

AFRICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS: A LITERATURE SURVEY

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The African public library systems have failed to respond to the needs of their constituency. The problems faced by these systems are multi-faceted but can be divided into five broad categories: the introduction of an anachronistic and inappropriate colonial model, inadequate training of library staff, deficiencies in determining specific needs through analysis, lack of cooperation among agencies involved in library-related work, and the absence of sustained efforts to achieve an alternative framework. In this literature survey, these problems will be discussed and recommendations made for addressing some of the issues. A table will also be provided detailing the ideal African public library system.

Introduction

Information on the position of public libraries on the African continent is relatively scarce and scattered over a wide variety of sources, some more accessible than others. In the very recent past, government leaders have renewed the call for an African Renaissance directed toward developing and empowering the people of Africa as significant participants in the modern world.

The main aim of this literature survey has been twofold:

- To determine the extent to which the public library has succeeded/failed in contributing towards the development and empowerment of the African people and
- To gather together and supplement the documented studies/literature on the topic of public librarianship in Africa.

The public library system is a relative newcomer to the African information-provision scene. It was not introduced until the middle of the twentieth century, at the end of the colonial era. The initial enthusiastic reception of these institutions by both the governments and the general public can be ascribed to the perception persisting at that time that they would serve as a remedy to severe existing educational problems as well as a tool in the process of national development (Abdullah 1998). A threefold role was designated to these institutions: to provide information to development agents and agencies, to support formal and informal rural education programs through the provision of materials to both students and teachers, and to serve as centers for community education and cultural activities

(Kagan 1982). For the purpose of this paper, the first role will be discussed in detail as it is currently, in the author's opinion, the most crucial role the library has to fulfill. A short discussion of the other two roles will also be included.

Chijioke (1989), Dube (1998), Sturges and Neill (1998), and Tise (2000) concluded that, in spite of lofty ideals, African libraries have failed in their designated mission and are currently not perceived as significant players in the process of national development. This sentiment is reflected in a study conducted in Nigeria in which information was emphasized as an important factor in development but libraries were not assigned any role in the process. The poor quality of existing information services is often seen as one of the contributing factors to this oversight on the part of developers. Other factors include outdated and irrelevant materials, lack of facilities, and poor management. Research clearly indicates that existing library services in Africa are not extensively used. For this reason, governments often withdraw their financial support, which brings about a collapse in services. Mchombu (1991) recorded the findings of several surveys bearing testimony to this process. In Botswana, for example, the overall percentage of users for all types of library services does not exceed five percent. Likewise, in Tanzania, with a population of more than twenty-three million people, only one to two percent of the population uses libraries.

To determine specific reasons for this unexpected lack of use, much effort has been put into researching the problems facing libraries and information services on the continent. Although it is difficult to make generalizations, most of the problems detected occur to a varying degree in most of the libraries and information services in newly independent countries. Many of the problems are multifaceted but can be broadly categorized into five main categories:

- § the introduction of an anachronistic and inappropriate colonial model,
- § inappropriate training of library staff,
- § deficiencies in determining specific needs through analysis,
- § lack of co-operation among agencies involved in library-related work, and
- § the absence of sustained effort to achieve an alternative framework (Afolabi 1998; Nawe 1993; Stillwell 1991).

Many of these problems are reiterated in a recent study by Issak (2000).

Anachronistic and inappropriate colonial public library model

Anglo-American model

Library systems adopted in Africa have been based on the Anglo-American model of librarianship with little or no adaptation to local circumstances. Expatriates, schooled in the Anglo-American tradition and trained to serve mainly a well-educated metropolitan clientele, have been imported to run these libraries. A further hampering factor has been lack of consultation between these librarians and their existing and potential clients during the initial planning stages for services to be offered in libraries and information centers.

This oversight has resulted in services that have been totally inappropriate and inadequate for the information needs of the African people. The vision of the librarians seems to have been limited to what has been familiar to them. In addition, however, according to Chijioke (1989), African people themselves have been to blame for many of the misconceptions since they expected to receive the same model as their European counterparts. In their view, anything less would have been inferior.

