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DEMONS, DISEASE AND THE LIBRARY IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

Librarianship in Africa exists in a kind of permanent crisis. Many institutions have libraries that perform some sort of service to their members, effective or not, but services to the masses of the population are thinly distributed and not particularly successful. Part of the problem is that hardly anyone, government, administrators, librarians and their potential users, really understands exactly what the libraries are for. This does not matter too much in those cases where libraries obviously perform some function or other that clearly gives satisfaction to at least part of their potential market. All too often they scarcely even do this. A rationale is needed, but existing justifications (particularly the fatuous argument that libraries directly benefit the economic development of the nation) are inadequate. However, IFLA offers two strong principles that offer to resolve this problem of a convincing rationale for libraries. They are:

- Freedom of access to information, and
- Lifelong literacy.

The former is the concern of the IFLA Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE), and the latter is the substance of Kay Raseroka's presidential theme 2003-5 'Libraries for lifelong literacy'. Taken together they interlock to provide a way of looking at libraries that suggests service priorities and points to ways of achieving them.

The importance of freedom of access to information is that it offers empowerment. By obtaining access to information people place themselves in a position to take control of their own lives and to play a positive role in the development of society. From access to information can come fuller participation in a democratic process, the ability to identify and grasp economic opportunities and the chance to avoid the worst manifestations of petty official corruption. The problem is that freedom of access to information is such a self-evidently appropriate principle for democratic society and the practice of librarianship that it can easily become a symbol rather than a genuine guiding principle. It is important to remember that not all information is easy to interpret. Citizens need to be able to choose information that makes sense to them and gives them the answers that they need. A full vision of freedom of access to

information offers them this choice and it offers the necessary range of language, format and mode of expression to satisfy all needs.

To take advantage of freedom of access to information the citizen needs the skills of literacy. What is more, the days when this could be taken to mean the ability to interpret lines of text alone are over. In the twenty first century different forms of interpretive skill, in effect other literacies, have become essential. Information obtained via the computer monitor, rather than the printed page, requires the ability to handle text, numbers, graphics, images, sounds and moving images, all presented in patterns that require navigation skills that are not necessarily intuitively grasped. Information literacy is now the entry requirement for admission to the world of the informed, but is not like some single membership payment that guarantees the ability to gain access forever after. Literacy and the use of literacy interact and sustain each other. Skills unused will not grow and strengthen, and it is precisely growth and strengthening that are required in a fast changing and increasingly complex information environment,

This is the lifelong literacy to which Kay Raseroka's theme refers. Freedom of access to information is both the reward offered by lifelong literacy and the means by which it is generated and sustained. The two are inseparable. For freedom of access to information to deliver lifelong literacy there a host of requirements placed on all who work as information professionals in any shape or form. For lifelong literacy to deliver a citizenry more able to gain and exercise their share of power and the benefits of power there are likewise other requirements. For librarians this goes much beyond the skills of collecting, cataloguing and classifying information and helping users to find answers from it that have been the core of their professional expertise for centuries. Library work in an environment of freedom of access to information and lifelong literacy is a much more demanding profession than it has ever been before. To understand its demands and respond to them, the professional must be exposed to a much greater range of ideas and consider a much greater range of human experience than was ever required before. When our starting point is the proposition that librarianship in Africa is in crisis, this may seem merely to pile unachievable demand on unachievable demand. This is not necessarily the case however. A refocusing on freedom of access to information and lifelong literacy should offer a clear, though not easy, path out of the confusion and despair of the current situation. Before exploring what that might mean in practical terms, it is necessary to establish the baseline from which libraries are currently operating.

LIBRARIES IN AFRICA NOW

An excellent and comparatively recent source of baseline information is INASP's report and bibliography on ten of the English-speaking African countries. (Issak, 2000) Most of the countries have provided public library facilities ever since the era of independence in the 1950s and 60s through National Library Services. The report shows that they share a set of basic problems. These problems can be summed up as poverty (both personal and civic), illiteracy and inadequate schooling, and a cultural tradition not receptive to reading. The country reports, on which the report is partly based, overflow with comments on the situation such as 'very poor', 'serious problems', 'financial difficulties' 'dramatic decline', 'alarming deterioration', low

morale', and 'lack of motivation'. What is more, the report suggests that the position of public libraries is actually deteriorating. The elements of this deterioration are; declining government funding (and over-dependence on donor-funding); weak book sectors and 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; questionable sustainability.

