because of the passion it evokes. However, I wish to point out from the onset that I am a loyal disciple of African librarianship. However, I will try to be honest and frank in my assessment of the presentation that I need to reply to. In some instances, I will ask more questions, rather than provide answers. This in itself is indicative of the complexity of the topic under discussion. I do not claim to have all the answers. But I hope that together we can collectively work on solutions to some of the challenges that have been identified by the keynote speaker.
Overall, I have picked up some differences in our thought patterns, as well as some convergence of ideas on the topic under discussion. I will try and illuminate these differences and commonalities, while attempting to provide alternative arguments in the ensuing response.

But first, I would like us to start from the beginning and look at the conceptual foundation. So, is African Librarianship a relic? By definition, a relic is something that has survived the passage of time, especially an object or custom whose original culture has disappeared. Relics are dead bones, but then they carry some mystical symbolism, like the relics of the saints, which evoke miracles and well-being. Ms Tise defines a relic as a practice that has survived a particular period, and essentially no longer has a place in the sun. So, the first part of this topic seems to suggest a paradox, namely, that African librarianship is dead, but it carries with it, some mystical attributes. My conviction is that African librarianship is still a solid foundation for library and information practice in Africa, with all its short-comings and weaknesses that we need to engage with.
On the second issue about African librarianship being a fallacy - what aspects of it are a fallacy? It most certainly is not a fallacy. If you trace librarianship back to its roots and look at the Alexandrian library in Egypt, for instance, or the Timbuktu library in Mali, you find the very cradle of civilization. Ms Tise argues that African librarianship is a fallacy because it is disappointing and does not add value to the current context. Indeed, whereas I concede that African librarianship has not made the great strides that we were all hoping for, there is some contribution that it has made to the discourse, through the loud voices that emerged from the scholars that I will mention at a later stage. On this basis therefore, I do not see enough justification to regard African librarianship as a fallacy. Ms Tise concedes that there were libraries in existence in some parts of Africa even before colonization, and these attest to the richness of African librarianship. If it is a relic, surely African librarianship carries with it a number of strengths.
Is African librarianship an imperative? Absolutely! Think of colonialism and the post-colonial state of Africa. For me the imperative for African librarianship is to guard against the re-colonization of Africa.

At the risk of being labelled a defensive apologist, I would like to remind us that before we pass any judgement on the status quo of African librarianship, we need to appreciate the harsh environments under which most African Library professionals operate. From governments that are not unreceptive, unprepared and unwilling to put resources into the development of libraries because of the negative attitude that they have towards libraries. Then you have the various basic needs in African communities that are in competition with libraries. Add all these factors up, and you have some of the most complex environments that you can imagine.

Various obstacles abound on the journey towards optimising African librarianship. But then again it would be a boring journey if there were no obstacles to stop us in our tracks and force us to reflect, review and develop strategies to underpin our quest for the true essence of African librarianship and finding African solutions.
Ms Tise, you provide a lucid analysis of one of the most difficult and sensitive topics in the profession. You are indeed correct in your assertion that when the colonial masters introduced the library to the African public, they left it to the public to adapt to this foreign institution. As we may well be aware, African societies and communities are largely adaptable and are known to confront their own peculiar circumstances in various ways. Whether you are talking about poverty, lack of houses or matters pertaining to libraries, you are most likely to find a model or a solution that has been developed to deal with each of the peculiar situations that African people find themselves in. However, can one fixate on illiteracy as a major contributor or perhaps the only contributor to poverty?

Libraries are indeed no exception to African people’s quest to make sense of their environment and find local solutions to their challenges. This practice is in stark contrast to what the prophets of doom want us to believe, and preach about the inability of African people to innovate. Chika Onyeani, he of the 'Capitalist nigger' fame, is the first one that comes to mind. You may remember him from the drivel he is
peddling in the notorious or famous offering titled Capitalist nigger, in which he makes sweeping generalizations about African people’s lack of creativity and innovation. I see one of our local musicians has recently also joined the African-bashing crusade, with a song titled ‘Blacks are fools’. Really? Is this not absolute hogwash, or are we overly sensitive to criticism as Africans?