This model relies heavily on a print-based service, pre-supposing a reading public, with emphasis being on the home reading of books borrowed from the library. Although educational by intent, it caters mostly to leisure reading (Shillinglaw 1986). As Anyim (1972) and Olden (1999) point out, the African people, however, favor oral communication over reading.

In addition, an estimated sixty percent of Africa's population is illiterate, making a European print-based library model ineffective for its potential library clients (Mabomba 1990). In Kenya, for example, the rural population comprises ninety percent of the population, most of whom are illiterate (Odini 1990). In spite of the introduction of universal primary education, education is by no means widespread, especially in rural areas. If level of education is a determinant in enabling an individual to use the proffered services, the majority of the population in Africa are thereby excluded. Library services are, therefore, perceived as elitist institutions, of service only to the educated few, most of whom are stationed in urban areas (Abdulla 1998).

Library collections

Empty library shelves are not uncommon in Africa, particularly in school and public libraries. Most of the time this is not due to a big demand for books but to the lack of books. When a reasonably sized collection does exist, it is very little used. Most of the time this is due to the nature of the content of the books, including the worldview they present. The African viewpoint is seldom represented. For those fluent in European languages and contexts, enough books are available; but since the contents usually do not correspond with the interests of the African reader, the choice of books is severely limited (Isnard 1968).

One reason for the meager supply of African books is that Africa has not made a significant contribution to the world's body of literature. In addition, there is a significant deficiency in bibliographic information. Even when bibliographic information is available, many African governments favor access to materials biased toward their own political, social, and cultural view while they restrict access to indigenous materials viewed as threatening (Muswazi 1999).

Many inappropriate books are the result of gifts and donations from charitable organizations and foreign governments. These books usually reflect the priorities of the donors, not those of the recipients. Gifts from charitable organizations often consist of discarded books from libraries, unsold books from publishers, or second-hand volumes. Many librarians tend to keep these useless donations just to have something on their shelves. The solution to such problems lies in helping Africa develop and produce its own

literature base rather than swamping it with irrelevant donations (Sturges and Neil 1998).

Language

A strong colonial influence is also reflected in the language content of most library collections. Book stocks in African library systems are almost entirely written in the languages of commerce, i.e., English, French, or Arabic. These languages cannot be read by ninety-five percent of the affected population (Raseroka 1993). These are also the languages spoken by the educated elite, mostly educated youth still attending school. The mass of potential readers are, therefore, prevented from reading in a language with which they are familiar. In most African countries, books are published in languages spoken by less than thirty percent of the population (Chakava 1984). A further complicating factor is that an estimated 1,200 languages are spoken in Africa, of which only about six hundred have a written literature. All of these factors contribute to the severe shortage of reading materials in the vernacular.

The building of appropriate collections is further hampered by a shortage of material written by African authors (Chakava 1984). Much of this is to be blamed on a tendency among African writers to have their work published by renowned foreign publishing houses, whose editorial and production policies, in many cases, are decided by the foreign parent body (Apeji 1998; Sturges & Neill 1998; Stilwell 1991). The poor output of local publishing houses also contributes to this problem (Olden 1999). In his study of six local Nigerian publishing houses, Apeji (1998) described the lack of output, attributing much of it to the lack of a sufficient, sustainable capital base. Thus a country such as Nigeria publishes only twenty percent of its local reading matter. In his study, Alemna (in Stilwell 1991) found that libraries in Ghana import about ninety percent of their materials from Britain and the United States. This trend is also reflected in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (Zulu 1993).

Inappropriate training of library professionals

During the initial phase of the establishment of libraries in Africa, expatriate librarians formed the core of library workers. They were all trained abroad, giving them a cosmopolitan field of experience. Although their intention seems to have been the development of a system and services totally integrated with the social and political circumstances of each individual community, their previous working experience worked against the fulfillment of their purposes (Sturges & Neill 1998). Even now, decades later, students educated abroad are often criticized for lacking competencies relevant to the environment to which they will return (Saracevic in Stilwell 1991).