If we take the example on which the clearest light is thrown, Kenya, we can see what this means in practice. The bibliography on Kenya is one of the best in the book. It is particularly strong on newspaper stories, magazine articles, and dissertations, as well as some worthwhile journal articles. Amongst the positive newspaper pieces describing new projects, exhorting people to read, or stressing the importance of providing materials for children, are a number of disturbing stories about the problems that the service faces. For instance a story from the Kenya Times of January 7th 1995 'National library in shambles' talks of inaccessible libraries with irrelevant stocks and no funds to acquire new materials. At a more local level, the East African Standard of June 4th 1999 in 'Kisii library ceiling a threat' talks of the danger to readers of a collapsing ceiling that has not been repaired despite complaints. The sad thing is that Kenya is not by any means the worst example. There are positive initiatives and a will to improve services, which is not the case everywhere.

All of this fits into the pattern of a critique of library service to the public in Africa that has been developed since the early 1980s. The first really prominent expression of this was an abrasive but not strongly-evidenced polemic, African Libraries: Western Tradition and Colonial Brainwashing. (Amadi, 1981) Soon afterwards, Mchombu (1982) put forward a related and equally powerful critique of the irrelevance of existing library services in Africa, calling for a 'Librarianship of poverty'. Their ideas were not actually completely new. If Amadi and Mchombu had had access to it, there was actually evidence of an approach consistent with their ideas being put into practice in Uganda some years earlier. An unsung hero of African librarianship, William Serwadda, briefly attempted a radically different approach as Director of the Uganda library services, 1964-1966. (Sturges, 2001) Since Amadi, Mchombu and others first wrote, the intellectual case for a fresh approach seems to have been won. Sturges and Neill (1998) set out the case in much more detail and support it with a large amount of evidence drawn from a wide literature. Their book, out of print for some years, is at the time of writing about to be made available on the Internet for free use by students and other readers.

Two main responses to the problem can be identified. The first comes from librarians and the second from civil society organisations interested in the supply of information to the populace. The librarian's response is to take innovative services out to the people, rather than waiting for them to come into the library. For example, the Kenya National Library Service has pioneered 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 the newspaper press in other countries. This is not the only example one can find, and railway carriages, boats and donkey carts have all been tried with a similar aim in other countries. Returning to Kenya, the camel-born services are not the only example of worthwhile departures from tradition in that

country. Libraries have been built with funds raised jointly between the library service and the local community; income has been generated from book-binding, printing and photocopying; an AIDS awareness project has repackaged and translated information from foreign sources; there are book box services to student groups, transported by bicycle; and initiatives in the training of teacher librarians. This overlaps in an encouraging way with the second approach, that of civil society bodies such as Zimbabwe's Rural Libraries and Resources Development Project (RLRDP) and the others of a similar type that are scattered quite densely in a number of African countries. They seek to provide simple reading and information facilities, initiated locally, developed as far as possible with local money and workers, often in association with schools, community centres, cultural centres, or other partners. Francophone Africa is particularly fertile of such experimentation.

However, it can be argued that all this experimentation currently lacks clearly articulated principles and relies on a sense that providing information for the people is, in some way or other, a good thing. The IFLA principles outlined in the first section of this essay offer precisely the type of rationale that is needed by the people developing a progressive approach to information services in Africa. The chief strength of the principles is that they provide questions by which to test the efficacy of experiments and innovations in information services. They encourage those involved to ask whether their libraries and information services provide true freedom of access to information and whether they are truly a resource for lifelong literacy. Put simply, this is a matter of relevance: the relevance of services and resources to people's lives and beliefs. Relevant services will provide the information that people show that they need in the forms that they prefer to use. Relevant services will address both old beliefs and current problems in a way that existing services have clearly not done in the past. The relevance of services can be tested by looking at the library and demons (as a symbol of old beliefs) and the library and disease (as a symbol of current problems).

