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"African librarianship: a relic, a fallacy or an imperative!"

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Introduction

There is an abundance of evidence in the literature that corroborates the hypothesis that African librarianship has its roots in the colonial era. In developing African librarianship, the colonial masters set in place a library and information service infrastructure that propagated western philosophies and imperatives. As pointed out by duPlessis (2007), the colonial powers, to support their anticipated protracted stay in Africa,developed an excellent library infrastructure and commensurate services. Running in tandem with this colonial agenda was the humanism issues and the quest to 'illuminate the dark continent' through missionary work for the betterment of the African people. To aid in the 'illumination' process, Africans were taught to read the Bible and the Koran. Bukenya (2008) makes the assertion that missionaries had to spread literacy among the converts and create new literature for consumption. However, libraries and reading were alien to communities that had very strong oral communication networks for the sharing of information and knowledge.

Herein lays the contradiction that has manifested over the decades with challenges from some of the leading African scholars including Amadi (1981)who introduced the 'barefoot librarian' as a African bred alternative. African librarianship was cultivated to mimic western models and not address African realities and imperatives. Amadi's postulation of the 'barefoot librarian' was to engender a system of librarianship for African realities, by Africans. By the same token, not all that is not African is irrelevant –therefore, should African librarians not continuously engage in discourse on significant and relevant library provision for the empowerment of the African citizenry. Is there not a need to revolutionize the concept to dredge a new stream that addresses African imperatives? Is there a need to divorce the relic in pursuit of reconceptualization? Is there a need to reinvent 'African librarianship' to represent new African paradigms?

Contextualization of the argument

There are three significant concepts in the title - over and above that of 'African librarianship' that need to be contextualised to enhance the debate for the afore mentioned enquiries. In the context of this debate, 'relic' is viewed as a practice surviving a period.The history of libraries in Africa is anchored on colonialism imperatives to serve their educational, recreational and entertainment needs. Nyana (2010)argues that colonial libraries were developed in line with the Eurocentric model of libraries and librarianship. Amadi(1981)adds that that colonial hangover or vestiges are manifested in current patterns of information organisation, educational and information policies, the curriculum and education systems, which emphasizes print resources at the expense of oral traditions, which were viewed as

unreliable and unscientific.There is very little doubt that 'African librarianship' during the colonial era was strong and relevant for the needs of that specific period – is it now a relic?

The second concept is that of 'fallacy' which is construed to be a practice that is disappointing and does not add value to the current context of the purpose for which it is intended. Librarianship in Africa is viewed,on the one hand as a list of 'technical' disciplines that we should be wary of and on the other as a list of 'pedagogical' disciplines that we should embrace. The two disciplines must converge between and among themselves and with continental realities.

The third concept is that of an 'imperative'which is interpreted as an obligation. At the formative stage, libraries in Africa were very highly regarded and obtained similar commitments as other essential services such as hospitals and schools, partly because of the thirst for education which gripped the continent at independence and the hope that libraries would contribute significantly towards achieving this cherished goal. At this stage, there was a belief that the information needs, and the information- seeking behaviour of Africans was identical to those of library users in Europe and North America. As pointed out by Mchombu (1991), it was thought that the concept and philosophy of librarianship as practiced in the Anglo-American tradition with its organizational and bureaucratic structures, bibliographically-biased foundation, and middle-class outlook could all be imported without modifications to Africa. It was left to the African public to adapt themselves as best they could to this alien institution, for the institution was sacrosanct.

So the big question is, given the alien nature of this form of librarianship, is there a need for developing new trends and practices that address current African imperatives? The context of implementation and practice is extremely important to underscore a new route for librarianship in Africa.

Before I address this new route, let's look at how libraries were used as propaganda for illuminations?

Library as propaganda machinery for illuminations

While libraries of printed materials existed prior to colonialism on the African continent (e.g. the famous desert libraries of Timbuktu in Mali), oral tradition and the arts were generally more responsible for the transmission of knowledge and cultural values. Human memory, speech, and collective activity served as the 'libraries' and centres of learning for the majority of African communities. Along with the other major disruptions and changes that occurred during the colonial era, ideas of what constituted worthy 'knowledge' and 'information', and thus 'libraries', changed. As pointed out by Sturges and Neill (1998) in some cases the colonial powers brought with them their own libraries, to serve their own communities exclusively. In other cases, they used libraries as a tool to exert a type of intellectual control over local populations. Collections reflected the colonial mind-set or what was deemed important or 'appropriate' for the local population to know. Indigenous knowledge and local systems of knowledge exchange were either not recognized as such, or were intentionally dismissed as primitive and unworthy of consideration.