In addition, many African library schools have adopted outdated syllabi, copied from abroad. Since library associations and employers in each country are seldom asked to participate in the development of curricula (Mchombu 1991), training still tends to reflect colonial values. Aboyade (in Makinta & Dahwa 1992) summarizes the situation as follows: “realities of the situation in the early years of library education in Nigeria . . . were that the curriculum reflected predominantly British and American systems.” The popular trend still

seems to be for students to spend a long time overseas, taking courses totally irrelevant to their native information environment. Swart (1990) states that librarians are being trained to serve a First World public; their training does not equip them for a Third World community. In their study of the growth of library schools in Africa, Gupta & Gupta (1997) indicate that, although library schools recently introduced modern library thinking and technology into their syllabi, the relevance and the quality of the courses offered still seem to be in need of evaluation in order to determine their value in the training of local librarians.

It would seem, therefore, that library education in Africa is currently in a conflict situation. It is urgent that it find a way of designing syllabi that can translate a library ethic that draws its inspiration from a print-based culture into one that is responsive to a semi-literate, information-starved society. Aboyade (in Dahwa & Makinta 1993), for example, sees the Africanization of curricula as of major importance. She recommends that the indigenization of the training program “take the form of infusing local content into standard courses or . . . involve an entirely different interpretation of the theory underlying the profession.” According to Issak (2000), more and more well-qualified staff are becoming available, but they must refresh and upgrade their skills on a regular basis in order to stay relevant to the needs of their communities.

Lack of needs analysis

Prior to the introduction of library services to the African people, neither proper analysis of information needs nor investigation into the composition of the potential clientele was made (Sturges & Neill 1998). According to Adimorah (in Stilwell 1991), a Nigerian sample interview revealed that most public libraries established in that country were set up without prior examination of the information needs of those who were to use the services. Knowledge of such vital issues was and still is based on conjecture and supposition. It was believed that the information needs and the information-seeking patterns of the African people would match those of library users in Europe and America. Services based on these presumptions led to libraries isolating themselves from the general public, content to serve only a small, mainly urban-based, relatively well-off, educated elite (Odini 1990). Raseroka (1993) points out that the need for proactive needs analysis is now readily recognized within African public-library circles. A severe lack of human resources and research skills, however, contributes to research being currently conducted by researchers and consultants rather than by library practitioners.

Lack of cooperation among related information systems

For information to be beneficial to the development of a country, it must be available, accurate, and current. In many developing countries, information needed for development has become highly segmented, divisive, and uncoordinated (Adeyemi 1991). Similarly, the sources that provide for the flow of information have become both monopolistic and without direction, thus affecting availability as well as accuracy and currency.

Kaniki (1992) and Bredenkamp (1995) identify information providers as including all types

of communication channels and sources, be it persons, publications, agencies, organizations, institutions, or groups of institutions possessing a variety of resources that can be used to transfer information. These include the following:

- p *Extension officers*—Most extension officers are attached to government departments as community workers or development planners. Governments create and acquire a large volume of information while conducting their normal business. Such information is contained in a variety of formats including correspondence; reports; information received from different ministries, departments, and parastatals; court records; and research reports from government-funded research institutions.

Much of this information is not made commercially available. Governmental research results are in many cases published only in internal publications, making public access extremely difficult.

- p *Non-governmental organizations and parastatals*—Many of these organizations publish a wealth of information in the form of research papers, reports, conference papers, theses, minutes of meetings, and data collections. Unpublished reports are seen as an especially important source of information. Their worth lies in their current and timely information that is issued as soon as research is completed.