DEMONS

The library and old beliefs is probably the more difficult of the two areas to address. There is a great deal of talk about the importance of indigenous knowledge and the need to preserve the oral tradition, but much of this treats traditional culture and beliefs as interesting side issues to the actual business of librarianship. The important thin to ask is whether old beliefs are indeed a side issue or whether they are a vital starting point for services that people will perceive as relevant to their lives.

What this means can be illustrated by some analysis of a story that appeared in a recent issue of a Ugandan newspaper. The New Vision reported that Bikisa primary school had been closed in May 2004 and again in June because of demon possession of large numbers of the pupils. (Nsubugu and Kiwawulo, 2004) The children had gabbled incoherently, run around, ripped off their clothes, foamed at the mouth, and shaken violently. Some had attempted to run away from home and their parents had had to tether them to posts to prevent this. In this case the trouble had quickly been attributed to the activities of a local man, Isma Sserunkuuma, who was arrested and questioned about the matter. What Sserunkuuma then admitted was that he had acquired demons from a witchdoctor because he wanted to be rich and felt that the

demons could help him achieve his ambition. Unfortunately he had found himself quite unable to meet the demands of the demons, which had asked for 300 virgins for sacrifice and cattle whose blood they could drink. Sserunkuuma had therefore had to release the demons, which had in turn attacked the pupils of Bikisa school. He was clearly contrite but pleaded that his offence was only 'failing to control demons'.

The story then goes on to detail the response of the community to this situation.

- The parents were obviously extremely distressed, and several local residents migrated to other places saying they were tired of the mayhem caused to them by demons.
- The chief local administrator, the District Commissioner Margaret Kasaija, was responsible for Sserunkuuma's arrest and asked 'I wonder why people really acquire demons and resort to bewitching other?' She went on to caution the public against acquiring demons.
- A traditional healer, Ben Ggulu (in fact the Chairman of the national association of healers), was called in to ritually cleanse the school. He then cured 15 particularly badly affected pupils by holding herbs over their heads. He sought out the demons, speaking in strange languages and wielding a cow's horn wound with bark cloth. He also pointed out that 'harmless demons do not ask for blood and human sacrifices',
- In his other capacity as Sub-County Chairperson, Ggulu criticised the police for an inadequate response and generally failing to investigate witchcraft cases properly. He also called for a review of 'weak' witchcraft laws.
- The district Police Commander merely confirmed that most incidents of mob justice in the area were due to witchcraft accusations.
- A priest was called in and prayed over the pupils, but this is not recorded as having any particular effect, nor does he seemed to have offered any memorable comment.
- A local councillor stated that it was unacceptable to acquire demons and suggested that 'We have to come up with a by law to evict anyone who will be found with demons'.
- The local Health Services Director could only say that cases were still being examined in the local laboratory.

Perhaps the most interesting responses of all are those of the journalists and photographer responsible for the story. At no point in the account do the journalists introduce any note of scepticism. Everything is recorded through the perceptions of local people and all of them are shown as accepting the basic facts of the case as indicating demon possession. The possibility exists, of course, that the journalists were directing a particularly subtle form of irony towards the local community by reporting the story just as they were told it, but there is absolutely no clue in the text to suggest that this was what they were doing. In fact, there is only one slightly discordant element. One of the photographs illustrating the story shows the Deputy Headmaster of the school restraining a possessed pupil in front of a group of other pupils. The grouping suggests that this was staged and many of the pupils are laughing happily at the camera. Perhaps here we get a small clue that not everyone took it as seriously as others did. However, this may by an over-analytical view of what is to all intents and purposes a factual account of supernatural events in an African community.

The story raises many questions. First of all, was this event typical, or was it isolated or unique? In fact, the symptoms described are far from unique and similar outbreaks are often reported in other less developed countries scattered across Africa, Latin America and Asia. Secondly, does it represent widespread beliefs? There is good reason to believe that it does: traditional religion continues to exist comfortably alongside Christianity and Islam throughout Africa and any visitor who is willing to listen can hear an abundance of stories of its expression. Then, if this is the case, do libraries and information services reflect this reality in their collections? Are there books and other materials on traditional religion, from positions both of belief and scepticism, in libraries serving the public? To this I would confidently answer that demons are ignored by the library and that the potential user will find only collections that completely turn their back on matters of fundamental significance in local belief systems. In this case, we should ask what kind of access to information and what resources to encourage lifelong literacy are libraries actually providing?