The colonial libraries became propaganda tools in the war to 'illuminate' the African world to mirror the European world. The image of the library itself became inherently associated with colonial rule for most African populations. The physical architecture of libraries, the underlying beliefs about information needs and information seeking, the procedures, collections, and training of staff were all developed in the image of European history and identity. The oral tradition was viewed as a 'problem' to be remedied and librarianship was viewed as strictly the preservation and documentation of the written word. This view of the oral tradition resulted in the dismissal of the social, literary, and historical relevance of the tradition and severely limited the understanding of African knowledge and the rich communication system that had developed over thousands of years. Print based containers for information were recognized as the only valid format for knowledge – and, even then, the print had to convey a certain world view and be in a European language.

The strong influence of colonialist thinking and behaviours resulted in a paternalistic attitude which persisted even after most countries achieved independence in the late 1950s and early 1960's. The one-way flow of information was viewed as an acceptable dynamic by librarians and information workers outside of Africa and even information professionals from the continent themselves. It must be acknowledged that there were leading African scholars that challenged the status quo. However, the dissenting voices were in the minority and librarianship in Africa continued to develop along the Anglo-American trajectory. As the 21st century dawned, the dissenting voices grew in number and became louder. Information professionals from both Africa and Europe began adding to the call for a more equitable flow of information and a reversal of straight North to South direction in favour of both South to North and South to South flows.

African imperatives

African librarianship during colonial rule served a specific purpose, in the post-colonial era it is critical that there is transformation to meet new imperatives and contribute to the growth and development of fledgling independent states. Having made the assertion, it is important to accept that there are a number of challenges and priorities that will have to be circumvented en route to relevant, efficient and effective library provision. These challenges which include, *inter alia,* political instability, poverty and illiteracy has seriously negated the development of public libraries. It is not possible to remove the political context from the growth of public libraries as political instability has the propensity to create a tsunami/Arab Spring of other desperate needs, the least of which is to provide reading material when millions are dying of poverty, the ravages of medical inadequacies and such. One on the many bridges to address these challenges is access to information which has the distinct and explicit capacity to empower the citizenry of the continent. The end product of empowerment is a citizenry that will contribute to the economic and other concomitant growths of the continent.

As mentioned or alluded to thus far, there are a number of critical strands that cannot find a home in the Eurocentric library model. Three of these critical elements are: the profusion and glut of indigenous knowledge, the high level of illiteracy and, the wealth and richness of the oral tradition. These strands among many others demand a library and information services

that is unique and distinct and, encapsulates all of these nuances en route to librarianship that is meaningful. African insights and realities underpin any attempt to define a new librarianship model. The Eurocentric relic needs to be divorced and new imperatives need to dominate the new model.

Indigenous knowledge

Africa has been blessed with a strong oral culture. However, this strong oral culture is on the decline given the systematic process, by the colonial governments to relegate that culture into a status of inferiority and of no value. This allegation is corroborated by Kawooya (2006) who quotes Beyaraza as stating that colonialists systematically dismissed African cultures and indigenous knowledge. Exacerbating the demise of the oral culture is the low preservation rate of the rich cultural heritage of Africa. This low preservation rate must be viewed against the backdrop of an aging population and the potential loss with the death of these elders. Raseroka (2008) draws an analogy from the death of these elders indicating that, "in Africa, each time an old person dies, it's a library that burns down."

The dominance of Africa's oral culture is rapidly waning with very little effort to collect, preserve and organize this rich culture. Mchombu (1991) says that the one institution most qualified to collect, preserve and organise this rich culture is the library. However, African libraries have found it very difficult to stoop and draw nourishment from their own people and enrich their environment. The traditional public library has failed to effectively reach the potential majority audience with relevant oral information and knowledge. Instead, the libraries have remained aloof and isolated and have been content to serve the minority rather than develop innovative services and form alliances which would have permitted services for both the minority elite and the majority with low levels of education (Mchombu 1991).

The lack of conviction to collect, preserve and organize the rich oral culture contributes to the information famine and compounds the positioning of Africa as a marginal player in the global knowledge flows. This is clearly evident in the disproportionate representation of Africa's knowledge output at the international arena which is attributed to the 'evaporation' of Africa's historical oral culture (Kawooya 2006).

Lor (2000) alludes to African libraries assuming a more diverse developmental role including the collection, preservation and organization of indigenous knowledge, the contribution to the development and appreciation of indigenous languages, the encouragement of the growth of indigenous writing and, the production and distribution of locally produced books especially those with indigenous themes and written in indigenous languages. Assuming that the libraries accept this responsible and is successful in this venture, there will be a growth of relevant information and knowledge to educate and entertain local communities and help those communities to resolve their local issues.

As alluded to by Lor, these are new roles and responsibilities which need to underpin a new mode of librarianship in Africa.