As is the case with governmental research results, the material is not made available in the same way as commercial publications. The trend within these organizations seems to be to publish results in prominent overseas journals, which would ensure more exposure (Otiye 1989). This raises a problem in retrieving the information locally as overseas abstracting and indexing journals are not readily available.

Kaniki (1992:87) maintains that because of inadequate training, information specialists avoid handling unpublished reports. Due to the inherent problems of this kind of literature, special skills and training are deemed essential. Lack of training results in unpublished reports—for example, feasibility studies, theses and dissertations, various types of reports and surveys, translations and conference proceedings—going unnoticed. Many of these materials are imperative for development.

Kaniki (1992:87) identifies the problem areas as those of collecting, organizing, storing, and using the material. Regarding the situation in Tanzania, Malima (in Musembi 1992:679) observes, “There is no systematic collection and organization of the many extensive and expensive studies commissioned by our government. A valuable resource is lost, often necessitating more studies, covering much the same ground. There is no policy of outflow of such studies, so that one day we will have to purchase the very studies that we commissioned and paid for.” As a solution to the problem, Kaniki (1992:87) recommends that the aforementioned techniques receive special attention during the training of information specialists.

- p *Radio, television, and the press*—Audio and audio-visual media are seen as extremely important media in providing information to the illiterate. Sturges & Neill (1998) note

that the radio is commonly used in Africa to communicate development-oriented information. The press, however, is severely hindered in its task of informing the nation as it is mainly government controlled, therefore serving only as a mouthpiece of government propaganda.

- p *Libraries and archives*—The basic function of the public library is to acquire, preserve, and disseminate information. In addition to this function, it is the aim of the library to match the needs of the users with the information content of documents. With the rapid escalation of prices, it has become impossible for library budgets to purchase all the needed material, therefore the urgent need for sharing resources.
- p *Information technology*—Lor (1992) points out that networking capabilities are enhanced through information technology, resulting in the quick and efficient sharing of resources that might otherwise be difficult or inconvenient to share.

Although computers are very much in evidence in Africa, albeit mainly in the urban areas, technology has not yet made a big impact in the library fraternity (Kisiedu 1998). According to Nawe (1993), this is due mostly to negligence, incompatible hardware and software, lack of commitment to maintain the equipment, and an underdeveloped telecommunications network, not because it is unavailable.

It also seems that international corporations, more than governments, are utilizing technology to supply them with information needed to gain advantage over those who do not have access to these sources. Some initiatives by these corporations have, however, resulted in making independent databases available to the general public, for example, Agricultural Research Information System (AGRIS), Industrial Council for Development, Sahel Information Network in Mali, and the Pan African Documentation and Information System (PADIS). Unfortunately, no standards or norms for the processing and exchange of information between the databases are currently in existence (Faye 1995), making wide access to a number of databases difficult and resulting in an unnecessary waste of resources.

Recently, the African Information Society launched the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) aimed at supporting and accelerating socio-economic development across the region through a network of technologically linked computer systems. As part of providing access to as many people as possible, the participation of libraries is seen as vitally important (Amonoo 1998).

Although access to the Internet is a high priority, full connectivity is currently available in only a few African countries. To address this problem, the African Network Initiative, a local initiative backed by international sponsors, was established. In spite of logistical and political problems, this group feels certain that most African countries will have access to the Internet by the late nineties (Adam 1997).

- p *Books and publishing*—The book industry is still very much a legacy of the colonial past. Much of what is being published emanates from local agencies of international

printing houses, leaving local publishers in a struggle for survival.

Library information workers on the African continent generally agree that publicly available resources are scarce. As a solution to this problem, Rosenberg (1993a) suggests that increased cooperation and resource sharing ought to form the basis of library and information services. Resource sharing in library and information services is usually seen as making information resources available to all participants. Sharing involves cooperation; coordination; interlibrary loans; and cooperative acquisition, processing, and storage (Ondini 1991). Research, however, does not indicate that much has been achieved in Africa in this respect during the past few years. In some cases, the perception among library professionals seems to be that the situation is actually deteriorating. Camara (1990), for example, sees insufficient financial resources, inadequately trained staff, lack of a national policy regulating its role and activities, and widely scattered documentary resources and considerable duplication of effort due to poor coordination among existing systems and services as the chief causes for the failure to establish a cooperative information system.