What I also need to point out, Ms Tise, is that the concept of African librarianship is in itself, part of the adaptation process I referred to earlier before the digression, through which African scholars wanted to make sense of the foreign concept of library. Whereas the colonizers hoped that what they were imposing upon African communities would work in their favour, some of the African scholars actually used the same platform and ideologies to propagate their own ideas and give their own progressive meaning to the concept of African librarianship. It is important that we don’t miss this connection and context in an attempt to understand the conceptual foundation of African librarianship.
Now, one of the mistakes committed by Western Library professionals was to doubt the ability of their African counterparts to come up with localised tailor-made solutions to address the challenges that they encountered in their own environments. But then again, it is not surprising if you consider that for most of the colonizers, Africa still remains the so-called ‘dark continent’ that is associated with backwardness, mediocrity and inferiority. Nothing good comes out of Africa, they say. I would like to mention some of the pioneers in the profession who have made an immense contribution to the discourse on African librarianship in various parts of the continent. Kingo Mchombu, Seth Manaka, Andrew Kaniki, Dennis Ocholla, Amusi Odi and Adolphe Amadi. The list goes on. You will recall that Amadi coined the concept of the barefoot librarian. It is therefore clear that African librarianship embodies the collective vision that African pioneers in the field of Library and Information practice have in their own different environments, and represents the determination of these professionals to craft home-made library solutions for the continent, and advance the course of African librarianship.
I listened with interest when you referred to the now famous concept of the barefoot librarian, which is another initiative designed to achieve more with less, and further demonstrates the wisdom and creativity of African librarians. Indeed, any discourse on African librarianship would be very pedestrian if it excluded such initiatives as the barefoot librarian. The concept of the Camel Library in Kenya further attests to the development of a model of African librarianship that is truly African in character, in that part of Africa.

One of the serious failures of Western librarianship, which is clearly captured by Ms Tise is the imposition of Western library practices on African people. This failure to respect the beliefs and traditions of the African people undoubtedly accounts for some of the problems that we are saddled with, today. You rightly point out at the destruction of the oral tradition and culture, which was thought to be an obstacle to library growth. Indeed, equating the oral tradition with illiteracy will always be problematic. The other blunder was to use libraries as propaganda tools, as Ms Tise rightly points out. One of the proponents of African librarianship, Amusi Odi, aptly captures the reaction of African people to what they perceived as an onslaught on
their culture and traditions. He offers the following explanation for the general apathy and negative attitude displayed towards libraries:

'Africans have their own view of nature, their own epistemology and quest for reality. The neglect of these constituent aspects of their cosmology, and even overt attempts to inhibit them, may have done irreversible damage to library development in Africa. (Odi, 1991: 558).

There are several areas that I would like to point out, where I have a different view, and I hope that these can be clarified during further discussions:

- The assertion that the colonial powers developed an excellent library infrastructure when they landed in Africa is problematic for me. Excellent by whose standards? Western standards? By now we know the inherent weaknesses in the Western library model, and we cannot therefore describe it in glowing terms.

- You mention the notion that African librarians should engage in a discourse and relevant library provision for the
empowerment of the African citizenry. Who needs to do the empowering? Is there an assumption that African citizens are disempowered, just because they don’t follow Western traditions? Is this disempowerment perhaps a result of colonialism? I notice that there is an attempt to qualify the empowerment later on in your paper. But what kind of empowerment is required then? The emphasis on the concept empowerment is indeed, very disturbing. It makes some untested assumptions.

- On the question of educating local communities, not much is said about who these educators are. It seems that the library only facilitates this process by making available relevant information and knowledge.