DISEASE

Strictly speaking, disease is not a new concern. It is HIV/AIDS that is the source of current concern, and that threatens to obscure the damage done by other major diseases. Figures from the World Health Organisation show that worldwide there are at least 300 million cases of malaria each year, resulting in a million deaths. Malaria is the leading cause of mortality for children under five, and the disease is increasingly resistant to the drugs regularly used to combat it. It is estimated that Africa loses $12 billion per year in lost productivity because of malaria. Tuberculosis may affect as many as one third of the world's population, although only 5-10% are actually sick or infectious. The highest rate of mortality is in Africa where resistance is lowered by HIV/AIDS. It is of course HIV/AIDS itself that leads people to think of disease as a particularly modern problem, but disease in general is, and has been, a matter of major concern for a long as records have been kept. HIV/AIDS is killing at least 3 million people a year and in Africa 75% of the 15-24 year-olds infected are women. These few statistics do no more than reinforce the significance of the problem. To the question 'How are libraries responding?' there are the beginnings of an interesting answer.

Just as national leaders in African countries have begun to overcome their reluctance to speak openly about HIV/AIDS in the early 2000s, so has the library community begun to see this as an area that should not be ignored. The Zimbabwe Library Association may not be entirely typical, but its response is extremely interesting. (Tokwe, 2004) At the ZLA Annual Conference held at Gweru in 2004, HIV/AIDS was the theme. The Deputy Mayor of Gweru described the scope of the problem from local experience and the Chief Executive Officer of the NGO Midlands AIDS Services Organisation (MASO) called for a multi-sectoral approach to the problem that would involve libraries. Clearly the most interesting contribution of all came from a librarian, Macberth Ndlovu, who thought through what this might mean. He called for librarians to develop counselling skills, to research HIV/AIDS, to liaise with AIDS NGOs, like MASO, and to undertake an active programme of information dissemination. In particular he suggested that libraries should have HIV/AIDS Information Corners with specially collected materials on the subject. All of this has

the smack of the kind of positive librarianship that might well eventually result in a library whose whole services was geared to access to information and the promotion of lifelong literacy.

It is also possible to draw attention to an excellent brief treatment of how libraries and information centres can respond to the need for HIV/AIDS information by Kingo Mchombu himself. In recent years he has identified the AIDS pandemic as a matter of such significance that he has devoted the major part of his professional efforts to alerting and prompting the library and information community to the need for a strong response. In addition to numerous conference and workshop presentations, he has researched and written a new chapter for his handbook on community information work that was prepared for use in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region. (Mchombu, 2004) Unfortunately this enormously valuable little book is not fully available in published form in all those countries where its knowledgeable and practical approach is needed. However, the downloadable version on the Internet compensates for this to a considerable extent. The HIV/AIDS chapter sets out just why there is a need for good information and outlines how an HIV/AIDS information resource centre can be set up. Matters such as the acquisition of materials, the dissemination of the information, where the centre should be located and other practicalities are all set out in clear, direct language. It can really be described as required reading for any information professional in the developing countries, but it also has plenty to say to their colleagues in the developing countries.

CONCLUSION

Libraries for the public in Africa will continue to fall short of their objectives unless they engage better with traditional belief systems and recognise health as the major issue of current concern. Just as a test as to whether a library engages with old beliefs would be its treatment of the subject of demons, so its commitment to contributing to solutions to new problems could be its response to HIV/AIDS. Of course the choice of these two examples is not intended to define and reduce the problem and its solutions. Collections and services generally need to be relevant. This does not only mean subject matter, but use of local languages and accessible formats such as pamphlets and illustrated books. Internet access is being provided in many libraries and in ICT centres are being set up in poor communities. This, handled well, is a major contribution to information access. All of this is expensive and, maybe even more demanding in that it calls for imagination and effort. Libraries and information services are potentially a major market for information materials of the types that are at present hard to obtain, often because producers do not have the confidence to create them. By strategic commitment of their sparse acquisitions budgets it is possible for libraries to engage in dialogue with publishers and other producers to encourage the creation of relevant and accessible materials. Unless they do adopt this type of approach they are in danger of remaining marginal to both information access and lifelong literacy.

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