Lack of sustained effort to find an alternative library framework

Research into the problem of the sustainability of library and information services indicates that revision of the basis on which library services are founded is urgently needed. For many years, severe criticism has been leveled at the public library system for allowing literacy to be the prerequisite for reaping the benefits offered by the public library (Raseroka 1993). As early as 1985, Kaungamno pointed out that libraries, especially those situated in rural areas, must be adapted to suit local conditions. For example, the lack of literacy in rural populations compelled libraries to support literacy programs. According to Abdulla (1998), there has always been a demand for information, especially in the rural areas where the farmer and entrepreneur are the predominant breadwinners but who, in many cases, cannot benefit from the information offered by the library because they are illiterate.

A recent development in South Africa has been the establishment of multi-purpose community centers to provide information, facilities, resources, training, and services to communities. The kinds of programs and facilities offered by these centers are determined by the needs of a specific community. It has been envisioned that, within these centers, the position of the librarian would change to incorporate the role of information organizer/manager with that of information/education. The librarian would be accountable to the employing authority and the community served (Nassimbeni 1998).

Through the years, attempts to find a suitable alternative to the Western public library model have resulted in different experiments and proposals. A number of these efforts have been piloted and documented, some more successful than others (Aboyade 1984; Berlyn 1998; Chiwamba Community Information Centre 1997; Mchombu & Mtunyatta; Raseroka 1993, 1994; Sturges and Chimsea 1996). In many of these projects, the major aim of the library was to support formal and non-formal education and training, literacy programs, and empowerment programs. Rosenberg (1993b), however, offers a bleak picture for the

continued existence of these alternative information provision services. She describes the life cycle of rural African libraries as follows:

Originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is followed by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departure of the initiators, loss of interest among staff and users—the library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen, or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity.

Doubt regarding whether rural initiatives will succeed is also expressed by Raseroka (1993). She concludes that more research into the conditions necessary for rural libraries to become viable needs to be conducted in order for library services to react and change meaningfully. Rosenberg (1993b) even suggests that it might be better to abandon services to the adult learner in order to concentrate on the school child, the adult of tomorrow.

Recommendations

- þ As the potential clientele are mainly semi-literate or illiterate, innovative services need to be developed to accommodate their needs. This would have to entail the moving away from a print-based information model to one incorporating a variety of formats accessible both to the literate and the illiterate. It could include the following materials:
 - * *Oral transmissions.* This could take the form of group discussions, person-to-person transmissions, as well as forms of art such as drama, poetry, and song. Oral transmissions play a very important role in many non-literate societies and should therefore be harnessed for the biggest effect;
 - * *Translations* of relevant materials into local languages that can be read and understood by most of the potential clients;
 - * *Easy do-it-yourself manuals, pamphlets, newspapers, and other materials* that can be read by literate users;
 - * *Audio-visual materials* such as posters, charts, diagrams, tape/slide presentations, films, cassettes, and recorded or radio programs.
- þ It is urgent that the shortage of materials written by African authors for an African audience be addressed. This would involve releasing the stranglehold that foreign publication houses have on the publication of materials emanating from African authors.

Especially within rural communities, community members should be encouraged to record their experiences in print or non-print form. With the availability of desktop

facilities on computers, it should be relatively easy to produce and publish this type of material for local use.