- The notion that illiteracy in the continent has contributed enormously to the current state of poverty in Africa is problematic. I sense that you are avoiding the root cause of poverty, which is colonialism. I would like to argue that in Africa, in pre-colonial times, natural resources were in abundance and there was enormous wealth, despite the lack
of literacy as it is defined in the European sense. Granted, illiteracy may bring a number of socio-economic problems, but there are equally many literate people who are disempowered - unemployed and poor.

- On the point you make about the failure of African librarianship, I am convinced that colonialism has in fact, made African librarianship fail, and this is a serious indictment. Colonialism wanted to erase African customs and traditions because they were perceived as backward and uncivilized.

- You advocate for a new model of African librarianship which will be less formal and less book-oriented. Is this a plea for an oral tradition, or are we now saying that we want people to be literate, but with fewer books? I am not entirely sure what the conclusion is here.

I would personally advocate for an adaptation to change, but without abandoning traditional principles of librarianship.
Ms Tise sounds the death knell for African librarianship in a far-reaching statement: African librarianship should be no more. So, what shall it become? Is there a suggestion of a name change here? What shall the replacement be?

While I understand that Ms Tise was writing largely from the perspective of a practitioner, there are two other critical areas that I would like to introduce to this debate which have not been addressed fully, or not raised at all. These are education, training and research. The education and training of a cohort of library and information professionals steeped in an in-depth understanding of the environment they are going to function in, is critical to initiatives aimed at revitalizing African librarianship. I would argue for the need of an urgent social epistemology on the African continent.

What about experiential learning for our newly-qualified LIS professionals? What kinds of environments do we want them to get exposed to, in order to entrench their understanding of African librarianship? What experiences do we want these future professionals to extract from their learnership experiences? What role do we
expect the library schools to play? Without creating that contextual training that would enable the newly-qualified library professionals to engage with the philosophy and model which under-pins African librarianship, we will continue to perpetuate the status quo and lament the lack of meaningful progress towards the transformation of library services, twenty years down the line, just as Kingo Mchombu warned several years ago. Why are we asking for an embrace of technology when we are neglecting a true African philosophy of librarianship? A thoughtless embrace of technology will in my view not change things in any drastic way.

Coming to research, have we clearly defined and articulated the thrust and research agenda for African librarianship? What role do we expect the academics to play in this area?

I am not sure whether the failure to mention LIASA in the discourse on African librarianship is a deliberate omission or an unintentional oversight. The question is what do we see as the role of professional associations in this discourse?
Finally, for me, if we want to engage in the discourse on African librarianship, the other critical question that we should also be asking is the following - and I want you to ask the person sitting next to you this question:

“What is your understanding of African Librarianship”

Of course, I don’t expect you to answer the question now, but I want you to reflect on it beyond this engagement.

Just because your vehicle has a puncture, it does not necessarily mean that you should get rid of it - you fix the puncture because it is more sensible to do so! I am making this analogy to indicate that as much as we as African library and information professionals are thought to be vigorously driving the phenomenon of African librarianship, we have to be frank and honest about what we have achieved, and what we have not been able to achieve. Have we failed individually and as a collective, to make strides in our environments?
And in conclusion, as much as I am willing to concede to some individual and collective failures, I still feel that it would not be rational to entirely throw away the concept of African librarianship because of the perception that it is a dead concept. While I have a problem with advocating for African librarianship to disappear from the face of the earth, I agree with Ms Tise about the need to usher in 'new imperatives that will drive a new philosophy for Librarianship in Africa in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century'. This process should however, not discard philosophies that are the cornerstone of African librarianship, but should instead, seek to review and revitalize these philosophies by engaging with their weaknesses. It becomes even problematic when the road ahead is not clear, in terms of the new direction that is proposed. Or are we prepared to take a giant leap of faith and hope that the new proposed model will work better? I personally do not think so! While it is important to reflect, we need to guard against a re-colonization by the very people who have been colonising the continent.

Thank you for your indulgence, and God bless!! Africa is rising....

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References