Illiteracy

The eradication of illiteracy has been of great concern to governments not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. The high level of illiteracy and the fact that much is not known about African cultural heritage has contributed immensely to Africa being tagged a Dark Continent.More than tarnishing the image of the continent, illiteracy has contributed enormously to the current state of poverty in Africa. As pointed out by Zapata (1994)there is synergy between illiteracy and, poverty and underdevelopment. This synergy is fuelled by the dearth of material necessary to eradicate illiteracy – it is a vicious circle. It is common cause that there is a need for reading material to dispel illiteracy and the lack of reading material breeds further illiteracy and further illiteracy breeds greater poverty.

Zapata(1994)goes on to reiterate that illiteracy is associated with country's socio-economic situation and development level. Access to information (and that would include the fundamental, that is, the capacity to read) is imperative for the eradication of illiteracy which in itself is essential in participation in the reconstruction of the socio-economic condition of the country. This is alluded to by Kargbo (2004) who points out that literacy is an indispensable means of "unlocking and protecting other human rights by providing the scaffolding that is required to secure good health, liberty, security, economic well–being and participation in social and political activity." Restrictive access or in some instances a total lack of access to information and knowledge does not augur well for the stimulation of a developing country: all it does is promote a ground swell of inequalities fuelled by illiteracy. These inequalities create a process by which illiteracy becomes at the same time, a cause and a consequence of poverty: "they are excluded because they cannot read and can't learn to read because they are excluded" (Rivero 1990). To corroborate the views of Zapata, Calanag (2003) and Aguolu (1997) vociferouslypoint out that information is widely recognized as a catalyst for both national and personal development, but many people especially in the developing countries are still unaware of the need for information and fail to exploit it even when information materials are available for free. They go on to point out that availability does not imply accessibility – the high levels of illiteracy disenfranchise the majority of the populace of Africa. Africa will continue on a trajectory of darkness unless it is illuminated through improving the capacity to read.

Matare (1997) stated that this is illustrated by the fact "80% of Africans are still illiterate and have no access to relevant information that is necessary for the overall development of individuals and the continent in general. High illiteracy level is the major problem of Africa's backwardness". Matare's view is affirmed by the report of Mchombu (1991) who says that in Botswana the overall percentage of users for types of library services does not exceed 5% and in Tanzania, with a population of more than 23 million people, only about 2% of the population uses the libraries. Although this assertion was made in 1991, more than twenty year later, Bukenya says that public library provision has declined to worrisome proportions in some African countries. This is mainly due to the alien and elitist nature of the public library; failure of the public library to identify community needs and therefore offer relevant services; inappropriate information materials; poor or inadequate staff.

Clearly, African librarianship has not delivered on its 'promise' to make information accessible to the majority of the citizens of the continent. Its perpetuation of the Eurocentric model has alienated the populace of the continent confirm thatit, that is African librarianship is a fallacy and a relic that needs dispensing with as soon as possible.

Oral tradition

The oral traditions of Africa are culturally rich and varied, as their development is synonymous with African culture and traditions and they have helped to sustain or leverage African culture even though Library and Information Science Training has not taken this cultural capital seriously because of the prevalence of the written culture. Oral tradition denotes the ultimate primacy of speech as the genesis of all human knowledge as reflected by the famous saying "…. In the beginning was the word…"

Ocholla (2000) observesthat oral traditions have not been fully exploited to make public libraries relevant and vibrant to the socially excluded or marginalized communities in Africa. Amadi (1981) adds that the repackaging information by librarians can help to revitalize education and training by adding value to the collection development of culturally relevant materials. For all intents and purposes, oral sources of information are considered powerful tools that help to illustrate or illuminate the dynamism of raw human memory, which has enabled traditional societies in Africa to maintain their unique collective identities.

Again, the failure of African librarianship to bring home these gifts of knowledge is a serious indictment. African librarianship has failed Africa and Africans – it has not capture and disseminated the cultural heritage not only for sharing with the rest of the world but to provide Africans with content for their growth and development. Many regard the oral tradition as primary sources of information for researchers and scholars which should be a boon to librarianship in Africa, rather than a bane.

The argument

Mchombu writing in 1991 makes the bold statement that we must face the fact that unless the real problems facing African librarianship are mapped out accurately there is a real danger that whatever prescription is suggested, it will only cure the symptoms rather than the disease. We can only come to appropriate solutions if we carry out a critical re-examination of the current conventional concepts and assumptions and if we are creative enough not to limit our search for solutions to the inherited model of traditional librarianship leading to the same old litany of unworkable recommendations. More than two decades later, we have not even cured the symptoms despite having identified the disease. This is a clear demonstration of the betrayal of African librarianship to adapt to African social, economic and cultural realities.