- þ A more efficient library model must take into account problems and conditions applicable to the African continent. African public library directors should select what is good in Western library practice and integrate it with what is relevant to local culture (Adimorah 1993). Breaking away from old established practices is, however, a difficult process.
- þ Proper curriculum planning by African library schools and breaking away from irrelevant training are crucial. Training must be made relevant to African conditions and responsive to innovation and change, including changing expectations of library services. It should instill a consciousness of the African information environment and develop an in-depth program of specialization, including the repackaging of information, indigenous knowledge resources, and literacy teaching skills, the design and production of audio-visual materials, training in oral literature, processing eyewitness information, and applying new information for the development and improvement of life in rural areas (Banach 1989; Mchombu 1991).
- þ The continuing education of existing staff is necessary in order for libraries and information services to respond positively to social and technological changes (Hikwa 1994). This could be accomplished through workshops and seminars directed toward instilling new skills, knowledge, and attitudes in the entire staff. Such programs should be conducted on an ongoing basis in order to address current as well as projected trends.
- þ Governments must be made aware of the importance of accessible information as a prerequisite for development. The successful implementation of community information services and ongoing cooperation with developmental agents working in rural areas can be of great assistance in this process. Such awareness could result in increased financial assistance to library and information services as well as better access to governmental and parastatal information resources. Training given to librarians should enable them to retrieve and disseminate information from such sources.
- þ A written information policy should be made a prerequisite for every country involved in information provision. The lack of an information policy coordinating the acquisition, organization, and dissemination of information, especially for developmental purposes, tends to be a major problem in all the African countries. The absence of such policy leads to poor coordination between related information systems as well as to unnecessary competition. It also often leads to an unnecessarily strict control of government-generated publications. Frequently, material containing important information relevant to development is classified as confidential. This is the result of ignorance regarding which resources should be regarded as confidential (Kaniki 1992) and is a situation that could be rectified with a formal information policy.

Conclusion

Librarianship in Africa has reached a crossroads. It has the option of slowly falling into oblivion or of adopting a new paradigm based on a rigorous re-assessment of priorities and a concentration on the most important aspects of service. New services will need to be developed and existing services enhanced. These services will, of necessity, have to be based on Africa's own resources and embedded in the real information needs of the inhabitants. The resulting model will have to be a less formal, less book-oriented information service, deeply rooted in indigenous information systems and targeting the real information needs of both the actual and the potential clientele.

The following table indicates the basic components and requirements needed to make the African public library a viable option as an information provider.

Table 1. African public library model

<u>Basic components</u>	<u>Requirements</u>
1. <i>Prerequisites (for successful service):</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Information policy;* Needs analysis;* Adequate financial resources;* Adequate, suitably trained personnel;* Systematic collection and storage of materials, including local materials;* Involvement of communities in planning, building, and running of information centers;* Focus on service to youth;* Active involvement in literacy programs;* Accessible to community members.
2. <i>Information (to be supplied):</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Information available, relevant, sufficient, accurate, and current;* Leads to tangible results, for example, water

3. Co-operation (between related information systems to make optimum use of scarce information resources):

supply, not just providing information on water pumps;

- * Offered in a variety of formats, for example, suitable for literates and illiterates.
- * Public libraries are focal point for collecting and transferring of information relevant to community needs;
- * Government departments are dynamically linked to information delivery system via, for example, extension officers to ensure active sharing of valuable gray literature;
- * Non-governmental organizations are actively tapped for unpublished research results, conference papers, sponsored theses and copies of papers published in overseas journals;
- * Radio, television and press are exploited for transfer of development-oriented information;
- * Networking utilizing information technology is stepped up with the assistance of international corporations active on the continent;
- * Standards for information handling and transfer are developed with the aid of international corporations.

4. Training (of suitable personnel):

- * Outdated syllabi reflecting colonial values are replaced;
- * Indigenization of training programs become a priority.
- * Requisites:
 - Ø Consciousness of African environment;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø In-depth specialization in repackaging; indigenous knowledge sources, for example oral history; information available from traditional rulers, community leaders, at drinking parlors, market squares, folklore dances and music; design of audio-visual materials; basic publishing; Ø Literacy teaching; Ø Continuing education of existing staff.
5. <i>Evaluation:</i>	* Programs continuously evaluated with active community participation.

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