As indicated earlier, African librarianship has found it very difficult to stoop down and draw nourishment from its own people, and in turn enrich its own environment. Instead it has held itself aloof and isolated and has been content to serve the minority rather than develop

innovative services and form alliances which would have permitted services for both the minority elite and the majority with low levels of education.

There are three core principles that serve as the bedrock of librarianship, namely collection, organisation and dissemination of information. One of the most significant elements underscoring these principles is the context. The context will, in many instances, determine the route of development and the uniqueness of the service to meet relevant imperatives. Further, it is the context that will provide the mission and vision of a service that can pull Africa out of the cultural crisis caused by decades of colonialism and misdirection. The overall expectation of libraries and librarians within a new African paradigm are two folds: providing access to information to fight ignorance, poverty and disease; and harnessing Africans indigenous knowledge and uploading them to the global information infrastructures.

This re-etched mission and vision will have a set of core values that will demand that librarians be committed to the development of libraries that will satisfy theinformation needs of the society. Mchombu, (1990) views the anatomy of poverty in Africa as the key determinant of the objectives and philosophy of librarianship in Africa. He remarked that the library profession does not operate in a vacuum. The public libraries in Africa should play a vital role in social economic development. It is important for the public libraries to provide basic or physiological needs, ecological self-esteem or self-actualization. Therefore information management in Africa should be geared towards a user-centric information services.

Does African librarianship imply a conduit for the exchange of information among African countries through regional and continental networks? Since African countries have a similar cultural background and face similar national development challenges, the knowledge and information products of one country are likely to closely match the information needs in other African counties. However, this free exchange of information among African countries has been identified as a major shortcoming African librarianship – it has failed miserably to promote the free exchange of information among African countries. It failure contributes to the interpretation that its existence continues to mimic colonial imperatives.

The road ahead for African librarianship, therefore, has already been signposted. It involves reforming African librarianship into 'development librarianship' which is capable of making a major contribution towards the development of Africa. But perhaps of equal significance is for African librarianship to develop its own identity rather than being a mimic of Anglo-American librarianship. The substance and methods of African librarianship will be an interlocking mix of indigenous knowledge and modern knowledge resources responding not only to Africa's information needs, but also arising out of thereality of Africa.

Librarianship in Africa is at a crossroad and has to seriously consider its option of transition with meaning. Librarianship in Africa could remains insensitive to the plight of the majority of Africans who are hungry, poor and generally underdeveloped, OR reassess, re-orientate and proactively fight illiteracy which is the major factor militating against human development. Any information development plan or project to be undertaken must be based

on Africa's peculiar information culture that is basically oral. However, Africa must embrace technology which is the new tool for modern society. Basically there should be a suitable balance between the universal information culture and the local information culture. The new model will be less formal, less book-oriented information service, deeply rooted in indigenous information systems and targeting the real information needs of both the literates and illiterates.

Conclusion

Librarianship in Africa must recognize,in total, the dynamics and complexities of African society. It must be associated with the information needs of a largely non-literate society and the ways and formats in which this information would be provided to make it relevant to the daily existence of the people.At the same time, it must recognize the imperatives of modern information requirements, and demands that a new breed of librarians with a new perspective of library service based on African socio-economic and political realities. Further, it needs to be developed to ensure that libraries and their collections are not developed to serve an elitist interest only, but to serve the majority of the populace.

As indicated earlier on, African librarianship to date has been characterised by mimicking Eurocentric library practices which has exacerbated the disconnectbetween practice and the needs of the continent. It has disassociated itself with the principle of 'empowerment'.

Librarianship in Africa must be seen to be governed by the principle of 'the empowerment of the citizens of the continent'. Core to the drive for empowerment is the context which must be relevant to the Africa continent. Africa can make use of such a sophisticated institution as the library if it is tailored along their own structure of information demand. As a matter of fact, the library can assist even the people struggling at the lowest rung of the ladder to realize their aspirations much more quickly than is possible without it.

There is sufficient evidence to show that African librarianship, during the colonial era, served a specific purpose and flourished under that purpose. It spilling into the post-independence period was not challenged with commensurate vigour and so the relic lived on. However, more than the relic living on, the fallacy associated with the relic plummeted librarianship into a meaningless entity and lost all purpose of its role and responsibilities in contributing to the social inclusion philosophy that is associated with libraries.

Its failure to collect, organise and disseminated the rich indigenous knowledge and to address the high levels of illiteracy is indicative of a practice that lost it terms of reference. African librarianship should be no more. African librarianship cannot be African librarianship if it is devoid of the Africanism that should be its underpinning.

Librarianship devoid of the negative connotation associated with African librarianship needs to be reborn – the African renaissance begins with discarding institutions of indoctrination and,is it therefore not time for ushering in new imperatives that will drive a new philosophy for librarianship in Africa in the 21st Century?